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Grytte Article on Spring Break in the Netherlands

When a Browning student goes abroad to France or Spain or any other French/Spanish speaking country, he can finally put his years of studying a foreign language at school to use. He can form almost perfect sentences with some thought, and with full immersion, a student can reach a level of mastery with a foreign language. This whole process of learning another language begins at an early age at Browning and takes a long period of time. But what if the student wanted to learn another language other than French/Spanish? Would he still be capable of acquiring mastery over a foreign language in a shorter amount of time? This was the challenge before me as I left New York to go to Amsterdam on the first day of spring break.

I had always wanted to be able to speak Dutch, because everyone in my family could speak it. My sister had a Dutch babysitter until the age of two, and she only spoke Dutch, when she started pre-school. Being surrounded by English at school, Dutch at home at such an early age, she easily became bilingual. I, on the other hand, had an English-speaking babysitter, and although my parents had originally spoken Dutch to me, they stopped when I was two years old, because it was discovered that I had hearing problems. My parents were advised to teach me only English, because it was uncertain whether I could even grow up to understand one language, never mind two. So I had grown up speaking only one language, while my whole family was able to speak a second. Eventually I became frustrated having to force everyone, from my family members, to my relatives back in the Netherlands, and to my friends there, to speak English. Finally, I decided this year that I had to learn Dutch, no matter how difficult it would be.

With permission from the school, I was able to spend three weeks abroad, two in the Netherlands, and one in Belgium in order to learn Dutch. The first two weeks were designed to maximize my

knowledge of Dutch grammar and sentence structure, of which I had known nothing. I spent my first week in Bussum, a small town, at a program called “Learn Dutch Fast!” My teacher was a woman named Sylvia, who teaches two to five students per week at her small house. She taught me the very basics of the language, such as telling time, common idioms, verb tenses, and pronunciation of specific sounds. Her program was accelerated in the sense that a student would be able to leave being able to communicate in Dutch, while still making mistakes that would be corrected. Her philosophy is to spend no more than twenty minutes on each exercise in order to keep the learning engaging and fun. By the end of the week, my knowledge in Dutch as well as the other student’s, a middle-aged man named Dennis, who was moving from England to Rotterdam, had increased vastly.

With my mother having left me, I stayed in Amsterdam with my Aunt during my second week. For five days, I biked in the morning to a language school, spent two hours listening to audio lessons, biked home for my hour lunch break, biked back for two hours of 1-on-1 lessons with a teacher, and biked home. I did quite a bit of biking through the city, and I felt very much like a local to the extent of that I was involved in an accident in which I hit a heedless tourist. My vocabulary and understanding of the language increased, but I did not enjoy the audio lessons, which were redundant. Nevertheless, being a part of the Amsterdam crowd, which involved playing soccer at a local square, watching the Hunger Games with Dutch subtitles, and going to an Ajax game, was very enjoyable.

For my third week, my aunt drove me all the way from the flat Amsterdam to the rather hilly Spa, Belgium, which is very close to Liège. For this week, I was at an immersion program known as CERAN, which normally houses adults, who want to learn French, English, Dutch, or German year round. However, over Easter break the program is available to children. For one week, I had to live with thirteen other children, who were usually Belgians that were learning Dutch at school. No one, but the

counselors and teachers spoke fluent English, and I found myself having to constantly express in Dutch what I wanted to say. I found this particularly the most rewarding, because although I was completely out of my comfort zone at the beginning of the week, I had made many friends and I had begun to be able to express myself in a completely new language. By the end of the week, I was sad to leave behind the language and culture I had immersed myself in after only three weeks, but I was happy to return back to my homely New York. In the summer, I plan to go back to the Netherlands in order to practice more and to acquire greater fluency.

What you should take from my story is to not be afraid to go to a completely different culture and a different language and to try to live in it. Nothing can be more exciting and rewarding than to find something very different from what you are used to and to enjoy it. There is nothing that can stop you from doing the same, if not better, than what I have done. I came home being able to speak just Dutch at the family dinner table. In contrast with what I could do three weeks before, that was a huge difference. Yes, I had the advantage of hearing the language for my whole life, but never quite learning it, but that still does not take away the fact that if you push yourself and really try hard, there's nothing you cannot achieve. So I encourage you to go out there and find something that truly excites and tests you, because I have no doubt that in the end, rewards far outweigh the risks, if they are any.