When Research Comes to LIFE

by Briana Wright (English Teaching '26)

Merrie Kay Ames did not just research the best methods of language acquisition—she experienced them firsthand in Panama.

Not all lessons can be taught in the classroom. For graduate student Merrie Kay Ames (TESOL MA '25), that truth became clear through her experiences in Panama presenting research, visiting a small Indigenous Emberá village, and attending a Sunday afternoon church gathering. The trip gave Ames the chance to not only share her findings from her master's thesis but also experience firsthand the very principle her research explored—that meaningful learning grows out of authentic relationships with others.

The Spark of Growth

In June 2025, Ames and BYU faculty traveled to Panama to present at the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese Conference. Her research examined the effects that nonlinguistic factors like age, age of acquisition, the months of learning a foreign mission language, and informal language learning have on college students' Spanish proficiency.

Many Emberá villages sit along the Chagres River.



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To study this question, she compared results from BYU's Language Ability Self-Evaluation Resource (LASER), which surveys students' background with a second language and evaluates their self-assessment proficiency, with Oral Proficiency Interview-Computer (OPIc) scores. She found that relationships were key: "Sustained, authentic communication—especially through missionary or immersive contexts—is the most powerful driver of language growth."

Living Like Others

Ames's own language learning was enriched during her visit to an Emberá village. Soon after arriving, she attended a presentation on the Emberá way of life and learned a few words in the people's native tongue, Emberá. Most importantly, she learned what these people hold most dear—their connection with the earth. "They're living right in this beautiful nature and make beautiful handiwork just with the leaves, flowers, and the plant materials there," she says.

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>
> – Merrie Kay Ames

Ames realized that understanding a culture requires more than observation, though: It requires participation. As she and her colleagues ate Emberá cuisine, danced with locals, and received henna tattoos, she formed relationships with the people and felt immersed in their way of life, which is something she loves about traveling: "I try to stay with people in their homes because that's how you really get to know them and really connect with and understand them."

Passing On the Spirit of Learning

This experience also deepened Ames's appreciation for genuine human connection, something she continued to find throughout her trip in Panama. One Sunday, she was invited to a bilingual ward luncheon after church services. While there, she started talking with a young woman who suddenly began telling Ames about her educational plans: She wanted to go to BYU and study TESOL. Coincidentally, that was the exact same path that Ames herself had taken.

Ames could not help but wonder if she had been placed at that Sunday dinner to help this aspiring BYU student achieve her educational dreams. "It's a small world, and people are really loving and giving," Ames says, feeling deeply grateful for the chance to give back by encouraging this young woman and connecting with her through WhatsApp.

Ames's experiences in Panama—from an academic conference to a tourist destination to a dining table—demonstrate the type of meaningful interpersonal connection that fulfills her and keeps her pursuing education: "I believe that every endeavor must be meaningful. If it is not, we should either cast it aside or infuse it with significance—and connection to others should be the underlying motivator."