When it comes to learning a foreign language, experts say the best method is to immerse oneself in it. Studying abroad might be the most popular way college students go about immersion, but Spanish majors and minors at The University of Alabama achieve a similar experience at home in Tuscaloosa, all while giving back to their community.

Spanish majors and minors enrolled in the SP 389 Spanish Outreach course serve as interns in Tuscaloosa city and county schools. Through individual tutoring and help with lesson-plan comprehension, personal dialogue, interpretation and other language-based tasks, students mentor elementary, middle and high schoolers who speak English as a second language. In the process, UA students hone their own linguistic abilities.

“I knew that it would be a practical way to develop my Spanish skills in a real-world setting, and I was excited about the chance to work with native speakers,” says Blake Senn, a senior majoring in Spanish and business. Additionally, while I was developing those skills, I would be able to give back to my community in a really unique, important way. It was a win-win.”

Since its inception in 2000, the Spanish Outreach course has included at least 10 UA students each semester. The number of students continues to increase, with typical classes now comprised of 16 students. Each UA student works with between one and 10 children, depending on the children’s ages and needs, and spends six hours per week in a school. In Fall and Spring 2014, 32 UA students committed approximately 2,240 hours to serving English-language learners in schools within Tuscaloosa County.

In addition to the mentoring portion of the course, UA students write a reflection paper, in Spanish, about their experiences in the schools and keep a journal with daily or weekly entries.

“Aside from my study-abroad experience, my Spanish hasn’t improved as much during any other semester as it did when I was involved with Spanish Outreach,” Senn says. “It’s six hours each week where you are immersing yourself entirely in the language, so your Spanish improves immensely.”

Each student meets with Shirin Posner, director of Spanish Outreach and a UA Spanish instructor, every two weeks to discuss how his or her work is progressing, detail any prob-
Adventures at the Museum

Students in other courses also are serving Tuscaloosa’s Spanish-speaking community.

In Spring and Fall 2014, 24 students enrolled in SP 353 Spanish Conversation or SP 366 Spanish-American Civilization (Honors by Contract) led approximately 200 children, parents and other community members on eight, hour-long Spanish-language tours of the Alabama Museum of Natural History, located on the UA campus. Each Spanish-language tour covered permanent collections at the museum and emphasized different themes. Students designed tours to be interactive, and each one concluded with a creative learning activity related to the tour’s theme. At the end of a dinosaur-themed tour, for instance, children made their own fossils out of salt dough. During a scavenger hunt tour, participants had to find and take pictures of certain things at the museum.

Offering guided tours of the museum in Spanish was a creative way for us to tap into an available resource and open it up to others,” says Judson Wells, a senior majoring in biology and minoring in Spanish. “I think it contributes to a campus that is welcoming to the local community and conscious of its needs. Above all it got the kids excited about science and provided an outlet to learn in Spanish.”

Students in Karina Vázquez’s SP 353 Spanish Conversation class first offered the Spanish-language tours in Spring 2014. The success of that project led Vázquez and Jeff Hirschy, educational specialist at the Alabama Museum of Natural History, to develop a Spanish internship in which students planned and led tours in Fall 2014. They also translated educational material into Spanish for the museum’s use.

“This experience has been very inspirational for members of the Hispanic community,” says Vázquez, assistant professor of Spanish. “Coming to the museum was an adventure itself for the children. They explored the campus and demonstrated great interest in the natural sciences. For parents, it was an opportunity to get more familiar with the U.S. educational system. For UA students, the tours were projects in which they not only had to communicate completely in Spanish, but also had the opportunity to get to know the Hispanic community, speak with native speakers and put their creativity into action.”

To learn more about the Spanish Internship or SP 353 Spanish Conversation, contact Karina Vázquez at karina.e.vazquez@ua.edu or 205-348-0998.

—Olivia Grider