

# Why You Should Study Spanish

## In This Chapter

- ◆ What Spanish has to offer
- ◆ How to study and succeed
- ◆ Where Spanish is spoken
- ◆ Twenty important phrases

If you haven't already purchased this book, you're probably leafing through it wondering, "Can I *really* do this?" No doubt you're deciding whether you'll have the time, whether you have what it takes to stick with it, and whether, indeed, it'll pay off in the end. Just like David Letterman on late-night television, I'm going to give my top 10 reasons why you should study Spanish:

**Reason #10** You want to impress your date at a Spanish restaurant by ordering in Spanish.

**Reason #9** You loved the movie *Man of La Mancha* so much that you want to read *Don Quijote* in its original language.

**Reason #8** When you meet Paloma Picasso on the street, you want to be able to ask her questions she'll understand.

**Reason #7** You want to buy time-share property on the beach in Puerto Rico.

**Reason #6** When you get pulled over for speeding in Tijuana, you don't want to wind up in jail.

**Reason #5** You want to study flamenco dancing in Madrid.

**Reason #4** You can get a discount on Cuban cigars if you order them *en español*.

**Reason #3** You want to sing along with Richie Valens when they play "La Bamba" on the oldies station.

**Reason #2** You want to run with the bulls in Pamplona, but they don't understand English.

**Reason #1** One word—Cancún.

## Seriously Speaking

Now that we've had a little fun, it's time to seriously consider why you should study Spanish. Let's take a look at some more credible reasons:

**Real Reason #10** You love music, especially music with a native beat. It just makes you want to move your feet. Although your friends are into more modern music, you have to admit you really find Casals's cello pieces and Segovia's guitar solos very relaxing.

**Real Reason #9** You love to dance. The music starts to blare and you can't help it—your hips start to sway and your feet start to move. Let's face it, you've got rhythm. You want to mambo, cha-cha, salsa, even tango. Just reading this makes your feet start tapping.

**Real Reason #8** You're an aficionado of Spanish movies, and you really would enjoy watching them without having to read the distracting, poorly translated, sometimes invisible subtitles.

**Real Reason #7** You're an artist at heart. You long to spend time at El Prado admiring the works of Zurbarán, Velázquez, Murillo, and El Greco. Picasso's *Guernica* brings tears to your eyes, and Dali's surrealist paintings make you wonder what was going on in his mind. You truly are a cultured person, and the Spanish-speaking world has a lot to offer.

**Real Reason #6** You definitely are not money-hungry, but you'd like to improve your chances in the job market. With so many fields open today, a knowledge of Spanish would be a real plus. Here's your opportunity to get that little extra knowledge that will put you above all the others who are competing for the job you want.

**Real Reason #5** You want to live in a warm climate, and the countries in Spanish America have a lot to offer: The landscape is beautiful, the people are friendly, the food is delicious, and you won't need an expensive winter wardrobe.

**Real Reason #4** Speaking of food, you love to cook. You want to learn how to make an authentic paella valenciana or a truly hot and spicy salsa picante. If you want to do it right, you have to go to the source. Besides, you probably won't be able to get all the spices and ingredients you need in your hometown.

**Real Reason #3** You hate to cook but you love to eat, and you like everything hot and spicy. You're a fan of tropical fruits, and you dream of sipping an ice-cold piña colada on a white sandy beach in Mexico. You're tired of the same old fare, and you want to sample all the different types of food available in countries that are really quite close by. You can plan your next vacation accordingly.

**Real Reason #2** You want to prove to yourself that you are smart. Foreign languages have always had the reputation of being impossible to learn. How many of your friends and acquaintances studied a language in school for two, three, or even four years and then claimed, "But I can't even speak a word!" That doesn't have to be the case. Learning a foreign language can be easy and fun. Try it. You'll be pleasantly surprised.

**Real Reason #1** You're a traveler. You want to see the world and all it has to offer, so you make sure you never go to the same place twice on vacation. If that's the case, keep in mind that Spanish is spoken by more than 350 million people throughout the world in more than 20 countries. You have a lot of trips ahead of you! Look at the following map to see all the countries in which Spanish is the primary language.

## Go For It!

The best way to become proficient in a language is to plunge right in. Immerse yourself in anything and everything Spanish. Have a love affair with the language and culture. Follow these suggestions to ensure a long-lasting and fulfilling relationship with Spanish:

- ◆ Examine your goals honestly, evaluate your linguistic abilities, and pace yourself accordingly. Don't rush—take your time studying the language. Set aside a special time each day that you devote only to learning Spanish.
- ◆ Invest in or borrow a good bilingual dictionary. Keep in mind that pocket varieties might be too skimpy and might be inappropriate for learning a new language. Carefully check what is available in your local bookstore or library before purchasing a dictionary. Current, popular, easy-to-use dictionaries that provide comprehensive listings of current, colloquial vocabulary words are published by a number of companies. (The best dictionaries include those by Simon & Schuster and Larousse.) They can be found in any bookstore to fit any size pocketbook.
- ◆ Take advantage of any opportunities to listen to the language. Rent Spanish movies and try not to read the English subtitles. If they broadcast in your area, listen to public service radio or television stations that provide Spanish programs. In addition, search bookstores and public or college libraries for language tapes that will help you hear and master spoken Spanish. Then try to create your own tapes and use them to perfect your accent. You can also ask to use the language laboratories and computer programs available in many high schools and universities.



### 10 minutos al día

Learn Spanish by immersing yourself in the language: buy a good bilingual dictionary; read, read, and then read some more; watch foreign films; tune in to Spanish programs on your TV or radio; make use of school language laboratories; surf the Internet; and use vocabulary labels throughout your home.

- ◆ Read everything you can get your hands on, including fairy tales, children's books, and comic books. Try to read Spanish newspapers such as *El Diario*, *El Nuevo Herald*, *La Opinión*, or *Hoy*. If you're not too bashful, read aloud to practice your pronunciation and comprehension at the same time.
- ◆ Set up *un rincón español* (a Spanish corner) in a convenient place in your home. Decorate it with posters or articles. Label any items whose names you want to learn and display them for easy viewing. Keep all your materials together and organized in this special Spanish spot.

## Fear Not!

Some people are truly afraid to study a foreign language. They think it will be too much work, too hard, and too time-consuming. In reality, however, if you take it slowly and don't allow yourself to become overly concerned with the grammar and the pronunciation, you'll manage very well. To help you feel more at ease as you begin your task, remember the following points:

- ◆ Don't be intimidated by grammar. Everyone makes mistakes, even in his or her native language. Besides, only one or two correctly used words (especially verbs) will often enable people to understand you.
- ◆ Don't be intimidated by pronunciation. Put on your best Spanish accent, don't be shy, and speak, speak, speak. All countries have different regional accents. Certainly yours will fit in somehow.
- ◆ Don't be intimidated by native speakers. They are usually helpful to anyone who makes a sincere attempt to communicate in their language.
- ◆ Don't be intimidated by the reputation foreign languages have for being difficult. As you will see right from the start, Spanish is fun and easy.



### In a Flash

Buy a Spanish newspaper. Every day, choose one article that interests you. Underline and make a list of all the words whose meanings you don't recognize. Spend a few minutes each day studying these words. In a week's time, you'll develop an extensive Spanish vocabulary.

## How to Study

As a more than 32-year veteran New York City public junior high and high school French and Spanish teacher, I have seen and dealt with every type of student imaginable: from those who've gone on to graduate with honors from the finest Ivy League schools to those who have dropped out. Except for the extraordinarily rare individual who defies all odds and excels at a second language without opening a book, the rest of us have to study. Over the years I compiled a list of suggestions to help students acquire better study habits and to make the task of learning a foreign language more enjoyable. I'll share them with you because I want you to succeed. So here's my list:

### How to Succeed in a Foreign Language Without Really Trying

- ◆ Let's face it: the overwhelming majority of us don't and can't intuitively learn a foreign language. Understand that you have to study to succeed. There's no getting around it. That said, the more effort you exert, the more rewards you will reap.
- ◆ There are certain key phrases that you should commit to memory because they will be useful in a tremendous number of situations. For example: **Quisiera** (I would like) can be used to say the following: **Quisiera comer.** (I'd like to eat.) **Quisiera ir a Colombia.** (I'd like to go to Colombia.) **Quisiera comprar esto.** (I'd like to buy this.) **Quisiera una habitación.** (I'd like a room.) Learn the expressions then plug in the vocabulary word or phrase that fits the circumstances. You'll only need a few key phrases before you'll be able to comfortably communicate in Spanish.

- ◆ Psychological studies have proven that, for the maximal retention of facts, the optimal times to study are first thing in the morning or right before you go to bed. So keep your *Complete Idiot's Guide* on your night table.
- ◆ While studying use as many of your senses as you can. This will help reinforce the new material you've learned in as many ways as possible. Remember that language is acquired in four steps: listening, speaking, reading, and then writing.
- ◆ Think in Spanish as often as possible. Don't stop to translate. See if you can make yourself formulate your ideas in your second language.
- ◆ Practice a little every day. Short practice and study periods are much more effective than one long, drawn-out cramming session.
- ◆ Use what you already know in English to help you communicate and understand Spanish. Many Spanish and English words have the same Latin roots. So if you hear or see words that seem familiar, there's a good chance that you will be able to correctly guess their meaning. Learn and use as many cognates (words that are the same or almost the same in both languages) as you can.
- ◆ Be organized. Keep all your language materials together in one place.
- ◆ If you can, find a partner who wants to learn the language with you. You'll see rapid results if you work together closely. Practice and test each other regularly.
- ◆ The absolute best way to learn and master a foreign language is to teach it to another person. You cannot teach something you don't understand or that you don't know well, so if you can teach it, you know it.

## Learning Specifics

*Pronunciation:* If one of your goals is to sound like a native, here are some tips you should follow:

- ◆ **Listen to everything** that's available to you in Spanish: television and radio shows, films, CDs. The more you listen, the sooner you'll be able to speak.
- ◆ **Speak as much as you can** with whomever you can. Don't be shy. If you're alone, record yourself on tape and then play it back. Keep your very first tape. Study and practice some more and then re-record yourself. Compare the two tapes to see how much progress you've made.

*Vocabulary:* Knowing the proper vocabulary words to use in various situations is the key to perfecting good communication skills. Here are some ideas for acquiring the words and phrases you'll use the most:

- ◆ **Make flash cards** for various groups of words (vegetables, hotel words, business terms, etc.) by writing the English on one side and the Spanish on the other side of the card. Start with the easier of the two tasks: look at the Spanish word and see if you can give its English meaning. Now for the hard part: look at the English word and see if you can give its Spanish equivalent. Set aside a specific amount of time every day for vocabulary practice.
- ◆ **Label things in your house** (furniture, rooms, food) or your car. In this way you will immerse yourself as much as possible in the language and learn as you go through the motions of doing your daily chores.
- ◆ **Test yourself.** Take a sheet of loose-leaf paper. Fold it into four long columns. Write the English for all the words you want to learn down the first column. Put your book away. Try saying and also writing the Spanish words in the second column. Once you've completed the second column, fold back the first column to see if you can write the English words in column 3. Now check your work. All the correct words can be considered words you've mastered. All the words you got wrong or didn't know have to be studied more carefully before you fold back the first two columns to try again to complete the fourth column with the correct Spanish word. Continue in this manner using both sides of the paper until you've mastered all the words you deem important. Remember that writing down what you've studied helps reinforce what you've learned.

Col 1	Col 2	Col 3	Col 4
pear	pera	pear	(mastered word)
apple	<del>mansana</del>	apple	(incorrect, needs more work)
			manzana (correct)

*Verb conjugations:* You'll want to make sure that your verbs agree with the subjects you use so that your Spanish sounds impeccable. Here are two good study guidelines:

- ◆ **Use flashcards to practice** learning how to give the proper oral conjugation of verbs.
- ◆ **Practice saying the verbs** as you write them on a piece of paper. Write the verb several times until you have it memorized.

## Where in the World Is Spanish Spoken?

Spanish is becoming a global language and is one of the official languages of the United Nations and the European Union. There are more than 350 million native Spanish speakers and more than 420 million people speak Spanish. That's more than 7 percent of the world's population! Spanish is the official language of 21 countries. Let's take a closer look at the Spanish-speaking world.

*The Spanish-speaking world.*



- ◆ **Spain** We are all well aware that Spanish is spoken in Spain. Located in Western Europe, Spain is the second largest country in that area, boasting a land area of more than 200,000 square miles. Spain and Portugal share the Iberian Peninsula, which is separated from the rest of the continent by the Pyrenees mountains. In Europe, Spanish is also spoken in Andorra, a small country that borders Spain and France.

- ◆ **The Caribbean** The Greater Antilles, located in the Caribbean Sea, contains three Spanish-speaking islands: Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. Cuba lies less than 100 miles from Key West, Florida. The Dominican Republic shares the island of Hispaniola with French-speaking Haiti. Puerto Rico, a self-governing commonwealth, is part of the United States.
- ◆ **Mexico** Mexico, the second largest Spanish-speaking country in the world, and home of the ancient Aztec and Maya civilizations, is separated from the United States by the Rio Grande. Acapulco and Puerto Vallarta on the Pacific Ocean and Cancún and Cozumel on the Caribbean Sea are world-renowned beach resorts that attract many tourists every year.
- ◆ **The countries of Central America** Central America is a narrow strip of land that connects North and South America. It is comprised of six Spanish-speaking countries: Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. Almost all of the more than 20 million inhabitants of Central America have Indian, Spanish, or mixed Indian and Spanish ancestry. Central America was also home to the Mayan Indians, one of the earliest and most advanced civilizations.
- ◆ **The countries of South America** South America is almost twice as large as the United States and covers about  $\frac{1}{8}$  of the world's land surface. Except where it is joined to North America by the Isthmus of Panama, South America is completely surrounded by water: the Caribbean Sea on the north, the Pacific Ocean on the west, and the Atlantic Ocean to the east. The nine Spanish-speaking countries of South America are: Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. In Brazil, the largest country on the continent and comprising almost half its area, Portuguese is the native language.
- ◆ **Spanish in the United States** Believe it or not, Spanish is spoken by more than 8 percent (33 million) of the U.S. population, especially in Florida, New York, California, and large areas of the Southwest, and it is an official language in New Mexico.
- ◆ **Spanish in Africa** In Africa, Spanish and French are official languages of Equatorial Guinea.
- ◆ **Spanish in the Philippines** Once an official language, Spanish is still spoken by a significant number of people in the Philippines, although not as their primary language. Filipino, the national language, contains Spanish vocabulary words and follows a phonetic pattern that resembles Spanish.

## Is Spanish the Same Throughout the Spanish-Speaking World?

As we all well know, the English that is spoken in the northern part of the United States sounds an awful lot different from the English that is spoken in the south. People from New England have an accent that is quite distinct from that of the Midwest. Let's not forget about our overseas friends, the British. Not only does their pronunciation differ greatly from ours, but sometimes they even have different words for things. We refer to an "elevator," which they call a "lift." Despite differences in words and accents, somehow we manage to understand, albeit with a certain degree of difficulty, those who are speaking the same language as we are but who hail from different regions.

The same holds true for Spanish, which is not spoken in exactly the same way throughout the Spanish-speaking world. Since Spanish is the native language of so many different countries, there are many regional differences in pronunciation and vocabulary and there is no standard dialect. Just as we can understand and communicate with others who speak English, speakers of Spanish can do the same with their language. Insofar as writing goes, there are fewer differences than in speaking, and this shouldn't pose a problem.

You can expect to hear four different types of Spanish:

- ◆ In the United States—as well as in your *Complete Idiot's Guide*—the most common Spanish dialect, standard Latin American, is used. Individualized accents and unique vocabulary aside, you can expect to hear this Spanish spoken in Mexico, Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia. How will you be able to identify this Spanish? It is characterized by the pronunciation of every letter and the strong "r" sounds.
- ◆ In most areas of Spain, expect to hear Castillian Spanish. How can you recognize this Spanish? The "ci" and "ce" letter combinations and "z" are pronounced as "th," so in Spain you would hear "gracias" (thank you) as *grab-thee-yabs* instead of the normal "s" sound you would expect to hear in Latin American Spanish: *grab-see-yabs*. Another difference is the use of the second personal informal plural "vosotros," (used as the plural of "tú") in Spain. In Latin America the formal *you* plural, Uds., is also used for the informal *you* plural, "vosotros." In Spain, a grammatical phenomenon known as "leísmo" exists whereby the feminine pronoun "la" is replaced with "le."
- ◆ A third type of Spanish is spoken in the Caribbean, in the coastal areas of Latin America, and in some instances in southern Spain. How will you distinguish this Spanish? It is quite informal and rapid. Speakers tend to drop the "s" sounds, so you would hear *eb-tab* for "está," otherwise pronounced *ehs-tab*.

- ◆ The last type of Spanish is heard in parts of Uruguay and in Argentina. This Spanish was influenced by Italians, who settled in these areas in past centuries. This Spanish tends to be “sung” and the pronunciation is different: Most Spanish speakers pronounce the “ll” letter combination as a “y”: “Me llamo...” (*meh yah-moh*), while these speakers pronounce the “ll” as “j” (*meh jah-moh*). The pronoun “vos” is used instead of “tú” to express the singular “you” and is followed by a modified old Spanish verb form.

Vocabulary differences should be expected but can easily be resolved by using a good bilingual dictionary that notes whether the word is used in Spain or Latin America. Expect to see something similar to the following: potato: *patata f (Sp)*, *papa f (LAm)* or computer *ordenador m (Sp)*, *computador m (LAm)*, *computadora f (LAm)*.

If you’re concerned about being understood or not understanding Spanish, don’t worry! The differences in vocabulary and pronunciation that you will encounter will not be so extreme as to prevent communication. If your pronunciation is good and you use standard, educated Spanish, you will be understood by everyone. *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Learning Spanish* will help you realize this goal.

## Twenty Phrases You Should Know

No matter what your reason for studying Spanish, the 20 phrases in Table 1.1 are an absolute must.

**Table 1.1 The Phrases to Know**

Phrase	Spanish	Pronunciation
Please	Por favor	<i>pobr fab-bobr</i>
Thank you very much	Muchas gracias	<i>moo-chahs grab-see-yahs</i>
You’re welcome	De nada	<i>deh nah-dah</i>
Excuse me	Perdóneme Con permiso	<i>pebr-doh-neh-meh</i> <i>kohn pehr-mee-sob</i>
My name is ...	Me llamo ...	<i>meh yah-moh</i>
I would like ...	Quisiera ... Me gustaría	<i>kee-see-yeh-rah</i> <i>meh goos-tab-ree-yah</i>
I need ...	Necesito ... Me falta(n) ...	<i>neh-seh-see-toh</i> <i>meh fabl-tab(n)</i>
Do you have ...	¿Tiene Ud. ...?	<i>tee-yeh-neh oo-stehd</i>
Please give me ...	Déme, por favor	<i>deh-meh pobr fab-bobr</i>

**Table 1.1 The Phrases to Know (continued)**

Phrase	Spanish	Pronunciation
Could you help me please?	¿Podrías ayudarme por favor?	<i>poh-dree-yahs ab-yoo-dabr-meh pobr fah-bohr</i>
Do you speak English? I speak a little Spanish	¿Habla Ud. inglés? Hablo un poco de español.	<i>ah-blah oo-stehd een-glehs ah-bloh oon poh-koh deh ehs-pah-nyohl</i>
I don't understand. Please repeat. What did you say?	No comprendo. Repita, por favor. ¿Qué dijo Ud.?	<i>nob kohm-prehn-doh rreh-pee-tah pobr fah-bohr keh dee-hoh oo-stehd</i>
I'm lost.	Estoy perdido (a)	<i>ehs-toy pebr-dee-doh (pebr-dee-dah)</i>
I'm looking for ...	Busco ... Estoy buscando ...	<i>boos-koh ehs-toy boos-kahn-doh</i>
Where is the bathroom?	¿Dónde está el baño?	<i>dohn-deh ehs-tah ehl bab-nyoh?</i>
Where is the police station?	¿Dónde está la comisaría de policía?	<i>dohn-deh ehs-tah lah koh-mee-sab-ree-yah deh poh-lee-see-yah</i>
Where is the American Embassy?	¿Dónde está la embajada americana?	<i>dohn-deh ehs-tah lah ehm-bah-hah-dah ah-meh-ree-kah-nah</i>

*Note that Ud. is the abbreviation for usted (you).*

## The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ The best way to learn a new language is to take your time and to read and listen to as much as you can in the language. To become proficient in Spanish, immerse yourself in it as much as possible.
- ◆ Don't let grammar and pronunciation intimidate you. You'll be able to make yourself understood, even with limited vocabulary.
- ◆ Practice good study habits to master Spanish quickly.
- ◆ Although Spanish is spoken differently throughout the world, if you use good, educated Spanish, you should have no trouble communicating with a native Spanish speaker.