

You can learn



Spanish too

“Learning the Lingo”

Author : Boelo van der Pool

- 2005 -

Babel

idioma y cultura

C/ Larios 4, 2º
Málaga (Spain)

www.babelidiomas.com
info@babelidiomas.com

I learned Spanish!

I am Dutch. When I was 22 years old, and after finishing my university degree, I decided I wanted to spend a year in Spain studying and working and, of course, enjoying the sun and the beach.

I was offered a receptionist job in Malaga and told my future boss that I already spoke some Spanish but had to brush up on it a bit and improve it further. He said that was fine and that I should do an intensive Spanish course at a language school in Malaga and get up to an upper intermediate level before starting my job. Unfortunately I had lied to him because I didn't speak a word of Spanish! Well, the only words I knew were "camarero", "playa", "sol", "chica" and "cerveza", that is to say, the essentials for going on holiday.

So I signed up for an intensive Spanish course in Malaga and hoped that after 10 weeks my Spanish would be good enough to work in this wonderful country.

A friend of mine, who had already been living here for a while, picked me up from the airport when I arrived (beginning of August 1994) and after leaving my bags in the apartment took me out to a bar to meet his Spanish friends. As soon as I heard him rattling away in Spanish to all of them, the first thought that came into my mind was: I WILL NEVER LEARN THIS LANGUAGE! Nevertheless, I did my course, studied loads and thought of various things that could help me learn the language more quickly.

Now I have been living here for 11 years and, as you may imagine, I learned the language. I married a Spanish beauty, have a son and with my wife, run a Spanish language school, where I see many foreigners come with the same thoughts as I had when I had just arrived.

At least I can tell them my story and say that I will NEVER SAY NEVER.

I wrote this guide for all the people that want to learn a language. It contains some of the things that I did to improve my own language learning and helped me learn Spanish in only 10 weeks.

I hope you'll enjoy it and that it helps you learn any foreign language.

Any comments you might have are always welcome at boelo@babelidiomas.com.

The numbers

Just after I arrived in Malaga I understood that one of the first things for me to learn were the numbers. Since I lived on my own, I had to do my own shopping and needed to understand prices or say how much I wanted of a product.

I had to learn all the numbers from 1 to 9.999 (the Peseta was still in use, so many prices were over 1.000). At school they had already taught me the numbers from 1 to 100. Or at least I knew how to pronounce them. But I didn't know them by heart, which was obviously more important. So I used a little trick to practise the numbers at least twice a day.

The license plate trick

I lived about 10 minutes on foot from the school. Every morning, I would leave a bit earlier and forced myself to read (out loud) the number plate of every 10th car that was parked alongside the road.

The first few days I had to read the numbers one by one. For example:

MA-9741-AL

9741 would be: NINE-SEVEN-FOUR-ONE

I can tell you that on the first day it took me about 25 minutes to get to school.

As soon as I had the individual numbers under control, I changed to 2 digit numbers:

MA-9741-AL

NINETY SEVEN – FOURTY ONE

Which in the end changed into

NINE THOUSAND SEVEN HUNDRED AND FOURTY ONE

It took me about 2,5 hours in total to learn the numbers (5 days, approximately 15 minutes twice a day)

VOCABULARY

I had already started my language course at the school, where my teachers did a great job teaching me the grammar. Only the grammar, though, is not enough to speak the language. Now, of course they tried to teach us vocabulary every day and practise it a bit, but I found that I needed a bit more, so I started working on the vocabulary myself.

They say that about 1.000 to 1.500 words are enough to be able to hold an average conversation in any language. So now I also had my goal.

I worked out a system with which I would learn 300 new words every month (apart from the ones that I would learn in class, of course). That way, in 3 or 4 months I would have enough vocabulary to reach my aim.

Here is what I did:

PREPARATION

First I made a list of about 100 words or expressions I didn't know in Spanish, and wrote them down in a long column on the left hand side of a sheet of paper, leaving a space between the lines. One word per line, and in my mother tongue (Dutch).

Then, I took my dictionary and wrote the translation of each word alongside the Dutch word, e.g.

Table	Mesa
Chair	Silla
House	Casa
Good Morning	Buenos Días
Door	Puerta

DAY 1

On day 1 I took my Vocab-list and covered the Spanish words with a Post-Card. You can also use a sheet of paper, or whatever suits you. ;-)

I read the first word on the left ("Table"), and didn't have a clue of what it was in Spanish, so I uncovered the Spanish translation ("Mesa"). Now I knew that Table was Mesa, so I covered all the Spanish words again and started from the beginning.

Again, I read the first word ("Table") and knew now that the Spanish word had to be "Mesa", so I said it and could continue with the second word ("Chair"), but I didn't know what it was, so I uncovered "Silla", and started all over again. First "Mesa", then "Silla" and then the word for "House", which, of course, I didn't know, so I had to start again. I repeated this until I reached the 15th word without any mistakes.

IMPORTANT!

You really have to start over again with any new word or any mistake you make. This way, you will repeat the words many times and, in the end, know them by heart.

DAY 2

On day 2, I started again from the first word (Table) and continued until I could do the first 15 words in a row without making any mistakes. Then, instead of starting a new list of 15 words, I just added another 15 words to it. This way I first had to repeat word 1 to 15 before uncovering number 16. And I had to do words 1 to 16 before uncovering number 17, and so on.

Obviously, after a while, the first 15 words were a real piece of cake for me (having repeated them more than 20 times already....), so it all went faster than it might seem to you while you read this.

DAY 3

On day 3, I repeated the 30 words from the 2 previous days and added another 15 words onto them. Again, repeating everything over and over again.

Now you might ask; "Isn't it a bit boring?", and my answer is: "Completely!"

But your question should be: "Is this effective?", and, again, my answer is "Completely!" Or better still; "DESDE LUEGO QUE SÍ"

DAY 4

On day 4, I decided to abandon words 1 to 15, since I had repeated them so many times already , and decided to stick to:

- 15 new words
- 15 words to be repeated, and
- 15 words to be re-repeated

I think it took me about 20 minutes a day of practice to do this, but I improved so much in a short time that even my teachers wondered how this was possible.

PRACTICE

A good language course is probably the most important aspect of successful language learning, but I believed that I could do a lot more myself than just going to class and doing my homework.

I had spent money on a language course and had to make the best of it.

So, apart from learning the numbers in 2,5 hours and working on my vocabulary, I decided to do more things to improve my language learning.

Watching Television:

In the beginning I turned on the TV in my apartment to watch the news or any kind of programme, but I didn't understand a word of what they were saying. The only real effect it had on my language learning was NEGATIVE, because it made me feel that, after all I had done I still hadn't learned anything. So I decided not to overdo things and take everything one step at a time.

After about 3 weeks I decided to turn the TV on again, but this time to watch the football (which is almost a religion in Spain, so there's a lot of it on television). That really worked, because I understood everything. Well, everything is as much as "corner", "off-side", "fault", "penalty-kick" and, of course: "GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOL"

After that wonderful experience (can't remember much of the match, though), I decided to try some news again, and I noticed that I started understanding a bit more every day.

Now, I understand that not everybody likes football, but you could also try watching game shows (especially the ones that are on over the summer, like "Grand Prix de Verano") or anything else which should be easy to understand (soap operas, etc.)

Exercises

To practise Grammar, the teachers gave us some exercises to do at home. Not too many, of course, since most students wanted to spend their afternoons on the beach. I thought though that the exercises they gave me were not enough, so started to ask for more and more to do at home. That way, I used the grammar better and more accurately than other students in my class.

It's not that I don't like the beach (I love it), but I knew that I had to learn the language in a relatively short period of time. And don't worry, I live very near the beach now, to make up for my first 10 weeks in Malaga ;-)

TANDEM Exchange

Apart from the vocab-lists, and my teachers of course, what probably helped me most was doing a "Tandem-Exchange".

My first "Tandem-Partner" was my Spanish neighbour who wanted to improve her Spanish. We would go for a coffee twice a week in the afternoons and spend about 1 hour talking. One day we spoke in Spanish and the other day was entirely in English. This practice really helped me a lot (and her as well, I think).

I would take my notebook to write down new words that she taught me, or new colloquial expressions and tried to use them straight away.

It gave me a lot of confidence and my pronunciation and accuracy improved a lot thanks to those 2 hours per week (and a cup of coffee..;-)

Obviously, the best thing is to find a boyfriend or girlfriend that is Spanish, which is what I did in the end.

Fear

One of the worst things that can happen to you if you want to learn a language is being afraid to speak it.

If we are afraid to speak it's not that we are afraid of what we will say, but of the reaction that other people might have. We think that they might laugh at us if we make any silly mistakes.

Unfortunately it's true, they might laugh at us. And that is probably the worst thing they could ever do to you!

They laughed at me many times, which really frustrated me. But I gave them the following answer:

"I am doing my utmost to learn YOUR language to be able to communicate with YOU, whereas YOU are showing no interest in learning MY language to communicate with ME. If you prefer it, from now on, I will only speak MY language and YOU will not understand a word of what I am saying, although I will be able to understand what YOU are saying in YOUR language." It usually calms them down and makes them understand that what you are doing is very respectful.

Sometimes, though, it is true that your mistake can be very funny, and then it is normal that they laugh WITH you, but not AT you.

Nevertheless, even if they laugh at you a hundred times, you should never give up. In the end you will learn Spanish and that's all that matters.

How to choose a good language course

I could give you an easy answer to that question and tell you to come to my school (Babel Idiomas) if you want a good language course. But you might not want to come to Malaga or you might prefer a different school.

Nevertheless, after having been language student in the past and a language school manager in the present, I think that there are a few things that you should take into account if you are looking for a good language school:

1. Small classes: make sure that classes are no bigger than 8 or 10 students
2. Levels: make sure that the school tests all the students when they enter the school and that they are able to offer all levels. (you can usually do a level test on the school's website)
3. Teachers: make sure all teachers are university graduates and native speakers.
4. Class material: make sure that the school uses good class material (just ask what material they use)
5. Personal service: make sure that the school is flexible and fast enough if you have any kind of problem, albeit in your course or accommodation. (How? Ask them any question by email and see how long it takes them to answer....)
6. Atmosphere: make sure there is a good atmosphere in the school and that you are going to have a good time. Ask them for student comments.