

Spanish Hacking:

Fast-Tracking Your Way to Fluency





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With a background in International Business and years of experience in the field, my true passion lies in sharing my culture and language. I have been creating YouTube videos showcasing my culture for 5 years. In 2019, while living in Vietnam, I started teaching Spanish, specializing in conversational skills. I have extensive experience teaching children and adults.



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Writer

Dave Cook is a multilingual educator with a passion for teaching English in international schools across Mexico, Colombia, Japan, and Vietnam. His recent achievement is being appointed as the head of the English language department at an international school in Vietnam, a testament to the satisfaction of both students and school management.

Now, teaming up with his wife Karen Aguayo, they bring together their expertise to help others achieve fluency in a fast and effective way. Drawing from their own language learning experiences and interactions with students from diverse backgrounds, they've distilled their secrets to improve Spanish conversations into this e-book.

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Introduction

So you have decided to learn Spanish? Maybe you've already begun your language-learning journey or maybe you're just about to start.

Whether you are just about to learn your first words or you are already fairly confident in your abilities and you just want to improve, this ebook is going to help you to identify the specific techniques and strategies that will help you to boost your progress and realize your goals quickly.

Before we start, it's important to work out why are you studying this language?

Learning a language is fascinating and a lot of fun but it also involves dedication, commitment and more-than-a-little frustration. So why do you want to put in the effort?

At Thrive in Spanish, we've worked with hundreds of language learners and we know that nobody is learning because they...

- ...want to know 50,000 words in another language
- ...learn to know the difference between the preterite and the past perfect
- ...long to master the use of subjunctive moods and conditional sentences.

Instead, people learn Spanish because they want to connect, communicate, and immerse themselves in a vibrant new culture. They

want to order a meal at a local Mexican restaurant with confidence, laugh at the neighborhood ‘chisme’, and build friendships that extend beyond language barriers. They dream of experiencing foreign countries and communities as more than just tourists, but as a member of the community - even if only temporarily.

So, if the student’s goal is to communicate, integrate, and make friends, why would you confine yourself to traditional language learning methods? Why do so many courses restrict you to rote memorization of vocabulary lists and drill exercises? These methods may serve as a good foundation, but they often fall short in teaching the nuances of conversation and cultural understanding that are vital to truly thrive in a new language environment.

If you only take one thing from this ebook, let it be this: Your goal is not to learn Spanish. Your goal is so much more. Spanish is just the tool which will help you to achieve it.

Ask yourself this. Would you rather be able to recite the conjugations of all of the irregular verbs perfectly or would you prefer to be able to accept an invitation to have dinner with a Mexican family and feel comfortable, with the skills to make the most of the situation even if you don’t understand every word you hear and maybe you make some mistakes.

That’s why at Thrive in Spanish, our teaching goes beyond grammar rules and vocabulary lists - we help you live the language, not just learn it. In this ebook, we’re going to show you how!

Disclaimer

There is nothing wrong with promoting fluency and accuracy. If your goal is to be able to write academic essays in Spanish, that's great. At Thrive in Spanish, we focus on building conversational fluency and we help students to get to a position where they can learn in an organic way from real-world resources. We don't focus on language perfection at all costs.

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Don't be this Kind of Language Learner

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As a teacher, I've encountered numerous students who view learning Spanish as a mission to be completed, a chore to be crossed off their to-do list. They're earnest and diligent, putting their best foot forward in class, yet they confine their language interaction to that one or two hours a week in the classroom. This approach, though well-intentioned, often leaves them stuck at a basic level, finding Spanish difficult and elusive despite hours of study.

It's always a bit heart-wrenching to watch, because these students are putting in so much effort, yet not reaping the fruits of their labor. They mean well, and they work hard. But the key they're missing is integration - they're not letting Spanish spill over the classroom boundaries and into their everyday lives.

Contrast this with some of the most successful language learners I've seen. They're not necessarily more intelligent or even harder working than their struggling counterparts. In fact, they make just as many mistakes, if not more. But that's precisely their secret sauce - they're not afraid to make mistakes.

These learners make the most out of their language journey. They embrace every opportunity to speak Spanish, whether it makes perfect sense or not. They relish in their awkward, halting conversations

with the waiter who replies in English, and they laugh off their linguistic blunders. They have a treasure trove of stories about their embarrassing mistakes, which they wear as badges of honor.

Consider this: two language learners move to a new country. The first, let's call him John, sticks mostly to his comfort zone, preferring the company of fellow expats. While there's nothing inherently wrong with this, it means that his opportunities to practice Spanish and to really understand the culture are limited. John's life becomes a microcosm of his homeland, with Spanish as a distant soundtrack, never quite making its way into his daily routine.

On the other hand, there's Maria. Maria jumps into the deep end, making friends with locals and other expats alike. She embraces every chance to use Spanish, whether she's buying groceries, hanging out with her local friends, or simply striking up a conversation with a neighbor. Sure, she fumbles sometimes, mispronounces words, and even gets her tenses mixed up. But each time, she learns, she grows, and she connects on a more profound level with her new community.

When John and Maria return from their vacation, their stories tell it all. John talks about the expat barbecues, the familiar dishes, the English movies. His vacation sounds fun, comfortable, but strangely similar to life back home. Maria, on the other hand, tells tales of local fiestas, homemade dishes taught by her friends, Spanish songs that made her dance, and the warm smiles

of people who became her family. Her stories sparkle with the color and rhythm of her new life, a testimony to her embrace of the Spanish language and culture.

So, the choice is clear. Do you want to be a John, limiting your experiences to the familiar? Or do you aspire to be a Maria, who sees language not just as a tool, but as a key to unlocking vibrant, enriching experiences? The choice is yours. Embrace the journey, the mishaps, and the fun of learning Spanish, and see where it takes you!

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Perfection is Overrated: Embrace Effective Strategies for Language Learning

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There are times when perfect communication is essential. Consider a courtroom lawyer delivering an impassioned argument, every word carefully selected and phrased for maximum impact. Imagine a doctor meticulously ordering medicine for a patient, where a single miscommunication can have severe consequences. In these situations, perfect command over language is not just beneficial; it's crucial.

However, let's consider the reality for most language learners. Situations requiring such precision are not the norm. As a student of Spanish looking to integrate into Mexican culture, you're more likely to find yourself sharing a casual chat with your local grocer or discussing weekend plans with new friends. In these scenarios, a few grammatical missteps or misused words won't impede your ability to communicate effectively.

If you do find yourself in a situation where accuracy is of utmost importance, don't worry! This book will guide you through various strategies you can employ to ensure clear and accurate communication. However, it's essential to understand that when it comes to language learning, imperfection is not just okay—it's inevitable.

Embracing this inevitability is the first step towards progress. As a language learner, your goal is to communicate, integrate, and

create connections, and minor mistakes shouldn't deter you from pursuing these objectives. Mispronouncing a word or messing up a verb tense isn't a failure; it's a part of the learning process. Each stumble is a stepping stone, guiding you towards linguistic competence and cultural integration.

The journey to fluency is less about achieving perfection and more about cultivating understanding, building confidence, and fostering connections. Let's explore how embracing effective learning strategies can pave the way to your language success, regardless of the inevitable imperfections.

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Navigating Misunderstandings: Strategies for Non- critical Situations

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In situations where precision isn't crucial, misunderstandings are opportunities for growth rather than pitfalls. Often, students panic and get flustered when they don't know a word. This can turn a potentially fun and beneficial learning opportunity into a stressful and discouraging situation. Instead, maintaining a positive and relaxed mindset can transform these moments into enlightening experiences that contribute significantly to your language learning journey.

The following strategies can help you handle these situations with ease and confidence:

- 1. Embrace the Mistake:** The first step in navigating misunderstandings is to accept that they happen. Instead of feeling embarrassed, view these as learning opportunities. Most native speakers are understanding and patient, especially if they know you are learning their language.
- 2. Context is Key:** If you stumble upon a word or phrase you're unsure about, try to infer its meaning from the context before asking for clarification. This practice not only helps improve your comprehension skills but also allows the conversation to flow more naturally.
- 3. Polite Clarification:** If you're still unsure about a certain point, don't hesitate to ask for clarification. The following phrases like,

“Could you please repeat that?” or “Could you explain that in another way?” are useful tools in your communication arsenal.

- ¿Puedes repetir por favor? - Could you repeat that please?
- Perdón, no entendí - I'm sorry, I didn't understand
- ¿Qué significa ...? - What does ... mean?

4. Use Paraphrasing: If you're struggling to find the exact word or phrase, try conveying your thoughts differently. Using synonyms, describing the word, or giving examples can often get your point across effectively.

5. Non-verbal Communication: When words fail, remember that communication is not just about language. Gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice can significantly aid in expressing yourself or understanding others.

6. Keep it Simple: If you're feeling overwhelmed, stick to simple and clear sentences. You don't always need complex vocabulary to make yourself understood.

Maybe you've found that it is more difficult to speak another language on the phone compared to in person. This is because communication is so much more than just language, context, gestures and other non-verbal signals play such an important role when we want to make ourselves understood. Make the most of these when you can't quite find the words.

Remember, the goal is communication, not perfection. Each interaction is a step towards becoming more comfortable with the Spanish

language and integrating into the culture. Embrace the journey, and you'll find that you're thriving in your new language environment, one conversation at a time.

When you find yourself in these situations, and you will, make a mental note of what it was that you didn't know. When you have the time and resources, try to work out how you could have said that in Spanish. Ask a native speaker - use an online forum if you don't know any. These slightly embarrassing situations are the best learning opportunities. One Thrive in Spanish student told me a story of when she was eating with a Mexican family. She wanted to say that she didn't like the food in the USA because there were a lot of preservatives and that Mexican food was more natural. She said:

No me gusta la comida en Estados Unidos porque tiene muchos preservativos.

Little did she know that "preservativo" in Spanish doesn't mean what she thought it meant.

Preservativo = Condom!

She had just told this family that American food is full of condoms! What an embarrassing mistake! But do you know what? She never forgot the word for preservatives (conservadores) or condoms in Spanish again!

Mastering Precision: Strategies for Crucial Conversations

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Imagine this: you're at a local bakery in Mexico, ready to order a complex cake for your friend's birthday party. This isn't your regular chit-chat with the barista; accuracy is important here, unless you want a cake saying "Happy Birthday, Octopus" instead of "Happy Birthday, Oscar". Yikes!

In such situations, where linguistic accuracy is crucial, here are some light-hearted but highly effective strategies you can employ:

- 1. The Trusty Dictionary:** Remember the good old times when we actually had to flip through pages to find a word? Well, that old-school technique can come in handy now. A dictionary, unlike online translators, provides multiple meanings, idioms, and examples for each word, helping you choose the most fitting one for your context. So dust off that dictionary and let's get flipping!
- 2. Prepare, Prepare, Prepare:** Just as you'd rehearse your lines before a big performance, it's helpful to prepare what you want to say in advance. Write it down, say it out loud, practice it with your pet - they're great listeners, you know!
- 3. Don't be afraid to check:** Ask the other person to repeat your request to you to make sure that you are on the same page. If you

don't understand the first time, feel free to ask for clarification with phrases like:

- *¿Podrías decirlo de otra forma?*

- *Could you say it in a different way?*

4. Phonetics Fun: Spanish pronunciation may be a tongue-twister at times, but sounding out the words phonetically can help. Listen to the pronunciation online and copy it. Break down the word into sounds and then combine them. You'll feel like a language scientist in no time!

5. The Phrasebook Phenomenon: A handy pocket-sized phrasebook can be a lifesaver. It's like having a mini tutor in your pocket, ready to help you out with common phrases and responses. If pronunciation is a struggle, you can point out the phrase you want to say. And who knows? It might just prevent any octopus-related cake mishaps!

Accuracy is important, but remember to keep the process enjoyable. After all, you're not just learning a language, you're diving into a whole new world of experiences, so let's make it a fun ride!

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Decoding the Spanish Language: Understanding Its Structure

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Ever tried fitting a square peg into a round hole? It's tough, isn't it? And yet, that's what many language learners do when they try to translate Spanish word-for-word into English. This method often leads to confusion, frustration, and sentences that sound as if Yoda from Star Wars said them. "Happy you make me" might sound romantic in a galaxy far, far away, but back on Earth, it's a bit odd, isn't it?

Let's make things easier and more enjoyable. Unshackle yourself from the constraints of English grammar and let's embrace the freedom that comes with understanding the structure of the Spanish language.

If you've ever learned a second language, you've probably heard people say, "Once you learn one, the rest are easier!" And you've probably wondered, "What sorcery is this?" Well, let me reveal the magic trick.

Learning a second language is like opening a door to a new perspective. You accept that word order can do a somersault and still make sense. You realize that words don't always have a twin in every language – sometimes they are unique, just like you. And you discover that certain expressions and idioms just have to be accepted as they are, without questioning their logic. (Like, why do we say "head over heels in love" when our head is usually over our heels?)

So, as you embark on your journey with Spanish, remember that it's not about cramming English sentences into Spanish molds. It's about understanding the rhythm, the flow, the music of Spanish language and thought. The verb might decide to hang out at the end of the sentence or an adjective might sneak in before a noun. It's all part of the adventure!

Unshackle your mind from the confines of one language. Embrace the unpredictable twists and turns of Spanish, and you'll not only understand its structure, you'll begin to think in it. And that, my friend, is when the magic truly happens!

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Lost in Translation: The Colorful World of Idioms

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Imagine you're an explorer, discovering a new land for the first time. As you wander through this strange territory, you stumble upon a phrase that says, "Kick the bucket." Do you start looking for a bucket to kick? Not if you know your idioms! That would leave the locals looking at you like you're the one who's lost your marbles!

You see, an idiom is a phrase where the words together have a different meaning than their literal definitions. It's a bit like a secret code, puzzling to newcomers but instantly clear to those who are in on the secret. They give a language its distinct flavor, adding a layer of cultural richness that can't be appreciated through direct translation.

Take our friend, the British manager. Eager to lead some activities at a company in China, he started his session with a classic English idiom, "To get the ball rolling..." In an attempt to clarify, he mimed the action of rolling a bowling ball. Instead of nodding heads, he was met with a sea of puzzled faces. His literal interpretation of the idiom just bowled a strike in the alley of confusion!

In reality, "to get the ball rolling" simply means to start an activity or process. It doesn't involve any actual balls or any form of athletic activity. Now, if our British manager had known this, he might have

avoided the bemused stares and his activity could have started off on the right foot, idiomatically speaking!

So you need to be aware of idioms in your own language before you even try to start speaking another. You could translate a phrase perfectly and it could still not make sense. Try to express yourself in the most simple way possible to avoid confusion.

But if you really want to wow people with your impressive Spanish, here are some idioms that you might want to show off:

- **Colgar los tenis** - *Literally: to hang up your sneakers*

This is an interesting one because it translates to a totally different idiom in English “to kick the bucket”. If you say colgó los tenis it means someone died. As you know, Mexicans celebrate death so they have several idioms to say this:

Lo chupó la bruja - *the witch sucked him*

Ya piró - *he already left (pirar is casual like “beat it”, “scram”, or “bounce”)*

Lo cargó el payaso - *the clown carried him*

- **Pan comido** - *literally: eaten bread*

This also has a similar translation in English - it’s a piece of cake.

As you may know, bread in Mexico can be very sweet so often pan is used to refer to what would be cake in English.

- **Echar hueva** - *literally: throw eggs (kind of)*

Latin Americans have an interesting obsession with eggs. You may know that while in English, you say balls to refer to testicles, in Spanish, we say eggs.

¡Me pateó en los huevos! - He kicked me in the balls!

But it gets even weirder. In English, if somebody has big balls, they say that they are brave. In Spanish, someone with enormous testicles is lazy!

In many parts of Latin America (particularly South America) the word huevón (he with big eggs) is a very common word to refer to a man, particularly if he is lazy. In Mexico, this same logic leads us to the phrase **Echar hueva**, which means the activity of being lazy or doing nothing. Don't ask me why **huevo** became **hueva** here! Sometimes languages are just like that...

¿Qué vas a hacer hoy? - Voy a echar hueva

What are you going to do today?

- Nothing. I'm just going to be lazy.

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The Role of Immersion: Surrounding Yourself with Spanish

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Imagine diving into a sparkling blue ocean. You're surrounded by fascinating marine life, from multicolored fish to stunning coral reefs. This is what language immersion feels like. You're submerged in the vibrant, living world of Spanish. It's not just about picking up vocabulary and grammar; it's about absorbing the sounds, the expressions, the culture, and the way of life.

Now, you might be thinking, "Great, I'll just binge-watch Spanish shows on Netflix!" Hold on, amigo! While that's a good start, it isn't enough to just watch shows passively. Language learning is an active process. When you hear a new phrase, write it down. Practice it in different sentences. Maybe use it in your next conversation. This way, you're not just a spectator; you're part of the action!

Moreover, it's worth noting that translated books and dubbed series might not give you the most authentic experience. The language in these resources can often be unnatural or lack the cultural context that makes language learning truly enriching. Think about it: language isn't just words and grammar. Watching Harry Potter or Friends again in Spanish might help you pick up a few new words but you're not going to get the same insight and understanding as if you watched a telenovela or local stand up comedians.

This is where original Spanish media comes into play. Movies, books, music, podcasts, you name it! They provide a snapshot of life in Spanish-speaking countries, complete with their customs, idioms, and social nuances. It's like getting a backstage pass to the grand show of Spanish culture.

But wait, there's more! The world of social media and memes is a treasure trove for language learners. These platforms showcase the zeitgeist, the spirit of the times, in a fun and relatable way. They're the digital equivalent of a bustling marketplace where you can pick up colloquial expressions, understand popular jokes, and even make friends. The best thing about it is that you can take part, even if you're on the other side of the world! Be an active participant in the content, comment, ask questions, and put your skills to the test.

Remember, language learning isn't a sprint; it's more like a salsa dance. It's about the rhythm, the movements, the connection with your partner, and, most importantly, enjoying the music. So, immerse yourself in Spanish, feel the beat, and let's dance!

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Integrating Learning into Your Daily Routine

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Language learning, much like a fitness regime, benefits greatly from consistency. Your daily routine offers a wealth of opportunities to subtly incorporate Spanish into your life. It's about turning those mundane moments into mini language lessons.

A mistake that so many students make is thinking that one or two hours of classes a week is enough to reach their goals. It definitely isn't - but it's not hard to supplement those hours either! Remember, learning a language isn't like a lot of skills that you study, where you master a certain process or memorize a list of facts. Instead, it's a journey of transformation, a voyage into a new cultural landscape. You're learning to see life from a different perspective, to understand people's experiences in a different light. This isn't a journey you can rush through. Instead, it's about finding ways to enrich your daily life with Spanish, making the language a constant, vibrant presence that opens your eyes to a whole new world.

Spanish classes are fun, but how sad must it be if that is your only exposure to the language!

Consider your daily commute. Instead of listening to the latest gossip from your favorite celebrity podcast, why not tune into a Spanish podcast? It's a fantastic way to immerse yourself in the

language and culture while you navigate through traffic or public transport. Don't worry about understanding every word; focus on the rhythm and flow of the language.

Next, how about turning your kitchen into a fiesta with some Spanish music? As you stir, sauté, or grill, you can hum along to catchy tunes and learn new words in the process. If a particular lyric grabs your attention, note it down. If that's not possible, don't fret! Sing along to practice pronunciation.

Here's the golden rule: consistency beats intensity. Studying for a few minutes each day is far more effective than cramming for hours once a week. Think about all the idle moments in your day. Waiting in line at the bank? Review your vocabulary app. Have ten minutes to spare in the morning and night? Use them to learn a new grammar rule or review what you learned yesterday.

Integrating Spanish into your daily routine is like slipping vegetables into a delicious smoothie - it's a painless way to get your daily dose. So, weave Spanish into the fabric of your day and watch your language skills grow effortlessly. Happy learning!

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Harnessing the Power of Language Apps

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There's a widespread misconception among language learners - they believe that by spending countless hours on language apps like Duolingo, they'll magically become fluent in Spanish. Let's get this straight once and for all - this simply isn't true. Relying solely on language apps to learn Spanish is like hoping to win a marathon by only doing arm workouts - it just won't work.

On the flip side, the most successful language learners I've met have one thing in common: they know how to effectively use language apps as part of their larger learning strategy.

How can these two perspectives coexist, you ask? Well, the key lies in understanding the role of language apps in the overall learning process. Successful language learners are fully aware that memorizing vocabulary is a crucial part of their journey. And they also know that flashcard apps like Quizlet or Anki can be excellent tools for this job. However, they also acknowledge the fact that knowing every word in the dictionary won't enable them to hold a conversation in Spanish. Vocabulary is merely one piece of the puzzle.

The next piece involves grappling with complex and unfamiliar grammatical structures, which need to become second nature. But let's face it, traditional methods like writing pages of exercises can be

mind-numbingly dull. Here's where apps like Duolingo shine - they turn grammar practice into a fun and engaging game. But even then, knowing how to construct a perfect sentence won't do much good if you can't speak it smoothly and naturally.

In essence, language apps are powerful tools, but they can't work miracles on their own. Successful language learners understand this and use these apps as part of a balanced approach, combining them with other crucial methods like conversation practice, cultural immersion, and active listening.

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The secret to language app success

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Now let's talk about something quite personal to your language learning journey - curating your own vocabulary lists. This is an often-underrated strategy that can supercharge your learning experience.

Textbooks and structured courses, like our very own Thrive in Spanish, are crucial for laying a solid foundation. They teach you essential vocabulary that enables you to navigate the world in Spanish. However, there's something especially magical about the words and phrases you discover in the wild - it's as if they have their own story to tell.

Let's imagine your language learning process as a thrilling safari, where you're out hunting for fascinating new bits of language. Each day, you go out into the wild - whether that's a Spanish-speaking neighborhood, a Mexican restaurant, or just a Spanish YouTube channel - with a keen eye and an open mind. When you encounter a new, unfamiliar word or phrase, you trap it within your vocabulary app.

Now here's the exciting part - as you review and practice these wild words, they're not just abstract entries in a dictionary. They're vivid memories, experiences, and stories. The word "Panadería" is no longer just the English equivalent "Bakery". It becomes that cute little shop around the corner with the intoxicating smell of fresh bread. "Lárgate

de aquí” isn’t merely translated as “go away”. It’s the dramatic phrase that the telenovela heroine screams at her philandering husband.

In this way, each word or phrase you ‘catch’ is tied to a unique context, a memory, or a sensory experience. It’s these rich associations that make the language come alive and stick in your mind. So, take the plunge and start curating your own vocabulary lists. Trust us, it will add a whole new dimension to your Spanish learning journey!

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