

Master key elements for fluency and high levels of proficiency in Spanish.

## **7 Essentials to Speak Spanish Like a Native**

### **It's one language.**

While there are many variations of Spanish, it's still one language. Many of the words that are used in different countries are unique to that country or unique to that area. I'm sure you can think of similar examples in English. The English spoken in the UK is slightly different from that in the United States. People speak differently in New York than they do in Georgia. Having said all of that, it's still the same language. You might hear a new word or two, or may not understand someone's accent right away, but it's still the same language.

Don't worry too much about the kind of Spanish that you're learning. A fluent speaker of Spanish can communicate with other fluent speakers of Spanish. It's all one language.

### **How long does it take?**

Spanish is what we call a Category I language- fairly close to English. People who go through the Foreign Service Institute (training for U.S. diplomats) can generally attain a B2 level (ACTFL Intermediate High) of Spanish with 750 to 1000 hours of study in many cases. CEFR B2 and ACTFL Intermediate High might not mean anything to you, but suffice to say, it's a pretty high level of language. You can speak and communicate with people, but in no way is it as easy as in your own language. You're still going to be pretty rough with your grammar. You'll still mispronounce some words, You'll still be grasping for vocabulary at times, but you can communicate with people. A native speaker speaks much more fluently and accurately than that level.

While I talked about that general amount of time that many Foreign Service Officers preparing for their assignments abroad can invest to attain that level of fluency that allows them to function in life in a Spanish-speaking country, to hit that really high native level, takes two or three times as long, in my opinion. It's relatively easy to move through the Novice and Intermediate levels. It tends to take a bit longer to move from that high intermediate through the Advanced, and up into that native-level language.

## **Learning-acquisition**

Dr. Stephen Krashen is a great teacher and researcher of Second Language Acquisition. He explains the difference between learning languages versus language acquisition very well.

When we learn a language, think about all of those rote things that you do. Flashcards and apps, exercises, going to a traditional language class, studying verbs, or going to a language lab. Those are all traditional, deliberate activities to learn a new language. They work by helping you get new patterns and words into your long-term memory that eventually all work together to a level where you can create your own language and sentences.

Acquisition is something that's slightly different. Acquisition is the way that you learned your first language. You were spoken to, you watched TV, you were read to, you went to school, or you listened to music, to name just a few ways we acquire language. You were completely immersed in that language. Instead of learning separate words and phrases, or verb tenses and patterns, in the way we talked about with learning, you absorbed all the messages you heard and read naturally.

Many people who learn multiple languages, and/or learn languages to very high levels, understand how these two things work together. You want to be deliberate in your studies, journaling, use of flashcards, regular chunks of time to study and study of grammar. In combination with regular, focused periods of study, you also want to spend a lot of time in acquisition. This could be speaking to native speakers, traveling, reading, watching movies or listening to music. Again, those immersive activities that taught you your own language. You will make swift progress when you learn how to combine these two things.

## **Input versus output.**

If you follow the polyglot community at all, you'll probably hear a lot of debate about input versus output. Dr. Stephen Krashen again tells us in one of his theories on second language acquisition that we learn languages by understanding messages. We learn languages from our input. That is learning languages from what we hear and what we see. I think this applies to both the learning and the acquisition. We learn languages from all the way down to the simple flashcard, all the way up to understanding a word or phrase in context. This might be in the line of a movie that we saw in the target language, or a phrase we read in a magazine.

Input- the new words and phrases you see, hear and understand- is where you get new languages.

When you get into the advanced level of Spanish, you need to really invest some time in input that's appropriate to your level. Invest in time in the paragraph level and beyond. Read books, magazines and newspapers. Listen to podcasts, news reports and watch television in your target language. Do TPR, which is total physical response. For example, take an exercise class in Spanish. There are many available on YouTube. Learn how to dance in Spanish. Again, many tutorials are available on YouTube. Learn how to play the guitar in Spanish, or more about a subject that truly interests you.

Output is an extremely important component of learning to communicate in a new language that needs a serious investment of time. Output is what you say and that you write. Go on italki and speak to a native speaker if you can't afford to take time to go abroad. Investing in time on a site like italki allows you to get both input and output. When you speak to native speakers, the beauty of it is that you get to test your own language skills with output. They then say things back to you- your input. That's how to build your language skills at lightning speed.

You don't always need another person to help you make progress. Get a notebook and journal every day. Get your phone out and start recording yourself talking. A minute or so spent bullet pointing topics to practice speaking Spanish can lead to long periods of time speaking. One of the best parts is that these periods spent speaking and writing not only build fluency, they point out your gaps in knowledge that you can then fill. Whether it's your journal, your voice memos or time with a native, document your progress. Do it every day for a month and you'll be amazed at how quickly you progress.

Invest time in input and output, as well as time in learning and acquisition. Time invested in these things is a fool-proof way to make fast progress.

### **Know how to measure your progress.**

One of the greatest things about learning a new language is that the assessment is sort of naturally built-in. We learn from the things that we hear and that we see. The test is whether or not we can respond. This is language assessment at its most basic level. However, to really get up into that native level, you need to learn about more of the assessment techniques that are out there.

Find the link to the self-assessment workbook at the end of the transcript. It's going to give you lots of options on how to measure your progress. There's also a course that you can sign up for on to how to measure your progress and fluency. Both include some self-assessment methods, as well as some official ways that you can get your language assessed. The more you learn how to assess your language skills, the more quickly you can move forward. It takes learning a language from being an unfocused type of experience to a very targeted, very deliberate, fast progression of skills.

### **Fit learning into your life in five-week chunks.**

Someone said to me recently, "We feed an elephant in bites.". I love the expression and imagery because I think it speaks so well to anything that's a big project. Do it in bites, step by step by step.

Nowadays, fitting language learning into your life doesn't have to be all or nothing. We don't have to get on a plane and go abroad, or go to a language class to learn. While those are fantastic options, the internet and mobile technology have transformed language teaching and learning. You could learn an entire language using nothing but your phone.

People from all over the world are sharing their language and culture in a way unprecedented in mankind. This allows you access to any language you want to learn from wherever you are. Learning does not have to be a class that you go to three nights a week that doesn't fit into your life easily. Learning can happen while you take walks. Learning can happen on your commute. Maybe you drive and you can listen in your car every day. Maybe you take a train and can do apps during your journey. Maybe you use your iPad. Do your language studies every day when you're cleaning your house or doing your errands. Combine learning with your exercise routine and start working out in Spanish (there's some great YouTube videos you can find on blog).

I love to do this in five-week chunks. Five weeks is enough time to make a fair bit of progress, but it also gives you enough time to check back in and assess yourself again, so you can keep moving forward. Remember when we talked about that 750 to 1000 hours to attain what most of us consider to be fluency, and how it takes probably twice as long to really get from that fluency level up to that native speaker level? Think about what you'll do over the next five weeks that fits into your life. Do you have 10 hours a week where you're commuting? Why don't you listen to a great

book from Audible on your phone? Do you have a little bit more time? You can listen to those same audiobooks while you walk an hour a day, if you want. There's lots of videos out there that give instruction in many things you might want to learn in many languages.

Some five-week periods you might have more time than others. As a teacher, I have much more free time in the summer. Some of my five-week language studies are intense. Maybe your life is the same. Maybe for five weeks you can get in two or three hundred hours of language study because you don't have any other commitments and you are in the target language country. Maybe your only language study for five weeks is going to be the 25 or 50 hours that you spend commuting or doing errands. Just know that all of that time is going to add up and bring you closer and closer to fluency.

### **Have fun.**

One thing that disheartens me a little bit as a language teacher is seeing people give up. However, it almost never surprises me. I think a lot of times people focus on certain systems or specific apps, and while there are many great ones out there, you are going to go nuts doing the same thing over and over again. Boredom will lead to giving up. If you give up, you'll never make progress.

There are so many effective ways to study a language that are varied, fun, and interesting. Look at cooking tutorials on YouTube. Research, read, and make recipes following the directions in Spanish. Do a tutorial. Learn how to paint. Listen to history lectures. Listen to the news. Watch television and films. There's many available on Amazon Prime, Netflix, and YouTube. Watch reality shows and telenovelas, do crossword puzzles, travel, make mistakes, listen to music, read your horoscope. It doesn't have to be academic to teach you Spanish.

Whether or not you choose to speak Spanish like a native speaker, I hope these seven essentials help you on your journey to learning to speak Spanish like a native. ¡Adiós!

[Dr. Stephen Krashen](#)