

Learning Spanish in Spain

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It was 1995 B.I. (before the Internet), and for the first time in my life, as I looked to my left and looked to my right, I couldn't see the Rocky Mountains. Having been raised in the Salt Lake City Valley, those mountains were my north, or better said, my east and west. Based on them, I always knew where I was and the four directions. A few months earlier, I had visited my local neighborhood library to check out some books on my new destination—Spain, with small white painted villages, cobble stone streets, and donkeys. Book after book of Spain showed the same pictures; however, where I was now standing, there were no white painted villages, cobbled streets, or donkeys to be seen. I was in the heart of the biggest city that I had ever witnessed. Madrid was as if I found myself in Mario's world, where I would go down one tube (known as the subway) and would pop up in a whole new level (another neighborhood). In this new place, all of my traveling was done in the underground, and because of this, it was impossible to piece together the streets or join the neighborhoods together. I was lost, lost without my east and west. There were no rocky peaks to indicate the direction. Here there were only buildings that all looked too much alike and shadows that danced with the passing day.

I had always prided myself in my sense of direction and now, after having this stripped away from me, I was frustrated and lost. The frustration of losing one of my skills, that of orientation, set in and was only outdone by the dismal feeling of loss of what I thought as my greatest skill, that of communication.

I knew no Spanish, or as they say in Spain, *ni jota*, which means not knowing how to say even the letter J. It wasn't that I didn't know Spanish, it was that I didn't even know how to differentiate between Spanish and anyone of the other Romance Languages. If I had to participate in a language line-up, I couldn't have picked Spanish out if it was standing next to French or Italian or Portuguese. So there, on a corner, on a street, in a neighborhood that I wasn't familiar with, being doubly lost, I began my language journey.

As they say, the best way to discover a new city is to walk it, and that's exactly what I started to do. Connecting one street to another and one barrio to its adjacent is how I began to orient myself. Truthfully, after a few months, I was well acquainted with Madrid. Learning is very different for every individual student, but in my case, I quickly regained my skill of orientation.



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Where once it was the rocky peaks, now I was able to recognize the buildings, bars, parks, and even the underground stations. I could move freely through my new town, but Spanish, the language, is a whole other story. That skill still eluded me. That journey was a long, hard road.

Just as I had begun little by little to piece together the city, I was trying to do the same with my new language. I would write down a list of words every day that I would see on my walks, quickly learning that *farmacia* is a “pharmacy” or that *el supermercado* is a “shopping center”; however, the verbs, the process of conjugation, became my own personal labyrinth—one in which I would be lost for many months. At the start, I was baffled with the concept of having to change the endings of the verbs. It just seemed too complex, so I decided that I would talk without using them. I began forming sentences like *Yo de Utah, Yo diecinueve años*, which in English would be “I from Utah, I nineteen years.” Even though it was a step in the right direction, and allowed me to communicate information quickly, it also won me the nickname of Tarzan.

My “Tarzan Period,” as I like to call it, lasted about two months. Towards the end of this period I realized that I needed to use verbs and that I couldn’t continue leaving them out of all of my sentences. The only problem was that I was still confused and felt unprepared to conjugate them. So, I decided that I could just include them in their infinitive form. So examples of my new sentences were *Yo tener hambre* or *Yo necesitar agua*, which in English would be “I to have hunger” or “I to need water.” This, my “Infinitive Period,” lasted a few more months and allowed me to convey more in my sentence and also allowed me to begin to have some basic conversations. Even though I continued to struggle with the verbs, I was learning a lot of vocabulary just by being immersed in the language. I continued to write down new words in a pocket notebook. My case is a little different than most learners because I was in Spain, but wasn’t there to specifically learn Spanish, so I wasn’t taking language classes. I would constantly jot down new words and try to use what little Spanish I knew.

It was out of necessity, the necessity to be able to talk with people, this was the reason I was trying to learn Spanish. I realized that there was a problem with my Infinitive Period and that was there was no way to express time, whether something had happened, was happening, or was going to happen. I couldn’t talk about the past, the present, or the future. But, I found a very easy solution to this problem. I could use *ayer* “yesterday” to refer to anything that had happened in the past. *Ayer ir a la escuela* is “Yesterday I to go to school.” The only thing was that I would express past actions that I had done last week the same as activities from 5 to ten years ago by using the time indicator “yesterday.” To speak of any present tense activity I would use the word *hoy* “today,” as in *Hoy ir al banco* “Today I to go to the bank,” and for the future *mañana* “tomorrow,” as in *Mañana casar y tener muchos niños* “Tomorrow I to marry and to have many children”. This period is what I call my “Time Indicators Period” and it lasted for a few more months.

After about ten months of living in Madrid and going through these different periods, I felt ready to start conjugating verbs. It was as if I finally grasped the concept and I had wrapped my brain around it. It was a euphoric moment for me because that necessity that had weighed so heavily upon me was lifted and I started to be able to not only understand what people were saying around me but could participate in the conversations. This was a liberation. I was no longer stuck in that frustration of knowing what I wanted to say but not knowing how to say it. I

could express my ideas and feelings, and in the next few months I made leaps and bounds in my language journey.

At that moment, what had been a very trying and frustrating experience changed, and language, the Spanish language, became fun. Everything about this new language was a game. Could I understand the song on the radio, the T.V. commercial, or my friend's story? How much could I read in the book before I was completely lost? The most gratifying experience was hearing a word that I didn't know and writing it down, remembering the context of its usage, and then waiting for a future moment when I could use this newly learned word in a conversation. When it happened, a smile would appear on my face and I would give invisible "hi fives" to myself.

I was in love with Madrid, the culture of the city and its people, which translated into a love of their language. After two years of living in Madrid and walking its streets I decided that if I wanted to continue progressing in my new found tongue that I had to study and dedicate more time to Spanish. So I made the decision to study Spanish Literature in the Complutense University in Madrid. I can still recall as if it were yesterday, the Saturdays I spent reading *El Quijote* in Retiro Park. Retiro is Madrid's version of Central Park. It felt so good to be reading this classic work and be brought to laughter by Cervantes' crazy tales. As I laughed I realized that I understood what I was reading and this brought me a great joy. It was amazing to think that I could read the classics in Spanish when just a few years earlier I couldn't even finger it in a language line-up. The most surprising thing to me about my language journey is that Spanish gave me something that I had lost earlier in my life, and that was my creativity. Spanish allowed me to find my poetic voice that I had lost in English, I don't know when or where I had lost it or if I ever had it. Astonishingly the other thing that started to take place on those Saturdays in the park when I would take a break from reading is that I began to write, at first verses or annotations that later would become poems, poems always in Spanish. I had never written a poem in English before in my whole life, and now, in my newly learned language, I began to create, to write, to play with all my new words.

Over twenty years have passed since I stood a lost young man on a corner in a new city, frustrated with myself because I knew no Spanish. I have spent fifteen of those twenty years living in Spain, and I can say that today I'm still in love with that city and Spanish. So I guess I should say that my language journey was, and is, a love story, and as a Spanish professor, my greatest hope is that I can help my students fall in love.

About the author:

Dr. Zachary Payne is a Spanish Language professor. He received his PhD from Madrid's Complutense University in Spanish and Latin American Thought. His academic interests are Language, Poetry and Translation. He loves living in Hawai'i and spends his time with his wife on the beach and bodysurfing.