

Breaking Through the Language Barrier

It's not exactly breaking news that the demographics of the labor force have changed drastically in parts of the U.S. Here along the Gulf Shore of Texas, I watched for years as job-site communication problems became more common. Increasingly, it began to look like learning Spanish was unavoidable. Though I could think of a few things I'd rather do with my time than learn a foreign language, I saw a couple of reasons to make the commitment.

First, though I'm a carpenter and not a GC, I often provide project management for owners who act as their own contractor. In that capacity, I'm constantly talking with the Spanish-speaking employees of other subcontractors on site. I don't actually direct their work, but I can help keep things moving if a problem or question arises while the owner is off site.

Second, I'm not getting any younger, and the day may come when I'm ready to give up the physical work and hire on with a larger company as a supervisor. In South Texas, even with my construction knowledge, I wouldn't stand much of a chance at landing that job unless I could speak Spanish.

Back in School

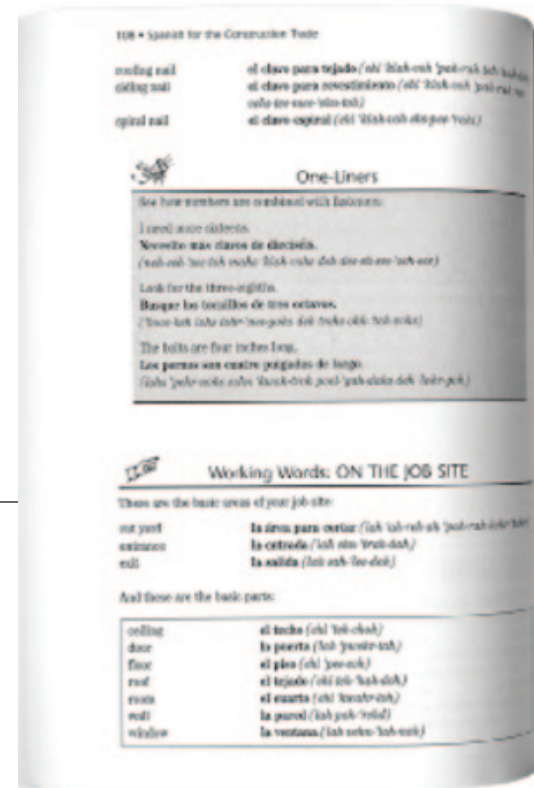
My first step was a six-week-long course at San Jacinto Community College. Tuition was \$250, and the textbook (*Invitaciones: An Interactive Worktext for Beginning Spanish*, Vista) cost a whopping \$105. I figured if I was going to make a \$355 investment, I'd better mean it. The teacher

warned us the first night that the course would be demanding and there would be only a few of us left at the end — and she was right. But she also promised that if we stuck with it and did the homework, we'd be able to converse in Spanish when we finished. It was definitely an accelerated introduction, with class for three hours every Tuesday and Thursday, reinforced by two to three hours a day of home study.

Being computer-illiterate, I was concerned I might miss out on some important exercises, but in fact this wasn't the case — the text, though it is available with companion CDs, is designed as a traditional workbook. The teacher did a great job covering basic verb conjugations, idioms, and a sprinkling of Hispanic cultural issues, all with a healthy dose of fun.

She also encouraged us to expose ourselves to Spanish any way we could. For me, this meant tuning into Spanish radio stations all day when I worked in my shop. On site, I did the same with my radio-receiver ear protectors. I'll never forget the day when — without having to think about it — I understood a complete sentence spoken by the announcer. "I can do this!" I remember thinking.

Just as the teacher had warned, the pace of the course was pretty grueling. We had to turn in six to eight pages of workbook exercises every class. I would usually get home around 9 p.m., then stay up a couple of hours to start the assignment while it was still fresh. I also typically studied for an hour or two before work every morning, then did the same every evening after



the kids were in bed. I had made the commitment and was in fact very motivated. The odd thing was I had never really liked school; this was one of the few times that learning something showed immediate results.

For Further Reading

The only downside to the course was that the textbook was, not surprisingly, geared toward college activities. So for more job-specific usage, I purchased *Spanish for the Construction Trade* (Barron's). The exhaustive vocabulary sections alone make this an excellent resource for home study and reference on the job. If you can't find it in this book, you'll probably never need to say it at work.

An aspect of the book I don't care for is the universal use of the more formal second person ("usted") instead of the familiar ("tu") form. In our part of the country, and certainly on job sites, the familiar usage is much more common in day-to-day life. Also, I wouldn't mind seeing the glossary translate Spanish to English as well as English to Spanish. But overall, this is a great book; I keep copies in both my truck and my shop.



Going back to school to learn Spanish can pay big dividends in the field

by Mike Shannahan

Continuing Ed

When the course ended last fall, I had no choice but to find other ways to keep learning, and here I got two lucky breaks.

First, I started working on a home owned by a retired Spanish teacher and her husband, two of the nicest people I've ever known. La Profesora has been patient beyond words in helping me through some of the more difficult aspects of learning the Spanish language (can anyone say "compound tenses" or "indirect object pronouns"?). I have continued to have weekly sessions with her. She offered to do this for free, or to swap for work, but I preferred a more formal arrangement. I pay her for one- to two-hour tutorial sessions and I always get more than my money's worth.

The second big break was finding myself working regularly with a bilingual apprentice who is employed by a property maintenance company I do a lot of work for. He is as eager to become a journeyman carpenter as I am to become fluent, so we have a great time together.

Recently I've also enlisted help from one of my daughters, who gives me nightly homework assignments by randomly

pulling verb forms from the book *501 Spanish Verbs* (Barron's). She gives me a list of 10 words — they can be any verb in any tense; first, second, or third person — and I have to write a sentence with each one. Then, weekly, my tutor goes over the sentences, corrects them, and explains the more idiomatic ways to express what I was attempting to say.

I'm continually looking for ways to learn more Spanish. I still listen to the radio, and I read *La Semana*, a free weekly regional newspaper. I also read the bilingual version of a local church bulletin and pay attention to every Spanish sign and billboard I see — all efforts to help me think in Spanish, which is key to speaking it well.

Immersion

The efforts I've described so far are a good foundation, but the best part of learning Spanish has been using it with native speakers. I try to never miss an opportunity to do so, which in this part of the country is not difficult. If Texans are known for anything, it's our friendly demeanor, and Latinos tend to raise this to an art form. In the bank, at church, in the lumberyard — you name it — if you can't find someone with whom to speak Spanish around here, you're not trying very hard.

If I'm waiting in line at a store, I'll often turn to the person behind me and ask, "¿Hablás español?" If he or she is a native speaker, most likely I'll be greeted with a smile, and we may have a short conversation about something — our families, our jobs, whatever comes up. If the conversa-

tion is going too quickly for me to follow, I'll ask the person to speak a little more slowly. Sometimes we end up speaking for several minutes.

You Can Do It

I started learning Spanish last fall. When people see me conversing, they'll ask me how long I've known the language. When I tell them a year, they typically act surprised; I hear that the learning curve is often a little longer. I say this not to brag but to point out that it's possible — even for someone with a checkered academic record.

At this point, I wouldn't say "mission accomplished." I am, however, now able to easily conduct business on site with native speakers, which makes for a more productive and safer job. The increase in the workers' respect for me when I speak to them in their native tongue is palpable. Over the last several months I've also taken on jobs where my communication skills were central. (I increase my standard hourly rate in these situations.)

In the future, if I'm ever in a job trailer interviewing and am asked, "Can you communicate in Spanish?", all I'll have to do is step outside and start a conversation. Learning Spanish is not for everyone, but if you take the initiative you can do it. I won't say it isn't difficult and time-consuming — quite the opposite. But it is also more fun than I ever could have imagined.

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