

## Learning Styles And Their Effect On Language Learning

By Frank Gerace Note: This article makes special reference to the effect of learning styles in the learning of Spanish but the principles are valid for all language learning.

¡LEER ES PODER!

¡Learning Spanish!

How can you best learn Spanish? It depends on your particular approach to learning. Take a look at the following approaches to learning Spanish. But if you already know where you are, you can skip the following reflections and go back to see what is available for your level (beginning, intermediate, or advanced) in Spanish, to sort and search for your specific needs, as well as to read reviews and summaries of the books that strike your interest.

### DIFFERENT STYLES

**Non-Virgins:** Those who studied another language should use the skills they acquired with that language. They know what a conjugation is. They know that verbs are different from nouns. Their previous study gives them some mental hooks to help with their Spanish. They should not throw away their advantage by working on Spanish in a completely conversational manner. They should try to get an overview of some commonplaces in the language. They should get an "old fashioned" grammar and lean heavily on the tables to organize their thought. This type of learner should "invent" Spanish on the basis of what they know of the other language. They will remember a little of the structure of the other language. For example, what is the relation between adverbs and adjectives in Spanish? What is the most common way to express what happened yesterday (past tense)? If the other language is a Western language, they should observe the possible similarities. If the other language is non-Western, the very differences can be their starting point to learn the counterparts in Spanish. In short, they should study "the wrong way". This is not for everyone. The learner should know his or herself.

**Brains:** These folks will operate much like the Non-Virgins. They will progress better by concentrating on the little points that intrigue them such as the difference in usage between the prepositions "por" and "para" and the verbs "ser" and "estar". To master one or two of these elements so characteristic of Spanish will help the learner build on their conquests to go on to master other things. This analytical approach will be of great utility to the persons with the cerebral learning style.

**Motor Mouths:** The persons who are not afraid to try out their Spanish will progress very rapidly. These folks probably have a little genetic edge over the rest of us. However, we all should try to put together the pieces as we learn them. If there is no opportunity to talk with someone else, then we can tape our attempts. There are two parts to this early talking practice: confidence and pronunciation. The most important thing is to gain confidence or to be thick-skinned enough to speak your piece, knowing that the exercise will pay dividends. However, we should not put off working on our pronunciation until it is too late and we have given up on acquiring a valid accent. There are too many people who after living years in a Spanish speaking country are perfect in their grammar but who have a typical or even stereotypical English accent. There is no need for that. Spanish is perfectly regular in its phonetics. Motor mouths should also work on their accent!

**People People:** Anyone who likes being with people and who has a need to communicate will progress quickly in learning a language. Many outgoing, friendly people learn language in the "motor mouth" mode. However, other people without the gifts of the motor mouths can gain valuable exposure to the language by just following their social instincts. These folks, however, should not overlook the need to speak correctly. Although they are not interested in traditional grammar in the same way the "brains" are, they must work at speaking correctly. We all know people who learned English years ago, but still say things like, "I am interested to go with you". You don't want to spend your life in Spanish with a similar easily corrected error. Learn it right as soon as you can. The people people have to stay curious about the language.

**Learn-while-doing People:** I was told once that the only way to learn French was to sleep with a French woman. The idea behind this is that we learn the expressions and words for the activities we are interested in. People who learn like this try to get their Spanish-speaking friends to accompany them as they cook or fix their car. They find that they learn better when their whole body is involved in learning the new words and phrases. For example, the person who learns the word "serrucho" while sawing a board will remember it better than the person (see the "word collector") who just learns the vocabulary from a list.

**Word Collectors:** This person may be great at crossword puzzles (Crucigramas) in Spanish but rarely gets to speak it. If you find yourself learning words

and not getting any further, break out of it! We once had a houseguest, a young man from Spain who came to learn English. There were times when our family would be talking Spanish, and he would echo all the Spanish words with their English equivalents. He had a great vocabulary but never got around to talking English. This kind of learner should always make sure that they make up sentences to practice using the new words they learn. They can combine their ability with vocabulary with the "divide and conquer" tactic. They should not only invent sentences to use the new words; they should run through different grammatical constructions as the setting for their vocabulary.

**Divide and Conquer People:** Every learner of a foreign language has to learn to incorporate the learning style of dividing and conquering into their own style. If they are "brains"; they should concentrate on one grammatical turn of phrase, such as conditions contrary to fact, (If my grandfather hadn't died, he'd be alive today!) until they can handle it.

The people people should repeat in the same conversation the new expression that they just heard. The same goes for all the others. The only way to learn a language is by following the "swiss cheese" method, nibble away at the things you don't know, and master them until they are all gone.

**Lost Latinos:** This person should try to remember the nursery rhymes that they might have learned in Spanish. They should run over the names of their cousins and uncles. All of this will loosen up their rusty language skills. They should listen to how others speak "spanglish"; and try to figure out the proper way to say things. They should make a game of trying to spot the influence of English in the Spanish they hear at home or in the barrio. This detective work will make them more aware of correcting whatever bad habits they have picked up. However, don't think that these persons have all the advantages. The person learning from scratch will probably spell Spanish words better than those who know a little Spanish. I'm not sure why.

**What works for EVERYONE...** There are two activities that will help everyone, no matter what their learning style, move forward rapidly: They are: 1. Passive Listening, and 2. Pattern Response Drills.

1. **Passive Listening.** Everyone should keep the Spanish radio on as much as possible. Keep the radio or TV on while you do other things. It has to be the sea of sound that you swim in while you are beginning your study of Spanish. You don't have to concentrate on it; you are not listening to try to understand. After a while you won't hear it but it will be affecting you. Little by little you will begin to anticipate the rhythm of the language, even before you understand everything. You will also begin to recognize certain words. You will begin to hear "beyond"; the differences in pronunciation of different people and recognize the underlying word. Once you clearly hear a word or phrase, you can look it up and progressively expand your vocabulary.

2. **Pattern Response Drills.** You have to run through all the permutations of the new expressions that you learn. For example, suppose you just learned to say. "Pedro tiene cuatro años"; rather than translating from the English incorrectly, "Pedro es cuatro";. Now to make this new element of the language stick with you, you should go on substituting different ages and the names of different people. You have to be able to say comfortably, "María tiene cuatro años." "Juan tiene ocho años." "Yo tengo treinta años." "¿Cuántos años tienes tú?" "Nosotros tenemos cuarenta años." This type of drill is necessary for all the different learning styles.

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## About the Author

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