

# LEARNER PROFILE: SPANISH

  
(español, castellano)

This guide presents common challenges faced by Spanish learners of English and typical features of language production. Please note, these guidelines are intended to advise teachers on areas where students may experience problems; however, native speakers may not all find the following points challenging.



## Facts

- **Language family:** Part of the Ibero-Romance family, evolved from Latin
- **Native speakers:** 477 million (second-most spoken in world)
- **Second language speakers:** 76 million (fourth-most spoken as second language)
- **Location:** Spanish is an official language of Spain and the Spanish territories of Ceuta and Melilla, the Canary Islands and the plazas de soberanía, as well as Equatorial Guinea, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Uruguay and Venezuela. It's also spoken by large minorities in Trinidad and Tobago, Brazil, Belize and the USA.
- **Writing system:** Latin script.
- **Alphabet:** The Spanish alphabet has 27 letters, the same as the English alphabet but with the addition of ñ.



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### Pronunciation

- The Spanish letter 'v' is pronounced as 'b' which can lead to Spanish speakers using the 'b' sound in English words e.g. 'very' becomes 'bery'.
- The 'th' sound in 'think' and 'the' is pronounced as 't' or 'd'.
- Spanish uses a rolled 'r' sound so this may remain when they speak English and they may struggle with words where English speakers omit or soften the 'r' sound.
- In Spanish, all written letters are pronounced, except the letter 'h'. Speakers may struggle to pronounce English words which have silent letters. They may fail to pronounce the 'h' sound at all or use the sound that is used for the Spanish 'j' instead.
- Spanish speakers may add an epenthetic 'e' to the front of words starting with an 's', e.g. 'Espain', 'estudent'.
- The [dʒ] sound (the first and last sounds of the word 'judge') is not used in Spanish so Spanish speakers may struggle to pronounce this and use 'y' instead, e.g. 'yeneral' instead of 'general', 'yam' instead of jam.
- Spanish speakers may struggle to identify and produce the differences in minimal pairs of long and short vowels e.g. ship/sheep, bit/beat.
- In English, we use the neutral schwa sound frequently (for example, the first and last vowel sounds in 'banana'). Spanish speakers may not recognise or use this and over-pronounce vowels instead.
- Words like 'suit' and 'juice' may be pronounced as 'sweet' and 'jweece'.
- The 't' sound in Spanish is pronounced softly, similar to a 'd'.
- Spanish students may struggle with consonant clusters in English, such as in the word 'fifths'.
- Spanish is a syllable-timed language, which places the syllable stress on last syllable of a long word. English is a stress-timed language and native Spanish speakers may have difficulties producing unstressed English syllables.
- Spanish speakers may forget to pronounce the 3rd person singular marker -s in English, which is added to verbs such as 'think' in 'she thinks'.



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### Grammar

- Spanish speakers may mix up prepositions, translating directly from Spanish collocations e.g. 'I depend of you', 'marry with someone'.
- In Spanish, the possessive pronoun agrees with the grammatical gender of the object, leading to mistakes like 'Lisa has his bus pass' because 'bus pass' (pase de autobús) is masculine.
- As nouns in Spanish are gendered, Spanish speakers may mistakenly attribute genders to nouns in English by using 'he/she' instead of 'it' e.g. 'I like football. He is fun'.
- In Spanish, the subject pronoun is not required as the verb conjugation indicates who it is. However, this is not the case in English.
- In Spanish, the same verb 'hacer' is used to mean 'make' and 'do' so Spanish speakers may struggle to identify when to use 'make' or 'do' in collocations e.g. make an effort, do your best.
- In Spanish the collective noun 'la gente' meaning 'people' is singular, whereas the English 'people' is plural. Spanish speakers may say things like 'the people here is friendly.' Similar misunderstanding of collective nouns like 'everybody' can lead to mistakes with subject-verb agreement e.g. 'Everybody like his music'.
- In Spanish, the verb 'to have' is used to express age, so Spanish speakers may say 'I have 12 years' instead of 'I am 12'. Similarly, expressions of hunger and thirst use the verb 'to have', leading to mistakes like 'I have hungry'.
- The same word is used to mean 'lose' and 'miss' in Spanish, so Spanish speakers may struggle to see the distinction in English, using phrases like 'I have lost the bus'.
- The Spanish equivalent to agreeing is 'to be in accord with something', so Spanish speakers may say things like 'I am agree'.
- In Spanish, modal verbs must be followed by infinitive verbs. Therefore, native Spanish speakers may insert an unnecessary 'to' in between a modal and a lexical verb, such as 'I must to study every day'.
- In Spanish, adjectives have a plural form to agree with the noun, whereas in English the adjective does not change. This can lead to mistakes like 'Ibiza's beaches are incredibles'.



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- In Spanish, adjectives usually come after nouns, which is the opposite to English. Spanish speakers may say things like, 'My mother was a teacher very good', 'I have the hair brown'.
- Spanish uses double negative structures and doesn't have an equivalent of 'anything' or 'ever', which can lead to mistakes like 'I don't know nothing' or 'She does not work never'. There are also no negative auxiliaries in Spanish as a verb is made negative by adding 'no' in front of it, which leads to mistakes like 'I no know the answer'.
- In Spanish, possessives are constructed using the form 'the pen of my brother', so Spanish speakers may use this construction instead of using possessive apostrophes.

### Writing

- In Spanish, it is common not to capitalise nationalities, languages, religions, days of the week or months.
- In Spanish, the only double consonants are cc, rr, ll and nn so Spanish speakers may misspell English words which contain other double consonants e.g. mm, bb, ss.
- In Spanish, a decimal point is used where a comma would be used in English numbers e.g. 10.000 instead of 10,000.

### Cultural differences

- School uniform is not usually worn in state schools in Spain, and teachers are often called by their first name. This can make UK schools seem overly formal.
- Spanish schools have a long summer holiday with more frequent days off during the year for religious or regional/national holidays.
- It is quite common for pupils to repeat a year (or more) of school in Spain.
- Bilingual education is common in the Catalan, Basque and Galician regions of Spain.
- Only 45% of children in Mexico finish their high school education.



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## Recommended FlashAcademy® lessons

-  Beginner > Phonics 1 > Set 4

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-  Beginner > Phonics 2 > 3-letter clusters

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-  Beginner > Holidays & Travel > Prepositions of time (in, on, at)

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-  Beginner > Holidays & Travel > Prepositions of place (in, on, at)

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-  Beginner > Holidays & Travel > In, on, by

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-  Beginner > English Language > Capital Letters

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-  Beginner > English Language > Subject Verb Agreement

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-  Beginner > English Language > Reading lesson 4

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-  Beginner > Punctuation > Possessive apostrophes I, Possessive apostrophes II

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-  Intermediate > Maths > Currency symbols

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-  Intermediate > Everyday Life > Make vs. Do