

## Strategies for when you don't understand Spanish

Being able to participate in conversational interaction is an important part of learning another language. When you talk, there are many things that you focus on all at the same time: pronunciation, grammar, the vocabulary, using appropriate styles of talking, being polite, being formal when necessary, body language, etc.

Therefore, it is important that you practice speaking as much as possible. Practicing conversation – even with another student – is critical because it forces you to think *syntactically*. This means that your second language gets a chance to develop because you apply, use, and express different aspects of the language at the same time.

In this handout, we provide you with some helpful tips on how to improve your communication skills. We also give you some suggestions based on the research of what language learners do.

- Ask questions to the person with whom you're talking.
  - (Literally, during the conversation, it's ok to say: "You know... how do you say it?" "Sabes ... el ... ¿cómo se llama, cuando...?") If you give enough detail, often times the person will give you the word and help you. All humans desire to communicate by getting meaning across, and research shows that people work together in conversation to do so.
- Don't worry about making mistakes. (It's ok! Just keep on talking. Errors are part of the learning process. And even if you make a grammatical error, your meaning will still get across).
- Simplify what you want to say. Use words that you know. Throw in a word from your first language! It is ok to use words from other languages that you know! The most important thing is being understood and making meaning. (You'll work on grammar in class!)
- Practice words and phrases when you are alone. Think of something you want to say and ask yourself: "How would a Spanish speaker say this?" Take note of expressions that you have heard Spanish speakers use (here in Miami, online, at work, etc.); write them down and practice saying them aloud to yourself.
- Initiate conversations with Spanish speakers as much as you can. Friends, colleagues, classmates, the uber driver, people at a store, and even your professor are great resources.
- Pre-plan out in your mind what you want to say someone (i.e., prepare and practice your sentences). Try it out with a Spanish speaker. Be willing to talk about topics that aren't familiar to you.
- Ask questions during the conversation.
- Memorize "phrases" or even expressions of how Spanish speakers ask for something, greet someone, join a conversation, turn down an invitation, make a request, apologize, etc. These are called speech acts. Observe how they're done in your community or online.
- Ask people to correct you if you make a mistake. (Tell them that you are trying to improve your Spanish).
- Use "circumlocution," which means the use of many words to describe something simple. For example, if you can't remember the word for *loan*, it's perfectly fine to say "the money you ask for from the bank." Just try the best that you can. And/or, throw in words from your other languages and linguistic varieties. Use your amazing linguistic resources. Remember: you are making a bilingual brain, not two monolingual ones!
- All human beings, no matter what the language, use conversation fillers (muletillas) when they talk. Try these out in Spanish! Examples are: *es de, entonces, bueno, mmhmmm, mmmmm, eeeeh, like, anyway, I was like, pero like, ...* etc. Can you think of any that you have heard Spanish speakers say? How does your culture do conversation fillers? ☺

### And most importantly:

**Be confident and believe in yourself.** There are many social, cognitive, and economic benefits to knowing how to speak another language. Most adults who start learning another language will always have an accent and will make mistakes – this is ok! (EVERYONE HAS AN ACCENT IN WHAT EVER LANGUAGE YOU'RE SPEAKING IN). Don't worry about making mistakes and sounding silly – every adult who learns another language goes through the same stages that you do. **You are showing how open-minded you are in trying to communicate in another language.** Good for you!

**Reference:**

Elola, I., & Liskin-Gasparro, J. (2008). In J. D. Ewald and A. Edstrom (Eds.), *El español a través de la lingüística: Preguntas y respuestas*. Somerville: Cascadilla Press.

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