

10 Mistakes to Avoid While Learning Spanish

Here, then, are 10 common mistakes that English speakers commonly make when they are learning Spanish. They aren't necessarily the most common errors, but they are ones that should studiously be avoided if you hope to get beyond a beginner's level.

1. Assuming that Spanish words that look like English words mean the same thing: Words that have the same or similar form in both languages are known as cognates. Since Spanish and English share a large vocabulary derived from Latin, more often than not words that are alike in both languages have similar meanings. But there are plenty of exceptions, and it wouldn't be a bad idea to study these lists of false cognates and partial cognates. You'll find, for example, that *embarazada* usually means "pregnant" rather than "embarrassed," and that a *violador* usually is a rapist, not someone who merely committed a traffic infraction.

2. Using pronouns unnecessarily: With very few exceptions, English sentences require a subject. But in Spanish, that frequently isn't true. Where it would be understood by the context, the subject of a sentence (which in English is often would be a pronoun) can and usually should be omitted. It usually wouldn't be grammatically incorrect to include the pronoun, but use of the pronoun can sound clunky or give it unnecessary attention.

3. Not learning how to use prepositions properly: Prepositions can be notoriously challenging. It can be helpful to think about the purpose of the prepositions as you learn them, rather than their translations. This will help you avoid mistakes such as *pienso acerca de ti* for "I'm thinking about you" instead of *pienso en ti*.

4. Always following English sentence order: You can usually follow English sentence order (except for putting most adjectives after the nouns they modify) and be understood. As you're learning the language, pay attention to the many times where the subject is placed after the verb. Changing the word order can sometimes subtly change the meaning of a sentence, and your use of the language can be enriched as you learn to different word orders. Also, some English constructions, such as placing a preposition at the end of the sentences, definitively should not be imitated in Spanish.

5. Translating idioms word for word: Both languages have their share of idioms, phrases whose meanings cannot readily be determined from the meanings of the individual words. Some idioms translate exactly (for example, *bajo control* means "under control"), but many don't. For example, *en el acto* is an idiom meaning "on the spot." Translate them word for word and you'll end up with *en el sitio* and "in the act," both of which are incorrect.

6. Not learning when to use articles (*un, una, el, la, los, las*): Foreigners learning English often have a hard time knowing when to use or not use "a," "an" and "the," and it's the same for English speakers trying to learn Spanish. Using them incorrectly usually won't keep you from being understood, but it will mark you as someone who's awkward with the language.

7. Not learning the subjunctive mood: In English, we seldom make a distinction when verbs are in the subjunctive mood. But the subjunctive can't be avoided in Spanish if you wish to do more than state simple facts and ask simple questions.

8. Ignoring proper pronunciation: Spanish pronunciation isn't all that difficult to learn, and you should make an effort to imitate native speakers whenever possible. The most common mistakes of beginners include making the *l* of *fútbol* sound like the "ll" in "football," making the *b* and *v* sound different from each other (the sounds are identical in Spanish), and failing to trill the *r*.

9. Assuming that the textbook (or this site) is always correct: Even educated people don't always talk according to the rules. Although Spanish according to the rules will almost always be understood, it can lack the texture and sincerity of Spanish as it really is spoken. Once you feel comfortable using the language, feel free to imitate the Spanish you hear in real life.

10. Being afraid to make mistakes: Mistakes are inevitable with learning, and the worst mistake you could make would be to be fearful of using what you know. Remember that no matter how many mistakes you make, wherever you go in the Spanish-speaking world your sincere attempts to learn the language will almost always be appreciated. ♦