

Next Stop: Spanish

Keith Massey

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Dedication

To my wife.

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About the Author

Keith Massey, Ph.D., is the author of *Intermediate Arabic for Dummies*. He is a former linguist with the National Security Agency and is currently a language instructor.

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Introduction to Next Stop: Spanish

Now, the story I'm about to tell you will include an unexpected adventure that, in many ways, has changed my life. But it is also the story of how I started learning Spanish. My uncle, whom you will meet soon, taught me some Spanish using a method he himself designed. It gives one a basic speaking ability by focusing on the most essential words and phrases you need. But it still requires a bit of work on the part of the learner.

If you want to join me fully on this adventure, you should try to learn along with me. As a part of this story, I'll be describing times when I needed to study the next installments of words my uncle gave me. My uncle's advice to me was to write out the English and Spanish in my own handwriting and then read the lists out loud to practice the words. There will also be times when you encounter Spanish in this book without understanding it completely. Join the club. But my uncle told me over and over again to just try and understand what you can. If you even just write out the lists of words once and try to follow this story, you'll be starting down the path of learning Spanish. And as I tell the story, I will be using more and more Spanish within it, as we both learn and become more comfortable with the language.

A few comments on how to pronounce Spanish. First of all, you can listen to all the words and phrases you will learn in this book on the author's website. But here's a rough idea of how to pronounce Spanish. Most vowels and consonants are pronounced the same as English. Here are the ones that are different:

A is pronounced like the O in *on*.

C is a hard K (as in *card*) before A, O, and U, but an S sound before E and I.

E is like the AY in *bay*.

G is a hard G (as in *game*) before A, O, and U, but a rough H before E and I.

H is silent.

I is like the EE in *feel*.

J is a rough H.

LL is pronounced like Y.

Ñ is pronounced like the NY in *canyon*.

QU is pronounced as K.

R is trilled.

RR is a long trill.

Z is pronounced like S.

Buena suerte, dear reader. That's Spanish for "Good luck!"

Chapter One

A jet roared overhead as the main terminal appeared around a curve. As I looked up, I saw wisps of white cloud beyond the plane in a brilliant blue sky.

“You have your passport, right?” my dad asked.

“You saw me put in my bag,” I answered, laughing.

“He’s just nervous since you’ve never left the country,” my mom said, running her hand through the hair on the back of my dad’s head. His premature gray seemed especially white against the deep black of his cassock. As an Orthodox priest, he wouldn’t absolutely have to wear the formal garb at all times. But that’s my dad’s way.

“Do you guys even know where Uncle Andrew is taking me?”

“Somewhere Spanish speaking, I assume,” he said.

“I just thought since you and he talk on the phone at least once a day he might have let it slip.”

“He wants it all to be a surprise for you,” my mom said, turning around with a huge smile. “He’s kept it a surprise even from his twin.”

“And he knows how to keep a secret,” my dad said.

We all laughed in the knowledge of my uncle’s particular background. As a former linguist with the National Security Agency, he was once in on lots of highly classified material that he can’t divulge even now.

My dad pulled up in front of a set of large glass doors. A sign overhead was marked with the name of my airline. We all piled out to head for the trunk.

“Here you go, John,” he said, putting the strap of my single carry-on over my shoulder. It was my only luggage, since I like to travel light. My father kissed me on each cheek, in the tradition of his Romanian heritage. “Call us as soon as you land in Washington.”

“I will.”

My mom hugged me and then kissed my forehead. “You’re going to have a great time. I know that is all about studying, but don’t forget to have some fun, okay?”

“Yes, mom. And you two enjoy the cruise!”

She smiled. “I’m a little nervous about getting seasick, but we’ll have fun. You get going now.”

“Alright. Call us later,” my dad repeated, stepping back toward the driver’s door of the car.

“Okay. Bye.” Turning toward the terminal building, I saw the automatic doors open to me as I approached. Once inside, I spotted a mercifully short line for check-in. Just a few minutes later, I was approaching the desk.

“Hi there,” I said, putting my driver’s license and the sheets I printed from the internet on the counter.

“Good afternoon,” responded a blue-uniformed woman with a nod. She took my materials and began furiously typing at her keyboard. “It’s just you travelling today, Mr. Valquist?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Could I have an aisle seat if one’s available?” Reading her badge, I spotted that her last name was Villalobos. Even though she spoke with no hint of an accent, I realized then that she did have vaguely Hispanic features.

“One passenger flying to Reagan International?” she confirmed, setting my identification and other sheets back in front of me.

“Yes,” I said, chickening out on a momentary impulse to respond in what little Spanish I already knew.

She handed me a paper envelope containing my boarding pass. “I’ve got you confirmed and

ticketed, aisle seat as requested.”

I remembered that my uncle had asked me to promise that I would use Spanish as much as possible on this trip. “*Gracias*,” I said.

She lit up with a huge smile. “¿*Habla español?*”

“Well, that’s about as much as I know right now,” I said. “But I’m going to Washington to study with my uncle.”

“*Buena suerte*,” she said, nodding. “Good luck.”

“*Gracias*.”

“*De nada*.”

An escalator brought me toward the security checkpoint. Walking slowly toward the growing line of passengers, I put my wallet, keys, and phone in a side pocket of my bag. Even though I had never flown internationally, I had gotten plenty of experience in it during flights to visit colleges during the past several months.

Once beyond the metal detector and x-ray machine, I settled into a seat by my gate. I extracted a manila folder from my bag and began looking at two pages of Spanish language materials that had come as an attachment in an email from my uncle. I leaned back in my chair and took a deep breath, releasing it in a sigh louder than I intended. I hate studying. So why was I spending the final week before I started college subjecting myself to a Spanish language boot camp? Sitting there looking at those pages, I needed to remind myself why I agreed to do this.

I have never been any good at languages. Two years of French early in high school had left me with little more to show than “*bonjour*.” My dad had tried off and on to teach me Romanian, which gave me little more than “*bună ziua*.” What I was very good at, however, was baseball. I was ranked as the top pitcher in Ohio my senior year and received a full scholarship to the University of Virginia. Unfortunately, I would still need to take two years of a language for my degree. I couldn’t bear to think of going back and starting over in French. So Spanish seemed the most logical choice, and I was already registered to take Spanish 101 in the fall semester. When my uncle found out about all of this, he and my dad crafted this plan for me to jump start some Spanish abilities before school started. It all seemed like a fine idea a few months back. But now here I was, sitting in an airport looking at my first homework assignment since graduation two months earlier.

I reread the letter Uncle Andrew sent me.

“This is ‘Phase One’ of your Spanish studies. Try to know what’s on these pages well before your arrival. And be able to tell me the Spanish for ‘I need help’ when you see me.”

A clock on the wall told me that I still had an hour before boarding. It was just enough time to make at least a dent in this work. Despite the initial shock of seeing how much I was supposed to study, I was relieved to notice that I already knew many of these words and phrases:

Greetings and Phrases

Hello

Hola

Goodbye

Adiós

See you later

Hasta luego

I took a deep breath and continued studying:

Good morning

Buenos días

Good afternoon

Buenas tardes

Good night

Buenas noches

Please

Por favor

Thank you

Gracias

You're welcome

De nada

Excuse me

Perdóneme

yes

sí

no / not

no

maybe

quizás

and

y

or

o

Following my uncle's advice, I took out a notebook and began the task of merely copying the list of greetings out, in both English and Spanish. I did notice that even concentrating momentarily on the task went a long way towards teaching me the few items I was not familiar with, like *perdóneme* and *quizás*.

My uncle had also told me that I was supposed to read all of this out loud after writing it down. Just to make sure that I was pronouncing everything correctly, I listened on my MP3 player to a file my uncle sent in which he read the whole list out loud. As I started, I read it first in a very hushed voice. I guess I was nervous that the other people would think I was crazy to be talking to myself. But I relaxed a bit about it and raised my volume when I saw that no one around me seemed to be bothered

I had just finished a second read-through of this section when the attendant at my gate came on the loud speaker.

“Boarding all rows for flight 407 with direct service to Washington.”

Packing up my things, I proceeded down the gangway and settled into my seat on what turned out to be a sparsely occupied flight. I had the aisle seat and no one had the window. Once airborne, I sorted out all my materials in the seat next to me and headed into the rest of the words and phrases I was supposed to study before arrival:

Do you speak English?

¿Habla inglés?

I don't speak Spanish very well.

Yo no hablo español muy bien.

“¿Habla inglés?” I said, repeating the phrase. “*Yo no hablo español muy bien.*”

“That's okay,” a woman's voice said, pushing a beverage cart up the aisle from behind. “I speak English.”

I turned a bit startled and saw a flight attendant smiling broadly. Her deep brown and curly hair and the name Maria on her name badge explained her response.

“I'm going to Washington to study Spanish with my uncle,” I said.

“That's nice,” she said. “*Buena suerte.*” Maria continued pushing the cart up the aisle and began dispensing drinks. Judging from the number of rows, I decided I had just enough time to at least begin working through the rest of the phrases:

Please speak more slowly.

Por favor, hable más despacio.

Please repeat that.

Por favor, repita eso.

I'm sorry, but I don't understand.

Lo siento, pero yo no lo entiendo.

How do you say that in Spanish?

¿Cómo se dice eso en español?

What does that word mean?

¿Qué quiere decir esa palabra?

It seemed that my uncle was giving me precisely those statements I would need if I began bravely using my Spanish as he suggested. I wrote them all out and gave the sentences a listen before starting to read them out loud to myself. Next came some basic verbs:

Basic Verbs

I am

Yo soy / Yo estoy

I have

Yo tengo

I like

Me gusta / Me gustan

I need

Yo necesito

I want

Yo quiero

I can

Yo puedo

I go / I will

Yo voy

I know

Yo sé

I think that

Yo creo que

Could you ... ?

¿Podría Usted ... ?

I'd like ...

Me gustaría ...

I had just finished writing out this batch of words when Maria returned.

“What would you like to drink?” she asked.

I realized I knew enough to attempt the exchange in Spanish. “¿*Como se dice* ‘Water with ice’ *español?*”

“*Agua con hielo,*” she said.

I repeated her words carefully and softly. Looking at my list, I added what she told me to one of the sentences there. “*Me gustaría agua con hielo.*” I smiled with excitement at having created an entire sentence. “Oh, *por favor,*” I added.

“*Claro,*” she said, giggling and preparing the beverage. “*Aquí la tiene,*” she said, handing me a plastic glass and a napkin. She set a bag of pretzels on my tray and continued on her duties.

Energized by the exchange, I pressed forward in my studies. All that was left of “Phase One” was a list of the pronouns and some basic numbers:

Pronouns

I

Yo

you (sing. informal)

tú

you (sing. formal)

Usted

he

él

she

ella

we

nosotros

you (pl. informal)

vosotros

you (pl. formal)

Ustedes

they

ellos

Numbers

number

número

zero

cero

one

uno

two

dos

three

tres

four

cuatro

five

cinco

six

seis

seven

siete

eight

ocho

nine

nueve

ten

diez

It relieved me to be done with the first installment of my studies, but then I remembered my uncle's assignment. I was supposed to say "I need help" in Spanish when I saw him. I had learned that *yo necesito* means "I need," but several scans through Phase One did not give me the final piece of the puzzle. I was momentarily worried I would not be able to complete the task when I remembered that Maria would certainly know the word.

A few minutes later she was returning to the front of the plane.

"*Perdóneme*," I said upon her approach.

"*¿Sí?*"

"*¿Cómo se dice 'help' en español?*"

"*Ayuda*," she replied.

I quickly wrote it on my sheet. "*Gracias*," I said grinning.

"*De nada*." She continued toward the front of the plane.

I pushed the button on my armrest and reclined my seat. Closing my eyes, all I saw were Spanish phrases in my own handwriting scrolling through my mind. A few minutes later, I slipped into a restless nap.

A nudge on my arm suddenly pulled me into a groggy consciousness.

"We're getting ready to land," Maria whispered. "Please put your chair back in the upright position."

"*¿Sí?*" I said, still disoriented.

"*Bueno*," she said with a smile. "You're starting to think in Spanish."

I nodded and complied with her request. Looking out the window, I saw we were already quite close to landing. Maria had apparently let me sleep until the absolute last second she could. A moment after seeing fields and trees, we were descending upon nothing but city. In the distance, a flash of white caught my eye. I focused on the source and spotted the unmistakable spire of the Washington Monument. A flutter of wonder and pride surged in my heart. Even though I had been to Washington on a number of occasions to visit my uncle, the national monuments have never failed to move me. A few minutes later and we were on the ground.

From within the crowd of bustling passengers, I flung my bag over my shoulder and filed past the pilot and Maria standing at the door.

"*Gracias*," I said. "*Your Ayuda ... me gusta*," I added, knowing that I had not produced anything

close to a correct Spanish utterance.

“*De nada,*” she responded, unfazed.

I was beaming as I walked through the doors and off the airplane. Even though I knew so little that point, it felt good to use Spanish to connect with people. The feeling made me want to know even more.

On previous trips to visit my uncle, I had gotten used to taking the metro which runs straight from the airport to a stop not far from his house. As I walked down the terminal in the direction of that train station, I opened my cell phone to inform him of my safe arrival.

“*Yo soy ... um ... here,*” I said, hearing him pick up.

“*Muy bien,*” he answered. “I’ll be waiting for you at the stop.”

“That’s Huntington Station, right?”

“*Sí,*” he said. “*Hasta luego. Adiós.*”

I heard a click and stuffed the phone in my shirt pocket. Following the signs toward the metro station, I continued through several series of halls, their floors gleaming with a fresh polish. Several minutes later, I stepped into the broad space of the station itself. A wind was swirling through the area as I saw my subway roar along the tracks and slow to a stop. I stepped onto the brightly lit train. Since I knew it had only four stops, I decided to stay standing and just held onto one of the chrome bars. As we travelled, I called and talked to my mom and dad to let them know I had arrived safely. I knew that since they would be going on their cruise the following day, I wouldn’t talk to them again now for a week.

After ten minutes, I emerged at Huntington Station in Alexandria, Virginia. As soon as the escalator had brought me to ground level, I spotted my uncle. Before me stood a mirror image of my father — the same medium height, late thirties, and prematurely gray hair — but in a tan tweed jacket instead of a black cassock.

“So good to see you, John,” he said, kissing me on both cheeks in the Romanian style.

“*Yo necesito ayuda,*” I said, in fulfillment of his request.

“*Fantástico,*” he replied. “Did you look up the missing word on the internet?”

“I got it from one of the flight attendants.”

“Even better. *Vámonos.* Let’s get going,” he said, stepping toward the curb.

I turned and saw what I recognized as his compact black car parked directly in front of us. I opened the passenger side door and got in.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, getting behind the wheel and pulling the door shut.

“*Sí,*” I said. “But anything you want is fine by me.”

He looked over his shoulder and pulled us into traffic. “Then you’re okay with ordering in some pizza?”

“*Bueno,*” I replied.

We drove quickly into an area that was quiet and thick with trees. As we drove in darkness through ever more narrow streets, I saw the orange glow of muted lights in the houses on each side of us. The size and apparent value of the homes gradually grew as we made what I remembered as the turn onto my uncle’s street. With a sharp turn on the wheel, my uncle pulled the car into his driveway.

In the light of a half moon, I saw his large and vine covered brick house. “I still don’t understand how you afford a place like this on the salary of a Latin teacher,” I said.

“They pay me more than I deserve,” he replied.

We quickly unloaded from the car. I followed my uncle through the front door of his house and immediately smelled a burning fireplace.

“Let’s get you settled in your bedroom,” he said. “Then you can get washed up and relax a bit.”

I continued after him as he proceeded through the unlit foyer. The bare hardwood floors creaked

whispers as we turned to the right and ascended a winding staircase onto the second floor of the palatial estate.

“You’re here on the first left,” he said, opening the door and switching on a light.

I saw swirls of purple paisley patterned wallpaper. The king sized bed in the center of the room matched the color scheme.

“I’ve redecorated this room since you were here last,” he said.

“It’s nice,” I replied, realizing why my mother is in charge of furnishing back home.

“Listen, you get settled in and cleaned up. Your bathroom is the room straight across the hall. You’ve got towels and everything else you need in there. I’ll call for our dinner so it will be here about an hour.”

“Sounds good, Uncle Andrew.”

He smiled and left the room.

I took a quick shower and changed into a t-shirt and sweatpants. Collapsing on the bed, I closed my eyes for a few minutes. I still could only see waves of words pouring across my mind’s eye. Since I knew he had only given me Phase One of probably several more, I felt a momentary shudder of depression that my time with my uncle would be dominated by this project. I like my uncle and enjoy spending time with him, but I was facing the prospect of a week-long mental fatigue in his presence.

I sat up and took a deep breath. The recollection of why we had come up with this plan returned. I needed to come away from this trip more relaxed about the semester of Spanish that I would be taking. My training depended on me taking as many stresses as possible off my mind. And so, I turned around and put my feet on the floor, a bit recharged for the journey ahead.

As I circled down the stairs to the first floor, I heard the doorbell ring. My uncle arrived at the foyer just before me.

“This is the pizza I ordered for us,” he said, taking out his wallet. He opened the door to reveal a man standing with a large box. “*Buenas tardes, Jorge,*” my uncle said, apparently already on a first name basis with the delivery man. “*Aquí tiene veinte dólares y el resto es para Usted.*”

I understood the word *dólares* to mean “dollars” and assumed *resto* meant “rest.” Given what usually happens in a pizza delivery, I deduced that my uncle had given him an amount of money and told him to keep the change. But I was very impressed at how nice of an accent my uncle spoke in.

“*Muchísimas gracias, Señor Valquist,*” the man said with a gentle smile. “*Adiós.*”

We went into the kitchen. I saw plates already arrayed on the table.

As I pulled out a chair and sat down, I saw several beverage options arranged before me. My uncle poured himself a glass of red wine and sat down.

“I suppose you’re wondering about our itinerary,” he said.

“It’s crossed my mind,” I chuckled. “Acapulco? Cancún?”

“Madrid.”

“Wow,” I said. “I’ve never been to Europe.”

He looked at the glass of wine he had poured for himself. “Now, John, since you’re eighteen, you could choose to drink wine when we’re over there. But you’ll understand that I can’t let you have any here tonight.”

I laughed. “That’s quite fine, uncle. It doesn’t fit into my training regimen.” I poured myself a glass of sparkling water and dragged a large piece of pizza onto my plate.

“Our flight leaves tomorrow mid-afternoon,” he said, taking a piece himself. “So tomorrow morning, we’ll have you start work on Phase Two.”

“And you really believe just one week will help me pass Spanish?”

He nodded. “You’ll see, John. I’ve crafted my program over several years to provide the learning

with exactly the words you need to be comfortably proficient. Before we come home from Spain you'll tell me that you feel good about that class."

"Sounds great." I took a few bites off my pizza and set it down. "What else are we going to see besides Madrid?"

"Well," he started. "There's plenty to do in Madrid itself. But we're also going to get out for a few excursions. You'll even meet a former colleague of mine who will also be in Spain."

Now my Uncle Andrew had never talked much about his time with the NSA. I always wanted to hear some of his war stories.

"So this is a friend from your former spy days?" I asked, hoping to get privileged information.

He looked at me over his glass as he took a sip. "The gentleman you'll meet is currently an agent with MI-5. How and where I made his acquaintance is top secret."

"MI-5?" I asked excitedly. "That's Bond's agency, right?"

"Oh, I assure you that the life of an intelligence officer is ordinarily not that exciting."

"But you did have some adventures, right?" I asked.

He smiled and sighed. "It was something very exciting to have done," he said. "And yes, I did things and went places I never in my life could have imagined. But now I'm happy to just be a mild-mannered Latin teacher."

"That is unless this Latin teacher job is just an elaborate cover for something else."

He raised an eyebrow. "And just what can you imagine an NSA agent would be doing undercover at a private academy specializing in Latin?"

"It's a strange world out there," I said.

We both laughed.

After the pizza, we sat in the living room and relaxed. My uncle turned on a Spanish language channel on the TV and let it play softly in the background while we chatted. All along I was also wanting to see the scores of several baseball games I knew were happening that day, but I stayed with him.

At ten o'clock my uncle got up. "It's time for bed," he said. "I'll be waking you up very early."

"How early are we talking here?"

"Try four."

"Ouch. Is there a reason?"

"By my experience, we'll get over jetlag in Spain easier if we start moving our body clocks in the direction of Europe even tonight."

"Will there be coffee?" I asked seriously.

"Of course. And right after coffee and breakfast ..."

"Yo sé," I said. "Phase Two."

"Sí," he said.

I got up myself. "Then, *buenas noches*, uncle."

"*Buenas noches, Juan.*"

Chapter Two

I did not sleep well that night and had been awake for maybe half an hour when the sound of my uncle's alarm clock blared distantly through the walls. I heard him moving around the house for a few minutes before he came to wake me up. He gently tapped at my door.

"John?"

"I'm awake," I said, struggling to sit up. "I'll be down in a minute."

I put back on the clothes I was wearing the previous evening and carefully stepped down the staircase, hoping coffee was waiting for me. The smell of a freshly brewed batch greeted me. I felt a little better already.

"Here you are," Uncle Andrew said, setting a cup in front of me. "Anything in it?"

"Just a little milk," I said.

"*Un café con un poquito de leche,*" he said. He poured it in so the fluid came directly to the brim. I leaned over and sipped enough to make it stable.

"I'm betting you didn't sleep too well last night," my uncle said.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"The first night doing some significant language work will usually clutter your brain enough to rob you of good rest. Don't worry, though. It'll pass soon."

"That's good to know." I took another deep sip off my coffee.

"And then tomorrow you'll have sleep disruption all over again from the jetlag."

"Excellent."

"What would you like for breakfast?" he asked. "I've got various cereals or I can make us some eggs."

"Eggs would be great," I said. "I need to eat a lot of protein because of my workout level."

"While I get that ready for us, you should start reading into Phase Two."

I nodded. "As long as there's refills on coffee."

He chuckled. "*Por supuesto.*"

Uncle Andrew began going back and forth between the refrigerator and the stove in preparation for the meal. I saw several sheets of paper sitting on the table in front of me.

"Phase Two, I presume?"

"Sí."

"A few questions," I started.

"Sí?"

"*¿Cómo se dice 'uncle' en español?*"

"Tío," he said, cracking eggs and pouring them into a bowl.

"Tío, *como se dice 'coffee' en español?*"

"*El café,*" he answered.

"*Me gusta el café,*" I said, smiling and holding up my cup.

He stopped work for a moment and turned toward me. "Why have you told me that you don't have any linguistic ability? Getting new words so you can use them is exactly what one has to do in order to succeed. You've been selling yourself short."

I sipped my coffee. "My dad couldn't teach me Romanian. And I did terrible at French."

"Romanian is an extremely difficult language. Your dad and I grew up speaking it every day."

"Why did my grandma make you two learn Romanian? You were born here in the United States."

My uncle laughed. "What has your father told you about her?"

“Only that she defected back in Communist times.”

“She had the dream of going back to Romania some day. And she wanted us to know Romanian case that ever happened.”

“That was before the accident.”

“Right,” he said.

I noticed that tears had formed in my uncle’s eyes. “I wish I could have met her,” I said.

“Your dad and I were your age when our parents were killed. And Communism ended just one month later.”

“She’d be very proud of what her sons became,” I said.

“She certainly would,” he returned. “Anyway, as for your French, your poor teacher was like saddled with a daily mountain of administrative duties and the challenge of teaching to a room of kids who don’t want to learn. It wasn’t your or your teacher’s fault that you didn’t take to French.”

“I suppose.”

“Alright, I have to get to work on breakfast. Study!” He turned back to the counter and started whipping the eggs.

I looked at the next installment of sentences:

Phrases

What is your name?

¿Cómo se llama Usted?

My name is ...

Me llamo ...

“*¿Cómo se llama Usted?*” my uncle asked, knowing the first phrases I was looking at.

“*Me llamo John,*” I replied. “*¿Y cómo se llama Usted?*”

“*Me llamo Andrew.*”

I continued into the phrases. Remember that if you write these out yourself, you can learn words and phrases of even long lists like this one:

Nice to meet you.

Mucho gusto.

How are you?

¿Cómo está Usted?

I’m fine

Estoy bien

So-so

así-así

Where are you from?

¿De dónde es Usted?

I’m from ...

Yo soy de ...

Where is the ...

¿Dónde está ... ?

What time is it?

¿Qué hora es?

How much does that cost?

¿Cuánto cuesta eso?

Where do you live?

¿Dónde vive Usted?

I live in the United States.

Yo vivo en los Estados Unidos.

I'm an American.

Yo soy americano.

I read the phrases several times and proceeded into the nouns:

Nouns

the man

el hombre

the woman

la mujer

Since my uncle was just then putting sausage links in a heated frying pan, I knew we had a few minutes until breakfast was ready. “Tío, can you explain the different forms of the word ‘the’ that I’m seeing here?”

He turned and nodded. “The word for ‘the’ in Spanish is just a little more complicated than in English. Every noun is either masculine or feminine. Feminine singular words use *la* for ‘the’. To make plural in Spanish, you add ‘s’, just like in English. If a word ends in a consonant, add ‘es’. Make sure you add the ‘s’ or ‘es’ to both the noun and the word for ‘the’. So how would you say ‘the women’?”

I looked at the item on the list. *Mujer* ends in a consonant, so I needed to add ‘es’. “*Las mujeres?*”

“Right.”

“How do I know if a noun is feminine?” I asked.

“For now, if it describes a female or ends in an ‘a’, it’s feminine. You’ll learn more word endings that are always feminine in coming days.”

I nodded. “And the masculine?”

“Masculine nouns have ‘*el*’ for ‘the’ in the singular and ‘*los*’ in the plural. And you’ll add an ‘s’ to the noun when you use ‘*los*’. So tell me, how would you say ‘the men’?”

I applied what he told me. “*Los hombres?*”

“Sí.”

“And words are masculine if they describe a male,” I said. “Any other rules?”

“Words that end in ‘o’ will almost always be masculine. But there are words that don’t end in ‘o’ that are masculine too. Don’t worry about details this early in your studies. What I’ve just described is enough to start playing with adding the word ‘the’ to things. Let’s do a little more practice on this. The way you say house in Spanish is *casa*. Add the word ‘the’.”

I thought through the rules he had told me. It ended in ‘a’ and so it was feminine. “*La casa*.”

“Good. Now make it plural. The houses.”

“Just add ‘s’ to the article and the word itself. *Las casas*.”

“Excellent. *Libro* means book.”

“Ends in ‘o’, so it’s masculine,” I said. “*El libro*. Plural would be *los libros*.”

“Nicely done, John. One more easy lesson. The masculine word for ‘a’ or ‘an’ is *un* and the feminine version is *una*. Tell me how to say ‘a book’.”

“*Un libro*.”

“*Bueno*,” he said. “A house?”

“*Una casa*.”

“*Excelente, Juan*. Breakfast will be ready in about ten minutes.”

“I’ll study until then.”

I continued into the nouns:

the person

la persona

the thing

la cosa

the place

el lugar

the chair

la silla

the table

la mesa

the house

la casa

the bathroom

el cuarto de baño

the name

el nombre

Food and Drink

the food

la comida

the drink

la bebida

the water

el agua

the bread

el pan

I saw that my uncle was almost done with our breakfast. “*Y me gustaría la comida,*” I said, putting together some of the things I had learned.

“*Yo también,*” he said, starting to scoop scrambled eggs onto the plates. He added a few sausage links to each and we headed into our breakfast. While we ate, I continued studying more of the words.

Adjectives

good

bueno

bad

malo

nice

simpático

pretty

bonita

handsome

guapo

sick

enfermo

tired

cansado

happy

contento

sad

triste

right

derecha

left
izquierda

this
esto

that
eso

big
grande

small
pequeño

“So most adjectives are masculine?” I asked. “I mean, they end in ‘o’.”

“I give you the masculine form in the lists, but if they end in ‘o’, you change it to an ‘a’ when describes something feminine. So a sick man is *un hombre enfermo*, but a sick woman is *una mujer enferma*.”

“What about the ones that don’t end in ‘o’, like *triste*?”

“Those don’t change. Quiz time. The small house.”

“*La casa pequeña*.”

“The big thing.”

“*La cosa grande*.”

“You got it.”

As I looked at the words and the ones still to come, I began to worry about how I would remember so much new information. “Any advice on how to learn all these words?” I asked.

“Just keep doing what I recommended. Write everything out in your own hand.”

“Why exactly?”

“For some reason, the human brain absorbs information more efficiently when it’s in your own handwriting. It’s something about how the brain stores it. This method has been known and written about for two thousand years.”

“If it works so well, shouldn’t I use it for all my courses?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” he said. “That’s why your teachers have you take notes. But with language it’s particularly important.”

We finished eating and my uncle set me up at a desk upstairs, so I could continue to work on Phase Two.

“Stop when you get to the verbs,” he said. “I want to explain some things before you study them.”

“Excellent,” I said. “I better get started.”

I could hear him cleaning up the kitchen and then packing. I wrote out everything I had looked that morning into my notebook and then continued to the new words:

Time

the time
el tiempo

the hour

la hora

the day

el día

the night

la noche

the morning

la mañana

the afternoon

la tarde

the evening

la tarde

yesterday

ayer

today

hoy

tomorrow

mañana

now

ahora

then

entonces

I quizzed myself on the addition of the word “the” using what I guessed were a feminine and masculine noun. *Hora*, “hour,” produced *la hora*, “the hour” and *las horas*, “the hours.” *Nombre*, “name” gave me *el nombre*, “the name” and *los nombres*, “the names.” I smiled in pride at my newfound ability.

I read on:

Interrogatives

who

quién

what

qué

where
dónde

when
cuándo

why
por qué

how
cómo

how much
cuánto

how many
cuántos

My uncle must have known that I was getting toward the end of Phase Two.
“Remember to save the verbs until we get to the airport,” I heard him call upstairs.
“Sí, tío!” I called back. I continued into some prepositions:

Prepositions

in
en

with
con

to
a
of
de

from
desde

for
para / por

I studied a miscellaneous collection of basic words and some more numbers:

Miscellaneous

here

aquí

there

allí

really

de veras

very

muy

also

también

but

pero

together

juntos

well

bien

again

otra vez

of course

por supuesto

Numbers

eleven

once

twelve

doce

thirteen

trece

fourteen

catorce

fifteen

quince

sixteen

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