

¿Se habla español?

Knowing even a little Spanish can be a big help. But how difficult is it for adults to learn?

By **JENNIFER CHAMBERLAIN**
Staff Writer

Many of us have studied language in high school or college, but truly gaining fluency is no easy task. And it only gets more difficult with age. “Linguists say that most children will learn a foreign language well up to age 12. After that, the brain works differently, and it is difficult to learn a foreign language,” explains Dr. Pierina Beckman, associate professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at the University of North Texas.

Spanish is everywhere in Texas, from radio stations to billboards, and even learning a little can expand your cultural horizons. So if you’re looking to improve your skills, what works and what doesn’t? Here are six ways to learn Spanish and the effectiveness of each.

STUDY ON YOUR OWN

There are dozens of books, tapes and software programs promising an easy way to learn Spanish.

Pros: Language programs can be very inexpensive. You can even check them out free from the library. They’re also convenient. Audio programs let you study in your car during a long commute or trip.

Cons: The biggest problem with self-study is motivation. Dr. Beckman admits

she’s bought many programs for learning new languages that have never made it out of the box.

“The commitment of having someone else involved — if you have to pay a tutor, if you have to pay an institution, if you have to enroll in a class. ... If you’re accountable for something, I think you will make the extra effort,” she says. “That’s just human nature.”

Tips: Seek out conversation opportunities to augment your lessons. The Dallas-

Plano Spanish Language Meetup Group meets once a month at a local restaurant to converse in Spanish. Membership is free, but you must register at their Web site to R.S.V.P. Go to spanish.meetup.com/36/

If you’re not comfortable with a crowd, find a Spanish-speaking friend or co-worker who can help you practice.

“There are so many Spanish-speaking enclaves, you’d be surprised at how far you can get just by being here and making a friend or two who are Spanish speakers,” says Theresa Kiefer, who teaches Spanish and ESL classes at El Centro College.

If you decide to do it:

Montana Walsh, who teaches Spanish through her Language Café business, suggests *Pimsleur Basic Spanish*, (Simon & Schuster, \$24.95), as an inexpensive introduction to the language.

TAKE A CLASS

Many universities and community colleges offer continuing education classes for various levels of Spanish.

Pros: By paying for a class, you’ve made a commitment to set aside time to learn. And your instructor can point out pronunciation errors or other mistakes.

Cons: Classes can be very grammar-



JIM MAHONEY/Staff Photographer

Elishba Doyle (left) and Sarah Blanchard point to their ears as Language Café instructor **Montana Walsh** asks the meaning of *oreja*.

intensive — like the ones you may remember from high school or college — as opposed to a more conversational approach. Ms. Walsh suggests sitting in on a class before you sign up so that you'll know what to expect.

Tips: You're not likely to become fluent in Spanish by just attending a class a couple of times a week. As with self-study, practicing outside of the class is critical.

Ruth Jackson, who's taking classes at El Centro College, spends time outside of class studying Spanish language and culture in books and on the Internet — as well as practicing with her children and grandchildren.

"You have to do more on your own. You've got to go home and study and get more information, and you also must practice," she says. "You can't wait until you get to class and be able to speak Spanish."

If you decide to do it:

Southern Methodist University

(www.smu.edu/languages) offers a variety of evening classes including a one-week immersion crash course. Classes are geared to adults and focus on conversational skills, says Amy Heitzman, director of continuing studies. SMU will also offer a summer series beginning in June, with lighter topics in a casual environment. For example, in one class students will watch Spanish-language films and discuss their unique idioms and dialogue. Prices range from \$79-\$109.

Dallas County Community College District: El Centro College (www.elcentrocollege.edu) offers its Cafe Español classes twice a week from noon to 1 p.m. (lunch not included). Evening courses are also available. Cost: \$60. Other Dallas County Community colleges also offer courses. Times and prices vary. For a schedule go to www.dcccd.edu/Continuing+Education.

See Page 6

IT WORKED FOR ME

Evangelist and author **Ruth Jackson**, 55, is taking a continuing-education course in Spanish to reach more people and to set an example for her grandchildren.

"I'm trying to encourage them to be bilingual, so that they'll have the opportunities that are open to people who are bilingual," says Mrs. Jackson, who is also an assistant vice president at Bank of America.

Mrs. Jackson's two teenage grandsons are taking Spanish in school, so she takes every opportunity to converse with them and help them study while building her own skills.

"I'm using this opportunity to motivate them to see how important it is," she says.



Ruth Jackson

Continued from Page 5

FIND (OR START) A PROGRAM IN YOUR WORKPLACE

Some companies will pay employees and offer time off to take continuing-education classes. Others will offer classes on-site if there's enough interest. If a program doesn't exist, consider getting one started.

Ellen Osburn, 42, owner of Therapeutic Innovations in Dallas, recently enlisted Ms. Walsh's company to teach Spanish to her administrative staff. Therapeutic Innovations provides pediatric therapy, and many of its clients are Spanish-speaking.

"The children are our clients, but so are the parents, and to be able to show them that you're making an effort to try to communicate with them is big," Ms. Osburn says.

Pros: "If you want to learn Spanish for work, that's going to open up all kinds of possibilities because the Spanish market is big right now and everybody is trying to sell to the Spanish market," says Acela Garrett, vice president of Liaison Language Center in Dallas. "We have students that within the first 60 hours are in a very good position to talk to clients."

For the employee, taking classes at work or during a lunch break is convenient, and having co-workers in your class offers instant conversation opportunities.

Cons: Not all companies are willing to pay for classes, and for a small business, it can be a big investment.

Tips: "Get someone who is able to customize the program to be relevant to your profession," Ms. Osburn advises.

One such option is Command Spanish, a nationally accredited program offered locally through Texas Christian University and Mountain View College.

"What's unique about Command Spanish is the curriculum is targeted to particular industries or interest groups," says Julie Lovett, assistant director for extended education at TCU. "So that when you take the class, you're learning information that's directly applicable to your job."

If you decide to do it:

The Language Cafe (www.languagecafe.com) offers 30 hours of instruction, including materials for up to eight students, for between \$3,200 and \$3,500.

Liaison Language Center (www.liaisonlanguage.com) offers 30-hour programs for up to 12 students for around \$65 an hour, not including materials.

Berlitz (www.berlitz.com), one of the oldest language-learning programs, offers workplace programs that teach both language and culture. Prices vary.

Texas Christian University offers Command Spanish classes in the workplace.

Prices vary depending on the number of students and the company's needs, but a typical 16-hour program for 20 people costs about \$2,700, including materials. For information, call 817-257-7132 or go to www.life.long.tcu.edu.

HIRE A PRIVATE TUTOR

Pros: Instruction is tailored to your needs and schedule. Dallas attorney Lisa Henry, 37, decided to learn Spanish when she became pregnant with her first child.

"It's so much easier to learn a language in the first five years of your life, and I thought it would give him a leg up," says Ms. Henry of her 5-month-old son, Beck.

Ms. Henry found tutor Henry Alfaro over the Internet and has been working with him since last August. She says she's been particularly pleased that Mr. Alfaro adapts the lessons to her learning style.

Now she's teaching her son some basic Spanish words so they'll be familiar as he learns to talk.

Cons: Tutoring is more expensive than taking a class. Rates range from \$25 to \$60 an hour.

If you decide to do it:

■ www.language-school-teachers.com lets you search for tutors in your area, or you can work with a tutor online. Registration is free, and your e-mail address is kept hidden.

■ [Craigslist \(www.craigslist.org\)](http://www.craigslist.org) is also a good place to find a tutor.

IMMERSE YOURSELF

Immersion programs can put you on the fast track to learning Spanish, language experts say.

"Not everyone can afford it. I understand that, but if they really want to have any kind of fluency, they need to do this," says Dr. Beckman. "I know this from experience."

Growing up in Mexico City, Dr. Beckman studied English for years in private school, but "I'm convinced to this day that if I didn't live here, I still couldn't speak it," she says.

Pros: In an immersion program, you're not only studying Spanish for several hours a day, you're also interacting in the language. Many programs offer the opportunity to stay with a host family who can help you further hone your skills.

Brooke Hersh, 29, a former Dallas resident who's now a doctoral student in psychology at the University of Texas, studied Spanish in Oaxaca, Mexico, last summer at the Instituto Cultural Oaxaca (www.inscu.oax.net).

After just a month at the school, Ms. Hersh was able to speak a little Spanish with the children and parents she works with as part of her clinical training.

"That felt really good," she said. "I defi-



Tricia Quaid

Tricia Quaid with (from left) Juan Cornejo, Joe Rios and Hilario Gonzalez.

IT WORKED FOR ME

Tricia Quaid, 45 (above), wanted to learn Spanish to better communicate with the employees of her Dallas landscape company, so she took private lessons.

After studying for about a year, she's found being able to speak some Spanish has made her business more efficient and helped her build rapport with the workers.

"They laugh when I make mistakes, and it frees them up to feel like it's OK if they make mistakes," speaking English, she says. "It's encouraging to them that I'm trying their language and they need to try my language, so it works both ways."

nately have a foundation I can go back to, and I have the intent to keep that up."

Cons: Immersion programs cost anywhere from about \$400 to more than \$1,000 plus airfare. Also, because of the cost and time required, many people can't afford to spend more than a couple of weeks in an immersion program, which may limit their progress, says Dr. Beckman. Students at the university who study abroad generally spend five weeks in a program.

"If you sent me to France today for two weeks, even though I've studied some French, I don't know how much I would be able to loosen up my tongue and be able to speak," says Dr. Beckman.

If you decide to do it:

■ **AmeriSpan** (www.amerispan.com) offers a wide selection of programs in various locales. Although the company does earn a commission from the schools, it also offers

an assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of each.

"We actually choose the schools that we work with in each location, so basically we evaluate them based on curriculum, facilities, reputation and cost," says vice president Elizabeth Gregory.

■ Once you've found some programs you're interested in, Ms. Hersh suggests asking the school for names of former students who can tell you more about it.

E-mail jchamberlain@dallasnews.com

DigitalEXTRA

Learn to speak Spanish using the Internet.

DallasNews.com/extra