

## So ... We Meet Again

Things always happen when you least expect it. It seems like ages ago that I was first introduced to the Spanish language. I was at the bottom of the food chain as a freshman in high school. For four years I battled my way through eight semesters of Spanish until finally graduation arrived—the day I would never have to speak another word of this foreign language called Spanish ... or so I thought.

After high school I attended college in San Diego, just a hop, skip, and a jump from Mexico. Yet Mexico was as alien to me as Mars. I only visited Tijuana twice—each time to buy fireworks, a poncho, a piggy bank, and a *sombrero* on my way back across the border. *Enchilada*, *burrito*, *carne asada*, *quesadilla*, and *taco* were the only Spanish words I had spoken since high school, even after spending my entire college years a short step away from Mexico, one of the most beautiful cultural gold mines in the world.

After college destiny took the wheel, slammed on the accelerator, and put itself on a collision course right into my path. I was heading towards another encounter with the Spanish language, but I just didn't know it at the time. My first job had me packing my bags to go and live in Mazatlán, Mexico, where the company I worked for had formed a joint partnership with a local seafood-processing plant that exported shrimp and squid to the United States. I accepted the challenge of broadening my cultural horizon with an open mind. So, I packed my luggage and a large bagful of books in order to pass the time. During my entire stay in Mexico, I never opened the bag of books. Bored? Are you kidding? I was thrown into a foreign-language ocean with barely enough skills to doggy-paddle, but I had the time of my life trying. The funny thing is that my years of high school Spanish mysteriously oozed back into my memory after being dormant for so many years. Even so, trying to speak with native Spanish speakers was a lopsided affair, to say the least. They spoke a mile a minute and used so many colloquial and slang terms that my head started spinning around in a sea of words. I was a little-league batter up against major-league pitchers who were throwing nasty curveballs, whizzing fastballs, and tricky knuckleballs. I could only really hit the underhand slow-pitch, and even that was a struggle at times.

They say, in Rome, do as the Romans do, and that was my strategy for living in Mexico. I was determined to speak like a local. During my first week in Mexico I bought a new blue spiral-bound notebook and started writing down every single English word or phrase I desired to know. Then I would ask sympathetic native speakers around the office to help translate them into Spanish. I carried this notebook everywhere I went: to dinner, to the theater, to the market. I jotted down all new words and included anything of interest that I heard on Spanish television. Soon the notebook was filled up from cover to cover.

One event of colossal importance that further fueled my desire to learn Spanish was my falling in love with Erika, who is now my wife and the mother of our daughter, Natalia. Erika was born and raised in Mexico, so in the beginning, communication was practically limited to playing charades in order to get our ideas across. Learning to speak Spanish, however, would later prove to be the key into her world and allowed me to forge wonderful relationships with her entire network of family and friends.

Unfortunately, my work in Mexico ended one day, but my quest to learn Spanish hasn't diminished since. Upon my return back to the States, I continued with my notebooks and I unabashedly continued to carry them with me everywhere I went. Eight years later, there I was with a ton of information crammed onto the rumpled pages of four tattered notebooks plus about one hundred pounds of scrap paper. It's a miracle that the notebooks were even still intact. So now what was I to do with all of this information? Well, scared of accidentally losing all the information I had so diligently accumulated, I decided to consolidate it by alphabetically arranging it into my computer. Then it dawned on me: In spite of searching far and wide, I had never found the intermediate Spanish book I was seeking. Suddenly, I realized that I had already written the book I was looking for. It was unorganized and unpolished, but it was in my possession the entire time. Thus, *Speaking Spanish Like a Native* was born.

What does a book written by a Korean American actually mean? It means that you will learn from the perspective of an average Joe. It means you will hopefully appreciate my humble beginnings—how I went scratching, clawing, and sometimes kicking my way through Spanish, just as you, too, may be doing right now. While Spanish comes more naturally to native speakers who are immersed in it, my growth spurt in Spanish occurred only

after I put in all too many years of stumbling in frustration and confusion. You and I are probably not all that different. I believe that you, the reader, are much more connected to this book than you probably imagine. I can guarantee that I had the same questions you had and made the same mistakes you are likely making today. With this in mind, I didn't take the subtleties and common pitfalls of the language for granted. Instead, I took all of them into consideration while writing this book.

In the ensuing pages, I share with you everything I learned from the locals in Mexico, from native Spanish speakers here in the United States, from Spanish-language television and radio, and from everything I learned just by being curious enough to ask. I hope you find this book a valuable resource that will allow you to carry on a conversation more skillfully and confidently with native speakers, in their terms.