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# Speaking espanol is next goal for a world traveler

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Nancy Burke, The Oregonian  
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## So many places in just this hemisphere use it, so it fits with the agenda

Even though I'm long past my college days, the arrival of fall always seems to put me in the mood to learn something new. After all those carefree summer weekends of barbecues, softball games and camping trips, I look forward to spending time indoors and pursuing something with a bit more mental stimulation.

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Looking at a world map one day, I realized that with a passing knowledge of Spanish, I could travel from Mexico through a dozen countries and thousands of miles to the tip of Tierra

del Fuego. Nowhere else in the world can you travel so far and through so many countries while communicating in just one language. It was then that I decided that this fall I'd focus on improving my Spanish.

I've done a few trips to Latin America and can function on a basic level in Spanish. Nothing too fancy, but enough to organize transportation, find a place to stay, order a beer and a decent meal. But I'd really like to take it to the next level. My goals are modest. I have no desire to read "Don Quixote" in its original language. I merely want to be able to interact more with local people and other Spanish-speaking travelers.

One of the most useful skills any traveler can possess is the ability to speak other languages, yet even an armchair traveler would benefit from learning Spanish. It is, without a doubt, America's second language. Most of us come into contact with it in some form daily: on the bus, at the local burrito stand, on the radio.

I wouldn't say that learning any language is easy. But Spanish, sharing a Latin base with English, would have to be one of the least difficult

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English is the language of default in most of the world. In Latin America, however, outside of the tourist areas, it is assumed that you will be speaking Spanish.

A few years ago I climbed a mountain in Bolivia with a couple of French guys I met in La Paz. Their Spanish was better than their English, and my Spanish was better than my French. So for practical reasons, Spanish became our common language.

Our conversations were simple. There were no philosophical discussions, but we did manage to communicate. I felt like I was using a part of my brain that rarely gets used or exercising a muscle that I didn't know I had. It wasn't always easy, but it was an oddly pleasurable experience.

Learning languages isn't my forte, but through my travels I've developed certain techniques to make the process a little less painful. In my next column I'll share a few of those strategies.

This winter I'm planning on putting my -- I hope -- improved Spanish skills to the test. I haven't decided where I'm going yet, but with nearly 20 Spanish-speaking countries in this hemisphere I'm spoiled for choice.

-- Shawn Donley has lived, worked and traveled in more than 50 countries. He now lives in Portland and works at Powell's Books. Send your travel-related questions and comments to: [shawn.donley@gmail.com](mailto:shawn.donley@gmail.com)

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