

Tips for Starting a Preschool Spanish Program

An Interview with
Sarah Farrell, Master
Preschool Spanish
Teacher

Progressive Language, Inc.
2015
SpanishChamps.com



This is an interview with Sarah Farrell, the lead author of the Spanish Champs curriculum. Sarah has a music degree from Harvard University, a Master's in Elementary Education from the University of New Mexico, is a National Board certified Teacher in reading and language arts, and is endorsed in Bilingual education and TESOL.

Sarah, how long have you been teaching preschool Spanish?

This is my fourteenth year teaching preschool Spanish. Before that, I taught 4 years of K-5.

How did you learn Spanish and have you ever lived in a Spanish-speaking country?

I took my first Spanish class during my last semester of college, and didn't do very well. In fact, the professor called me in and gave me the option to drop it since I was struggling. I finished the course, and that gave me a good foundation for really learning to speak and use Spanish. Later, I rode my bicycle from Alaska to the southern tip of Argentina, and that's where I really began to learn more Spanish. I had to use Spanish to go shopping for groceries, and to explain to people about our ride. After that ride, I returned to school to earn my teaching license, and was fortunate to be selected for a Bilingual/Multicultural program during which I did my student teaching in Dual Language classrooms. By teaching, speaking with parents, and reading many, many children's books, I further developed my Spanish.

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What tips would you give to someone that wants to start a preschool Spanish program, but doesn't have a strong background in Spanish? Is it possible?

There are really only two key factors. One is to get buy-in from families and administrators. Spanish Champs is a field-tested, research-based program, which makes it very easy to get support. If a person doesn't have a strong Spanish-speaking background, they should first look within their school setting for someone who speaks Spanish. That person can give the weekly or bi-monthly lessons. If there is not someone in the school setting, look to Spanish-speaking churches or schools that have dual-language programs. These organizations often have parents or teachers who make excellent teachers.



You majored in music at Harvard; how has this background helped you as a teacher and in the development of Spanish Champs?

My music studies at Harvard provided a strong foundation as far as music theory, and how to compose music. This has helped me create songs and other materials that are easy to sing, and fit the vocal range of young children.

There are lots of different Spanish resources out there, besides Spanish Champs, what would you recommend and why?

When I use Spanish Champs, I sometimes supplement the materials with published fairy tales in Spanish. The children enjoy the repetition of stories such as “The Three Billy Goats Gruff,” or “The Three Bears.” I also sometimes search online for songs related to specific topics. This led us to begin including songs that can be used in combination with school themes, such as vehicles, Halloween, and Christmas.

What is the biggest mistake teachers can make?

I think teachers are afraid that since children don’t speak Spanish, they don’t understand it. To the contrary, when teachers use appropriate gestures, and embed familiar vocabulary, the children are able to make inferences as far as meaning, and from there become very comfortable at listening to Spanish.

What if a teacher’s accent isn’t very good, how much will it affect the kids and how do I overcome this?

It is important to have access to resources that can serve as good language models for children, such as songs and videos that feature native speakers. Children (and teachers) will then have a good point of reference. Sometimes, you can also improve your accent by simply trying to exaggerate your Spanish so that it sounds more native. However, don’t be overly concerned that you don’t have a perfect accent when teaching, as long as children have ample exposure to good resources. For example, Spanish Champs resources are all recorded by native Spanish speakers, and by listening and singing or reading along, children will get sufficient exposure to a proper accent, and you can dramatically improve your accent at the same time.

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In Spanish Champs Level 2, you created a Reader's Theater, what is the purpose?

In my Spanish and Bilingual classes, we always have an end-of-year performance. We invite the families to watch our children sing songs, and act out a familiar fairy tale. I created the Reader's Theater to compile the children's favorite songs, stories and characters from Spanish Champs into a single, fun dramatization that would also serve as a review.

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What guidance would you give to teachers on setting goals for their program and how these goals affect the selection of resources and the time needed?

It is important for teachers, parents or school administrators to know what type of outcome they are hoping for when starting a Spanish program. For example, are you simply wanting children to learn a few words and phrases in Spanish, or build a foundation for bi-lingual and bi-literate children? These are very different goals and will require different amounts of time and resources. We added an explanation to the Spanish Champs website that describes different desired learning outcomes and the resources that can help achieve these outcomes: <http://www.spanishchamps.com/which-kit-is-best-for-me/>

The Spanish Champs curriculum has goals clearly delineated, which is very helpful. When teaching a language, however, goals are set but not necessarily met in a linear fashion. For example, a goal might be for all children to name four colors. However, some children might be able to do that very quickly, while other children might take a long time. With language, it is preferable to continue teaching, reviewing the songs, and embedding the vocabulary or grammar goals into the lessons so that the children continue to be exposed to them. The children might not all be able to name the colors by the end of the week, but they will continue learning over time, and you'll be surprised one day when you notice everyone knows their colors.

