

Teaching Preschool Spanish

Lessons Learned
from Sarah Farrell,
Master Preschool
Spanish Teacher

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Sarah Farrell is the lead author of the Spanish Champs curriculum. She 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 will be sharing some lessons learned from her many years as a Spanish teacher. These lessons will help others who are launching a preschool Spanish program or wanting to improve their existing Spanish program.

"Preschoolers and young learners make excellent students. They are eager to learn, willing to take risks, and are usually enthusiastic participants. They also present unique challenges, being young and sometimes inexperienced students. These are some of the lessons I learned while teaching preschool Spanish, I hope they are helpful." — Sarah

Lesson One: "One More Time" is your friend!

Preschoolers thrive on repetition. This is why all cultures have developed folksongs and oral traditions. So, even if it seems to you that you have sung the same song or played the same game too many times, the children are still learning. Often, when you think that the current repetition is just one time too many, the children will surprise you with an improved competence in singing the lyrics or joining in a game.

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Singing the same song, or playing the same game multiple times doesn't necessarily mean that you are teaching the same thing. An intentional teacher will use familiar songs, vocabulary, games, etc. to introduce new ideas or concepts. They may change an aspect of the familiar to bring greater understanding. For example, after singing "Yo me llamo" many times, teachers might decide to have children name an animal instead of their name, miming the movements. Another teacher might use a familiar repetitive story to teach simple nouns during one reading, verb conjugation during a subsequent reading, and oral expression another time. This simultaneously develops vocabulary and expression while reviewing and cementing familiar language.

If you remember the children's program Blue's Clues, it was intended that the same episode be seen 5 times, because each time through was like peeling back another layer of an onion. To an adult, this is very repetitive and dull, but to the preschool mind it was new each time because each viewing brought new insight into the puzzles they were solving.



Lesson two:
“What are we doing today, teacher?”—The value of predictability.

All people are better able to function in situations where they are prepared with an understanding of what is going to happen. For example, when you go to a play, you are given a program. This tells you what to look forward to, where you are in the event, and where you have been. This is certainly true for young children. Learning a new language can potentially be intimidating, but using predictability and routine can minimize that threat. If a student knows the structure of the class (or any event), she knows what to expect. If she doesn't understand each and every word, gesture or nuance, she knows the structure surrounding the activity which can give reassurance and support. Additionally, if there is an activity that she finds stressful, knowing that there is a finite end can help her finish the task and move on with the next one.

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Spanish Champs supports this on a very basic level by beginning and ending each class with the same songs—“Hola, Buenos días,” and “Adios.” Teachers can incorporate other simple strategies during each lesson that can continue this regularity. Many teachers use visual schedules that they post on the wall, or list on a chart that they bring to class. This schedule has an image for each song and activity. At the beginning of each class, the teacher leads the children through a review of the schedule. With time and repetition, the children will begin to “read” the schedule independently, using Spanish vocabulary. For activities that aren't repetitive, simply make an image to represent surprise, or that shows where the children will be doing the activity, i.e. a table, rug, etc.

During each lesson, teachers can support children's need for predictability by ensuring that they use the same vocabulary and gestures for common songs, commands and comments. Over time, as children become more confident, teachers can begin to introduce new phrases or vocabulary for familiar commands by using known gestures with the same meaning.



Lesson three: “What are you saying?”—Using complex language.

When we speak to newborns, we often change our inflection, but we usually use complete phrases and complex vocabulary when we speak to them. We don't expect them to understand everything, but we know that over time, they will begin to understand the gist of what we are saying, and with time, will understand more and more.

When we teach Spanish, we are doing more than teaching vocabulary. We are also teaching children to listen to natural speech, and use their knowledge of English to make inferences. They are learning to make use of visual, contextual, and aural cues to make sense. As they progress through Level 1 and into Level 2, they will continue to recognize single words and use those words to construct greater understanding. As they create that understanding, they will more easily synthesize the surrounding language, learning grammatical structures. Additionally, by presenting children with complex, natural language, you are training them to pay attention and search for cues. This skill will serve the children well as they continue through school. As they continue to learn Spanish, and begin to use it in community situations, they will be less intimidated and better able to cope with native speakers' Spanish.

Lesson four: “How can I help my child?”—Involving Families

All parents want the best for their children, but often are at a loss as to how to help. Spanish Champs makes it very easy to involve families. Teachers can send home the Parent Page for each lesson. They can also send home the coloring pages, for children to use at home with their families. Some teachers make Spanish notebooks, with all the songs, and any work the children do at school. These notebooks travel back and forth with the child between home and school. Parents love seeing what their children are learning! Parents can purchase the Spanish Champs CDs and learn the songs together with their children. As children learn Spanish, be sure to provide opportunities for families to join their children during school-based activities, such as Spanish parties, performances or even field trips to shows or restaurants.

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Lesson five: “But I don’t speak Spanish!”—Teacher and Staff Buy-In

It is not uncommon to be teaching Spanish in a classroom where the teachers don’t speak Spanish. This can be very intimidating for them. Adults often have years of unsuccessful language experiences behind them. To begin with, ensure the teachers that they won’t be expected to do anything they are uncomfortable with. During Spanish lessons, the teachers should participate with the children, and learn alongside them. When the Spanish teacher is not present, she should provide the classroom teachers with all the materials related to the lessons: CDs, DVDs, Song Book, etc. At first the teachers can simply play the songs each day, and learn them with the children. As their comfort level increases, they will naturally want to do more in the classroom.

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Work with the teacher to incorporate her themes and vocabulary into the Spanish classes. If a class is studying family and community, introduce the song “Mi familia.” The children will learn the vocabulary quickly, and the teacher will discover how easy it can be to incorporate Spanish into her teaching.

Lesson six: “I really want to do a Level 2 song.”—Varying and Individualizing the Curriculum

The Spanish Champs curriculum has been carefully designed to provide a program that gradually builds upon itself, leading children through successful language learning. However, each class is different, and sometimes it makes sense to alter the curriculum so that it better suits a class’s needs. For example, if the class is working on a certain theme, by all means, jump to the Spanish Champs song that relates. Some of the Level 2 songs are perfect for certain times of the year, or relate to units of study, like Christmas, vehicles, etc.

The Spanish Champs curriculum includes instructions and activities for each song, so a teacher can simply use the corresponding resources to teach any song at any time.



Lesson Seven: “Can children understand an entire story?”—Using Stories and Books with beginners.

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Most libraries and book stores have a selection of children’s books in Spanish. In addition, Spanish Champs has several stories at various levels. At first glance, it may seem like books and stories are too complicated for beginning language learners. In fact, the opposite is true. When our children are young, we read them books and tell stories which include vocabulary that they don’t understand. Children are skilled at making sense of stories that are slightly beyond their language level. They use the pictures, inflections and voices of the reader. Additionally, since we reread and retell stories numerous times, children gain more comprehension each time they listen to the story. When a story is good and exciting or engaging, the children get lost in the plot, and with repetition, begin to learn key phrases and expressions within the story. When adults refer back to the story, asking questions or commenting, children will demonstrate their understanding. Remember, they might not be able to answer the questions in Spanish, but the first thing we are looking for is comprehension and engagement.

Lesson Eight: “What a disaster!”—When a Lesson Doesn’t Go Well

Ask any teacher, and he can describe a lesson that didn’t go well. For whatever reason, he knows that the children weren’t engaged, or the introduction of a new song or concept didn’t work. Sometimes the first instinct is to think, “That isn’t going to work.” However, oftentimes what we consider a failure is just a different day for the children. It’s usually not the actual content that is the problem, but more likely a combination of presentation and the emotional states of the children. Teachers can consider the failed lesson a pre-introduction to the song or concept, and present it again using different strategies during the following lesson.

Lesson Nine: “Build Motivation In”—Even Children Can Get Bored!

If you create a fun environment of “structured play,” children will have an easier time learning Spanish. They will be focusing on the activities rather than on the fact that they may not understand everything that is going on. Rather than discussing it here, please look at the link below where you will find the Special Report we created called *Preschool Spanish: 16 Ideas that Motivate Young Children to Learn*.

<http://www.spanishchamps.com/preschool-spanish-motivational-tips/>

