

Learn Spanish: Avoid 100-Plus Gringo Mistakes

Learn To Avoid Over 100 Common Mistakes
that Native English Speakers Make
When Speaking Spanish

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WHY DID I WRITE THIS BOOK?

I'm an American from New York City who has lived in Colombia since 2007. Initially, I lived on the Caribbean coast of Colombia in a city called Barranquilla. And then in 2008, I moved to Medellin, Colombia and have remained in Medellin since. In my quest to learn Spanish, I have traveled to several Spanish-speaking countries, including Panama, Dominican Republic, Mexico and Spain.

For the most part, I am a self-taught student of the Spanish language. In my efforts to learn Spanish, I have noticed that native Spanish speakers were reluctant to correct my errors. Not only in Colombia, but also in New York City, where I had many native Spanish speaking friends from the Dominican Republic.

As native English speakers, we often do the same. Unless the native Spanish speaker is a child, we rarely correct native Spanish speakers when they commit errors when speaking English. Whether the unwillingness to correct others is from a feeling of indifference or a fear of offending someone, we rarely, if ever, correct them even if they are close friends.

As a result, the foreign language learner continues to make the same mistakes over and over again. Unfortunately, when you commit errors when speaking a foreign language, some people may make assumptions about your intelligence or level of education. And if living abroad, some people may make assumptions about the degree of respect that you have for the host country's language and culture because of your written and spoken blunders.

In 2001 while still living in New York City, I started writing notes in a notebook every time a Spanish instructor would correct my Spanish. At the meet-ups that I would attend or other Spanish language exchange meetings that I attended, there were always a couple of Spanish instructors who were willing to correct my blunders. It didn't take long before I had a notebook full of my mistakes.

When I moved to Colombia in 2007, I continued the practice of taking notes every time a Spanish professor corrected my Spanish. But by that time, my Spanish had improved enough where I could easily spot the speaking-Spanish errors of other Americans and foreigners in Colombia. I made it a habit to never leave home without a pen and a notepad to make sure that I was ready whenever I heard a mistake spoken in Spanish by a non-native Spanish speaker. With the advent of the smartphone, I transitioned from a pen and notepad to taking either voice notes or written notes with my smartphone.

This book is an accumulation of notes of speaking-Spanish mistakes that I either personally made or heard others make over a span of more than 15 years. My motivation for writing this book is to provide you with a resource that will help you avoid over 100 of the most common errors and pitfalls that native English speakers make when speaking and writing Spanish. A native Spanish-speaking professor who teaches the Spanish language could have also written such a book. However, only a native English speaker could truly explain to you 'why' we make these errors. By providing you with a better understanding of 'why' we make these errors, I hope this increased understanding will prevent you from making the same mistakes over and over again.

This book is also my way of 'giving back' to this wonderful romance language. Prior to 2004, I was a New York attorney. To say that I was miserable practicing law would be an understatement. Ever since the early 2000s, when first I learned about people creating online businesses from their hobbies or passions, I dreamed about taking my passion (learning Spanish) and turning it into a business that would allow me to finally 'escape' from the practice of law and live in a Spanish-speaking country.

The Spanish language allowed me to be the Founder of a company, Learning Like Crazy, that has created products such as Learning Spanish Like Crazy, Verbarrator (Spanish verb conjugation software), Visually Speaking Spanish, Fast Lane Spanish and Learning Italian Like Crazy. Above all, the Spanish language has allowed me to leave a profession that I was so unhappy with and has enabled me to turn my passion into a business that allows me to live the life of my dreams in Medellin, Colombia. Medellin is known as "La Ciudad de la Eterna Primavera" (The City of Eternal Spring). But I simply call it "paraíso" (paradise).

If you are wondering if this is a book about Colombian Spanish, it is not. After writing this book, I had the entire book proofread and corrected by a Spanish professor from Guatemala, and then re-proofread and re-corrected by a Spanish professor from Mexico. I wanted to be fully aware of any Spanish words, phrases and expressions that I covered in this book which are idiosyncrasies of Colombians. In this book, I will bring to your attention any words, phrases or expressions that are peculiar to Colombia.

Before we begin, there is something about the word "Gringo" that I must bring to your attention. When I use the word "Gringo" in this book, I do not use the word "Gringo" as a racial term to mean "American white male." I also do not use the term "Gringa" to mean "American white female." Many people associate the words "Gringos" and "Gringas" with American white males and American white females, respectively.

However, in this book you will find that I use the terms as they are commonly used in Colombia. In Colombia the term "Gringo" is used loosely and the word can be used irrespective of one's race when referring to nearly any native English speaker, including, but not limited to, English speakers from America, Canada, the U.K., New Zealand and Australia. Even my American-born Latino friends who visit or live in Colombia are often referred to as "Gringos" or "Gringas" by Colombians.

I'm a black American and my "ex-novia" (ex-girlfriend) use to lovingly refer to me as "mi gringuito" which is an affectionate way to say "my Gringo." (In Spanish the names of nationalities are not capitalized. I mention this because one may argue that some Spanish speakers use the word "gringo" as a nationality). Nevertheless, if anyone is offended by my use of the words "Gringo" and "Gringa" in this book, I apologize in advance.

I hope that you not only enjoy this book but also learn how to avoid many of the most common errors and pitfalls that English speakers make when learning and speaking Spanish. Besides learning to avoid many common mistakes, you will also learn lots of Spanish words and phrases that are commonly used in Latin America but rarely taught in Spanish books and courses.

LEARN SPANISH: AVOID 100-PLUS GRINGO MISTAKES

1. No tengo un billete menos que 20.000 pesos.

That's not how you say "I don't have a bill less than 20,000 pesos."

One night, I took a taxi home from a "discoteca" (night club) with a friend named Jim (not his real name) from the States who lives here in Medellín, Colombia. Whenever he is in the mood, he tends to speak to me in Spanish.

I told the "taxista" (cab driver) to drop Jim off first. When we arrived at Jim's home, Jim handed me a bill valued at 20,000 Colombian pesos bill (about \$10 U.S.) But the fare to Jim's home was less than 10,000 Colombian pesos (about \$5 U.S.). And when he handed me the "billete" (bill) Jim said to me "no tengo un billete menos que 20.000 pesos."

Did you notice Jim's error?

Well, that's not how you say "I don't have a bill less than 20,000 pesos." Although in Spanish, when comparing two things the English word "than" is normally translated to the Spanish word "que," there is an exception. When comparing numbers you must use "de" instead of "que." For example:

No tengo menos de 20.000 pesos.

I don't have less than 20,000 pesos.

No tengo un billete de menos de 20.000 pesos.

I don't have a bill less than 20,000 pesos.

Notice the use of "que" when comparing something other than numbers:

Esta película es más interesante que las otras.

This movie is more interesting than the others.

By the way, in many Spanish speaking countries, they use a period where the English language uses a comma in a number. In those Spanish-speaking countries, they also use a comma where the English language uses a period in a number. For example,

English: 2.43

Spanish: 2,43

2. Te rogo que me perdones, no quise lastimarte.

That's not how you say "I beg you to forgive me, I didn't want to hurt you."

Not long ago, an American friend of mine, here in Medellín, asked me to proofread a "carta de amor" (love letter) that he was emailing to his Colombian "novia" (girlfriend). And one of the sentences in his letter read, "te rogo que me perdones, no quería lastimarte." "Te rogo que me perdones" is not how you say "I beg you to forgive me."

The Spanish verb "rogar" (to beg) is a stem-changing verb where the verb's stem changes from "o" to "ue" in all forms but nosotros and vosotros. Look at how the verb is conjugated in the present tense:

Ruego (yo)

Ruegas (tú)
Ruega (él, ella, usted)
Rogamos (nosotros)
Ruegan (ellos, ellas, ustedes)

So my "amigo" should have written "te ruego . . ." (I beg you . . .) and NOT "te rogo . . ."

Te ruego que me perdones. No quería lastimarte.
I beg you to forgive me. I didn't want to hurt you.

Some other Spanish verbs that are conjugated the same way (stem changes from "o" to "ue") are:

almorzar (to have lunch)
colgar (to hang up)
contar (to count, to tell)
costar (to cost)
dormir (to sleep)
morder (to bite)
morir (to die)
mostrar (to show)
mover (to move)
probar (to prove)
recordar (to remember)
sonar (to sound, to ring)
soñar (to dream or to dream about)
volver (to return)
volar (to fly)

3 and 4: Cuando llego en casa te llamo.

That is not how you say "When I get home I'll call you."

One day when I was having lunch in Medellín in a very touristy area of Medellín called Parque Lleras located in a "barrio" (neighborhood) of Medellín called Poblado, I overheard an American make several mistakes while talking on his smartphone. A couple of his mistakes involved his Spanish. The other mistake could have involved his life.

I was sitting in the same restaurant as him and he was speaking on his shiny new iPhone while having lunch with a couple of guys who were apparently also Americans. I have noticed that American men visiting Medellín who are in a tourist area often speak very loudly on their cell phones. Sometimes I think they want others to know that they are Americans. Even in an upscale "barrio" (neighborhood) of Medellín, such as Poblado, bringing attention to the fact that you are an American or foreigner is "tonto" (dumb) or "bobo" (dumb) at best, and "peligroso" (dangerous) at worst.

When the American was speaking on his smartphone, I heard him incorrectly say:

Cuando llego en casa te llamo.
(When I get home, I'll call you.)

Did you notice his two mistakes? Besides the fact that he should have used the subjunctive and said "Cuando llegue . . ." he should have said "a casa." In other words, "cuando llegue a casa" (when I arrive home).

Notice that in conversational Spanish, in this instance, most Spanish speakers would not use the future tense, unlike in English where one would say, "When I get home I WILL call you." But in Spanish, it is literally "when I get home I call you." Of course, it is perfectly fine if you prefer to use the future tense and say "te llamaré" (I will call you.) So he should have said:

*Cuando llegue a casa te llamo.
(When I get home, I'll call you.)*

The reason why he should have used "a casa" instead of "en casa" is because in Spanish, you must use "llegar a" when talking about arriving at a location. And you use "llegar en" when talking about a means of transportation, such as bus, plane, train, car, etc. For example:

*Llegué en tren muy tarde.
I arrived by train very late.*

5 and 6: Me bañé con sopa. Estoy muy embarazado.

"Me bañé con sopa" is not how you say "I bathed with soap." And "estoy muy embarazado" is not how you say "I am very embarrassed."

Earlier this year, I received an email from a subscriber to my newsletter who wrote:

"Patrick, you like to talk a lot about the learning-Spanish mistakes that your American and other English-speaking friends in Medellín make. Surely, you have made tons of mistakes of your own in your journey to learn Spanish."

Well, I have certainly made lots of mistakes. In fact, I think one of the main reasons why I was able to learn Spanish so quickly is because I have never been afraid to make mistakes. By committing lots of mistakes, I learned the correct words and proper grammar. But there is one story that I would like to share with you where I made a couple of very embarrassing mistakes. I committed these errors back in the fall of 2001.

Once a week, in the evening, we (a group of English speakers learning Spanish) would meet with a group of Spanish speakers learning English. We would meet at an elementary school in lower Manhattan.

We would help the Spanish speakers with English and they would help us with Spanish. It was a free class given at an elementary school in the evenings. But the class was only for adults. I am absolutely certain that it was the fall of 2001 because of a horrific odor that I distinctly remember and will never forget for the rest of my life. It was an odor that lingered in the air for several months, if not longer. An odor that you could never imagine unless actually experienced it. The awful odor was a combination of burnt jet fuel and charred bodies.

There were about 5 or 6 of us (English speakers) in the class and about 15 to 20 Spanish speakers. One evening, the instructor of the class asked if any of the English speakers would volunteer to demonstrate

how you to use the preterit tense in Spanish by describing what he or she did that morning. For example, woke up, showered, brushed your teeth, ate breakfast, left for work, etc.

I quickly raised my hand before any of my English-speaking classmates had a chance to volunteer. I don't remember everything that I said but I do remember saying "me lavé con sopa." I was trying to say "I washed myself with soap." Unfortunately, the Spanish word for soap is "jabón" and the Spanish word for soup is "sopa." So I actually said that "I washed myself with soup (and not soap)."

All of the Spanish speakers in the class were roaring with laughter after I said that phrase. One of the Spanish speakers then politely corrected me and told me that the Spanish word for soap is "jabón" not "sopa." In an effort to express my embarrassment, I then said to the class "estoy muy embarazado." Unfortunately, the Spanish phrase "estoy embarazado" does NOT mean "I am embarrassed." "Estoy embarazada" means "I am pregnant."

So when I told the class "estoy muy embarazado" I actually said that "I am very pregnant." As you probably imagined, my second mistake led to even louder round of laughter from the Spanish speakers in the class. The correct way to say "I am embarrassed" in Spanish is "siento vergüenza."

By the way, I noticed in Colombia the people do not say "siento vergüenza" in order to say "I am embarrassed." In Colombia the "gente" (people) say "me da pena" in order to say "I am embarrassed." "Me da pena" literally means "it gives me shame."

In some Spanish-speaking countries you may also hear people say "me da vergüenza" (I am embarrassed). I also noticed in Colombia, or at least in Medellín, they normally do not say "estoy embarazada, ella está embarazada, etc." when referring to pregnancy. In Colombia they usually say:

Estoy en embarazo. (I am pregnant.)

Ella está en embarazo. (She is pregnant.)

7. Tengo un cólico en la pierna.

"Tengo un cólico en la pierna" is not how you say "I have a cramp in my leg."

If you think my mistake when I said "estoy muy embarazada" was so embarrassing, wait until you hear about the mistake that I am now going to tell you about.

I practice an "artes marciales" (martial arts) in Colombia called "jiu-jitsu brasileño" or Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu isn't nearly as popular in Colombia as it is in Brazil or the United States. So when "extranjeros" (foreigners) come to Medellín and they want to practice Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu while they are here, they usually go the Gracie Barra Jiu-Jitsu academy where I train.

One night, I was training Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu with a guy who was visiting from the States. His name is "Mike" (not his real name). Mike told me that he was visiting Medellín for two reasons: To improve his Spanish

To meet a very beautiful "Paisa." (The people of Medellín are called Paisas).

Mike stressed to me "not in that order." By the way, Medellín has a reputation not only for being the "La Ciudad de la Eterna Primavera" (City of Eternal Spring), but the city that also has the reputation for having some of the most beautiful women in Latin America.

While we were training in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, Mike suddenly stopped and said to me in a voice full of anguish “tengo un cólico en la pierna.” “Tengo un cólico en la pierna” literally means “I have a menstrual cramp in my leg.”

I resisted the temptation to laugh aloud at what Mike said, and explained to him that if you are referring to the type of cramp that you get from exercising or running, you must use the word is "calambre." And the type of cramps that women get from their menstruation are called “cólicos.” So Mike should have said:

Tengo un calambre en la pierna.

I have a cramp in my leg.

On a side note, “cólicos” can also refer to abdominal pain caused by a condition such as “diarrea” (diarrhea).

8 and 9: ¿Ese perrito es un muchacho? ¿Es una mujer?

Although the questions ¿ese perrito es un muchacho? and ¿es una mujer? may make grammatical sense, they are not how you ask “Is that puppy a male?” and “Is it a female (puppy)?” respectively.

This is a rather funny incident that I had the pleasure of experiencing. I want to share this story with you because it illustrates two very common mistakes that English speakers make when speaking Spanish.

This incident took place one morning when I went with a Colombian friend to buy a "perrito" (puppy) for his daughter's birthday. While in the "tienda de mascotas" (pet shop), I noticed an English speaking male with his wife or girlfriend. I couldn't figure out where he was from by listening to his accent. He wasn't American. But his native language was English. I believe that he was from New Zealand or Australia.

And I heard him ask the "muchacha" (girl) working in the "tienda de mascotas" a question about one of the puppies. He asked, ¿Ese perrito es un muchacho? (Is that puppy a boy?) The "muchacha" working in the store then gave him a very confused look. And then he asked her: ¿Ese perrito es un hombre? (Is that puppy a man?) Then she turned and looked at her "compañera de trabajo" (co-worker) as if she wanted to ask "Do you understand this foreigner? Why is he asking is an animal a human?"

Well, it is a common mistake for English speakers to refer to male animals as "muchachos" (boys) or "hombres" (men) when speaking Spanish. But the correct word for a male animal is "macho." For example:

Mi perra tuvo una camada de siete cachorros, cuatro hembras y tres machos.

My dog had a litter of seven puppies, four females and three males.

Back to the incident that took place . . .

The English speaker then asked the "muchacha" (girl) another question. Referring to the same puppy, he asked:

¿Es una mujer?

Is it a woman?

And again, the "muchacha" turned and looked at her "compañera de trabajo" (co-worker) with a very puzzled look. Well, it is also a common mistake for English speakers to refer to female animals as "mujeres" (women) when speaking Spanish. The correct word for a female animal is "hembra." I also want you to be aware that besides "hombre" you may hear Spanish speakers refer to a male human being as a "varón."

As we were leaving the "tienda de mascotas" (pet shop), my Colombian "amigo" who also speaks English fluently, and who happens to have a very warped "sentido del humor" (sense of humor) then said to me:

"Patrick, the Gringo's mistake could have been worse. Imagine if he had made a mistake with his Spanish and asked the question in reverse: '¿Esa mujer es una perra?'"

By the way, in Colombia, I noticed that Colombians have a tendency to use the term "gringo" very loosely and refer to almost any English-speaking foreigner as a "Gringo" -- not just Americans.

10: Me trae los utensilios, por favor.

That is not how you would ask a waiter on anyone else "bring me the eating utensils, please."

I have a friend named Larry (not his real name) who comes to visit me in Medellín about 3 or 4 times a year. During one of Larry's trips to Medellín we ate out at a restaurant. Larry with his huge appetite ordered the largest dish on the menu: Bandeja Paisa.

"Bandeja Paisa" is a dish that is what Paisas and other Colombians consider "comida típica" or food typical of Colombia. "Bandeja Paisa" is actually only typical of Medellín and the other surrounding areas of the Colombian department Antioquia. "Bandeja Paisa" is a humongous dish that consists of:

arroz blanco (white rice)

frijoles (beans)

aguacate (avocado)

carne molida (ground beef)

maduro (sweet plantains)

chicharrón (fried pork rinds)

chorizo (spicy sausage)

huevo frito (fried egg)

arepa (patty made of cornmeal, similar to a tortilla)

When Larry's plate arrived, Larry was all set to eat. But the "mesero" (waiter) had forgotten to bring Larry's silverware. So when the waiter passed by our table again, Larry said "me trae los utensilios, por favor."

I was expecting the waiter to return with pots, pans, spatula, and a cooking spoon instead of just a knife, fork and spoon. The Spanish word "utensilios (de cocina)" means kitchen utensils or cooking utensils as opposed to "eating utensils." The Spanish word "cubiertos" means silverware or eating utensils. So Larry should have said:

Me trae los cubiertos, por favor.

Will you bring me eating utensils, please.

*Tráigame los cubiertos, por favor.
Bring me eating utensils, please.*

11: Necesito una navaja para cortar la carne de res.

Unless you are accustomed to cutting your steak with a folding knife, that is not how you say “I need a knife in order to cut the beef/steak.”

It is a common mistake for English speakers to call the knife that you would cut a steak with a “navaja.” Although “navaja” does mean knife, a “navaja” is a folding knife. The Spanish word for knife, as in the type of knife that you would use when eating a steak dinner, is “cuchillo.” By the way, if you want to say Swiss army knife in Spanish the phrase is “navaja suiza.”

You should also be aware that in some Spanish speaking countries the Spanish word for steak is “bisté” or “bistec.” (Just think of the English word “beefsteak.”) And in some other Spanish-speaking countries, such as Colombia, the word for steak is “carne” or “carne de res.”

*Necesito un cuchillo para cortar la carne de res.
I need a knife in order to cut the steak.*

While we are on the topic of the Spanish word “navaja,” I have also heard English speakers make a mistake and refer to a folding knife as a “navajo.” “Navaja” means folding knife, not “navajo.” Navajo is a Native American tribe.

12: Yo comí pollo frito.

That is not how you say “I ate fried chicken.” The Spanish verb “fritar” (to fry) has an irregular past participle: frito (fried). So the correct phrase is:

*Yo comí pollo frito.
I ate fried chicken.*

While we are on the topic of “fried,” there are two things that you should be aware of. In some Spanish speaking countries, they use the verb “fritar” in order to say “to fry.” And in other Spanish speaking countries they use the verb “freír” in order to say “to fry.”

If you are thinking about taking a trip to Colombia, you probably will not hear the phrase “pollo frito” anywhere in Colombia. In Colombia, they say “pollo apanado” (fried chicken). “Apanado” literally means “breaded.” But the “pollo apanado” in Colombia is not breaded. The chicken is coated with flour before being fried, just like the fried chicken in the States. Even in the Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants in Colombia, the fried chicken is called “pollo apanado.”