

# *fortissimo* *Strong Ideas for* *thoughts* *Multilingual Desktop* October 2006 *Publishing*

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**I**Hola! Welcome to my newsletter which comments on all things multilingual and typographic. The article this month would, in certain places in America, provoke anger and violence. However, it rings true to me and I believe it will to you also.

## **Learn Spanish: Why Americans Don't**

*by Douglas Bower and Cindi Bower*

I just bet you had absolutely no idea that the U.S. Senate, on February 17, 2005, declared this the "Year of the Foreign Language Study". You didn't know, did you? Ah-ha! I knew it!

It is true.

The year 2005 was the official Year of Foreign Language Study. And it is about bloody time, I would like to add. In case you are wondering why your elected officials bothered with passing this resolution, on taxpayer's time and money, it is because most of America is afflicted with a dreadful and painful lack of foreign language ability.

This, my foreign-language-illiterate fellow American, is because we have this disorder (and this is true) called, xenoglossophobia—the fear of foreign languages. Moreover, in America it is, and always has been, a chronic case!

Before 1923, 22 states in America had laws prohibiting the teaching of foreign languages. Is that xenophobic (having abnormal fear or hatred of the strange or foreign) or what! It was in 1923 when the Supreme Court overturned this silliness.

However, by 1954, 56% of the U.S. high schools did not even have foreign language courses available to their students. Of those who did, only 14.2% students enrolled in foreign language study.

This was all due to America's abnormal fear of the strange or foreign as applied to foreign languages—xenoglossophobia! Tell me if you have ever, in your life, heard this one: "When those Mexicans come to American they should have to learn how to speak English."

I wish I had a dollar for every time I heard this. I know you have heard it too, so don't deny it!

Well folks, many Americans who move to (or even just visit Mexico) do not bother to learn Spanish. One could make the case that if you were just a tourist that you could squeak by with pointing, grunting, and making loud gaseous sounds.

However, if you are going to move here, why in God's name don't you learn Spanish?

Excuse: xenoglossophobia!

Now you have this real excuse to blame for your total lack of linguistic skills in Spanish. But know that it not only hurts the feelings of the locals that you come to their country and don't learn their language but the Mexicans see the hypocrisy in that you expect something out of them, when they expatriate to America, that you are not yourself willing to even try when you move to Mexico.

Just explain to your Mexican housekeeper xenoglossophobia—I am sure she will understand.

In America, the situation is getting worse even today. In a 2002 story by Patrik Jonsson for The Christian Science Monitor, it was reported that the states of Georgia, New Jersey, and the school district in Denver either had waived or were in the process of ending a foreign language requirement for high school graduation.

I contacted all of these school districts. Only Denver responded. They said, "I have checked with several counselors. At this time, we cannot think of any district in Colorado that requires Foreign Language (particularly in the Metro area). That's not to say there isn't a small district somewhere that requires it."

There you have it—xenoglossophobia at its best. Or, should I say at its worst?

The solution?

Foreign language learning is not something that happens overnight; it takes a commitment of time and money. U.S. schools compound the problem by waiting too long to start foreign language instruction. According to ACTFL Professional Programs Director Elvira Swender, U.S. students often start learning foreign languages at puberty, "an age at which their brains are least receptive to language learning".

Swender also notes the relative unimportance that schools assign to languages. "It doesn't occur to anyone that we should wait to teach students math", she points out, "so why do we wait with foreign languages?"

You should not dismiss this issue of xenoglossophobia. There is a real and unacknowledged fear of foreigners in American culture. I see this all the time in the people I talk to. I am a syndicated columnist and book author and am constantly being deluged with reader's comments. Some are not so nice. I get a sense from the hundreds of column reader's responses I receive that not just xenoglossophobia is a real problem, but xenophobia in general is alive and well in America.

At the writing of this article, the Minuteman Project Movement is growing leaps and bounds that will, in my view, cause an even large isolationism from Mexico. I do not know but maybe it will even go back to the days when learning a foreign language will be outlawed or at least dropped from the school's curriculum all together. Anything is possible and stranger things have happened.

The main reasons I think people who would really like to learn Spanish, but who do not, are those who suffer from xenoglossophobia. These are people who would love to learn Spanish but do not because of their fear of second language acquisition. They are just plainly and simply afraid. I think that fear works out in some of the following ways:

- They think that they will not be able to master the thousands of vocabulary words required for communicating in the language.
- They are terrified at the thought of having to learn grammar rules. I mean, who wouldn't be? Can you imagine anything more boring?

• They are afraid that they are too old. They are convinced that had they started as a child they would have had a fair shot at mastering Spanish. They think their learning curve is retarded because of their age. Here is the BIG ONE: They are scared to death of making a fool of themselves.

I believe there are other reasons that I haven't thought of but these are some of the top ones that give the adult learner fits. I talk to people all the time who voice these concerns. They are genuine. They would love to live in Mexico and to take advantage of all its benefits but these objections loom so largely in their brains that they cannot move past them.

Unbelievably this xenoglossophobia is such a real disorder that some people cannot get past it without professional help.

Sometimes all the knowledge in the world will not convince someone so afflicted so that they can get past their fears and start to acquire a second language. If you are xenoglossophobic and yet it is a life goal of yours to master Spanish, get the help you need. What we cover in this series may be of help to get you started.

Here is what you will learn:

- That you not only do not have to master thousands of vocabulary words before being able to communicate in Spanish but that you will begin to learn all that vocabulary in the same natural and fluent way you learned your native language as a child.
- That you will not have to memorize numerous grammar rules in order to become fluent in Spanish.

• That you are NOT too old to become FLUENT in Spanish and that children do not learn languages faster than adults do. One of the consequences of this xenoglossophobia, is that less than 9% of Americans are fluent, to any degree, in any foreign language. Americans are a linguistically challenged people.

What may happen is that when a potential American expatriate does work up the courage to move (retire) to Mexico he or she ends up moving to one of the huge English Speaking American Enclaves or colonies that have formed in Mexico. Or they may forego the opportunity of a lifetime to live in Mexico because of their fear of learning a second language.

It may surprise you to learn that there may be more than one million Americans living in Mexico at any one time. What they have done is invade a particular city, and create, for all practical purposes, a new culture of English speakers. You can, if it is your desire, move to cities like San Miguel de Allende or Puerto Vallarta and live there the rest of your days and never, and I mean NEVER have to utter one word of Spanish.

The local population in those cities has had to learn English. They've been forced, out of sheer necessity, to learn English to cope with a population, and sometimes a huge population, of American Gringos who refuse to learn the language—that is xenoglossophobia at work. I have mixed feelings about that whole situation.



I am glad for the local Mexicans who have become bilingual. This fact actually makes the entire point of this article.

The local Nationals have, in the majority of cases, learned English without ever stepping foot in an English speaking country. (They never lived in an English speaking country for even a nano-second of their lives and yet have a high degree of spoken fluency in English.) Some of them have excellent accents to boot. Some of them are poorly educated and yet have learned English and have done so well.

Shouldn't this be an indictment of every U.S. educated American who comes as a tourist or expats who never in their lives learn even the most basic of survival phrases in Spanish? Just think of this for a moment. We have here in Mexico entire cities with huge number of locals who are too poor to afford English lessons and yet have a high degree of spoken fluency in English. I might add that this phenomenon is mostly restricted to the resort areas of Mexico. Do not come to where I live, in Guanajuato, and expect the locals to speak English.

If these financially challenged locals can learn another language without ever participating in any sort of total-immersion course in an English speaking country then what excuse do Americans have for not learning Spanish?

Another concern I have is that when Mexicans expatriate to America there is an American cultural expectation for them to learn English. You hear this complaining all the time and currently it is one of the battle cries of the anti-Mexican movement in America. Yet, when Americans expatriate to Mexico, particularly retirees, they do not do what they expect the Mexicans to do when they expatriate to America—learn the language.

What they do instead is congregate into enclaves. They create “Little Americas” in certain popular cities. They have names for them like “Gringo Gulch” or “Gringo Landia”. These have become areas of Mexico where the Gringos have transformed Mexican cities into something Non-Mexican.

Do not miss the hypocrisy here.

This is the political platform of anti-Mexican movements like “The Minuteman Project” and yet Americans do the very same thing of which they accuse the Mexican immigrants to America—they do not learn the language or assimilate into the culture!

This bothers me greatly. If America expects that immigrants to the U.S. should have to learn English and assimilate into the American culture then is it not the height of hypocrisy not to Practice What You Preach when you, the American, moves to Mexico?

If Mexican nationals, who cannot afford English lessons, can and do learn English so they can get good jobs in the resort areas, then you too, Mr. and Ms. American (who can probably very likely afford to do so) learn Spanish BEFORE moving to Mexico. Remember: these resort town locals learned English having never stepped foot in a class or English speaking country.

A point you may be thinking about now is that if there are cities in Mexico where you could move and never have to learn the language then why not do so. Is not that the perfect setup? The answer is that you could do that. Then stop complaining that immigrants who move to America should have to learn English and assimilate into the American culture. If you are going to move to Mexico, never learn the language so that you can assimilate into the Mexican culture, then you do not have the

right to expect the same thing of Mexicans when they expatriate to America!

I am convinced that the Xenoglossophobia is the direct result of two issues: Method and Motivation.... The wrong method kills the motivation. Motivation never blossoms and grows because of the frightful methods Americans have been led to believe should be the one and only way to learn a foreign language.

The biggest thing to consider at this point is that if a member of a poor and barely developing country can somehow manage to learn English without the resources available to the majority of Americans, then there is hope—BIG HOPE—that you too can develop a high degree of spoken fluency in Spanish.

I think the xenoglossophobia is the biggest factor in why Americans do not learn Spanish. And just think about this a minute: there will be no assimilation into the culture if you cannot communicate in the language of the culture. Whether you want to move here or function better as tourist, there is a way to master Spanish.

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*Expatriates Doug and Cindi Bower have successfully expatriated to Mexico, learning through trial and error how to do it from the conception of the initial idea to driving up to their new home in another country. Now the potential expatriate can benefit from their more than three years of pre-expat research to their more than two years of actually living in Mexico. THE PLAIN TRUTH ABOUT LIVING IN MEXICO answers the potential expatriate's questions by leading them through the process from the beginning to the end.*

You may buy their book here: <http://www.universal-publishers.com/book.php?method=ISBN&book=1581124570>.

### About fortissimodesign

Hi. My name is Chuck Mountain. I am the owner of *fortissimodesign*, a multilingual desktop publishing and graphic design studio. I am fluent in **Adobe InDesign CS/CS2** and **QuarkXPress 6.5/7.0**, making the typesetting of Romance, Germanic, Cyrillic and other orthographies well within my capabilities. To date I have worked in Spanish, French, Italian, Dutch, Danish, German, Polish, Russian and Bosnian. Unicode and OpenType fonts are standard fare.

Concurrently with multilingual DTP, I have worked for the past 6 years as a freelance graphic designer. I am proficient not only in Quark and InDesign, but also in **Adobe Illustrator CS2** and **Adobe Photoshop CS2**. Teaching at the college level has also sharpened my skills in the everyday use of this software.

My design work includes cover and page layout for full length books, as well as posters, brochures, newsletters, marketing materials and stationery packages.

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