

A Report on Duolingo Spanish

Yashodhan M

14/01/2025

Abstract

This report describes my personal experience with the Duolingo Spanish (from English) course, covering my study methods, time calculations, self-assessment of Spanish proficiency, reflections on grammar, and commentary on the course's structure. The document details three distinct phases of my study routine and offers insights into the practical aspects of language learning.

1 Introduction

I completed the Spanish (from English) course on a program called Duolingo. The equivalent level in CEFR is B2. I am able to speak Spanish now. I will share my technique, my experience and other general comments. I hope this helps.

From here I will assume that the reader is acquainted with Duolingo.

I completed the program today and my daily streak stands at 375. I started my study in late December of 2023 and finished it in mid January of 2025. The questions regarding my abilities in Spanish shall be answered later.

The 375 days is misleading as all the days were not all equivalent. There were three phases.

1.1 Phase 1

For the first four months, I did one exercise a day in order to maintain my streak. I often missed days and used streak freezes. This is what most users do, however I still learned faster than others because I only did the first bubble and a story before skipping to the next unit.

I realised that the exercises are repetitive after the first bubble (having 5-6 exercises) and I would not be learning anything new. Hence, I would skip to the next unit. I would discuss the efficacy of this method shortly.

1.2 Phase 2

Around May I started doing Duolingo at the same time of the day everyday. That was around 5AM-6AM in the morning. I wake up at 5AM everyday, even on weekends and on special days. This consistency was a game-changer.

Now I could do more exercises per day as I had time in the early morning. I was unhappy with the unstructured progress that I was doing per day. I saw that I had a long way to go and I needed to go faster. I needed to do more per day.

Here, a thought occurred to me. What if I do one unit a day? That is, one bubble (5/6 exercises), one story and one unit test.

It seemed extraordinarily fast and I calculated that I would finish the course in 8 more months.

I asked myself whether I would be able to do so much per day and whether I would forget what I had learned.

I committed to this experiment for 28 days, for that's how many units existed in the third section.

By the end of the 28 days I had realised two important things.

First was that I was able to study that much without issues, and I was even able to do German and Russian afterwards. It might have taken a week for my brain to be adjusted to the new load.

The second was that this method was far superior to the previous one. Simply because I was studying Spanish for 30 minutes a day at the same time, I was doing far better than 5 minutes a day at a random point in the day.

My retention was better, I started connecting the dots and started passing my unit tests without failing. By the way, back then you only had 3 hearts in unit tests, now you have 5 (except at the section test).

Since after doing one unit of Spanish I would have a 2X boost, I would do a unit of German as well.

In fact I completed German too, but unfortunately it only has 5 sections so my ability is limited.

I have had a 5:30AM-6:30AM Duolingo time for a good part of 8 months now. I didn't do it for an hour only twice, owing to unavoidable circumstances. But a couple of times I did more than usual. For the most part I had a very steady pace.

1.3 Phase 3

After doing this for about 6 months, after the German course was over and the Russian course turned out to be inconsistent and incompatible with my method; I started doing 2 units of Spanish per day. This took me one hour everyday, like before.

My brain needed 1 week to adjust to the new load again. The first 3-4 days were not entirely enjoyable. Duolingo also changed the 6th exercise in the bubble from review of mistakes to reviewing previously taught words and phrases; and that was also a factor in the slight frustration.

But afterwards I was able to do 2 units a day without issues, which I did for a little less than 40 days, finishing the last two sections (72 units) and completing the course today.

2 Time Calculations

At my first phase speed, which is still many times faster than casual learners, I would have taken 5.4 years to finish the course. (If you do 1 exercise a day, and don't skip anything, you'll take over 18 years to complete the course).

At my second phase speed, one would take 282 days (as there are 282 units) to complete the course.

At my third phase speed, one would take 141 days to finish the course.

3 Can I Speak Spanish?

Now, to answer the most important question, can I speak Spanish?

The answer is: Absolutely. I can.

Here's how I would give you an idea of my current level of Spanish:

- I can understand Spanish dubbed *Friends* (a US TV show) without subtitles and I am able to understand new words from context. *Friends* was my first English language TV show and I did learn a lot of English from it. In general I understand Spanish language media and internet comments.
- I can read Wikipedia pages in Spanish for the most part, I can use Spanish language websites without the need of a translator except for particular words. There's a variety in vocabulary per country so you may need a translator plugin.
- I can fully communicate in Spanish and explain myself. I'll discuss my current limitations in the next segment.
- I can read *Harry Potter*, a book I've read so many times in two languages without needing translation.

Where I am yet improving:

- I tried a book by Gabriel Márquez and I needed translations. I can't read proper books yet.
- While I speak Spanish, I can't always say the exact thing I want to. I say it differently and I'm not as smart as I am in other languages. So for a simple example, if I can't say "I'm not pulling your leg", I instead say "I'm telling you the truth".

While speaking I also make grammatical errors which I realise after I listen to the recordings.

These problems are understandable at this stage and should go away soon enough with practice.

Essentially I can speak and understand Spanish as used by common people but I cannot write poetry or read literature.

Here's a sample paragraph randomly off the top of my head:

" ¿Qué quieres ver aquí? Puedo hablar y escribir en español cómo he contadote. Ojalá que no quieras que hago errores para que tú sentirás mejor. Lo siento pero la gente aquí son malos. Tú no, pero los otros sí. La última vez cuando había escrito sobre mi método, alguienes de los redditores me dieron merda. Sé que todavía no hablo correctamente, pero estoy aprendiendo. "

(Note: The Spanish paragraph has many errors.)

4 What Made This Possible?

Firstly, if you try my method, you'd realise that it's not possible to follow it unless you have a proper daily schedule.

You'd have to get your whole life in order. I have an ironclad bedtime schedule and I have my routines which I've solidified over the past year. I wasn't like this before, so it's doable. But I didn't do this for Spanish. Language learning has only been a small part of my life in last year.

Secondly, Spanish is not my second language. I had studied 5 languages (no Spanish) in school/junior college before entering university, and that is normal here. It gets easier picking up new languages with practice. Though I am only good with Indo-European languages so far.

Now that I know that I can do 2 units a day, I'm planning to complete French in 126 days. I may take a little longer because I'm moving to another country midway and might lose a few days to jet lag and internet issues.

So check back around the beginning of June to see whether I can speak French. French after Spanish should not be as hard.

5 What About Grammar?

I learned the grammar implicitly. For example, I have a good grasp on when the adjective goes before and when it goes after the noun but I was never taught a rule. I can think about it and maybe come up with a rule, but I understand it implicitly. Similarly I forgot the distinctions between verbs ending in *ir*, *ar* and *er* as I simply started remembering the conjugations themselves and now I just have one set of verbs in my mind and not three different sets.

This is something I found fascinating because previously I had been a grammar hardliner. But now I learned how to learn grammar innately. Chosmky be vindicated.

So essentially you learn by making mistakes and then fixing them, and eventually begin writing and talking intuitively.

Appendix: Comments about the Duolingo Spanish from English Course

- Guidebooks stop appearing in later sections. If they appear, they are copy pasted from earlier sections.
- Unfixed mistakes in the course increase in the latter sections as there are fewer people flagging them.
- You get more xp per exercise later and you also get to write what happened in a story in your own words. There are many Spanish to Spanish questions starting in unit 4; but it never does majorly become Spanish to Spanish.
- Conjugations for 'vosotros' are never taught, I dislike that.

6 Conclusion

Duolingo is a great resource for learning Spanish. I would make some improvements but it's highly util as it is.