



New Country No Spanish *-LJET*

An Expat's Guide to Surviving Culture Shock and Daily Life Without Spanish

Retired

Sheri Summers
SpanishSlowandEasy.com

New Country, No Spanish (Yet)

When you move abroad later in life, you expect adventure, beauty, and maybe even peace. But what many new expats don't expect is just how hard the first months can be. Suddenly, everyday things feel complicated — the grocery store, the pharmacy, even asking for directions.

I remember my first trip to the supermarket in Portugal. I had to guess what I was buying based on the pictures on the packaging. Sometimes I got it right. Sometimes I didn't. When the cashier rang it up, I couldn't understand a word. So, I simply handed her a fistful of money and hoped she'd take the right amount. That night, I went home and cried. To be honest, I cried most nights in those first months.

If you've felt that way, you're not alone. Culture shock is real. The language barrier is real. The loneliness and frustration are real. And it's okay to admit that this is harder than you expected.

This guide is here to help. It's not about being perfect or learning Spanish overnight. It's about surviving those early months with more ease, making sense of the culture around you, and slowly finding your footing. And step by step, you'll move from surviving to thriving — I promise.



Chapter 1 – Understanding Culture Shock

(and Why It's Normal)

When you first move abroad, no one warns you how disorienting the smallest things can feel. It isn't just the language — it's everything. The streets don't look the same. The doors don't open the same way. Even the food on your plate can feel unfamiliar.

This stage has a name: **culture shock**. And while it feels uncomfortable, it's completely normal. Everyone goes through it. In fact, psychologists often describe it as happening in phases:

1. **Honeymoon Phase** – At first, everything feels exciting. The sights, the sounds, the beauty of your new country fill you with awe.
2. **Frustration Phase** – Then reality sets in. Simple tasks feel overwhelming. Why is the bank so complicated? Why do store clerks talk so fast? Why do people do things *this way* instead of *that way*?
3. **Adjustment Phase** – Slowly, you begin to adapt. You learn a few phrases. You figure out how to get groceries without panic. The new ways become a little more familiar.
4. **Acceptance Phase** – Eventually, life takes on a new rhythm. You may never feel 100% “local,” but you find peace and belonging in your new home.

It helps to know these stages exist, because then you realize: *this isn't forever*. Where you are now is just one part of the journey.

For instance: *One expat remembered walking through her new town, trying to be brave by greeting everyone. She said “good morning” to everyone she passed... only it was late afternoon. The looks she got were mortifying. Later she laughed*

about it, but in the moment she wanted to disappear. Culture shock has a way of humbling all of us — but those stumbles are part of the process.

Why Language Makes Culture Shock Harder

Not knowing the language magnifies everything. You can't ask questions easily. You can't explain yourself when something goes wrong. Even buying soap or tea becomes a guessing game.

It's easy to feel small, embarrassed, or even invisible. Many new expats cry during this phase — I did, and almost everyone I've worked with has, too. But tears don't mean you're failing. They mean you're stretching beyond your comfort zone, and that takes courage.

The Reframe

Instead of seeing culture shock as a sign you don't belong, see it as a **rite of passage**. Every expat has stories of confusion, mistakes, and misunderstandings. Later, those stories become the funny ones you tell at dinner parties.

Right now, it may not feel funny. But hold this truth: you are not weak, you are not failing, and you are not alone. You're simply in the middle of an adjustment that millions of others have lived through, too.

Reflection Prompt: *Which stage of culture shock do you feel you're in today? What's one small thing you've figured out since you first arrived?*



Chapter 2 – Surviving Without Spanish (Yet)

One of the scariest feelings when you first arrive in a new country is not being able to communicate. You look around and suddenly realize you can't read the street signs, you can't understand the announcements, and you don't know how to ask for help.

For instance: When I lived in Taiwan, I could only recognize a few words on signs and understood even fewer when people spoke. My biggest fear was getting lost and not being able to find my way back. At the time, that thought was terrifying. But later I realized all I had to do was ask, *“Does anyone here speak English?”* Almost everywhere I went, at least one person would step forward, happy to help. The fear of being helpless was much bigger than the reality.

Communication Hacks That Work Without Spanish

- **Gestures:** Point, mime, and use your hands. You'd be amazed how much can be understood without words.
- **Write it down:** Numbers, addresses, or the name of a medicine written on paper go a long way.
- **Photos/screenshots:** Take a picture of what you need (bus stop, medication, product). Show it when you're stuck.
- **Translation apps:** Google Translate can be downloaded offline, so you're not stuck without Wi-Fi.
- **Magic phrase:** *“¿Habla inglés?”* (Do you speak English?) You'll be surprised how often someone nearby does.

Daily Survival Basics

- **At the grocery store:** Point, count with fingers, use the self-checkout if available.
- **At the pharmacy:** Bring medication names written down in Spanish (or show the box from home).
- **Transportation:** Carry a card with your address printed clearly, or show your driver a screenshot on your phone.
- **Restaurants:** Start with one or two meals/drinks you can order confidently. Familiarity builds confidence.

Mindset Shift

Most of the time, locals *want* to help. You may feel embarrassed asking, but people often appreciate your effort. Remember: you don't need perfect Spanish to get through today — you just need resourcefulness, kindness, and a willingness to try.

Reflection Prompt: *Think of a time you were stuck and someone helped you. How could you carry that same openness and trust into your new life abroad?*



Chapter 3 – Daily Life Made Easier (Quick Wins)

Once you've made it through the first couple of weeks, patterns begin to emerge. You notice the same errands over and over: buying food, paying bills, getting medicine, taking transportation. These daily routines can either feel like a nightmare or become small victories. The key is breaking them down into simple steps.

At the Grocery Store

- **Bring a list with pictures** of the items you need. If you can't find them, show them to a clerk. Even better, write the words down in English with the Spanish word next to them. That way, you have a better chance of remembering the new word later.
- **Learn the basics of weight & packaging:** kilo, litro, bolsa (bag), caja (box).
- **At the register:** If the cashier says something you don't understand, smile and hand over your reusable bag, or simply say "*Lo siento, no entiendo*" (Sorry, I don't understand).
- **Pro tip:** Keep small bills and coins handy. Cashiers are patient if you hand over a larger bill, but smaller notes avoid delays.

***For instance:** One expat remembered the day the clerk at her corner store greeted her with a smile and asked if she wanted "the usual." It was just a tiny moment, but it made her feel like part of the neighborhood instead of a stranger passing through.*

At the Pharmacy or Doctor

- **Carry a “health card”:** a small paper with your name, age, allergies, medications, and conditions written in Spanish. Hand it over instead of trying to pronounce.
- Learn one lifesaving phrase: *“Me duele [body part]”* (It hurts in my [body part]).
- Bring medication boxes with you; pharmacists can often find the local equivalent.
- Many pharmacies have private counters. Don’t be afraid to ask for help with gestures.

***For instance:** A traveler once panicked trying to describe heartburn, then pulled out an old pill bottle. The pharmacist immediately understood and found the right medicine. No words needed.*

Banking & Bills

- **Prepare paperwork in advance:** account numbers, slips, or amounts written clearly.
- Use apps or online banking if possible, but know it may take patience to learn the local version.
- If you’re unsure, write down your request in Spanish beforehand and hand it to the teller.
- Remember: it’s normal for the process to take longer than back home. Bring patience.

Transportation

- **Carry your address printed in Spanish** (or saved as a screenshot). Show it to taxi drivers.
- Learn one question: “*¿Cuánto cuesta?*” (How much?). Oftentimes, shopkeepers will write the numbers down or show you on a calculator.
- For buses: ask the driver or another passenger. A friendly smile goes a long way.
- If lost, pause and ask calmly: “*¿Dónde está [place]?*” (Where is [place]?).

For instance: A newcomer in Ecuador once boarded the wrong bus and started to panic. Instead of being stranded, they held up their phone with the name of their town written in Spanish. The driver smiled, shook his head, and pointed them to the bus across the street. Within minutes, they were on their way. A few words, a little patience, and a kind stranger were all it took.

Restaurants & Cafés

- Learn 3 basics: *agua* (water), *café* (coffee), and your favorite meal. Start small.
- If you don't understand the menu, point to something or say “*Quiero esto, por favor*” (I want this, please).
- Don't worry about mistakes — servers often appreciate your effort and patience.
- Tip: Practice ordering the same thing until it feels natural.

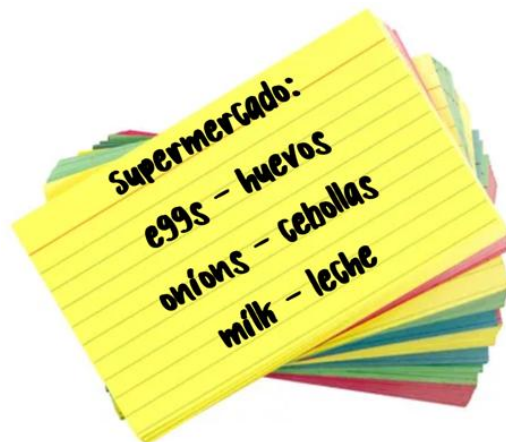
Quick Wins Checklist (Carry these with you)

- 📌 Grocery: pictures, small bills, reusable bag.
- 📌 Pharmacy: health card, old pill bottles.
- 📌 Bank: write requests, bring paperwork.
- 📌 Transport: printed address, key phrase.
- 📌 Restaurants: learn 3 essentials, point when needed.

Mindset Reframe

Each errand you complete — no matter how clumsy — is a win. Even if you mess up words or hand over too much money, you're learning. Every small victory builds confidence, and confidence grows faster than you think.

Reflection Prompt: *What daily task do you dread the most right now? How could you simplify it into two or three small steps?*



Chapter 4 – Navigating Cultural Differences Gracefully

One of the biggest surprises for new expats is how many little things feel different. It's not just the language barrier, it's the culture around it. How people greet each other, how time is understood, how personal space works, even how loudly or softly people talk. These differences can feel frustrating at first.

But here's the secret: if you can shift from *judging* these differences to *curiously observing* them, you'll adjust much more quickly — and your stress will drop.

Greetings & Personal Interactions

- **Greetings matter.** In many Spanish-speaking countries, it's considered rude to launch straight into business without saying “*Buenos días*” (good morning) or “*Buenas tardes*” (good afternoon).
- **Personal space may be different.** People may stand closer, touch your arm, or greet you with a kiss on the cheek. At first, this may feel uncomfortable, but it's usually a sign of friendliness, not intrusion.
- **Tone of voice varies.** Locals may sound loud or animated compared to what you're used to. Don't take it as anger — it's just expression.

For instance: A couple moving to Mexico recalled their surprise when neighbors stopped by unannounced with homemade tamales. At first, they didn't know how to respond. But when they simply smiled, accepted the food, and later returned the kindness with banana bread, a friendship began that lasted for years.

Time & Pace of Life

- **Mañana doesn't always mean tomorrow.** Sometimes it means “not today” or simply “later.” This can be maddening for someone used to punctuality.

- **Slower pace is normal.** Government offices, banks, and restaurants may take longer than you expect.
- Reframe: Instead of feeling your time is wasted, see it as an invitation to slow down and notice life around you.

Reflection Prompt: Think of a moment when you were frustrated by waiting. How could you reframe it as rest instead of wasted time?

Food & Mealtimes

- Meals may be earlier or later than you're used to (lunch at 11 a.m., or dinner at 9).
- Dishes may look or taste different from what you expected.
- Reframe: Rather than comparing, approach meals as a cultural adventure. Try, taste, and keep what you like.

Social Norms & Courtesy

- **Politeness counts.** Always add *por favor* (please) and *gracias* (thank you). It softens every request.
- **Titles matter.** In some places, addressing people as *Señor/Señora* shows respect.
- **Directness varies.** What feels like “beating around the bush” to you may actually be considered polite.

The Cultural Notes Journal

One helpful tool is keeping a little notebook of your “cultural surprises.” Instead of just getting frustrated, jot them down:

- “Bank clerk insisted I fill out three copies of the same form.”
- “Neighbors bring tamales at Christmas — must bring something back!”
- “Taxi driver didn’t give change unless I asked.”

Over time, these notes turn into your personal “cultural dictionary” — and you’ll smile at how much you’ve learned.

The Reframe

Culture shock doesn’t mean the new way is wrong and your way is right. It means you’re learning to dance to a new rhythm. Some steps will feel clumsy at first, but eventually, you’ll find the beat.

Reflection Prompt: *What’s one cultural difference that has surprised or frustrated you? Could you reframe it as “interesting” instead of “wrong”?*



Chapter 5 – The Emotional Rollercoaster of Expat Life

No one talks about how emotional moving abroad can be. You're not just changing scenery — you're leaving behind everything familiar: language, routines, friendships, even the way you order your morning coffee.

In the beginning, this often brings waves of loneliness and frustration. Many expats cry in those first months. Some wonder if they made a huge mistake. But here's the thing: these feelings are part of the journey. They're not signs of failure; they're signs that you're growing.

The Loneliness Factor

- At home, you knew how to chat with the cashier, joke with a neighbor, or greet the mail carrier. Abroad, those small connections vanish — and it can feel like isolation.
- Even when surrounded by people, you may feel invisible if you can't join in the conversation.

***For instance:** One retiree said her turning point came when she managed to call a taxi on her own for the first time. It wasn't perfect Spanish, but the driver understood. That little success gave her the courage to try again the next day.*

Missing the Familiar

- Your favorite foods, your comfy routines, even hearing your own language. These little things become surprisingly precious once they're gone.
- Some days you may long for "home comforts" more than you expected. That's normal.
- Tip: Pack or find small reminders (a favorite tea, a familiar book, a recipe from home) — these comfort anchors can make a big difference.

The Dependence Dilemma

- For many retirees, independence is a point of pride. Suddenly needing help for basic things can feel humiliating.
- Reframe: Asking for help is not weakness — it's connection. Most locals are proud to help and often see it as hospitality.

For instance: When I lived in Taiwan, my greatest fear was getting lost and never finding my way back. In reality, all I needed to do was ask, "Does anyone here speak English?" and people stepped up to help. The fear was far greater than the reality.

Caring for Your Heart

- **Give yourself grace:** It's okay to cry, to feel lost, or to long for home.
- **Routine helps:** Establish a simple daily rhythm (morning walk, market trip, afternoon rest) to feel grounded.
- **Stay connected:** Call family or friends back home, but also join expat groups so you don't feel isolated.
- **Celebrate small wins:** Every time you navigate a task on your own, acknowledge it. These victories build resilience.

Reflection Prompt: *What comforts from home do you miss most? Could you create a small ritual or substitute in your new country to bring that sense of comfort back into your daily life?*

The Reframe

Every emotional dip is also a sign of transformation. You're not the same person you were before you moved. You're stretching, learning, and becoming someone who can thrive in more than one world. That's a brave and beautiful thing.



Chapter 6 – Building Bridges Without Words

Human connection doesn't depend entirely on language. Before you speak Spanish fluently — or even before you can say more than a handful of words — you can still create bonds, friendships, and trust.

In fact, many expats discover that kindness, patience, and a sense of humor go further than perfect grammar ever could.

The Power of Nonverbal Connection

- **Smile and eye contact:** A warm smile communicates more than words.
- **Gestures and body language:** Pointing, nodding, miming actions — these work surprisingly well.
- **Tone of voice:** A gentle tone, even with broken words, communicates respect.

***For instance:** I once mixed up the words for “rabbit” and “underwear.” At first, I was mortified. Now I laugh about it, because even though I’m sure they found it hilarious, they didn’t mock me. They understood I was trying, and kindly corrected me. Mistakes became bridges, not barriers.*

Small Acts of Kindness

- Offer your seat on the bus.
- Hold a door open.
- Buy from the same fruit vendor each week — and smile.
- These little gestures create familiarity and goodwill, even when words are few.

Finding Your Communities

- **Expat groups:** Facebook, WhatsApp, or local meetup groups often organize dinners, walks, or events. These are lifelines for support.
- **Local activities:** Attend neighborhood fiestas, markets, or classes — even just as an observer at first. Showing up matters.
- **Volunteering:** Simple acts like helping at a food drive or joining a cleanup project can connect you instantly with people.

The Secret of “Shared Stories”

Every expat — and every local — has stumbled in another language or culture at some point. Sharing your mistakes can break the ice. Instead of hiding them, let them be your funny stories. People respect effort more than perfection.

Reflection Prompt: *Think of one person you see regularly — a neighbor, a cashier, a vendor. What small gesture could you make this week to turn that encounter into the beginning of a relationship?*

The Reframe

You don't need Spanish fluency to belong. You belong because you're here, you're trying, and you're human. Every smile, every kind act, every small connection is a thread in the web that will eventually make this place feel like home.

Chapter 7 – From Surviving to Thriving

Survival is a wonderful first step. You've made it through the culture shock, you've figured out how to buy food, get your medicine, pay your bills, and maybe even navigate a bus ride without too much panic. That's no small accomplishment.

But there's a difference between **getting by** and **truly belonging**.

When you begin to learn even a little Spanish, the walls of separation start to fall. The cashier becomes a neighbor. The taxi driver becomes a storyteller. The vendor at the market becomes a friend. Suddenly, life here feels less like something happening *to you* and more like something you're part of.

Why Spanish Changes Everything

- **Confidence grows.** Ordering your own coffee or asking for directions feels empowering.
- **Relationships deepen.** Locals warm up when they see you making the effort, no matter how imperfect.
- **Daily life smooths out.** Simple errands stop feeling like mountains to climb.
- **Your heart relaxes.** Instead of bracing for every interaction, you find yourself looking forward to them.

***For instance:** After years of working with international students, I saw a pattern. At first, they relied on gestures and translators. But the moment they learned even a handful of phrases, something shifted. They laughed more, connected more, and started to feel at home. The same will happen for you.*

Start Small, Keep It Gentle

You don't need to aim for fluency right away. Start with:

- Greetings (*buenos días, buenas tardes*).
- Politeness (*por favor, gracias*).
- One or two phrases for your most common errands (*¿Cuánto cuesta?* – How much does it cost?).

The secret is to take it slowly, consistently, and kindly with yourself. Progress comes in layers, not leaps.

A Gentle Next Step

That's why I created **Spanish Slow and Easy**. It was designed for people just like you — expats who want to feel at home, but who don't want overwhelming grammar charts or fast-talking teachers.

Instead, you'll find:

- **Short, clear audios** you can listen to daily.
- **Memory hooks** to help phrases stick.
- **Transcripts and worksheets** for easy review.
- **A friendly voice** guiding you, without pressure.

You don't have to struggle through Spanish. You can ease into it — slowly, steadily, and at your own pace.

The Invitation

You've already proven you're brave enough to start this new chapter of life abroad. Now give yourself the gift of connection, freedom, and belonging.

Click [here to try Spanish Slow and Easy](#) today, and take your first step from surviving to thriving.



Reflection Prompt: *What would open up in your daily life if you could say just 10 more phrases in Spanish? Who would you connect with? Where would you go with more confidence?*