

Language and culture guide

Spanish

Language experts agree that language learning is most effective when language and culture are linked. *The Polyglots* apps aim to spark children's interest in language and culture through play. This guide provides some general information about Spanish language and Spanish-speaking cultures that may be of interest to you and may extend children's learning.

About Spanish-speaking countries

Spanish is spoken by approximately 561 million people across the world. It is the official or national language in Spain, Equatorial Guinea and 19 countries in the Americas.

Early childhood education

Spanish is spoken in many different countries and territories, each with different policies and levels of wealth. Early childhood education varies from one to the next. Policies adopted in some countries (Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela) show a trend towards emphasising early childhood education as part of human development. In Mexico and Peru, compulsory education begins at the age of three.¹ In 2022, more than 97 per cent of children in Spain attended early childhood education.²

Language

'Castellano', the original language in which modern Spanish has its main foundation, travelled from Spain to the Caribbean and to North, Central and South America as a result of expeditions funded by Spain during the 15th and 16th centuries.

Besides evolving from Latin through Castellano, Spanish has been influenced by many other languages, including Catalan, Arabic, Basque, Greek, French, English and the native languages of the Americas.

Spanish uses the same Roman alphabet as English but the alphabet has one extra letter (ñ), and accents, called 'tildes', are used on some vowels (for example, á). Question marks and exclamation marks both start and end a sentence, for example, '¿Por qué?' (Why?).

The pronunciation of Spanish words is generally directly represented by their written form.

Spanish is a gendered language. Articles, nouns and adjectives have a gender, meaning they are either masculine or feminine; for example, 'la piña' (feminine) or 'el brócoli' (masculine).

For correct pronunciation, listen carefully to the words as they are spoken in the app or in the sound library in the app toolkit on the ELLA website.

Culture

Spanish-speaking countries have many different peoples, cultures, religions and traditions. A majority of people are Christian with Catholicism being the main religion.

Politeness and customs

In Spain, depending on the time of day, you may say good day ('buenos días'), good afternoon ('buenas tardes') or good evening/night ('buenas noches') and shake hands when you meet or leave someone. Close friends and family give two kisses or embrace.

In most Spanish-speaking countries, young people say '¿Hola!' to their peers. However, with their elders they mostly use courtesy greetings such as '¡Buenos días!' and the formal 'you', as in '¿Cómo está usted?' (How are you?).

Culture in *The Polyglots* apps

As children play with the apps, they can discover fun and intriguing cultural references to Spanish-speaking countries, such as a bull, a llama, a pineapple, maracas and a piñata. You can learn more about the cultural references in the app toolkit.

¹ 'Early childhood care and education regional report: Latin America and the Caribbean', United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2010

² 'Education at a glance 2024', OECD, 2024

Interesting topics

Animals

Some animals in Spanish-speaking countries include:

- wolves
- brown bears
- deer
- opossums or possums
- armadillos
- sloths and anteaters
- lemurs, monkeys and apes
- rodents, including the huge capybara
- big cats, including ocelots and jaguars
- llamas, alpacas and vicuñas
- guinea pigs
- elephants
- birds such as toucans, Argentinian horneros (ovenbird) and turquoise-browed motmots
- sea animals such as pink dolphins in Colombia.

Arts

Spanish-speaking countries are rich in the arts, including visual arts, music, theatre, film, architecture and literature.

- Famous visual artists include Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí, Francisco Goya, El Greco, Diego Velázquez, Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera.
- The Chupa Chup's lollipop logo was designed by surrealist painter Salvador Dalí in 1969.
- Pre-Columbian art (the art of the native peoples of the Americas and the Caribbean prior to the arrival of Christopher Columbus) includes that of the Olmec, Toltec, Maya, Aztec and Inca civilisations.

Food

Food varies greatly across the Spanish-speaking world, with many regional variations. Some well-known dishes are:

- paella (from Spain): a saffron-flavoured rice dish from Valencia that may contain meat, seafood and vegetables
- tacos (from Mexico): small tortillas (flat cornbread) stuffed with a variety of fillings
- tapas (from Spain): small dishes of different types of appetiser or snack food
- ceviche (from Peru): raw fish marinated in lemon or lime juice
- churros (from Spain): deep-fried dough snacks.



Interesting topics

Games

- 'Pares y nones' (evens and odds) is played in Mexico. Children walk in a circle and when a number is called by the teacher (or a designated child) they try to form groups with that number of people. The maximum number they can call depends on the number of participants playing. Children without a group are out of the game.
- 'Mar y tierra' (sea and land) is a game played in Spain. A line is drawn on the ground; one side of the line is sea and the other side is land. One child calls out either 'mar' or 'tierra' and the other children must jump to the correct side of the line.
- 'El escondite' is the Spanish-speaking version of hide and seek. In some countries it is called 'las escondidas' (South America) or 'las escondidillas' (Mexico).
- 'Arriba y abajo' (up and down) is a game where the players must keep a beachball in the air. Children work together to keep the ball from falling, saying 'arriba' (up) every time they hit it.

Places

- The Alhambra Palace in Granada was originally an Islamic palace and fortress. Alhambra contains many beautiful details, including mosaic tiles.
- Machu Picchu, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Peru, was built by the Inca civilisation in the 1400s. This stone citadel is on a mountain ridge 2,430 metres above sea level. The stones fit tightly together without mortar.
- Museo del Prado in Madrid is a museum and art gallery that has one of the world's best collections of European art.
- Sagrada Família is a Catholic church in Barcelona designed by Antoni Gaudí. He used the natural world for his inspiration, so there are pillars that look like trees and no straight lines. Construction began in 1882 and may finish by 2035.
- The Iguazu Falls on the border of Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil are the largest waterfalls system in the world. Angel Falls in Venezuela is the highest uninterrupted waterfall.
- The Panama Canal is an artificial waterway (77 kilometres long) that connects the Pacific Ocean with the Atlantic Ocean and is used for shipping.
- Chichen Itza in Mexico was a large pre-Columbian city built by the Maya. It includes many amazing structures, such as step pyramids, a great ball court and an observatory.



Interesting topics

Geography and climate

There is huge variation in climate across Spanish-speaking countries.

- Spain has three different climate zones. Weather in the south has warm, dry summers and mild, rainy winters. North of the Cantabrian mountains the climate is similar but is moist all year round. The west and northwest coastal areas have wet winters and dry summers.
- South America covers a huge area and its climate varies greatly. While South America's rainforests are some of the wettest places on earth, the Atacama desert in Chile is considered the driest place on earth.
- The Andes, running along South America's western side, is among the world's longest mountain ranges. It has glaciers, volcanoes, grasslands, deserts, lakes and forests.
- Central America and the Caribbean lie in the tropics and generally have a humid tropical climate, but there are many different climate zones.
- Mexico has temperate and tropical zones.
- Equatorial Guinea has a tropical climate with distinct wet and dry seasons.

Note: This document contains content that has been gathered through independent research and consultation with subject matter experts. The figures and information included in this document should be reviewed for accuracy over time.

