

Getting it right: Spanish for Hispanics

You've already got a head start —
even if all you know is English

IT was embarrassing enough for Adele Nieves to be called a “gringa” by her grandparents in Puerto Rico because her Spanish was shoddy.

But when the 29-year-old New York native was passed over for a job and separate business-related trips to Mexico and Spain because of poor Spanish-language skills, she realized she had to learn her mother's native tongue — *pronto*.

“I got to a point in my life where I was missing out on a lot,” said Nieves, a third-generation Nuyorican, or Puerto Rican New Yorker.

“It hurts. Not knowing the language well enough has been a source of embarrassment, especially when I'm talking to people in my age group who grew up speaking their native tongue.”

So Nieves decided to enroll in a Spanish course for Spanish speakers at Berlitz.

Like Nieves, many U.S.-born and -bred Latinos reach adulthood only to find that they can't read, write or speak Spanish well enough to get by in a professional setting.

In fact, nearly 22 percent of Hispanics reported to the Census 2000 that they spoke only English.

For the millions who grow up speaking Spanish at home and listening to *telenovelas* (TV soap operas) and *las noticias* (news) running endlessly in the background, that's not enough to develop the language proficiency they need as professionals, experts say.

“You have to be taught how to write and how to express yourself,” said CUNY Spanish professor and Argentine native Lia Schwartz.

“There are grammar and syntax and all those things that one doesn't learn when one speaks the language at home.”

In Nieves' case, her second-generation Puerto Rican parents spoke English at home, and there were few opportunities for her to practice what little Spanish she learned in high school.

She would attend family parties where she was intimidated by more fluent speakers, and sometimes met with taunts like, “Aren't you Spanish? You should know this. You've lost a part of you.”

Many second- and third-generation Hispanics find themselves similarly tinged with regret at not learning the language of their roots.

For comedian and writer Sofia Quintero — a second-generation Dominican and Puerto Rican New Yorker — learning Spanish is about feeling connected.

“Culturally and spiritually, I felt I was missing a lot,” said Quintero, who recently hired a Spanish-language tutor to help her learn her parents' native tongue.

Experts say students like Quintero and Nieves have a head start on other adults trying to learn a new language, since they were exposed to at least some Spanish at a young age. They agree that the best way for Hispanics to learn Spanish is to take courses geared toward native Spanish speakers.

“They can communicate” in Spanish, said Concha Sevilla, who teaches Spanish to Hispanics at the Manhattan-based Instituto de Cervantes.

“But they have problems with writing and grammar.”