

# Don Francisco's Six Steps to Better English

— MARIO KREUTZBERGER (“DON FRANCISCO”) —

**IN TODAY'S WORLD** to be bilingual is an advantage, especially if our second language is English. Looking back, I remember that in public schools in my native Chile, we were offered both English and French. But we practiced language only in the classroom.

Years later, experience taught me that formal knowledge, although it gave me a firm foundation, was very far from being a second language. When I was 19, my father sent me to New York to take a technical administration class in men's fashions. Before the trip I decided to improve my English with a conversation course at the Chilean-North American Institute in Santiago.

It was enough for me just to arrive in New York and take a taxi to understand that what I knew would scarcely serve me to ask for the check in a restaurant or where the bathroom was. All of a sudden I realized that I knew very little English.

I had to take emergency measures—my classes were starting in one week and I simply couldn't fail. The need compelled me to create a unique system that helped enormously. Perhaps it can be helpful to others who are in a similar situation.

Looking back, I can safely say that I had six resources that helped me in important ways:

1. Buying a pocket dictionary and a standard encyclopedia for my hotel room.

2. Talking with Anglos who didn't speak Spanish.
3. Watching and listening to English-language television and radio every day.
4. Reading newspapers and magazines and trying to translate everything that was going on.
5. Keeping a dictionary with the words that I learned every day. I took notes in a small pocket notebook during the day, then copied everything at night into a regular notebook that I alphabetized.
6. Translating everything that I saw: signs in shop windows, neon signs, ads in the subway, everything. (Remember, this was 1959, and electronic agendas, computers, BlackBerrys, and all that didn't exist.)

My system was simple. On my way down to the subway, I would look for older people who didn't seem in a hurry and I would ask them how to get to an address. They tried to explain, and almost always they would ask me who I was, where was I from, and what was I doing in New York. Each time I understood a little more and I could answer a little better.

At the end of each day, I'd incorporated new words into my dictionary and prepare the sentences that would start a new conversation the next day, again supposedly asking for directions. I complemented this routine by watching television to train my ear to the English accent of the North American.

Every night I chose ten new words that I had incorporated in my dictionary, and I'd try to use them in my increasingly lengthy subway dialogue. Also, talking with people at my hotel improved my pronunciation and added phonics to the dictionary.

The system really worked for me. After 90 days I could navigate pretty well, and after a year I felt I had enough ability to join in conversations and understand almost everything being said.

At the end of 1961 I had the opportunity to start in television as a host back home in Chile. I held that position for 24 years. During

that time I lost some of my English for lack of practice, though I did use it during trips, especially when I had to translate the interviews I did for the “La Cámara Viajera” segment. In 1986 an opportunity opened up for me to work for Spanish-language television in Miami. As a result, I renewed my interest in improving myself in the language of Shakespeare. I took courses in grammar and conversation and continued with my system of new words that I’d add to my dictionary.

I have arrived at this conclusion: there isn’t a subject or theme that one finishes learning; it has to be continuously worked on day in and day out.

I should add: The past we knew, the present we are living, but the future gives us the opportunity to live another day and to learn something that we didn’t already know, whether it’s English, Spanish, or anything else.

**MARIO KREUTZBERGER** (Talca, Chile; 1940-), known to television viewers as DON FRANCISCO, hosts the enormously popular weekly three-hour Miami-based audience participation variety show *Sabado Gigante*. He was elected national vice president of the Muscular Dystrophy Association (2000) and named a Champion of Health of the Americas by the Pan-American Health Organization.