

A Gringo in Mexico – Tripping over my Spanish

by Michael Maggio

I retired to Santa Maria del Oro, Nayarit, México, in January of 2012. I'm happy as a clam here. It is a second-world town of 3,000 people at an elevation of 3,000 feet above sea level. It is about 50 miles east of the Pacific Ocean. It's a clean and tidy town with friendly hard-working people. I've been teaching English, guitar and math and doing volunteer work. I love the people, the climate, the food, the geography, and especially the language. Spanish is so expressive and musical. However, I was not fluent when I arrived and I still study it every day. For your amusement here are a few of my experiences in learning Spanish.

1. Palillos/pollitos: When I went to the store to buy toothpicks (palillos), there was a misunderstanding because of my Spanish accent coupled with the clerk's fright at talking to a Gringo. She asked me to repeat my request a couple times. I told her, "You know, they come in a small box." She said she could put them in a plastic bag and how many did I want. After much confusion and pointing, it turns out she thought I was asking for small chickens (pollitos) which she sells in plastic bags. We had a big laugh as I mimed trying to pick my teeth with a plucked chicken.
2. Harina/arena: In Puerto Vallarta there are many restaurants near the beach so they sometimes have sand on the floors tracked in by the customers. I often see restaurant staff sweeping floors and they are proud of how clean and sanitary their restaurants are for the fussy tourists. One morning I went to a new restaurant and asked about wheat in the food, explaining that I'm allergic to it so it was very important that we go through my order item by item. In Spanish "wheat" is "harina" with the "h" being silent so it's pronounced "a-REE-na." But I misspoke and kept asking about "arena" which is pronounced "a-REE-na" in English so it sounds like "harina" but it's actually pronounced "a-RAY-na" in Spanish and it means "sand." I was adamant that there be no sand in my food. The waitress was upset that I thought there would be sand in the food just because the restaurant is near the beach. By the time she and I realized my mistake, we were starting to get a bit testy. Then, of course, we had quite a laugh.
3. Peso/peso: "Peso" is a Spanish noun meaning "weight." It is also a noun meaning Mexican currency. I was riding in a combi (small shuttle bus/van) with about 10 Mexicans. We got a flat tire and the driver didn't have a jack. We waited for other cars to come by but it was a seldom-used road in the Copper Canyon so no one came to help. Finally, the driver arranged to have the men pick up the front of the van and hold it up until he quickly changed the tire. As part of the process, he turned to me and said he needed my peso. At the time I had no idea peso had a double meaning. I thought he was asking for money to fix the tire if and when help arrived. At first I was polite in refusing to empty my pockets but eventually I got irritated. I told him it was not my problem and why was he asking for money from the only Gringo on the bus. Then all 10 of the passengers got in my face, trying to explain they wanted my body weight on the back of the van to help lift up the front for the guys who were holding it up. This went

on for quite a while because they kept pointing at my body saying, "Give us your peso!" I kept saying no, it's MY money. I never figured it out until I get back to the hotel and looked up peso in my dictionary so it was all very awkward. I'm sure I came across as an ugly American. Odd thing is, that was a day when I deliberately left my dictionary in my hotel room to see if I could get by in Spanish on my own – not yet!