

## Starengu's Interview with StartSpanish Founder, Alfonso Santiago

Spanish has always been on my bucket list of languages to master. When I was a kid, whenever I heard my friends speak Spanish, I was always in awe. It sounded like a song and I was determined to learn the lyrics!

I can proudly say that I am *thisclose* to crossing Spanish off of my bucket list. It's all because of Alfonso Santiago, Founder & CEO of StartSpanish. I can honestly say if StartSpanish existed when I was in high school, I would be fluent in Spanish.

StartSpanish provides individuals the opportunity to learn the language through real life conversations via live 45 minute online group sessions. If you're like most people, you may be intrigued, but then automatically think to yourself, "I'd like to check it out, but I don't have time."

Well, I've got news for you...StartSpanish has completely taken this excuse away from you! Regardless of where you are in your Spanish journey, StartSpanish has a class for you. There's a Spanish class held almost every hour during the day. For example, I live in the Central Time Zone so the first class for me begins at 7am and the last class ends at 9pm (check their website to see what the schedule would be for your time zone).

I LOVE the flexibility of being able to join a class at any time during the day. That's not even the best part. The teachers are extremely fun, knowledgeable and patient and the class sizes are small (they typically consist of 5 people).

StartSpanish is incredibly unique because of the variety of session topics. Everyday there is a different topic. They are actually teaching you how to speak using real life scenarios such as how to hold a conversation with someone you just met, at the airport, etc. I have learned more Spanish in the past two years from StartSpanish than I did in the 4 years of Spanish I took in high school. I'm not joking.

My passion for Spanish has only increased and that's all because of StartSpanish. I've been in awe of StartSpanish for a long time. Therefore, I was honored to have the opportunity to interview Alfonso (he's a genius to me!) to learn more about him and how he came up with StartSpanish.

1. Choose 3 words to describe yourself and why.

- Persistent: Once I get started with something, I don't like to quit. I work hard in order to keep going.
- Social: I like to speak and interact with people in order to learn from them.
- Kind: I always think that whatever you give is what you get. So, if you give kindness that is what you will receive.

2. What advice do you have for students learning a language?

- To lose the fear of making mistakes. It doesn't matter if you do it right or wrong, just say it. Be comfortable exposing yourself because that's the way to be

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corrected.

- Always be in learning mode. Arrogant people have a tough time learning new things so you need to be humble.
  - Be exposed to the language as much as possible. Start speaking with everyone from day one regardless of your current level.
3. When you're learning a language you're going to make mistakes. Share one of your most memorable mistakes or funny moment you experienced while learning the language and/or culture.

I've done so many so it's hard to pick just one! Well; I've got one that's more related to the culture. When I was in an exchange student I was learning English and I lived in Fort Wayne, Indiana. In Argentina, when we meet someone we give them a kiss on the cheek even if it is meeting someone for the first time or see someone we know we give a hug and kiss on the cheek.

The first week, my host brother invited some friends over and I was upstairs. So when I went downstairs to say, "Hi," to everyone, I was kissing everybody on the cheek. The girls were very nervous about me going in and kissing everybody and my host brother told me that you didn't have to do that anymore. I didn't even have the vocabulary to apologize so it was just a whole mess.

4. Why should students study Spanish?

I think after English, which I think is the global language for communication, I would choose Spanish for a couple of reasons:

- It is spoken in over 25 countries in the world. There are more than half a billion people whose native language is Spanish. It's a very popular language among other languages. Spanish will open doors to a wide range of countries you can visit and it will also open doors to a very wide range of cultures.
- If you are in the U.S. because there is a lot of Spanish influence based on the number of immigrants from all across Latin America so I think it is a great way to open up to that culture as well who are also living within the U.S. as well.

5. How did you come up with the concept for StartSpanish?

The circumstances at the moment were there and all the pieces came together. The first thing is that I learned English during a trip to the U.S. Of course, not everyone has the opportunity to travel and stay in an English and/or Spanish speaking country for a period of time in which you will be learning the language which is usually at least 3 or 6 months. I stayed in the U.S. for a year.

I wanted to bring that type of experience to people who couldn't actually travel abroad.

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So the first concept was, "What if we build something that people can jump into conversation classes every hour?" So, we decided to offer live classes led by native Spanish speaking teachers that could be available at any moment. So it's very flexible.

Practice makes perfection. The more practice you have the faster you will learn and I wanted to bring that experience online. I went through that experience myself learning abroad. I wanted to bring that to the online learning environment.

I went through that experience myself by learning abroad and having a lot of exposure to the language and I wanted to bring that experience online. I was already in the eLearning space not related to languages. I have the skillset to start this because my previous projects were geared towards online education.

I have a degree as an industrial engineer, but I started working in technology related companies early on and I decided that I wanted to continue doing that as an entrepreneur. I started with an eLearning platform to serve companies that wanted to train their employees online. Then I decided that with the technology we developed, we could tap into the language learning space online.

My background, what I was doing at the moment, this thing that I had with languages and the experiences that I had when I was learning English helped glue the pieces together. This is how I came up with the idea to have live classes every hour with native Spanish teachers in small groups. Then we started to adapt the service to our students.

6. What makes StartSpanish different from all of the other language services/products on the market?

The quality of our teachers is what makes the difference. Learning is a process that depends on the quality of the instructors. We take care of our teachers very well and we try to recruit the best teachers that we can get. We have a terrific team.

7. Why do you feel StartSpanish is successful? What is StartSpanish's awesomesauce (your secret sauce)?

It is a combination of different things. Like every sauce it is the ingredients.

- We have good high quality teachers
- Good customer service. Respond quickly to our students' requests and needs. You cannot always make everyone happy but at least make an effort to respond and provide a good service.
- Make sure students are actually learning. There are other sites and products that don't care as much as we do about the student. These are the ingredients that make this company successful.

8. Are there any new features that you would like to share?

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We will soon be releasing the ability a new way to book private classes. Students will be able to select the teacher in order to have some more continuity with a single teacher.

We are also going to be organizing our huge category of private classes in order to make it easier for the students to pick topics related to their interest.

9. What is one important skill every person should possess that will get them further in life?

Be a good listener. Don't just hear but actually listen. It's an underestimated skillset.

10. What is the best advice you have ever received and still follow to this day?

Focus. There are so many things that you can do with your time. Time is limited. It's the only resource that you don't get back. If you don't focus on the things that really matter, in all aspects of life, your family, your work, etc. you need to focus on what's most important and what will get you closer to whatever goal you have in life.

11. What is one of the things on your bucket list?

I would like to learn how to pilot an airplane. I want to fly a plane without an engine because they say that's it a great experience. You don't listen or hear any noise while you are flying. In order to go up you need another plane to take you up. It's called sailplane. So that's on my bucket list.

I thoroughly enjoyed my conversation with Alfonso and I hope you did as well. I'm confident that if Spanish is on your bucket list, you will cross it off much sooner if you sign up for StartSpanish.