

Learning the Language

By Marilyn Reeves

I've always loved languages. When properly spoken or written, languages provide a nearly perfect conveyance of thought from one individual to another.

Our first language teachers are our parents. I was fortunate that both my parents spoke excellent English, so I learned to speak it correctly. Which is not to say that my family didn't frequently indulge in the use of slang, clichés, or even the deliberate use of improper dialect, just for fun. My father, especially, was prone to quote Shakespeare one moment, and then say something like "I ain't gots none" in the very next breath. We, of course, knew he was butchering the language just for effect, and the rest of the family eventually picked up the habit. I should be more careful, however, when spicing my grammar with words like "ain't." That word can cause shock waves to shudder up and down the spines of my listeners, who are probably thinking that I simply don't know any better. Although there are probably times when I make unwitting grammatical errors, because I actually *don't* know any better. But I made good grades in English when I was in school, and feel that I am fairly proficient in the use of my native tongue.

I also made good grades in the two foreign languages I studied in high school: Latin and Spanish. Latin helped me see the common roots of all the Romance languages, but Spanish especially caught my interest because it is spoken by a very large segment of our population.

Spanish is phonetically pronounced more or less like English, so I was able to pick up on it fairly quickly. My first Spanish instructor, Mr. Custer, was a great teacher, and had the class reading, writing, and speaking Spanish within just a few months. My biggest challenge was learning vocabulary. I've always found rote memorization to be difficult, but I was better at it back then than I am now. Nowadays, I can't remember *nada!*

Over the years I have tried to keep up my Spanish, although there have been numerous long breaks – sometimes years – between sessions, so I have had to return to the basics time and time again.

Currently I am enjoying attending an informal Spanish class here at Windsor Gardens, taught by a resident volunteer named Ruth, who spent a number of years living and teaching in Bolivia. Ruth speaks Spanish slowly and distinctly enough that I can follow most of what she is saying. She also encourages the class to read, write, and speak the language to the best of our ability.

While I'll never be able to converse fluently with Spanish speaking people, I find that, as an exercise for the mind, attempting to express myself in another language has been time well spent.