

Learning Spanish

Category: Immigrants

written by Colleen T. Fogarty | September 1, 2025

My preceptor sent me into a patient room, telling me, “When you come out, I want you to tell me what country the patient is from.” I had just begun my family medicine rotation with Dr. Alberto Rodriguez in his practice in Hartford, Connecticut.

As a middle school student, I’d chosen Spanish as a second language from a purely practical standpoint: in the U.S., I was pretty sure I’d be more likely to encounter a Spanish-speaking person than a French-speaking person. Over time, I became passionate about continuing to improve my Spanish conversational ability.

I went to medical school in Connecticut, where the hospital-based clinics cared for many low-income patients from Puerto Rico. A number of Puerto Ricans had come to Connecticut in the 1940s to work in the shade-grown tobacco industry. Puerto Rican Spanish differed from the dialect I’d learned in high school. But I rapidly tuned my ear to the new cadence and some of the vocabulary differences.

Dr. Rodriguez, a native speaker of Spanish, had an outstanding reputation as a private practice family physician and clinical teacher. His patients loved him. After I’d met his office staff and learned the flow of the office, Dr. Alberto trusted me—and my medical Spanish—to begin doing patient consultations independently. Most of his patients spoke Spanish; some were U.S. citizens from Puerto Rico who’d relocated to Connecticut, while others had immigrated there from other nations across the Western Hemisphere.

In addition to teaching me family medicine, Dr. Alberto taught me how to listen for regional variations in dialect, vocabulary, and cadence, associating the subtle differences with each patient’s region of origin. As I learned the nuances of family practice, so, too, I learned the soft “sh” sounds and melodic rhythms of Argentinian Spanish and tuned my ear to the rapid pace, dropped “s” sounds, and elided words of Dominican Spanish-speakers.

By the end of the rotation, I usually had a pretty good idea of the patient’s national origin. In the span of a month, I’d learned much more than how to practice family medicine; I’d learned from immigrants about the diversity and beauty of spoken Spanish.

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