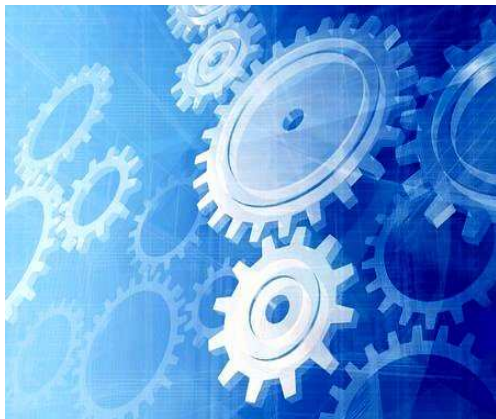


4th October 2007

The summer in Spain, gears and language learning

by Jeremy Quinton



Are you feeling sad? Have you ever ridden a bike? What's the connection between this and learning a language? Bear with me for a couple of minutes and I'll try to explain.

It's over, finished. Those long and laid-back summer days are now a distant memory, and October sees the return of the everyday routine, the 'daily grind'. Maybe that makes you sad. You can always see it coming with the Back to School signs in the supermarkets. And then along come those 'collectables magazines' on TV and the 'test your English' pop-ups on the Internet. Right now next summer seems light years away.

But the summer south of the Pyrenees is a magical time. You can *pasear* along a traffic-free Paseo de la Castellana in Madrid, bask in Mediterranean sunshine in Barcelona, or jazz it up in San Sebastian.

But you can do much the same in loads of other places too, so what makes it special here? The summer here can give you the chance to do something that in other places they've forgotten how to do, they're not allowed to do, or they simply don't do (or never have done!). I'm talking about the chance to **stop**. Or at least, to press the **pause**

button on your life. To take things easy...to **relax** and **recharge** the batteries.

In other places (especially the ones where English is spoken by the majority?), the pace of life never stops, or even slows down, for long. Can you imagine how quickly your batteries would run out if you were living at the same speed all year round, for years on end?

Imagine two cyclists riding up a hill. Which one gets to the top first? Is it the one who's fitter? The one who's been training longer? The one with the latest cycling shoes? Or...the one who's got the bike with the most gears, perhaps?

That's the way I see you Iberians and your lifestyle - you've got more gears! You know how to slow down during your holiday periods, and yet when September comes you go back up a gear or three. The whole 'Iberian Calendar' (or even 'Iberian day') is full of ebbs and flows, highs and lows - your concept of time, and the way you move through it, is different. If 'lifestyle' could be transcribed onto a sheet of music, your score would contain a richer variety of tempos. You play more notes. Your gears give you the option of changing speed and allow you to save and accumulate energy - which makes sense to me!

Going back to the top of the hill...those two cyclists have both now arrived. Now, which of the two has still got the energy to go out for the night and party till dawn? See what I mean?

So what has this talk of an 'Iberian calendar' got to do with language learning? A 'study calendar', even if it doesn't actually exist, is probably going to contain periods which invite a 'study holiday' (i.e., when you're especially hectic at work or home or...), but also other periods in which your time and energy allow you to move up a gear with your learning, and to gain a real sense of progress. Maybe it's the people who can change gear - and do so - who actually learn the most.

Are those of you reading in Madrid, Barcelona, San Sebastian, Pamplona and beyond...among a group of people who are "possibly the world's best language students" (*à la* Carlsberg adverts of a few years ago)? It's a serious question. With your ability to change gear, to use energy efficiently when you need to but go into top gear when you want or need to...perhaps you could be.

What do you think?