



How to Improve Your Spanish Listening Skills: Interview with Shahidah Foster from Black Girls Learn Languages

Episode 07

Do you have a hard time understanding native Spanish speakers? Does it sound like they just speak *way too fast* for you to catch every word? Well, we're here to help. In this conversation with Shahidah Foster, founder of Black Girls Learn Languages, we'll give you 4 specific strategies you can try right away to improve your Spanish listening skills. Listen up as we help you tune your ear to understand spoken Spanish.

Time	Speaker	Transcript
00:33	Host	Hola y bienvenidos. Welcome to episode seven of the Learn Spanish Con Salsa podcast. Have you ever tried listening to your local radio station that plays Latin music? Maybe you tried to listen to a few songs and just when you were starting to feel like you were getting the hang of listening to Spanish music and actually understanding some of it, in between songs, this host comes on and starts speaking super fast Spanish. And you feel like you can't understand a word they're saying. If this has ever happened to you, you are not alone. Many Spanish learners report that it can be difficult to understand native Spanish speakers. The ability to understand spoken Spanish is a skill that you need to develop just like you learn grammar and vocabulary or any other part of the Spanish language. In this episode, we're going to talk about some ways that you can improve your Spanish listening skills with our guest,
01:29	Host	Shahidah Foster. Shahidah is the creator of Black Girls Learn Languages, a multi-platform, digital community for black women language enthusiasts, language learners and linguistas, or women fluent in more than one language. Since launching in 2017, Black Girls Learn Languages has garnered a worldwide audience with more than 2,400 social media followers across multiple platforms, including a growing Facebook group with more than 500 members. Shahidah is fluent in English and German and has also studied French and Spanish. She was a speaker at the first Women in Language event and was featured by Tandem as one of 12 amazing female language bloggers and vloggers. She's also an author at Bauce magazine, and that's spelled B, a u c e. I hope that you enjoy this conversation with Shahidah and that you're ready to

		take notes on some ways that you can improve your Spanish listening skills right away. Vamos a empezar.
02:31	Host	Shahidah, welcome to the Learn Spanish Con Salsa podcast. Thank you so much for taking your time to join us today.
02:36	Shahidah	Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate that.
02:39	Host	Shahidah I came across you on social media actually, because you run a site called Black Girls Learn Languages. So If you could just tell us a little bit about yourself and why you decided to start Black Girls Learn Languages.
02:53	Shahidah	I am originally from Brooklyn, New York, and that's very important because we all know that New York City
03:00	Shahidah	is a melting pot. So I grew up hearing a lot of Spanish. I heard other languages too, but mostly Spanish. So ever since I was little, ever since I remember, I just was like, oh, I would love to learn how to speak Spanish and and you know, we don't have the resources we have today. So back then was like, I'm gonna watch Telemundo all week and that's what I'm gonna do, because I want to know Spanish. I want to speak Spanish, I think it's so cool. And then you know, I'm gonna watch Univision and I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that. And I would pick up a lot. I did pick up a lot of Spanish, but I wasn't able to practice with anybody, write, do any of these things that are very important. Fast forward to junior high school, high school. I studied French and I liked studying French.
03:50	Shahidah	Everybody else they just kind of treated it like, Oh, I'm just doing this so I could get my credits to graduate. But I actually enjoyed it. I enjoyed it so much. I kept a diary in French and I also lived in Germany and during high school too, so I learned German and I like language and it was really hard for me because I would want to connect with people that looked like me and it just seemed like I couldn't. Like I remember I went to a French club one time. I was like, Oh, I think I'm gonna join the French club. And I think it was the only black person there and I was just like, so this is a little awkward because this is my first time because I'm from New York, so I'm used to being around, I guess you could say minorities, right?
04:33	Shahidah	Even though we're not really the minority anymore, but that's another discussion. But um, I'm used to being around black people, I'm used to being around Latin people, I'm used to being around Asian people. Like it wasn't really a lot of white people in the schools that I went to. So it was very like, okay, I don't know how to relate to these people. I'm coming to this French club, I'm going to try it. And it was just, it was very hard. It was a shock because it's like, it was, it was clear that these people weren't really able to relate to me either. So I quit the French club, but I just was like, I know there's got to be people like that, like me that look like me and we could laugh and ki ki about, you know, all these language problems and stuff, you know, and just kind of connect on that.

05:17	Shahidah	<p>But I just didn't know where. So I just, you know, that's always been in the back of my mind. Like I love to have these conversations, but I would really love it with somebody who looks like me, who is my culture, who understands and we could laugh. And so flash forward to last year, a couple of years ago, I was working with a language consultant. I mean, not a language consultant, a consultant and language came up in the conversation and she said, you know, maybe you should do something with that. And I was like, no, not doing that. Then, um, I thought about it and I was like, you know what, I still don't see this community. Like I still don't see a community for black women learning languages, knowing languages, whatever. So I'm just going to create it and I'm just gonna see where it goes. When I started, there was like five people, five followers, you know, and then I remember when I started I finally decided, you know, what, it's nice to have Instagram and all that.</p>
06:10	Shahidah	<p>It's nice to have twitter, but I want to have a conversation like I want to be able to continue to talk to you. So I started the group on Facebook and I remember when it seemed like I was talking to myself at one point I was like, I'm not going to even post anymore. Like, I'm done. And then slowly like I have people that regularly comment, they post their own resources and stuff and um, so that basically just the story of how I got to this point. So I wanted to create that community I didn't see. And I'm so glad that I did because I've met people because of Black Girls Learn Languages in real life. And you have met some amazing people. So I'm very glad that I did this.</p>
06:51	Host	<p>I'm glad that you did it too because I actually, I've met some people through your group too. And I don't even know how I came across it. I think someone added me. I'm not sure. But I've met so many cool people in the group and hearing different conversations because like you mentioned, culture is really important to learning languages and I was talking about that allowed in this podcast that you really can't learn language in a vacuum. You really need to connect with the people that speak the language. And it's really hard to do that if you don't know anything about the people. And also if you don't have people that look like you, like you mentioned, I think it's really interesting that one of the things for me as well that stood out when I was learning Spanish was having a community of people that also are into language learning. Because, you know, your friends aren't always going to be into like, oh, how do you learn this new Spanish grammar thing?</p>
07:37	Host	<p>Or like what? How do you improve your accent? Right. Most of my friends weren't really into that until I started connecting with other people in a language learning community. And really being able to have those conversations like you talked about. So yeah, I'm really glad that you started it too. And I think that's great because sometimes we can be reluctant to start something, but when you see a real need, when you start that and you really</p>

		start to get the feedback and see people participating in it can be really rewarding.
08:05	Shahidah	What I wanted to talk to you about Shahidah is a little bit about something I actually saw you post on Instagram with Black Girls Learn Languages because sometimes you also share your own language learning journey. And I know that right now you are learning Spanish. So I wanted to talk to you a little bit about a really common issue that a lot of people, a lot of the clients and folks I work with who are learning Spanish struggle with and that's improving your ability to really understand Spanish when it's spoken.
08:37	Host	So a lot of English speakers learning Spanish, they are really good at reading it, right? Or at least they think they are, that's another story. They recognize where it's more when they see them, but if somebody walks into the room like a native speaker and reads the exact same words they just read, they wouldn't understand it, so it's a real problem I
08:56	Host	think with, especially English speakers in particular, but it's a real issue with learning the Spanish language. So can you tell us a little bit about some of the things you've done to help improve your Spanish listening comprehension and some of the strategies that you've used so far?
09:09	Shahidah	Yeah. Listening comprehension is is the bane of my existence, OK? I have to admit that. Even when I was learning French, I got really good, but it was struggling because I learned French in a classroom setting ,and it wasn't an immersive classroom setting. Because I learned German on my own. I was totally in full control of that. I decided, you know what I'm going to take with the Spanish that I know and I'm going to take control of this and take it to the next level. And I know that listening comprehension is hard for a lot of people and it, but it is also key to gaining that fluency, that level of fluency.
09:50	Shahidah	So things that have helped me is one of the things is understanding it a little bit better because it's beyond just the superficial, okay, my listening comprehension is bad. It's like, it's not that you're listening comprehension is bad, it's just, it's, it's, that's the starting point, it's going to get better. So first thing is I would say is we definitely need to change our mindset and reframe the things that we're saying. For instance, one of the things people always say is, "oh, I can't understand them, they talk so fast." And it's like, actually they're not talking, they're talking the normal speed that people in that language or any language speak they, they're normally talking. It's just that because there's a lot of things at play such as connected speech. What I learned as liaisons in French class, there's a lot of linking and connected speech.
10:44	Shahidah	So it sounds like they're speaking quickly, but it's just, you learn the words isolated and robotic and choppy and so that's what you're listening for. But that's not natural speech. And so knowing that that's gonna get you. Okay? So the problem is not that they're talking fast. The problem is the way that I'm

		<p>learning how to listen. You're not learning how to listen, what to listen for. You're learning, this is the word, this is what it sounds like stand alone. But people don't just say words randomly, standalone. It's a sentence, you know? So that's one thing that I have gotten myself. I stopped saying like, oh, French people speak so quickly. It's like, no, I, you know, I'm not used to the way they speak. I need to get used to it. Because when you say that, oh, they speak so quickly, you automatically, your mind, your preconscious is saying, it's like telling you you're not going to be able to do that. So you don't want to do that. You want to say I'm not used to it. I need to get used to it. Um, that's the first thing</p>
11:45	Shahidah	<p>The second thing is you need to learn what things sound like in normal speech patterns. And so for instance, I was watching Celia, which I'm addicted to and I'm very upset because I wanted to binge this weekend and, and having an opportunity.</p>
12:01	Host	<p>Yeah, I will confess, I also binge watched, like I think it's 80 episodes of that show so it's definitely addictive. So yes, I've been through that binge-watching with Celia too. And if, if anyone doesn't know what she's referring to you. So there's a, a telenovela or soap opera and it's on Netflix now, I believe. It started out on Telemundo and it's about the singer Celia Cruz who's from Cuba. So it's a really dramatic but right. Interesting story about her life and the history and culture of Cuba and the music. So it's really just a really fun show to watch. But yeah, but hopefully you get a chance to binge watch it soon. It's a great show.</p>
12:36	Shahidah	<p>Right because if it's still on when this episode airs, watch it, because we all know that Netflix does not keep licensing forever. So who knows how long it's going to be on there, so if it's on there, get it, watch it while you can. But yeah, like I was watching it, I was thinking to myself, oh my goodness, is this the Cuban accent? I can't do this because I never really talked to Cubans before. Like I've heard for Puerto Ricans talking, I've heard Mexican people talking. I've even heard people from Spain talking, but I never really listened to a Cuban so I'm listening to this like oh wow. And I had to put Spanish subtitles on because I'm like, I don't understand. And you know, as I'm looking at the words and you know, listening to how they're speaking them out, I'm like, oh, they're saying it completely different than how I expect to hear it.</p>
13:25	Host	<p>Right.</p>
13:25	Shahidah	<p>So, you know, and that's something I did in German as well. Like when I was learning German I would watch TV in German and I will put the German subtitles on because I'm like, why don't I understand anything?</p>
13:35	Shahidah	<p>And then I'm reading it like, oh, that's how the word sounds when you say it in a sentence in between, sandwiched in between other words. Okay. Because if you're saying one word one way just by itself, it sounds completely different than when you're saying it in a sentence.</p>

13:50	Host	Yeah, and I mean we do it with English too. I think we just don't realize it because it's her native language. But you know, if you wanted to ask someone how they're doing, you're not going to say How. Are. You. Or it would sound really crazy. We'd be like "How are you?" And it sounds like one word, but we hear it as three different words because we're used to it. So I think that you're right. It's definitely a mindset thing and if we tell ourselves it's going to be hard or that it's too fast and it's already going to set us up for failure.
14:15	Host	So you mentioned one thing I wanted to ask about because you talked about watching German shows with German subtitles and watching Spanish shows with Spanish subtitles. And I've heard some people recommend watching with English subtitles. So just kind of give us some insight on why you choose to do it that way instead of using subtitles in English and how that helps you with your listening comprehension.
14:37	Shahidah	Well I think it's nothing wrong with watching with English subtitles because I did also do that too. But once you get to a certain level and you'll notice within yourself, like once you get to a certain level where you're like, I'm good
14:52	Shahidah	on that, you can try and put it in the native language one because you know, I think it's a good starting point. I also did that as well, like because MTV in Germany at the time because it may be different now, but at the time they showed English speaking shows and they showed German speaking shows. So sometimes they would have no subtitles. Sometimes they did. Sometimes it would be like they had, um. Oh my God, the Osbournes this is old. I'm dating myself, but they had the Osbournes and like it would be German subtitles. So I would watch it in English. I understand everything mostly. And then read the subtitles. Like, oh, that's what that word means in German. Okay. That's how you use it. Whatever. And vice versa. They may have a German show and it may have English subtitles. And then I would say, oh, okay, that's how you say that phrase.
15:45	Shahidah	And so it's nothing wrong with that, but I just feel like I'm kind of beyond that at this point. Like I don't want to be doing that. Like I'm trying to take myself to a next level and the next level for me is understanding natural speech. Like just understanding it. And the key to that is knowing what to listen for. And like I noticed in the, in the, uh, in Celial noticed that a lot of people aren't really saying like certain sounds. So of course, like for instance, I noticed like they said like the word "explicar" and notice they sound like they sound like "e'plica". Like there's no x sound or like when her father was saying like respect is the most important thing. He was like a little "el re'peto", like not "respeto", you know what I mean?
16:34	Host	Yeah, Cubans tend not to pronounce the letter "s" a lot. So yeah, a lot of words, just the "s" disappears and it seems like they swallow it, right, it's like they're

		eating the "s"s, they don't pronounce them. So yeah, that's pretty uh, pretty characteristic of the Cuban accent.
16:48	Shahidah	But the thing is if you don't know this, then of course you're sitting there like "I don't know what I'm hearing." So it's like kind of have to know what you're hearing. Another thing that I do encourage, and I, and I don't know if anybody does this, but I do encourage is I do also encourage talking to someone who's not a native speaker but a little more advanced than you and maybe listening to them and interact with them. I feel like that's a good bridge to getting from, because we tend to understand non native speakers better at first, so that's also a good bridge. Like if you can find someone that's like, like let's say you're a beginner, right?
17:32	Shahidah	You're a beginner and you can find someone that's at least an advanced beginner, intermediate, advanced intermediate, whatever, and they're not native and you can talk to them. You're gonna be able to understand them because they're not going to talk. They're gonna speak and you're going to be able to catch that speech linking because they're going to be, you know, not native fluent, so they might not, they're flow may not match a native's flow and so you may be able to catch that speech linking like, oh, that's what it sounds like. Oh, that's what it sounds like when you say that word, that's what it sounds like in the full sentence. That's what it sounds like after this word and you will get the hang of it. I feel like that's a good, like the training wheels to begin talking to native speakers. If you don't feel comfortable and if you want to start to understand what you're trying to listen for.
18:23	Host	Yeah, I like that idea. It's actually a good bridge because I think sometimes we assume we have to just jump in, and you know, a lot of people in the language learning community say you have to talk to native speakers. But if you don't understand anything it can be really demotivating and demoralizing if you're trying to have a conversation, you're like, I didn't catch any of that, so I like that idea—talking to someone whose level is a little bit higher than yours so you can at least get the hang of hearing spoken Spanish. And then like you said, kind of use it as training wheels and once you get better and better at that then you can kind of make that jump to listening to more native speech at more of a regular pace. So you can start to get used to that too. So is there anything else that you've been doing as you've been working on what you call the bane of your existence? Working on improving your Spanish listening.
19:09	Shahidah	Yes. Actually it's so crazy because like I'm actually going to do a video on this. So another thing that I would have to say in listening, I personally believe that if you can video is better than audio alone. I just find that because one of the things that I was doing was I subscribe to a podcast for kids like sesame street or whatever in Spanish. One thing I don't like to do is I don't like to watch exported entertainment. And when I say export an entertainment, I mean shows that are

		like they're dubbed in Spanish or you know, they originally in English or they're originally Italian. I don't like to do that, I like to get the content already originally created in that language because I just feel like you don't have to worry about learning something incorrectly because sometimes the translations are completely wrong. They're just really wrong.
20:02	Host	Yeah that's a big problem.
20:02	Shahidah	So I highly encourage original content in the original target language, not exported content that's been dubbed over. But anyway, I digress. What I want to say was I was watching, I was listening to the podcast and another thing is repetition. So for instance, if I'm watching the podcast and I only understand, let's say 40 percent of it and then I watch it again and then understand 50 percent and then I watch it again and then I understand 80 percent, like I'll keep watching until I pretty much understood what they said. Like I feel comfortable enough to know, okay, I didn't really miss that much, that many words. And then I'll go onto the next thing because repetition is a huge part of learning language. So if I'm watching it. well I was listening to it, and I was listening to over and over.
20:49	Shahidah	But there was a lot of stuff that I was missing. And so one day I was like, Oh, you know what? I'm going to watch it while I'm getting ready for work. So I turned it on, Sesame Street in Spanish, like not dubbed over. It's actually made in Spanish. The characters are speaking Spanish. So I was watching it while I was doing my makeup and watching it and I'm like, I went from understanding 20 percent of what was going on to understanding like 60 percent of what was going on. Just because there's body language that goes with it, you can look at them, the mouth, the way the mouth is moving, when they're talking the context of what's going on, like all of that goes into language and people don't realize that like that's a huge part of language because I was like thinking like I don't really understand like what's going on with this, but you know, so that's why I highly recommend if you can, as much video as you can take in, please take it in.
21:44	Host	Cool. That's a really good suggestion as well because I think that, like you mentioned, being able to see how someone's mouth moves. I think it also really helped you with your pronunciation as well because I think a lot of times when we hear something that a native speaker says and then we try to say it, we might go, wait, why don't I sound like them. Right? Especially like in like a quick example is like when we say like a super American, I'm going to use my super American accent and say like "Oh-laa," right? And we're like, why doesn't it sound like, it sounds different when they say it, and it sounds like "Hola." It's because your tongue is in a completely different place. Right? When you're saying the "L" sound and you won't notice that unless you see someone actually pronouncing the word and you can kind of see their mouth is open more.

22:28	Host	You can see their tongue is behind their teeth instead of like in English we kind of have a more lazy like "Oh-laah" so you can also start to pick up on things with video I that will help your pronunciation I think .
22:40	Host	<p>So, those were some good tips you gave us.</p> <p>1) You first talked about mindset, making sure you don't overwhelm yourself by thinking this is going to be hard or too fast.</p> <p>2) You talked about watching shows with subtitles in Spanish and not in English to really help you take your listening to the next level.</p> <p>3) You also talked about talking to, not a native Spanish speaker, right? But talking to an English speaker who may be a little bit more advanced than you, so you can really start to understand some of those natural speech patterns,</p> <p>4) and also watching video and using repetition to really see how much you can understand and I think you're right, you'll find the more and more you listen and repeat. You understand more and more every time.</p>
23:23	Host	So thank you so much for sharing that advice. I hope that will help our audience who's working on listening comprehension to really kind of get over that hump to where you're just sitting there going, oh, it's too hard. I don't understand anything that they're saying to giving it a shot. Trying some of the tips that Shahidah gave us today and seeing if you can apply it to your learning. And also Shahidah, I want to link in the show notes, the video that you just talked about. So I definitely put that in the show notes. So anyone who's listening can check out her video where she goes into more detail about how to improve your listening comprehension.
23:54	Host	Okay. So now I want to switch over to do our quick fire round in Spanish. So this is our segment where we ask five quick questions in Spanish and we get your answers off the top of your head, you know, to give you an opportunity to practice your Spanish as well and to give our audience an opportunity to listen to you some Spanish. So Shahidah, ¿lista? <i>Ready?</i>
24:12	Shahidah	No. (laughs). That's OK, let's do it.
24:20	Host	¿Lista? No. Jajaja. Okay. So, tenemos 5 preguntas en español. Y la primera es, ¿Cuál fue la última cosa que leíste, miraste, o escuchaste en español? <i>Ready? No. (laughs) OK, so we have 5 questions in Spanish. And the first one is, What was the last thing you read, watched, or listened to in Spanish?</i>
24:38	Shahidah	La última cosa fue podcast de Sesame Street. <i>The last thing was the Sesame Street podcast.</i>
24:43	Host	La segunda pregunta: ¿Cuál es tu canción favorita en español? <i>The second question: What is your favorite Spanish song?</i>

24:47	Shahidah	Oooh, una buena pregunta. Mi canción favorita en español es de Selena, "Baila Esta Cumbia." <i>Oh, good question. My favorite song in Spanish is from Selena, "Dance this Cumbia."</i>
24:47	Host	Ah "Baila Esta Cumbia," Selena es muy popular. <i>Oh, "Dance this Cumbia." Selena is very popular.</i>
24:47	Shahidah	Sí, sí. <i>Yes, yes.</i>
24:58	Host	Y, número 3. ¿Cuál es tu palabra favorita de español? <i>And, number 3: What is your favorite Spanish word?</i>
25:01	Shahidah	Extrañar. <i>To miss [someone or something].</i>
25:11	Host	Y, número 4. OK, Saca tu teléfono y traduce para nosotros el último texto que recibiste al español. <i>And number 4. OK, take out your phone and translate for us the last text that you received into Spanish.</i>
25:22	Shahidah	OK momentito. Recibí un mensaje de mi prima, dice "Voy a volver pronto, estoy a (en) Pep Boys." <i>OK just a moment. I received a message from my cousin, it says "I'm coming back son, I am at Pep Boys."</i>
25:33	Host	Que bueno. Y la última pregunta. Esto es una pregunta al azar (so it's a random question), ¿Si tuvieras música de presentación, qué canción sería y por qué? <i>OK good. And the last question: this is a random question. If you had theme music, what song would it be and why?</i>
25:54	Shahidah	Pienso, pienso, pienso. De Remy Martin, "Conceited." <i>I'm thinking, I'm thinking, I'm thinking. From Remy Martin, Conceited.</i>
25:55	Host	Que interesante. Okay, gracias Shahidah. Gracias por participar. <i>How interesting. OK, thanks Shahidah. Thank you for participating.</i> Thanks for participating in our quick fire round. I hope that was a little bit of fun for you and gave you a chance to practice your Spanish as well.
26:11	Shahidah	Yes, it did.
26:13	Host	So to wrap things up, do you have any projects coming up? Or just kind of let folks know how to follow you on social media and where they can get in touch with you.
26:21	Shahidah	I want to have a language event for black women so I don't have the dates yet, but just look out for that. Other than that, you can follow me. I am heavily on instagram @blackgirlslernlanguages. I'm occasionally on twitter saying things that I just feel like saying, on twitter @blacklinguistas. Also, I have the Facebook group. I guess you can see the link in the show notes, but I'm definitely in there posting all kinds of stuff, memes, you know, resources, asking questions, just

		interacting. But I mean we talk about things, you know, that's not just language that's just about being a black woman in this world.
27:02	Host	Thank you so much for your time. Shahidah. I'm gonna let you run, I know you're a busy woman.
27:07	Shahidah	Thank you so much for having me.
27:12	Host	That is it for this episode of Learn Spanish Con Salsa. Now if you're looking for more ways that you can improve your Spanish listening skills, check out the free course, the 5 Day Spanish Ear Training at learnspanishconsalsa.com/eartraining . That's learnspanishconsalsa.com/eartraining , and you can sign up for a free five day course that will give you a daily lessons on how to improve your Spanish listening comprehension. In just under a week. You will be surprised at how much better you're able to understand spoken Spanish.
27:51	Shahidah	For links to all the resources we talked about in this episode as well a full transcript. Go to the show notes page at learnspanishconsalsa.com/7 . That's learnspanishconsalsa.com/7 for episode seven of the podcast. If this is your first time listening to the Learn Spanish Con Salsa podcast and you're not already subscribed, make sure you go ahead and click the subscribe button. You'll be notified of all of our new content as soon as it's made available.
28:25	Shahidah	And as always, we love to hear your feedback. You can follow us on Instagram @learnspanishconsalsa or join our Facebook group at spanishmusicandculture.com . I hope you heard something in this episode that will take you one step closer from being a beginner to bilingual. Hasta luego.

Show Notes: learnspanishconsalsa.com/7

Links and Resources

- [Celia Telenovela](#)
- [Cuban Spanish](#)
- [Plaza Sésamo](#) (Sesame Street)
- [Shahidah's Video: Why You're Having Trouble Listening](#)
- [Shahidah's Favorite Song: Baila Esta Cumbia by Selena](#)
- [Shahidah's Theme Music: Conceited by Remy Martin](#)

Guest Information

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