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Spanish

How to get an A in the Junior Cert
Spanish Exam



by Eve L.

Eve L. got an A in her higher Junior Cert Spanish paper. Here she shares what she learned.

Spanish is slowly growing in popularity amongst Junior Certificate students. Across the globe there are more than 400 million speakers, making Spanish is the second most commonly spoken language in the world! It's certainly a beautiful language – but that doesn't mean that some people don't find it really difficult. In this blog, hopefully you will pick up some advice and ¡sacar buenas notas! come June!

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Layout

Spanish is marked out of 400, of which the Final Examination is 320 marks. The remaining 20% is achieved before you even go in to the exam hall through the oral! However, if you don't do the oral – you are marked out of 320.

Oral Test (Optional) – 20%

- ▶ The oral exam usually takes place in March or April of third year, just before the Easter Holidays. Usually no longer than 10 minutes, it is designed to allow students to show off their ability to speak their language as well as write it – because at the end of the day, that's the purpose of learning a language; being able to speak with other people!
- ▶ For some, the oral is an absolute saviour, but for others, it haunts their waking nightmares! Don't listen to what people say about it, though – little can go wrong if you're prepared and know what's coming up. It's all material you've learned in class anyway. The key to success in any oral is very simple – **answer the question you're being asked!**
- ▶ Remember, guys – the Spanish oral is nowhere near as difficult as the Irish oral. You have years of Irish under your belt, but you've only been learning Spanish since first year – the difficulty of the questions will match the length of time you've been speaking the language. You won't be asked about Sraith Pictiúr in Spanish!
- ▶ The oral is generally split into two parts:
 - General Questions:** 40% (8 questions for 4 marks each) and **Role-plays:** 60% (2 role plays, each worth 24 marks)
 - ▶ In the General Questions section, your aim is **to be understood**. Pretend the examiner, or the person on whom you're



practicing, hasn't got a word of English. Your Spanish must be *muy bien* in order to communicate with them!

- ▶ You'll be asked 8 basic questions, such as 'Cuántos años tienes?' and will be expected to answer them as accurately (linguistically – you can lie if it's easier!) and as extensively (within reason – you don't have to go into your genetic history when they ask you about your family!) as possible. The examiner will give you time to answer your question and will help you

if you're really stuck. **They're there to give you marks!**

- ▶ A full list of these potential questions can be found on Studyclix; now, you can start practicing them with your mates or your teacher in preparation!
- ▶ There are marks going for nearly everything. Clarity, structure, delivery, etc. 4 marks are given for full, unambiguous, undistorted communication, and likewise 0 is given for silence. **Attempt everything!**

- ▶ Once this is finished, you'll move on to your Role Plays. These are also available on the site and can be practiced. There are two parts – Sections A and B. For each, you are given one card with a scenario written in English.
- ▶ For both Section A and B, you must **use your knowledge of the Spanish language to act out these potential real-life situations**. For example, it might ask you to ask the policeman for directions to the bus station and thank him after. You will go on to ask the examiner this and they will respond based on whatever is written on their card. Then, you might be asked to translate the directions to tell your friend who doesn't speak Spanish! It's basically you acting-out what would happen if you were in this situation in a Spanish speaking country!

Final Examination – 80-100%



- ▶ The final examination is one of the last of your exams in June. It takes place over 2½ hours and is worth 80% of your grade if you do an oral, and all if you do not.
- ▶ There are three parts in this paper: Part I is a Listening Comprehension Test (a.k.a the Aural). Part II is a Reading Comprehension Test; Part III is a Written Expression Test, otherwise described as the letter and translation section. The aural lasts about 30 minutes, after which you should proceed to the other sections of the test.
- ▶ The Aural is worth 35% (44%)*, the comprehensions are worth 25% (31%)*, and the written 20% (25%)* of your final grade. (The * denotes without oral)

Listening Comprehension

- ▶ The aural is worth over 1/3 of your final mark – whether you do the oral or not. It is really important, therefore, that you do everything in your power to get as high a mark as possible in this section.
- ▶ In this portion of the exam, a tape recording of several Spanish people talking will be played, after which you are expected to write answers to the questions on your exam paper regarding these conversations (Section A), announcements (B), notices (C), and descriptions (D).
- ▶ The recordings will be played three times. According to the State Examinations Commission, “the first recording is to give you a general idea of the content and it is suggested that you listen carefully and do not write the answers.” (I have to admit, I used to just write whatever I thought the answer was on the first go, and recheck it the following two times – however, yes, the SEC are right. Listen first, write second, and check third.)
- ▶ There is a long pause after each track, during which you should write the answers to the questions on the paper



regarding the segment just played. BY THE WAY – you **answer in English** for all tape questions.

- ▶ For section D, the layout is a little different. You will still hear each of the passages three times, but the first and third recordings will be uninterrupted; i.e. the entirety of the passage will be played. However, during the second recording, there is a pause in the tape – the answers to the questions ahead of the word *PAUSE* can be found in the section of the tape heard before, and similarly, the answers to the second half can be found in the part after the pause. The pauses are designed to allow you to answer the relevant questions.
- ▶ The continuous bleep which follows the third recording of the second passage signals the end of the aural, after which you should turn to the other sections.
- ▶ You can practice for the aural exam all the time: in the car, on the way to school, at home, etc. I burned the audio files from as far back as 2005 till 2016 onto a CD, after downloading them from the SEC website. I listened to this CD on the way to school when the exams drew near and played it on my laptop when I was doing tape questions. It really helped as I was able to practice every tape question for the last 11 years and became really good at them. **Practice is really the only way to become better at the aural section.**
- ▶ **I would also recommend getting your hands on a tape-script**, if you can. I got one for my aural book - ¡*Vamos a Escuchar!* –and was able to highlight and look up new words I learned. I also recorded any words I learned from the tape in case they came up in the exam and looked at the marking scheme for answers after, so I could correct myself and see where I was going wrong.
- ▶ What would I recommend revising in preparation for the aural? Directions, numbers, time, days, dates, weather, in particular – **but you need to extend your vocab to really do well.** I



kept a *Diario de Vocabulario*, or a vocab diary, for the three years I studied Spanish – in which I wrote every new word I learned under the first letter of their English meaning – e.g. *sacapuntas* was recorded under S for sharpener. By June 2017 I had a full school copybook full of new Spanish vocab!

- ▶ Obviously, you have no choice but to answer this question first. **DO NOT BE LATE FOR YOUR SPANISH EXAM.** Not only is it going to affect your grade, but it will also disrupt everyone else around you.
- ▶ Be at least 10 minutes early to calm your nerves, and to hear the practice tape recording. Here, the superintendent will play a sample so you can hear the volume – ask them to turn it up if necessary. I was sitting down the back and had to do this so I could hear the tape. You can't ask them to adjust during the exam so be on time for the practice run.
- ▶ Before the tape starts, you'll have about 3 minutes to read through the paper. I highlighted the key words in each question, e.g. 'who' and 'how many' so I knew what to listen out for. Eimear says in her French guide that if you see a word in the question that you know the (Spanish) word for, write the word above it so that you know to listen out for that word in the tape.
- ▶ Write down the Spanish words relating to the questions' answers in the margins in pencil as you hear them. For example, if the question asks you to write down how many people were at the party, and you hear *dos mil cuatrocientos seis*, write it down, and translate and answer it when you reach the pause. Otherwise you'll have to translate it as you hear it and are more likely to get it wrong this way.
- ▶ This is an obvious one – but for goodness sake's, **LISTEN to the tape!** You'd be surprised as to how easy it is to get distracted and lose 10 marks for daydreaming!



- ▶ **Finally, if you don't know something – make an educated guess.** Take a look at the context of the piece and formulate an answer based on that. Don't leave blanks – who knows, you might get a few attempt marks!

Reading Comprehension

- ▶ There are 12 comprehensions in your exam. They account for a good portion of your final grade, too, so don't neglect this section either.
- ▶ Section A, Question 1 is asking you basic questions with Spanish answers which are listed among others below, and you must tick the right answer. For example, 'What would you use to open a tin?' Here, you would tick *un abrelatas* as the right answer.
- ▶ The second comprehension is the exact opposite – they give you a Spanish word and ask you about it in English, e.g. what would you store in la nevera? This section can be a God-send if you know basic vocab. However, if you don't do well – the two combined are only worth 15 marks.
- ▶ Questions 2-5 in Section B are short comprehensions written in Spanish, which you answer questions about in Spanish. For this, I suggest reading the questions first and looking for their respective answers in the text.
- ▶ Question 6 is usually a set of guidelines, of which you pick 3 to translate into English and write below. Pick the three you know, not the first three – and **if you don't know every word, don't panic.** The general gist will do.
- ▶ Section C, Questions 1 and 2 are just two more, short, but slightly harder comprehensions. Question 3 is very long and worth a lot of marks, but if you spend a bit of time thinking about your answers, and comb the text for keywords, it should be manageable.
- ▶ Section D has 2 parts: a dialogue, and a really long and detailed comprehension. The dialogue is easy enough, but be mindful that there are two people



speaking, so if it asks you about something Maria said but you write about Juan, you will get no marks. Highlight all the lines spoken by one of the characters

to avoid confusion. All you can do for the last question of this section is **take your time, read the text, read the questions, and answer them as best you can.**

- ▶ The **vocab book** is a must to do well here. I cannot stress it enough. All the words you will be asked questions on or relating to will be on the curriculum, so it is likely you will have met them before. Record every new word in your *Vocabulario*! Even when you're practicing old comprehensions – the SEC love recycling old vocab!
- ▶ **Take note of the key words** – who, what, where, when, why, how, how many, etc. It will only lose you marks if you write down 'the president' for a question asking, 'when was the visit to the Canary Islands.' Additionally – **READ THE QUESTION!**
- ▶ People don't seem to realize that you don't get bonus marks for writing additional answers – you might get an examiner who will dock you marks!! If you're asked for full details, give them, but if they only ask you for one – give only one. If you write down more than that, and if one of the few is wrong, you will get negative one.
- ▶ Lastly – **don't leave blanks**. Paraphrase if you don't know the whole meaning of the sentence and remember the context if you're really stuck. You can get marks for writing down the correct verb alone!

Written Expression

- ▶ This was my favourite part of the exam – the only time I got to write a bit of Spanish! It isn't worth a whole pile in the scheme of things, but it can make the grade if you work hard at it.



- ▶ Section A is worth 10 marks. Here, you have to write the Spanish words for the numbers in each of the sentences, e.g. *100 alumnos* is *cien alumnos* in Spanish. They're all only worth two marks, but ten marks altogether can make or break a good grade. Practice numbers – print out the sheet from *Quizlet* listing all the numbers in Spanish and stick it inside your copy. Be wary of the cardinal numbers – they love to turn up every so often. Also, practice writing the date in Spanish when you're writing to get used to it. Part e) is usually a year number, e.g. *1982* is *mil novecientos ochenta y dos* – I would recommend writing down a load of these because they can be tricky. Also, don't forget about masculine and feminine nouns!
- ▶ Section B is worth a whopping 30 MARKS! Here, you write what you would say in Spanish in various scenarios. **Verb knowledge is essential.** I wrote up a table that I stuck inside the cover of my Spanish folder which had the verb endings for all the respective tenses and endings that I knew by heart for the exam. You also need to know how to structure sentences, e.g. the pronoun/name first, verb second, etc. Vocab isn't as important – but it helps. These require practice to do well, and I cannot stress enough how important your verbs are here.
- ▶ Section C is worth 40 marks. This is 10% of your exam. It is really, really important that you do well here – otherwise you pretty much lose your chance at getting an A. You have to write a letter / e-mail in Spanish to your pen-friend using the prompts given.
- ▶ For this section, layout is worth 4 marks. The town and date go in the right-hand corner, e.g. *Dublín, el 21 de junio 2018*. The opening, *Querido / Querida* (depending on the gender of the recipient) goes on the next line on the left, and the body of the letter should go under that. No indentations are necessary; if you want to make the examiner happy, skip a line for every new paragraph (new point = new paragraph). To end your letter, give regards to their family and sign off – *Un abrazo, Eve*. If you follow this, you'll definitely hit the 4/4 for structure.



- ▶ The remaining 36 marks are split into six marks for each of the six points. For 6 marks, you have to expand content with a **good range of vocabulary, idiomatic phrases** and **correct use of tenses** and verbs. **Show off – write as much as you can!** Keep in mind, however, that the language end of it must make sense in order to get as close to six marks as possible.
- ▶ **Attempt all the points** – each one is worth nearly as many as one comprehension. Acing the layout is vital, too. **Practice makes perfect** here – it would be no harm to find a pen-pal website on line to practice with someone from Spain!

Helpful Hints



- ▶ **Vocab book.** You won't know the value of it until you need it, come June. I recommend starting early!
- ▶ **Using websites such as *Duolingo*** will really help you for Part III. Download it onto your phone or create an online account – play games on the go while simultaneously learning more Spanish!
- ▶ See about setting up or joining a lunch-time Spanish speaking club to prepare for the oral and aural. I was in the Spanish film club and it really helped me improve my listening skills. I also picked up some phrases that I used in my letter in the JC, after watching *La Ciudad de las Estrellas* (La La Land)
- ▶ The online pen-pal is something I would really recommend. *Students of the Word* is a totally safe option that friends of mine used after the mocks. However, if you're lucky enough to have exchange students – ask them for help with practicing your spoken Spanish!! I'm sure they'd be more than happy to speak their native language for a few minutes at lunch.
- ▶ Finally – if languages aren't your thing, that's fine. It doesn't guarantee you'll fail, so long as you work hard and **make an effort** on the day. If you can memorize phrases you can recycle in every letter, and know the verb endings – I promise, you'll do just fine!



¡Buena suerte!

