



THE BEST OF TI 99/4A™ CARTRIDGES

THOMAS BLACKADAR



Cover Art by J. P. Penichoux
Book design by Ingrid Owen

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KEY TO SPANISH

Overall Quality	Excellent
Period of usefulness	Extended
Graphics	Very good
Time needed to get started	1/2 hour
Ease of everyday use	Fairly easy
Clarity of instruction book	Clear
Clarity of screen instructions	Clear
Grade level	Adult
Color television needed?	Strongly recommended
Extra equipment required	Cassette recorder

This is an excellent new idea for the TI-99/4A home computer. Texas Instruments has joined its computer resources with Westinghouse Learning Corporation to produce a Berlitz-style language package. It is aimed at adults who want to learn Spanish for basic travel and business conversations. The Key to Spanish series combines the computer's interactive visual displays with the advantages of a spoken cassette tape. It concentrates on spoken conversation with a basic vocabulary of 500 words. You buy this package as a unit containing four cartridges and four audio cassette tapes.

The series consists of an introduction, six standard lessons, and a pair of word games for vocabulary practice. The first of the four cartridges contains the introductory lesson and the word games, while the other three contain two lessons each. Each lesson is made up of a number of sections, typically starting with "Say it in Spanish" for pronunciation, followed by a "More About . . ." section to expand the basic dialogue into other situations and teach basic grammar. Each lesson ends with "The Pablo Tapes," an extended conversation which you must listen to and answer questions about.

Each of the cassette tapes works hand in hand with one of the four cartridges. Through most of the lesson, you will leave the cassette recorder

connected directly to your computer, just as if you were reading data. After you have started it up, the computer controls the recorder. You turn the tape on when you start the lesson and switch it on and off as it needs the spoken examples. The spoken voice will automatically play through the computer and come out on your television monitor. The result is a computer program that speaks in Spanish.

The only exception to this automatic control is the Pablo Tapes, which are more extended selections. Since you may well want to replay these conversations several times to grasp their meaning, the program asks you to disconnect the recorder and to control it manually. This is easy to do, and allows you greater flexibility.

The Key to Spanish program comes with a 150-page book of operating instructions, supplementary material, notes on language and Latin American culture, and an English-Spanish/Spanish-English glossary of the series' vocabulary. This well-written book gives a clear view of the language as well as useful tips on the culture and travel.

Key to Spanish requires a cassette recorder and cable (not a disk drive). Since the phrases are being spoken directly by the tape recorder and not by the computer, this series does not use the Speech Synthesizer. This means that the taped phrases are accurate representations of native Spanish speech.

Using the Series

You set up your computer for the Key to Spanish series just as you would if you were using your cassette recorder to record a program or an adventure game. It is especially important that you connect the computer to the remote control jack with the black wire of the cassette cable, since the program must turn the recorder on and off as it needs it.

You will normally want to start with the Introductory Lesson, on the first tape and cartridge. This covers basic expressions such as "buenas dias" (hello) and useful phrases such as, "I'd like to reserve a table." The phrases are not hard, and the lesson will help you learn what to expect from the series.

When you feel you are ready to go on, you can start working your way through lessons one through six, found on the other three cartridges and cassettes. The structure of each lesson is essentially the same as the introduction.

You learn a foreign language with your ears. Modern language programs rely heavily on taped conversations between native speakers. By listening carefully to these sentences and repeating them as accurately as you can, you will slowly learn the sounds and structure of the language, so that you can begin to make up your own sentences.

Once the computer has led you through this basic listening and repetition drill, you can pass on to the "More About" sections. These expand on basic concepts of the opening listening section, introduce more vocabulary, and lead into more specific details about sentence structure and grammar. In the introductory lesson, for example, the computer gives variations on the sample sentences. Having taught you to say "I want to reserve a table," it might ask you to say "I want to find a museum" or "I'd like to rent a car." The more advanced lessons will have more complicated exercises in this place.

The real test comes with "The Pablo Tapes." This is an extended conversation involving a person named Pablo. Unlike the earlier sections, the sentences are not written on the screen, and you do not need to repeat them. You must listen very carefully, though, since the computer will ask you questions at the end of the conversation. You are free to rewind the tape and play it as many times as you wish.

This is excellent training in following spoken conversations. At first, it may seem impossible to catch the drift, even if you have studied the unit carefully. The dialogue moves very quickly, and sometimes includes words you have never been taught. But don't give up if you're having trouble. If you listen to it often enough, you will begin to catch words, then sentences, then entire ideas. This is the best training you can get for the time when you will actually need to understand a sentence in real life.

When you have finished the Pablo Tapes, you may want to try one of the word games on the first cartridge. They will let you work on vocabulary from any combination of this and past units. Both of the games help you to practice the vocabulary of the units by forcing you to guess the letters of words. Wordchase, a Spanish version of the Hangman game, is the easier and more useful of the two.

You will probably want to repeat each unit until you feel at home with all the phrases and can speak them clearly and effortlessly. Texas Instruments feels its Spanish program should take about sixty to eighty hours to work through.

The Key to Spanish series is generally easy to use, as long as you go straight through the lessons. Problems can arise if you try to skip around, since the cartridges are designed to work hand in hand with the cassette recorder. If you want to start with the "More About" section, for example, you must either find the place on the tape manually, or let the computer silently search for about ten minutes. Even then, you can only start the section at the beginning, not in the middle.

If you skip around, the tape can get out of synch with the cartridge program. If this happens, you should try to find the correct selection manually. If you can't, go back and restart the lesson from the beginning.

General Evaluation

Key to Spanish is an excellent idea, well implemented on the TI-99/4A. It uses a traditional, proven approach to language teaching, in which the student imitates native speakers. The well-written reference book gives insight into the language and culture.

The only problem is the beginning-to-end structure the cassette tapes impose on the lessons. Though possible, it is difficult to start in the middle of a lesson. Fortunately, the lessons are not so long that this becomes a major problem.

Of course you must also weigh the cost of the package: with four cartridges and four cassettes, the Spanish series is considerably more expensive than the standard TI line. But you do get a lot for your money—a well-balanced, sound approach to the language with full pronunciation drills. If you study the series carefully, you will learn the basic conversation skills you would need for travel in Latin America.