

How can I learn Nahuatl?

[Ricardo J. Salvador](#)

[Last updated: 19 January 2003]

-
- [Grammars](#)
 - [Dictionaries](#)
 - [Texts](#)
 - [Current Materials](#)
 - [Courses](#)
 - [Mailing List](#)

Ideally, one would learn any new language in an environment where that language is spoken. Since this is a luxury that most people do not have when approaching Nahuatl, the following are some suggestions to help with the basics of the language.

Even though there are many sources on Nahuatl, the "average" learner will find that many of these sources are old and therefore do not describe the language as it is currently spoken. Additionally, most descriptions of the structure and grammar of the language are locked up in technical linguistics publications. Even so, the following suggestions will hopefully be helpful for beginners.

To learn on the basis of books, you will need at least:

1. [a grammar](#)
2. [a vocabulary \(or dictionary\)](#)
3. [readings](#) with Nahuatl and Spanish or English versions.

There is plenty to choose from in these categories, beginning with the classical works:

Grammars

It is problematic to recommend grammars and vocabularies for contemporary Nahuatl. Many divergent dialects have evolved as a result of the relative isolation of towns and regions where the language has been conserved. In Mexico, there are strong social pressures AGAINST speaking a native language, and this has affected the degree of expression and development of the native languages spoken in various regions of the country.

Mexico's education ministry (Secretaría de Educación Pública, SEP) and its "Bureau of Indian Affairs" (Instituto Nacional Indigenista, INI) have jointly published a few primers to teach reading

and writing to monolingual speakers of several native Mexican languages, including Nahuatl. Curiously, many of these primers are actually authored by protestant linguists associated with the [Summer Institute of Linguistics](#), SIL (also known by its former name, Wycliffe Bible Translators). Such individuals typically have invested decades to decipher native languages in order to translate and teach natives how to read the Bible in their own languages. Learners interested in reviewing these primers should contact the SEP, INI or the [SIL](#), and inquire after the specific region whose dialect they are interested in learning or researching. For obvious reasons, these primers are not usually available through normal commercial book distribution channels. A copious amount of valuable resources for Nahuatl, including texts, grammars, dictionaries, technical papers and short courses are available online from the [Summer Institute of Linguistics Nahuatl Family Page](#).

Some of the technical works available through SIL include:

- "**Aztec Studies, I & II**", Dow Robinson, Phonological and Grammatical Studies in Modern Nahuatl Dialects
- "**Curso del Náhuatl Moderno**", Ricardo Beller & Patricia Cowan, Vol. I & II
- Four volumes of "**Studies in Uto-Aztecan Grammar**" by Ronald W. Langacker, are available, but these are technical works focused upon the great family that features Nahuatl as only one of its many languages. However, volume three ("**Modern Aztec Grammatical Sketches**") is quite useful in understanding the Nahuatl dialects of Tetelcingo (northern Puebla), the Huasteca region and of Michoacán.

Arthur J. O. Anderson published a translation of Francisco Xavier Clavijero's "**Rules of the Aztec Language, Classical Nahuatl Grammar**" in 1973 (Univ. Utah Press). The original work dates to the 18th century, and Anderson translated it with his own modifications. You'll need to look for this in a library, as it is out of print.

Another out of print classical work is J. Richard Andrews' **Introduction to Classical Nahuatl** (1975, University of Texas Press), which includes a workbook. This is a very technical and intricate presentation, even for linguists. Andrews has been working on a follow-up to this (due in print by mid-2003).

For a more accessible grammar, Dr. Angel María Garibay Kintana published in 1949 a very useful primer specifically so that a serious non-technical learner could approach Nahuatl. The publisher, Editorial Porrúa Hermanos, continues to reprint this work periodically, titled: "**Llave del Náhuatl.**" It is currently in its 6th or 7th printing, and contains readings from classical Nahuatl (which refers to the period of the Spanish conquest), enough grammar and vocabulary to decipher the readings, an abundant commentary and many useful suggestions.

An English-language grammar that is still in print is Thelma Sullivan's 1988 translation of "**Compendio de la gramática náhuatl**", "**Compendium of Nahuatl Grammar**" (Univ. Utah Press).

Michel Launey has published a very useful grammar and literary anthology in France under the title "**Introduction a la langue et a la litterature azteques**" (1979-1980, Ed. L'Harmattan). The grammar portion has been available in Spanish since 1993 as "**Introducción a la lengua y a la**

literatura náhuatl" (Univ. Nacional Autónoma de México).

Online:

[Gramática náhuatl \(mela'tájtol\) de los municipios de Mecayapan y Tatahuicapan de Juárez, Veracruz](#) by Carl Wolgemuth, is available online in Portable Document Format (PDF) from the Summer Institute of Linguistics. An associated dictionary is also available online.

A basic introduction to the phonology and grammar of Nahuatl is provided by [Acoyauh.com](#), a travel agency specializing in excursions with pre-Columbian themes. This page also provides [Nahuatl to English](#) and [Spanish to Nahuatl](#) vocabulary lists.

Dictionaries

There are plenty of Nahuatl dictionaries, but unfortunately the majority of these were written several centuries ago by Catholic missionaries for purposes of evangelization, and therefore are not the most useful in order to understand the modern state of the language. However, I personally do find Rémi Simeón's "**Diccionario de la Lengua Náhuatl o Mexicana**" (Siglo Veintiuno Editores) very useful, when used cautiously. This dictionary dates to the end of the 19th century and contains a "classic" vocabulary that is updated with syncretic words used at the time the dictionary was assembled (a favorite: "mahomacalli" for a mozque). In addition, the preface consists of a condensed grammar that is particularly useful for beginners since it doesn't assume specialized linguistic knowledge.

An "old workhorse" in this category is the Franciscan Friar Alonso de Molina's "**Vocabulario en Lengua Castellana y Mexicana y Mexicana y Castellana**," originally published 1555-1571, and now reprinted periodically by Editorial Porrúa Hermanos. An especially useful aspect of this work is that it contains both Nahuatl-Spanish and Spanish-Nahuatl halves.

There is also Francis Karttunen's excellent "**An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl**" (originally published by Univ. Texas Press, with a second edition in 1991 by the Univ. of Oklahoma Press). This is particularly useful because it contains (among other things) rarely acknowledged information regarding vowel pronunciation.

Online:

[Diccionario Náhuatl de los municipios de Mecayapan y Tatahuicapan de Juárez, Veracruz](#), by Wolgemuth Walters et al. is available online in Portable Document Format (PDF) from the Summer Institute of Linguistics. A matching grammar is also available online.

Brief [Nahuatl to English](#) and [Spanish to Nahuatl](#) word lists from [Acoyauh.com](#).

Dr. Joe Campbell's [Spanish-Nahuatl dictionary](#).

Texts

There are many sources of Nahuatl texts, dating from the conquest to the present. Some of the better known and most useful for beginners are:

- "**Historia de la Literatura Náhuatl**," by Garibay K., 2 volumes, Porrúa Hermanos.
- "**Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World**." by M. Leo'n Portilla, Univ. of Oklahoma Press (a 1992 update and translation of classic work long available in Spanish).
- "**Los Cuentos en Náhuatl de Doña Luz Jiménez**," by Horcasitas and Ford, Univ. Nacional Autónoma de México.

To understand how Nahuatl is currently spoken, a valuable resource is Hill and Hill's "**Speaking Mexicano**" (Univ. Arizona Press), which details how Nahuatl and Spanish have been syncretized by contemporary Nahuatl speakers. In addition, the region covered by these authors is roughly a triangle with vertices in Puebla, Tlaxcala and the Malinche volcano, and the introduction to this book contains a very sharp social and historical analysis of this important region.

Online:

[Cuentos en nahuatl de Guerrero](#) is a series of short folk stories in Nahuatl and Spanish available through the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

[Sup-Infor Editions](#) offers a number of original Classical Nahuatl texts online (the materials can also be downloaded).

Current Materials

The following recommendations are quoted from Ascensión H. de León-Portilla's book reviews in [Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl](#):

- Campbell, Joe R. and Frances Karttunen, **Foundation Course in Nahuatl Grammar**. Vol. I: Text and Exercises; vol. II: Vocabulary and Key, Austin, University of Texas, 1989, 336 p. 272 p.

Didactic work prepared for a six-week summer course at the Univ. of Texas at Austin in 1989. Even though these authors describe their work as a "foundation course for learning Nahuatl," in truth it is much more than this because they in fact deliver a thorough grammatical analysis of the language. The first volume contains this detailed grammatical portion, complemented by practical exercises. The second volume is a thematic vocabulary, also including morphological and syntactical exercises. [This work is available only through [the Nahuatl Home Page](#), University of Minnesota-Morris].

- Galarza, Joaquín y Carlos López Avila, **Conversación náhuatl-español, Método**

audiovisual para la enseñanza del náhuatl III, México, CIESAS, 1987, 172 p., ils.

Method for learning Nahuatl. The book is divided into three parts: the first consists of lessons through drawings and phrases in Spanish and Nahuatl. The second consists only of the drawings without the phrases, and the third contains only the Nahuatl phrases.

- Hernández, Delfino y Miguel Angel Mendoza, **Nahuatlahtolli. Curso de Náhuatl clásico**. México, Centro de la Cultura Pre- Americana, 1988, 2 vols.

In two volumes -module "ce" and module "ome," this is a course in grammar, which will be complete with an upcoming third module. The purpose of the two first courses is to introduce the student to the various parts of a sentence. The book is enriched with many Nahuatl texts that help the student practice the language.

- Lastra de Suárez, Yolanda, **Las áreas dialectales del náhuatl moderno**, México, UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, 1986, 776 p., 16 maps. (Serie Antropológica 62).

A group project in which the main variants of modern Nahuatl are studied. The author and a group of linguists began with a glossary of 431 words and phrases that they translated into multiple variants spoken in 16 states of the Mexican Republic and one in El Salvador. The result is a large number of vocabularies, which make up the greater part of the work, from p. 273 to the end. The first 272 pages contain a phonological, lexigraphic and morphosyntactic study.

- **Ma tímumachtika nahuataketsalis. Aprendamos el idioma náhuatl**, El Salvador, Comisión Nacional de Rescate del Idioma Náhuatl, 1989, 51 p., ils.

Primer on first notions of the Nahuatl dialect Pipil. Assembled under the direction of Joel Martínez Hernández, with collaboration from Martino García, Genaro Ramírez, Adrián Sánchez and Augusto Salvador. The last four are natives from Sonsonate.

Courses

- An intensive one-month course in Classical Nahuatl, based on Molina's dictionary and Lockhart's "Nahuatl as Written," is offered by [the University of Zacatecas](#) (Mexico). The course features a 5-day home-stay in a Nahuatl-speaking village, and daily exercises in translation of classical texts.
- Dr. D. K. Jordan of the University of California-San Diego offers [a comprehensive page featuring resources for learning Classical Nahuatl](#). The page features a pronunciation guide, online lessons and a reference grammar, together with a link to Dr. Joe Campbell's [Spanish-Nahuatl dictionary](#).
- For linguistics specialists desiring an intensive "crash course" and introduction to various aspects and time periods of Nahuatl, the best recurring option is the occasional [Nahuatl Summer Language Institute](#), offered by Yale University's Summer Foreign Language

Institute.

- Try the Nahuatl Summer Institute's online [Lessons and Exercises](#).
- David Tuggy's "[Lecciones para un curso del náhuatl moderno \(nawatl de Orizaba o de la Sierra de Zongolica\)](#)" is available online from the Summer Institute of Linguistics.
- The [Tlahui "Immersion course"](#) is an intensive, 44-day experience taught in Xoxocotla, Morelos, and offering home-stays with local families of native speakers.

Electronic Mailing List

Lastly, there exists a valuable electronic distribution list for researchers and students of Nahuatl. For subscription details, consult the [Nahuatl Discussion List](#) web site.

Following are details on the charter of this list, and subscription instructions:

Announcing a new discussion list:

A discussion list which deals with [Aztec studies](#) in general and Nahuatl (the Aztec language) in particular.

NAHUAT-L is an unmoderated discussion list which will focus on Aztec studies in general and the Aztec language, Nahuatl, in particular. Scholars interested in beginning projects will find the list useful in determining if others are already working in a particular field. The list may also be used to answer questions about Nahuatl translations, historical details, and all aspects of Aztec life and culture. Anthropologists, archeologists, linguists, historians, and all interested in [the Aztecs](#), are welcome to participate.

The languages of the list will be English and Spanish, although scholars are encouraged to submit pieces in Nahuatl. The list will be used as a primary means of publishing the guide to Aztec language manuscripts which was begun in [Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl](#).

An associated web site, [The Nahuatl Home Page](#), features a number of valuable texts, source materials, archives and links for the pursuit of Nahuatl studies.

The owner of the Nahuatl Discussion List is [Dr. J. F. Schwaller](#), Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at the University of Minnesota-Morris.



