



Kurt Ellison

Instructor Martha Torres (left) works with city librarian Vivian Hurley (left rear) and Allan Camp-

bell, Octavio Romo, Jerry Carry and Leigh Sakaguchi on their conversational Spanish.

City employees brush up on their Spanish

By CHELA ZABIN
STAFF WRITER

Carl Johnson, who's lived in Watsonville long enough to speak Spanish with a good accent, runs into trouble because he sounds like he's got the language down pat.

Johnson does construction work for the city Water Department, and he deals with Spanish speakers all the time in his work. Unfortunately, they often think he's fluent, speak at what seems like a mile-a-minute to him, and then don't understand why he looks so lost.

Chris Gallagher, a sergeant with the Watsonville Police Department, is in a similar situation. He gets by OK with the Spanish he learned in high school and college when he worked in the traffic division, but now that he's back on patrol he encounters people who are much more excited — and speaking less clearly.

Leigh Sakaguchi, a parking-meter maintenance worker, said his Spanish is rusty, and he'd like to be able to give better directions to Spanish speakers who ask him where things are in the city.

"People come up to us all the time with questions," said Omar Guerrero, who also does construction with the water depart-

ment, underscoring the reason why some 33 city employees have enrolled in a lunchtime Spanish course provided to them by the city.

The program, worked out between the city and Watsonville Adult Education, is an 18-week course being offered for 40 minutes, three days a week. The city paid \$1,350 for the course, which is being provided free to city employees.

Joellen Bruce, the director of Watsonville/Aptos Adult Education, said this is the first time as far as she knows that the school has set up a program for a specific group of people, and it appears to be going well. The class is taught by Carlos Lopez, a retired Pajaro Valley Unified School District administrator, who also teaches an evening class through Adult Education. Lopez has taught Spanish elsewhere, including an institute in Mexico through Southern Illinois University.

Students will learn two things in the class, Lopez said — basic, general Spanish and job-specific vocabulary. There is a varying level of abilities in the class, and Lopez is bringing native Spanish speakers to sit in on the class to act as "language models." That way, students learn from each other as well as from him.

Lopez said he is also trying to weave some understanding of the culture into the language lessons.

Yesterday, students were going over how to ask people for basic information — name, address, marital status.

"It might be good in certain situations to say *'me llamo...'* (my name is...) to put them at ease," Lopez said.

Lopez warned about other pitfalls — the "closest relative" may be in Mexico. He told the students they should explain that the name is needed *"en caso de emergencia,"* (in case of emergency) and that a friend in Watsonville would suffice.

The students and the teacher were clearly enjoying the class yesterday.

While getting the class to guess at the spelling of *"divorciado"* (divorced), Lopez said, "This is better than the Wheel of Fortune."

"I'm having the time of my life," he said later, adding that he has "a great deal of respect" for the employees who are trying to learn Spanish.

The class was started by Vivian Hurley, who heads the Watsonville Public Library. Hurley said many city employees have expressed frustration

with their inability to communicate with a Spanish-speaking public. Others, like her, just wanted a chance to increase that ability.

"I speak Spanish everyday with library patrons," she said. Hurley described her Spanish as "passable," adding that if it pertains to the library, she can usually understand requests and be understood herself.

Hurley said the city went through some "pretty elaborate scheduling changes," to make sure as many people could get to the class as possible. Ideally, if interest remains high, the city will be able to offer it at a variety of different times in the future.

So far, the class is being attended regularly by about 20 people in a wide range of city departments. City Manager Steve Salomon and Fire Chief Gary Smith come to class when they can, Hurley said.

Salomon said there have been problems with continuity for many of the students — not being able to get away from work and other obligations to get to the class — and people aren't going to be bilingual after 18 weeks.

But, he said, "it's a start."