

Can Trinis Learn to Speak Spanish Fluently?

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Can citizens of Trinidad and Tobago ever become bilingual? Or are they to remain forever locked into a monolingual world? Modern languages have been taught in the secondary schools of Trinidad and Tobago since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as knowledge of a language was considered to be an indispensable part of a sound education—an intellectual discipline giving the student access to a body of literature, familiarity with which was the hallmark of the educated man. The teaching of Modern Languages, however, was influenced by the way the classical languages of Greek and Latin were taught and a grammatically based approach was used. This was characterised by the predominance of the written form and an emphasis on translation and written exercises evaluated by external examinations geared towards university matriculation requirements. Only a minority of students however continued on to university education.

Emergence of new theories of language acquisition saw a shift towards methodologies such as the audio-visual and audio-lingual, and the provision of free secondary education to a larger number of pupils meant that the student population now spanned a wider ability range. Many of these students were not interested in going on to pursue literary studies. As a result, changes in curriculum and methodology became necessary. Recent trends accept that the goal of language teaching should be communicative competence, and learners have indicated in numerous surveys that their priority is the ability to communicate in the foreign language.

Successive governments have recognised the importance of teaching a foreign language to our citizens based on the need for closer relations with our Spanish-speaking neighbours, especially in the area of trade relations, and have been making efforts to deepen our ties with Latin America. The fact that our national airline BWIA now has regular flights to Costa Rica, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic bears witness to this. To support this thrust, largely fuelled by economic interest, various initiatives to encourage foreign language learning, particularly of Spanish, have been launched.

When the junior secondary and senior comprehensive system of schooling was put in place thirty years ago, Spanish was a compulsory subject on the curriculum for all students. Spanish was one of the subjects that every student wrote when taking the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) examinations at the end of Form Five. Large numbers of failing students caused a reversal of this policy and Spanish became an elective subject. Attempts were also made previously to introduce Spanish at the primary level through a pilot project in a number of schools, but these never reached the stage of full implementation. This initiative is once more being revived. Efforts have also been made to ensure that the most appropriate curriculum is being used in the schools and the Spanish curriculum for lower secondary students has been through a number of revisions, with the Secondary Education Modernisation Programme (SEMP) curriculum being the most recent. Despite these efforts, some teachers complain of students' lack of interest in the language. This may not be true of all schools but is often the case in the new sector schools, which are in the majority.

What then needs to be done if Spanish is to become the second language of Trinidad and Tobago?

I believe that one of the main actions to be taken is a radical change in the teaching of Spanish throughout the educational system. The persistence of the grammatical approach demotivates many students, particularly those of average ability. Students complain that the study of Spanish is boring, difficult, and irrelevant to their needs. An approach that uses authentic materials, that involves exposing students to Hispanic culture, and that provides creative opportunities for students to use the language in real-life situations is needed if students are to be motivated to learn the language. It is crucial therefore to have a cadre of Spanish teachers who themselves have near native fluency in the Spanish language, and can provide authentic input for their students.

A communicative approach to language teaching focuses on real communication and **use** of the language rather than learning **about** the language. Traditional grammatical methods still predominate in a large number of classrooms where lessons are conducted in English rather than in the foreign language. I believe that if teachers are fluent they will be more likely to use the language themselves in the classroom and provide a model for students that will encourage greater student use of the target language.

Many of our foreign language teachers have earned their degrees at universities here and abroad. Although in some of these institutions visits to Spanish-speaking countries are arranged for language majors, it is not a compulsory requirement for the award of the degree. In many universities in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, however, it is mandatory for foreign language majors to spend a semester, or in some cases an entire academic year, in a country where the language being studied is spoken. The knowledge of the language, culture, and mores of the country gained during this time is invaluable and would greatly enhance the performance of those students who go on to become foreign language teachers. For teachers already in the system, the Ministry of Education should arrange for a regular programme of teacher exchanges during the August vacation so that every Spanish teacher would have the opportunity to spend at least two months in a Spanish-speaking environment. The rewards of such a programme, as demonstrated in more effective teaching and learning of the foreign language, will ensure that the generation to come will be far better equipped than the present generation to realise the ideal of a bilingual society.

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