

Spanish lessons on the move

'Vamos a aprender español – Let's Learn Spanish': A Huge Success for SIS

Contrary to popular belief, the Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish (SIS) is not a language institute where one can attend classes to improve his or her Spanish proficiency. It is in fact the division of the Ministry of Trade and Industry mandated by Cabinet to oversee the Spanish As the First Foreign Language (SAFFL) initiative in the entire country.

Therefore, the portfolios of the officers at the SIS are structured in such a way so as to ensure that all components of society are covered when it comes to the SAFFL initiative. For example, one officer liases with members of the private sector, while another liases with members of the public sector, to guide the respective parties in implementing Spanish programmes in their organisations. In view of the fact that the SIS has a national responsibility that extends beyond just these two (2) sectors, it was believed that a community-based programme needed to be created so that members of the general citizenry could also be exposed to our nation's First Foreign Language.

As the position of an officer dedicated solely to the community did not exist at the Secretariat prior to August 2006, the Research Unit was given the task of coordinating the pilot phase of such a programme. The first step in the organisation process involved the development of Basic pre-tests, curriculum, syllabus and lesson plans by staff. Then, venues suited to the hosting of classes with a maximum capacity of thirty (30) were sourced and written approval was secured. The next step was the recruitment of tutors, who were required to possess at least a Bachelor's degree in Spanish. Finally, once all these things were put in place, advertisement of the

programme commenced. This took the form of flyers and brochures in each of the communities targeted, and in some cases, even involved the use of public address announcements.

The result of all this planning was the launch of the Secretariat's Spanish Language Acquisition Programme *¡Vamos a aprender español! - Let's Learn Spanish!* in July 2005. This pilot phase was hosted in five (5) communities throughout Trinidad and Tobago; Fairfield-Tobago, Five Rivers, Petit Bourg, Plaisance Park, and Warrentville. By the end of this phase in September, there were approximately 60 graduates.

Phase II was then offered in February 2006, in Black Rock-Tobago, Oropouche, Sangre Grande and Ste. Madeleine, and there were some 40 graduates. However, the biggest phase of classes to date was phase III, as this was held during the July/August 2006 vacation period. In addition to offering Basic classes in some twenty-two (22) communities, which saw more than 260 graduates, the SIS partnered with five (5) vacation camps in venues ranging from Port of Spain to Arouca to Mayaro. The Secretariat would like to encourage all vacation camps throughout Trinidad and Tobago to include a Spanish component within their plan curricula.

From Phase IV, an Assistant to the Secretariat Officer, with responsibility for the Community, was hired to continue and even expand the success of previous Programmes. The result was the introduction of the Intermediate level of the Programme in some seven (7) communities that had already benefited from Basic tuition. During this phase, four (4) additional communities were offered the Basic level and in the end, there were approximately 100 graduates.

The main objective of the Spanish Language Acquisition Programme is to introduce participants to a solid Spanish foundation by developing an

acceptable level of communicative competence. Therefore, participants are exposed to and equipped with a wide range of topics, which provide them with vocabulary relevant to everyday situations, and are also introduced to aspects of Hispanic culture. Another objective of the Programme is to encourage participants to continue their studies in Spanish so that learning the language continues long after the Programme has ended.

The curriculum aims as much as possible to develop participants' skills in listening, reading, speaking and writing. However, as most of the Programmes currently being offered are at the Basic level, for obvious reasons more emphasis needs to be placed on the written aspect of the language.

At present, the SIS offers its Spanish Language Acquisition Programme at the Basic, Intermediate and Conversational levels. For Basic classes, the only requirement for admission is no prior knowledge of the language and of course, space availability in the respective community. For Intermediate, one must have a Basic knowledge of the language or have been exposed to Basic Spanish tuition, and for Conversational, it is compulsory that participants have an Advanced knowledge of the language.

Regardless of the level offered, classes are free and open to all members of the public irrespective of age, religion, background, creed or race. Therefore, tutors plan their classes based on the age group to which the majority of students in the class belong. In other words, if the majority of students are adults, the material throughout the course will be geared mainly towards adults. The freedom allowed with respect to the age of participants has not posed any serious problems as yet and in fact, some classes have had graduates as old as 81, while others have had as young as 8.

Registration for the classes is contingent on the venue of the classes. For example, classes held at schools offer registration through the Secretariat via telephone, whereas classes held at Community Centres, Regional Complexes, Civic Centres or Church Halls, facilitate their own registration using forms provided by the SIS. On the first day of classes, all participants are required to take a pre-test to determine their level of proficiency. Those completing the Programme also take the same test at the end to gauge their improvement, and consequently, the Programme's success.

In theory, by the end of the Programme participants should have received thirty-six (36) contact hours of free Spanish tuition. Classes normally meet twice (2) a week, with each session lasting ninety (90) minutes. Sessions are on weekdays, beginning at either 4:00 p.m. or 4:30 p.m. to accommodate students and working adults alike. Therefore, it is a twelve-week course, at the end of which, participants satisfying at least 75% attendance receive a certificate of participation. Some communities even take the initiative and organise their own graduation ceremonies to celebrate the last day of classes and the achievements of participants. Carenage for example, the community to date with the highest number of graduates, had a ceremony that included handmade graduation caps, latin dance performances by students, and dinner.

Phase V is currently underway in some ten (10) communities. It is being offered at the Basic level in Cunupia, La Romaine, Maracas Valley, Maraval, Princes Town and Rio Claro. Meanwhile, Couva and Canaan/Bon Accord/Crown Point are being exposed to the Spanish language at the Intermediate level. This phase also introduced the Conversational level of the programme, whereby citizens already in possession of an Advanced

knowledge of the language could practise their oral skills with native speakers.

As a result of all of the aforementioned phases of the Spanish Language Acquisition Programme and the camp collaborations, the SIS has now reached all municipal corporations and counties in Trinidad, and 5 of the 7 parishes in Tobago.

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For more information about the Spanish As the First Foreign Language (SAFFL) initiative, please contact the Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish (A Division of the Ministry of Trade and Industry) at 623-2931 ext 2123, 2019 or fax us at 627-0002.