

The Importance of Language Learning to Regional Development and Tourism Competitiveness



The Greater Caribbean region boasts linguistic plurality as a result of its colonial history: English, French and Spanish are the three main languages spoken in the Region, which are among the most spoken languages in the world and could offer the region a competitive advantage in relation to trade, investment and tourism. Despite this linguistic diversity, however, we have failed to harness this feature in ensuring multilingualism in the region. The Greater Caribbean is still very much separated by language barriers, which acts as an impediment to effective communication between the peoples of the region and consequently to regional co-operation and integration among the Member States of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS).

Following a 2007 feasibility study undertaken by the ACS, the need for adequate language training programmes in the region was recognised. Consequently, the ACS was mandated to incorporate initiatives in the Sustainable Tourism Work Programme to promote the Languages and Cultures of the Greater Caribbean. The aim in this regard, is to improve the language skills of nationals of ACS Member States through a series of immersion courses, encourage awareness and appreciation of the languages spoken among the Member States and their respective cultures, and establish a network of regional language training institutions.

In the implementation of this programmatic area, progress has been made thus far with the forging of linkages to establish the framework for the implementation of exchange programs among the ACS countries in the Greater Caribbean. This includes the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the ACS and the Centre for Language Learning of the University of the West Indies (UWI/CLL), St. Augustine Campus on May 25, 2010. The MOU formalised the technical cooperation to be received from that institution and allowed for other partnership and collaboration activities to promote language learning in the region. Negotiations are ongoing to formalise agreements with the relevant institutions identified through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Bolivarian Republic of

Venezuela. For their part, Colegio Universitario Hotel Escuela de Los Andes Venezolanos (CUHELAV) and Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV), have been identified for instruction in the Spanish Language in that country. Additionally, a Letter of Commitment was signed by the ACS as a regional counterpart of the project to develop the Guadeloupe International Centre for a Regional Approach on Languages (CIGAREL), an initiative of the Regional Council of Guadeloupe within the framework of the INTERREG VI Caribbean Space Programme to facilitate instruction in the French Language.

Established by the Association of Caribbean States in 2001, the Sustainable Tourism Zone of the Caribbean (STZC) aims to put in place a system of tourism sustainability assessment and to encourage further integration in the region with specific attention to the enhancement of tourist sites and sustainable destination management. Such an aim requires a collective effort, as well as cooperation and dialogue on a number of matters related to efforts made by the countries of the Greater Caribbean in incorporating the principles of sustainable development in integrated tourism planning. Given the region's diversity, it isn't at all surprising that much of this dialogue must take place across the same language barriers that continue to limit us.

While immersion programmes aim to strike down these barriers through fostering multilingualism among the citizens of the Greater Caribbean, one has to consider the hindrances in foreign language learning which according to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Classroom 2.0 include: biological factors such as age, psychological fitness associated with social and cultural factors linked to socio-economic status, literacy and attitudes towards language learning, and pedagogical challenges, including access to adequate facilities. Additionally, research indicates that the majority of those who undertake the effective learning of a foreign language are motivated by passion and interest as opposed to a sense of obligation.

Given these obstacles, it is at this point that one can acknowledge the two-fold function of foreign language training as a driver for socio-economic development and a benefit to the region's rapidly evolving tourism sector. In addition to seeking to raise overall proficiency levels, those who have been effectively instructed in foreign languages are capable of facilitating communication, as middlemen of sorts, working as interpreters and translators. Those with foreign language training can also occupy posts in the industry which allow them to directly interface with foreigners, for example, bilingual secretaries, working with both regional and international airlines, travel agencies, bureaux de change, as airport and hotel staff, tour operators, with diplomatic missions and tourism organisations, among other posts. Foreign language learning is a veritable asset to all of the positions mentioned above as it increases the value of the individual, enhances their communication skills and consequently, the service provided to incoming foreigners.

The inherent language and cultural diversity of the region, allows countries a unique opportunity to build bridges based on the sharing of knowledge and skills to grow the region as a whole, and contribute to developing the competencies of the human resource. It is with this goal in mind that the ACS promotes immersion exchange programmes through the establishment of agreements between local and regional institutions in order to provide foreign language training that produces professionals that are better equipped to function in the competitive 21st Century global

environment.

The tertiary education facilities in Trinidad, with the assistance of the Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses (GATE) programme, have proven themselves highly equipped to enable students with the language skills necessary for entering the aforementioned fields, providing a curriculum that includes instruction in Latin American Studies and comprehensive and enriching training in oral and written communication, literature, culture, politics and history in the foreign language or languages of choice.

Facing the reality of the language barriers within the region that have quite a long way to go before they can be effectively broken, Trinidad and Tobago as a major player in Caribbean trade and tourism has proven its commitment to ensuring that facilities for adequate foreign language acquisition are readily and affordably available. The Association of Caribbean States continues to harness the resources of both Trinidad and Tobago as well as those of their other member states to improve the tourist experience through promoting greater ease of communication.

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