

English Education Amidst Unrest:  
Critical Aspects of Teaching English as a Second Language in Venezuela

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*Critical Aspects of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*  
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**Abstract**

After declaring its independence from Spain in 1810, the newly formed Republic of Venezuela proclaimed Spanish to be its national language. The discovery of oil in the 1920's brought the Latin American country into close contact with global markets and the English language. In 1950, the Ministry of Education made English a required subject in all secondary schools. Then in 2013, English language education was expanded, and instruction was to begin in students fourth year of primary school. Although once well supplied and well funded, the public school system has been adversely affected by political turmoil. This political strife has also made the country a dangerous place to travel and work. Government education spending has decreased and many students no longer receive a satisfactory education from the state. Venezuelan foreign policy has changed over the last decade and the countries ties with the U.S. and other English speaking countries has weakened while political and economic connections to Russia and China have grown stronger. The future of English education in Venezuela, as well as the future of the national government, is uncertain at this time.

*Key Words:* English Education, Venezuela, Language Policy

## **Introduction**

The ability to effectively teaching English as a second or foreign language is a highly nuanced ability that requires far more skills and knowledge than simply being able to read, write, and speak English. Located on the northeastern tip of South America, Venezuela is a Spanish speaking country that has had a high demand for English language instruction for several decades. Its culture, educational policies, and global market interactions made Venezuela a prime country to teach English in. However, recent political turmoil has put the future status of English education in question. To explore English education in Venezuela, this paper will first give a brief history of the country. Second, it will examine the education system and education policies. Third, it will explore the population of Venezuela and note a few important cultural components to consider while teaching, and look at learners' motivations. Finally, this paper will analyse the current political situation and explain the possible effect on English education.

## **Brief History**

Originally inhabited by the Carib and Arawak people's, what is now present day Venezuela was claimed as a Spanish territory by Christopher Columbus in 1498, and became a colony in 1521. The first colonial exploitation of the land and people revolved around pearl oyster diving. In the 16th and 17th centuries the pearl industry began to dry up and the colony's economics shifted towards gold mining and coco production. Spanish mining companies imported African slaves to work in the mines and on the plantations. The French invasion of Spain in 1808 led to the collapse of the Spanish Monarchy and a power vacuum across all Spanish held territories in South America. Venezuela used the opportunity created by chaos to launch their independence

movement. On the 19th April 1810, The Municipal Council of Caracas headed a successful movement to depose the Spanish governor. On the 5th of July 1811, independence was officially declared and the Republic of Venezuela was established. Ratified on the same day that Venezuela declared independence from Spain, the first constitution was written in Spanish and listed Spanish as the official national language (BBC Timeline, 2019).

Despite all government proceeding taking place in Spanish, there is a great deal of room for other languages in the country. The World Population Review claims that there are 35 known indigenous languages spoken by about 350,000 people in Venezuela. Spanish is the mother tongue of roughly 30,000,00, and the second language of almost 700,000 (World Population Review, 2019). English began to gain traction in the 1920's as the country's oil export industry brought it in contacted with global markets. Oil exports increased up considerably during WWII and Venezuela became the first South American country to join the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Realizing the need for more English speakers, the Venezuelan Ministry of Education made English a compulsory subject in secondary school in 1950 (Gamero, 2017, p.2).

### **School System and Education Policies**

The Venezuelan school system is set up on a nine/two system. This means that primary education extends from grade one through nine and secondary education is only grades ten and eleven. The first nine years are required by the state and secondary school is optional (Sarmiento, 2018). Although requiring English education in secondary school increased people's exposure to the language, it meant that students would only have two years of English language instruction.

Recognizing the need for more English education, the Venezuelan Ministry of Education passed a new bill in 2013 that made English a compulsory topic beginning in grade four and extending until grade eleven (Gamero, 2017, p.1). Thus, students entering the Venezuelan school system after 2013 have had six more years of English education than students who graduated prior to the reform bill. Although the new bill has increased students exposure to English, it contained some flaws that have limited its effectiveness. The Ministry of Education is highly centralized, but passes laws that affect every corner of the country. The 2013 bill did not properly account for under resourced school, particularly in rural areas. Many primary school teachers had never taught English before, and therefore were ineffective instructors (Griffiths and Williams, 2017, p. 34).

The public education system has historically been well funded and supported by the national government. Between 2001 and 2005, the Venezuelan government increased its education spending by 288 percent. By 2008, education spending accounted for 15 percent of the national budget (Muhr and Verger, 2006 p.166). More recently however, the status of government spending on education has begun to change. Economic policies that have reduced teachers salaries and purchasing power have lead to a decline in qualified instructors in the public school system. According to Fausto Romeo, head of the Association of Private Education Institutions, Venezuela should expect 15 percent of schools to shut down this year. “We’re talking about 400 to 500 kindergartens, elementary schools and high schools that won’t be able to open in September (Sarmiento, 2018).” A decline in the quality of public education has opened the door for private schools to flourish. Unfortunately, private school can be expensive and many parents can't afford to send their students to school. Some parents have reverted to

sending their students to school only three days a week and only for two out of three terms a year as a means to save money (Sarmiento, 2018). As an English teacher, it would be important to keep in mind the financial situation of your students, and recognize that lower income families may attend class less frequently.

### **Population and Cultural Considerations**

Other important aspects to teaching English in Venezuela are the demographics and population density of the country. The last census was taken in 2011, but estimates place the current population of Venezuela at just under 33 million. According to the World Atlas, roughly 50 percent of the population is of mixed Latin American decent, 42.5 percent is of European descent, 3.5 percent is African descent, 2.5 percent indigenous, and 1.2 percent other groups (Gamero, 2017, p.3). Most of the European population in the country is second or third generation and immigrated during the second World War. Nearly 90 percent of the population is urbanized and centered in a handful of cities in the northern part of the country. Outside of the cities, Venezuela is very rural. The entire country has a population density of 37 people per square Kilometer (World Population Review, 2019). A teacher in the rural part of the country should expect their students to have to travel a long distance to reach the classroom.

In addition to population, there are several cultural considerations that any person teaching English in Venezuela should be aware of. In general, Venezuelans are known for being warm and welcoming and often greet each other with a kiss on the cheek or an *abrazo* (a cross between a handshake and a hug). Handshakes are reserved for strangers, or people of a very different social class. Compared the United States, personal space is less important and people

tend to stand very close together while having a conversation. In Caracas, and other urban areas, people wear more conservative and formal dress than most people in the U.S. On the coast, things are a bit more casual, but beachwear and shorts are still not acceptable except at the pool. Venezuela is home to a large Roman Catholic population. Approximately 77 percent of people said that they were practicing Catholics on the last census. Catholicism plays a prominent role in the public sphere and many schools will display crucifixes and crosses (World Travel Guide). It is critical for any teacher traveling to Venezuela to take these cultural aspects into account. Common greetings and dress code can be easy enough to conform to, but being conscious of the deep religious beliefs held by many students could be harder to account for and more critical to a successful teaching experience.

### **Motivations and Teaching Approaches**

Motivations for students to learn English vary dramatically across Venezuela. One of the primary reasons to learn English is to become more competitive in the job market, particularly in the lucrative oil export industry. As discussed previously, Venezuela's oil exports began in the 1920's and have progressively increased with the advent of new extraction techniques and increasing global demand. Some experts speculate that Venezuela may be home to the largest oil reserve in the world. The U.S is one of the world's largest users of oil and was the primary buyer for Venezuela throughout the 20th century. Several large U.S based oil companies are well established in the country and employ thousands of Venezuelan citizens. English is extremely helpful to any Venezuelan hoping to engage in, and profit off of, the oil industry. This is one of the primary reasons that the majority of English speakers in Venezuela are members of the upper

class (Gamero, 2017, p.2). People learning English for this reason need to be very proficient in the language because unique situations can arise and it is imperative that they can effectively read, write, and speak English.

The other motivation to learn English in Venezuela is for the tourism industry. The beaches in the North of the country are attractive to tourist from around the world. Venezuela is home to the tallest waterfall in the world, Angel Falls, which cascade off of an impressive rock plateau. Caracas, is a bustling city with several famous historical sites. Nearly one million people visited the Venezuela in 2014 to enjoy any one of these attractions (CEIC Data, 2019). Many members of the tourist industry may not have had much formal English education, but are typically able to communicate within their field. For these English learners communicative language learning is the most important because they typically only need to know how to interact with English speakers in a specific context.

Knowing your students motivation to learn English is critical to creating a successful lesson plan. For students who are motivated to learn English so that they can participate in the oil industry, a teacher should tend to use a comprehension based approach. In this approach language acquisition occurs only if the learner receives and comprehends sufficient meaningful input. This approach to English language learning grew out of the idea that learning a second language is similar to learning a first language and that extended exposure and comprehension must precede production (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Snow, 2014, p.8). This approach is well suited for these students because it simulates what their real world language usage might look like. Working in the global oil industry, people may not have to communicate in English on a



daily basis. However, it is likely that they will have to comprehend English, whether it is a message from a foreign executive or a new OPEC policy.

For students who are motivated to learn English so that they can participate in the tourism industry, teachers should consider a communicative language teaching approach. This approach assumes that the goal of teaching is so that the learner can communicate in the target language (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Snow, 2014, p.8). A key component to this approach is tasked-based teaching. This style of teaching focuses on helping the student learn language specific to a task (McKay, 2002, p. 23). In the case of a Venezuelan learner in the tourism industry, instruction should be focused around specific situations that they might find themselves in. In both cases, the choice of topic is vitally important to keep students engaged. Folse (2006) notes that, “no one knows your students better than you do, so the ultimate responsibility for choice of topics belongs to you, the teacher (p. 20).” It is therefore critical, that you take into consideration everything, from cultural norms to learning motivations, before deciding on a topic and writing a lesson plan.

### **Political Turmoil and its Effect on English Teaching Opportunities**

In 2013, long time socialist president Hugo Chavez died and Nicolas Maduro was elected to office by a thin margin of 1.6 percent. During his first six year, the Venezuelan economy went into free fall and many citizens blamed the governments socialist policies on the downturn. The International Monetary fund predicts that inflation would reach 10 million percent by the end of 2019. In 2018, Maduro won a second term in office in a highly contested election. Most opposition parties boycotted the election because most other candidates for the office had been

barred from running, imprisoned, or fled the country. After Maduro was sworn in for this second term, the opposition controlled National Assembly declared that he had no legitimate claim to power and that the presidency was vacant (Specia, 2019). The president of the National Assembly, Juan Guaido, is leading the charge and has repeatedly called for Maduro to step down. Guaido has been recognized by the U.S. and most Western countries as the legitimate leader of Venezuela, while Maduro maintains support from China, Russia, Turkey and Iran, as well as the military (BBC, 2019).

Guaido has called for several marches on the capital to show the public's opposition to Maduro's rule. Dozens of people were injured earlier this month in one of these marches. No change has yet occurred, and tensions continue to rise (Specia, 2019). The U.S. State Department issued a Level 4 "DO NOT TRAVEL" warning for the entire country earlier this year (U.S. Department of State, 2019). The outcome of this conflict will dramatically affect the future of English teaching in Venezuela. If Maduro remains in power, it is unlikely that the country will be safe to travel to, or work in, for the foreseeable future. Even if the opposition takes control, it is likely that the country will remain unstable for several years to come.

Although teaching opportunities are almost non-existent at the moment, we can hope that the country's politics will sort themselves out and that English teaching opportunities will appear once again. To get an idea of what these opportunities might look like, we can examine teaching positions that existed prior to 2013. According to Berlitz, a multinational education corporation that operates in Caracas, most English teaching jobs required a TEFL certification. With the certification the average pay was somewhere between \$400 and \$600 a month (Go Overseas,

2019). The Peace Corps does not, and did not, operate in Venezuela, so most opportunities were through private school and Catholic volunteer organization.

### **Globalization and English**

In many areas of the world, learning English is viewed as a step towards globalization. English is the language of the world markets, most intergovernmental organization, and one of the primary tools that people use to share their ideas and culture (McKay, 2002, p.81). However, this is not the case everywhere and things are beginning to change across the globe. Recently, China has been making more and more aggressive foreign investment expenditures, bringing countries into contact with Chinese firms instead of American ones. Russia too has begun to expand its global influence and has made several economic trade deals with countries around the world. The increased presence of China and Russia in global markets has begun to question the hegemonic status of English as the language for globalization. Venezuela is the hot bed for this debate.

As previously discussed, the political future of Venezuela is uncertain. If Maduro prevails, and remains in power, it is likely that Venezuela will grow closer, both politically and economically, with Russia and China. This could lead to a decline in the demand for English education across the country as people may begin to opt to learn Russian or Chinese instead. Even though government policy still dictates that English is a required subject in school, recent economic troubles have left schools underfunded, and the quality of education has declined. The nation's tourist industry has felt the impact of political violence and has shrunk by nearly 50 percent over the last 5 years (CEIC Data, 2019). Even if the opposition manages to take control of the government, they will be left with the daunting task of fixing an economy that is in tatters.

It is unlikely that English education will be a top priority for at least a decade. Political tensions have made Venezuela dangerous for people to travel to, and teach English in, and poor funding has resulted in inconsistent instruction (Sarmiento, 2018). Currently, the status of English education in Venezuela is poor, and its future is questionable.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Venezuela is a country of complexities, and very careful analysis must be done before someone attempts to teach English there. Although the culture and the economics of the country have the potential to benefit greatly from English education, the current state of politics and the funding of the public school system makes English language instruction very difficult at the moment. Additionally, changing international connections may reduce the demand to learn English in the future. Venezuela is a country that should be watched closely by anyone who has the proper teaching experience and certifications, and wishes to teach English in Latin America in the future. For the time being however, it is best to let the politics sort themselves out and listen to the U.S State Departments, “DO NOT TRAVEL,” recommendation.

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