

English Teaching and Private Enterprise in Colombia: A Business Perspective and a Challenge to Educators

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Teaching English to employees, and maintaining the language levels of those already hired, is a constant and growing concern for those responsible for corporate education in Colombia's private sector. Although it might be argued that acquisition and maintenance of a second language is an individual responsibility, when faced with an increasingly globalized economy and the resultant use of English as the language of business, private enterprise in Colombia has had to intervene in a systemic problem resulting from deficiencies in private and public secondary and higher education, as well as in private language institutes.

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The situation has several aspects that merit consideration:

- How to confirm real achievements in use of the English language when new employees join the company;
- How to strengthen deficient English language skills among current employees;

- How to maintain English language skills in employees who have little opportunity to practice the language they learned at some time in the past.

The list is not complete. There are other significant difficulties that will not be covered in this article, such as retention of employees with good English and superior business skills in Colombian companies whose salary scales and benefits do not compete with those offered by multinationals, and others that are more closely related to personnel administration than to corporate training and development.

When a company hires a new employee, how can it check the candidate's English skills in a simple, reliable and systematic manner? Let us remember that the candidate's potential superior or the company's human resources professional has the same language deficiencies as the rest of the population; thus, it is unlikely that he or she will be able to personally check language skills through a personal conversation or by reading something written by the candidate during admissions tests. Grades in English, whether from high school, university or a language institute, are so variable with respect to actual achievements that they are unreliable. Few candidates have studied enough to have achieved an internationally valid certificate, or are wealthy enough to have graduated from a truly bilingual school. The remaining possibility is that the company send all promising candidates to a qualified person or entity to test and certify English language skills. For jobs that actually use English frequently, the cost is justifiable. But, what happens for the many jobs in which English is useful, though not used frequently? Since this describes the great majority of cases, the company either wastes resources in an era of increased competition, or hopes that English won't become critical in the future and chooses to ignore the problem. The first difficulty faced by companies seeking to hire candidates with good English language skills is that of finding a **reliable, simple and inexpensive way to confirm potential employees' specific English language skills.**

In addition to new hires, any Colombian business already has a group of current employees with deficient English language skills. Perhaps they have been in the company many years; and when they were hired, English was not a significant factor in the labor market. Perhaps the company's salary scale is not competitive enough to attract individuals with good English, in addition to other required skills. No matter what the reason, they are current employees in good standing with satisfactory performance reviews. Therefore, terminating the contract

is not usually a viable option, considering the additional costs imposed for “unnecessary” termination by highly protective Colombian labor laws. What has caused this change in job requirements over the years? Possibly, some of these employees have completed their educations and have been promoted over the years, finally reaching a professional or hierarchical level which makes English desirable or necessary. Perhaps the evolution of the company itself has made English necessary – a buy-out by or a merger with a foreign company, newly-begun imports or exports, establishment of franchises or branch offices, or other similar situations. It might be simply that a greater degree of global competition and rapid obsolescence of knowledge has made constant reading and research necessary, without waiting for local translations. In any of these circumstances, the company normally takes an active role in strengthening its employees’ skills, either paying for all or part of English classes, providing classes in company installations, or making special agreements with universities or language institutes. There are, however, a series of considerations and difficulties worth reflecting upon:

- How will this English-learning experience differ from all the years of English classes in elementary, secondary and higher education taken and passed by these employees, in which they did not achieve basic skills? *What will guarantee that this time they actually achieve the desired results?*
- How do the changing needs of the workplace (travel, meetings, changing workloads) fit with the inflexibility of formal education and language institutes? In addition, how will these two aspects fit in with other normal and frequently non-schedulable requirements of adult family life?
- How soon will the company be able to perceive the specific achievements it requires? How do the company’s needs combine with those of the English teacher or English-language institute, and the interests of the student-employee?
- How does the company promote a positive view of strengthening English language skills among its employees, *most of whom found their previous English classes to be difficult, irrelevant and/or dull?*

In synthesis, private companies face problems of **quality, timeliness and relevance** when seeking to strengthen the English language skills of their employees. Colombian companies find it necessary to intervene in an unfamiliar process – teaching and learning English

– due to the business requirements of an increasingly competitive global economy. **What role might language institutes and English teachers play in this situation? What creative, practical alternatives could they present?**

Finally, there is yet another situation which is the logical result of the one described above. In order to avoid deficient English in future employees who might need it at a later date – for the same business reasons described previously – English language skills now are required for many technical and professional jobs. The problem is that Colombian companies – in contrast to the multinationals – use very little English in their daily activities. With the exception of technical reading in special subjects, or receiving the visit of a foreign consultant or expert, business is conducted in Spanish. As a result, the employees who entered the company with good English-language skills - frequently achieved with a great deal of dedication and personal sacrifice - are caught up in the daily grind of company and personal activity and use those skills infrequently. In a short time, their English skills deteriorate to a minimum. If at some future moment any of these individuals must use English in their work – due to changes in the business itself, buy-out or merger with a foreign company, promotion to a level which requires international travel, or due to the need for research or current specialized information – the company finds that its “English-speaking” employees are no longer able to use the skills they once had. Both sides blame the other: the company blames the employee for not keeping his or her skills current, and the employee blames the company for workloads that make it difficult or impossible to maintain his or her language skills through study or recreation. Obviously, both parties have good intentions, though they have both failed at execution. They might have been more proactive, by offering or seeking experiences which would have allowed them to maintain language skills, well aware that this would eventually occur. Faced with this reality, **what alternatives might formal and informal education offer to assist in maintaining language skills in adults who have few opportunities for practice?** What are reasonable possibilities for working adults with family and personal responsibilities which would keep them from having to “enroll for life” in a language class?

We may conclude that teaching and learning English has consequences far beyond the academic world. Frequently educators focus so strongly on the task at hand that they forget the long-term objective. One long-term objective is that private enterprise in Colombia have access to a pool of potential employees prepared to successfully face the immediate challenges of a global economy which, in turn,

provides worthwhile employment for individuals and leads to collective social and economic growth. One of the many skills that this future population of potential employees must have is the adequate use of the English language, the international language of business. Reaching this goal will take time, and Colombian society has many urgent, competing needs. However, there are short-term, practical, partial solutions which might help private enterprise and individual employees reach the final goal. In order to define them, I suggest that the professionals and institutions dedicated to teaching English carefully consider the questions I have posed. I am sure that they will find ample opportunities for dialogue and an enthusiastic response from the private sector in Colombia.

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