

Talk to the World: Bogotá's English Language Training Program

The City Paper

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06.2009

The city is providing opportunities for 10,000 through this innovative English language program.

A little over a year ago an innovative pilot program, Talk to the World, was launched in classrooms across the city providing 600 hours of intensive English language instruction to 100 students - completely free of charge. This project, a collaboration between the Secretaría Distrital de Desarrollo Económico, the secretariat of economic development for the city, and Invest in Bogotá, has since expanded with nearly 600 students enrolled today.

Patricia Roncancio, Director of Competitiveness of the Secretaría explains that T2W, as it is known, is part of the city's Ciudad Global initiative and has two main aims: making Bogotá more competitive for investment and improving the livelihoods of people.

By the end of this year, around 2,600 students will be learning English. And by the fourth and final year of the program in 2012, more than 10,000 Bogotanos will have been trained. Roncancio is hopeful that the program will continue beyond 2012.

Who are the T2W participants? Many of them come from high schools throughout the city but there are also university and technical school students as well as young professionals enrolled in T2W. It is a voluntary and competitive program and to participate in it students must pass a placement test and demonstrate their commitment to attending the classes.

It is a huge commitment – two hours per day, five days a week for 60 weeks. That's almost a year and a half of study. With other family, school and professional commitments that they have, it is quite meritorious that they make the effort just to show up for class each day. But they do.

Twenty-two year old Miguel Ángel Pérez arrives each day to class straight from work at the front desk of a hotel and is one of the first group of 100 students who started in the T2W pilot program in May of last year. "It's a very good option to improve lives, helping people get good jobs," he says. He started out at the A1 level – beginner's English. He is now in the B2 level – the most advanced at T2W – and will complete the program in September. After that he aspires to work in a multinational in Bogotá or perhaps go to the United States at some point.

Others in Miguel Ángel's class of about 20 are engineering students from the Universidad Nacional along with a few who work in software development. While their textbooks come from Cambridge, it is mostly American English that is spoken in the class, providing the students exposure to both dialects. Surprisingly very little Spanish is to be heard in class,

even between the students, and if students slip up with some Castellano, they are given dirty looks. Here it is complete English immersion and this group of students has gotten over any fear they once may have had of speaking up in English.

Felipe Villar, general manager of Teaching & Tutoring, the institute that leads the project, says that the benefits of the program go much further than benefiting the students. “It has been a wonderful experience. This is an incredible opportunity for the city,” he says.

When the program was designed, it was found that people had basic reading and writing skills but were stumped when they had to speak. That is why, in designing the program, the focus is 100% conversation. From Panama to Chile to Costa Rica, the city looked at successful – and not so successful - models around Latin America and found that with an intensive approach, people can achieve a high level of proficiency in a fairly short period of time. The big difference with other English programs is that leave with a command of spoken English.

“T2W provides English training to ordinary Bogotanos with the same quality as elite private schools. It will provide extraordinary lifetime opportunities to the students, and allow them to improve their income earning potential. This is revolutionary.” says Virgilio Barco, head of Invest in Bogota.

Source: **The City Paper Bogota** (06.2009)
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