

*Feature Address by*

*The Honourable Kenneth Valley  
Minister of Trade and Industry*

*Delivered at the*

*Spanish As the First Foreign Language (SAFFL)  
Media Launch*

*9 :00 am, Tuesday, March 22, 2005*

*TTMA Headquarters  
Barataria*

- ❖ Distinguished Members of the Diplomatic Corps
- ❖ Colleagues and Permanent Secretaries from the Public Sector
- ❖ Members of the Cabinet Appointed Spanish as the First Foreign Language Steering Committee
- ❖ Members of the Media
- ❖ Friends
- ❖ Good morning or should I say Buenos Días!

Today we celebrate the launch of the Spanish as the First Foreign Language or SAFFL initiative. This is no small undertaking and indeed, is of great importance to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

By declaring Spanish as the First Foreign Language of T &T, the Government has taken yet another step to prepare our citizens for challenges of the future. When we made plans to be a developed country by the year 2020, this Government knew we must equip

Trinbagonians with the tools necessary to be competitive on a global level. Today, we know that in the almost immediate future, one of those tools, is Spanish proficiency.

Twenty years ago demographers across the globe focused on the population explosion happening in Asia, now their focus is not on a single continent, but on speakers of a single language. Much attention is now given to the growing population, and the concomitant increasing economic power, of Spanish speakers in the Americas. 2000 Census figures indicate that within the next decade, Spanish speakers will cross the 900 million mark in the Americas. As a result countries are clamoring to advertise in the Spanish-language media market, employees proficient in Spanish and English are being hired over equally qualified monolingual employees and already, trade talks are increasingly held, not in our native English, but in Spanish.

Ladies and Gentlemen, twenty years ago it utopic to imagine 34 countries from our region uniting to strengthen trade links. In 2005, we stand ready to host that utopia, the FTAA, aquí, in Trinidad and Tobago. With 18 of the 34 countries in the FTAA citing Spanish as their first language, and the fact that Trinbago benefits from over \$1 billion in trade from our Spanish speaking neighbors it seems only fitting that we take steps to ensure Trinbagonians can compete in this new, increasingly bilingual environment.

Today we celebrate one of those steps – the step declaring Spanish as the First Foreign Language of T&T and the establishment of the Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish that will serve as the execution arm of this initiative. To some it may seem odd to require an “implementation arm” to drive a project that has already been part of our cultural heritage. One need only look to the names of our cities to see Spanish already has a home in T&T: San Fernando, Arima, Las Cuevas and Diego Martin – just to name a

few. In fact, the term “First Foreign Language” is most appropriate for Spanish in Trinidad and Tobago because, as you know Columbus spoke Spanish when he named our island “La Trinite”.

The mountains that inspired the name of our great nation are extensions of the Andes in Spanish language nation of Venezuela. Formed long before the earth severed our geological navel string to Americas, these mountains and many of our rich natural resources are proof the energy of South America engendered many of our greatest treasures... and indeed, the energy and passion of our people are echoes that of our familial neighbors. So close are we to the Americas, that many across the globe incorrectly assumed Spanish is our *first* language. With the launch of this initiative, we will ensure the answer to inquiries into whether we speak Spanish in T&T will be “Sí.”

It is for that reason the Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish took on their logo. They adeptly incorporated the word Sí,

Spanish for yes, into their logo because, SAFFL means we are saying yes to Spanish in T&T. Already, senior executives throughout the private sector are saying “Sí” to Spanish. The TTMA and TIDCO report trade visits to Spanish Speaking countries in our region resulting in interest in Spanish language programmes here at home. The Centre for Language Learning at the University of the West Indies reports increased enrollment and interest in Spanish classes – as do the School of Business and Computer Science, Venezuelan Embassy, NIHERST and many other Spanish providers across the nation.

Free Trade talks and headlines about MercoSur, the potential opening of Cuba and growing economic power of many countries across Latin America, have inspired many companies to seek employees already proficient in Spanish. A fact supported by many employment agencies, both locally and internationally, finding more and more clients giving preference to persons competent in our First Foreign Language. The recently published UWI Institute

of Business Corporate Confidence Index shows that 61% of executives said their companies would be recruiting within the next year. Those job seekers already fluent in Spanish will be able to demand higher salaries and/or benefits packages from employers.

Those of us that follow employment trends will remember fifteen years ago, employees listing computer literacy on their resumes were able to the same. Many failed to notice that trend, and while we as a nation are closing in on that technological divide, many find themselves facing great difficulty in today's computer driven workplace. As a Government, we will not allow a similar situation to challenge our citizens in the bilingual workplaces of the future – that's why we are launching SAFFL today – to secure a future for our people.

Different units within the Government are already working on this initiative. As the Representative from the Ministry of Education

has stated, that steps taken by the Ministry of Education will ensure that a child born tomorrow will be exposed to Spanish during their primary school education. While this ensures there will be knowledge of the language, the SIS under the Ministry of Trade and Industry will ensure there is utility in that knowledge. Focusing on the public and private sector, the Secretariat will serve as a resource, providing statistics on the practicality of having a Spanish proficient workforce, information on best practices in creating a Spanish learning environment in the workplace and helping companies explore the Spanish training options best suited to their needs.

Charged with the implementation and development of Spanish As the First Foreign Language in all spheres of our society, the SIS will be diligent in bringing this initiative to fruition. Already the Secretariat has been active – working to launch Spanish programmes in Government Ministries. In November of 2004 the Ministry of Tourism launched its programme. The Ministry of

National Security's programme is being implemented and, with the help of the SIS, many others will follow within the next 12 months. At the Ministry of Trade and Industry, a walk through our offices show signs that "Estamos aprendiendo Español" – we are learning Spanish – slowly, but surely.

To reinforce our Spanish language knowledge, on lunch times Ministry staff plays scrabble and we ensure Latin music is played at functions. Why? Because, as any socio-economic scholar will tell you, language is a basic expression of culture. And so even if you are very knowledgeable about the grammar and pronunciation of Spanish words, you must take the time to learn about the cultures that engendered the language to say you are fluent in Spanish. Modern approaches to language teaching/learning include exposure to elements of the culture that produced the language being taught. This again, is common sense. Can one truly understand what the Hindi word Deya means without understanding the Hindu festival of lights – Divali? No. But when

it comes to Spanish, we are lucky. We need only to take a closer look at our local symbols to discover the Spanish threads interwoven into our cultural fabric. For example

- ❖ Arroz con pollo (rice and chicken) will be extremely familiar to any lover of pelau

And as we all know, our neighbors like a fiesta ALMOST as much as we like our partying here in T&T.

Ladies and Gentlemen, learning a new language takes dedication and it takes support. The Secretariat can offer the nation support in the form of facilitation – assistance in making offices, both in the public and private sector, conducive to learning Spanish, recommending activities to reinforce language acquisition and even providing limited translation services. But ladies and gentlemen, the dedication must come from each of us. No one can force you to learn Spanish now, but the times are changing. Those that ignore the utility in sharpening their language skills now, may

find themselves forced out by globalization and in the bilingual workplaces of tomorrow. The time to learn Spanish is now.

Ahora – when global attention is turning to our Republic as we prepare to host FTAA.

Ahora – at the same time other countries across the globe are stepping up their Spanish programmes

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Ahora – when the Government is readily providing you with the tools, through the work of the Ministry of Education and the Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish, to learn Spanish aquí in Trinidad and Tobago.

Thank you Ladies and Gentlemen. At this time, it is my privilege to officially launch the Spanish As the First Foreign Language initiative.