



# Using English in Colombian Companies: A Pathway to Internationalization and Increased Productivity

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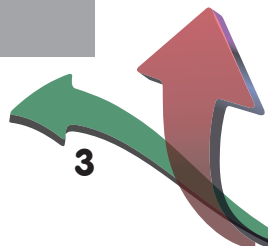
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1.

## A Pathway to Internationalization and Increased Productivity

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## 1.1 Introduction

Over the past few years, the Colombian government, chambers of commerce and several other public and private institutions have centered most of their efforts on one key goal: internationalization. Both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism have implemented various programs with that goal in mind. “Bilingual Colombia” and the “National Policy for Competitiveness and Productivity” constitute two of the most remarkable attempts to place Colombia on the world map as an attractive country for foreign investment.

The Colombian economy has been growing at a very fast pace and will most likely continue to grow steadily. With the recent signing of free trade agreements with the United States, the European Union, and South Korea, Colombian companies will undoubtedly enjoy new opportunities for international partnerships and exchanges. As a result of Colombia’s economic growth and internationalization efforts, many Colombian companies have started to hire bilingual employees to communicate with foreign investors and clients. They have also begun to develop the foreign language skills of their staff to seek a competitive advantage at both a local and a global level.

*Using English in Colombian Companies: A Pathway to Internationalization and Increased Productivity* was written in an attempt to help managers at Colombian SMEs (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) and multinational companies to effectively promote and use English as a communication tool for international business. In this book, we provide managers with all the information they need to know in order to make informed decisions regarding English training, foreign language policies, and translation. We introduce the need to rethink, carefully design and implement language training

programs in Colombian companies. We also offer pertinent insights into the option of mandating English as a corporate lingua franca and discuss the most common mistakes that managers make when hiring translators in Colombia.

To better contextualize the need to rethink the uses of English in Colombian companies, this introductory chapter first analyzes the changing roles of developing economies within the context of internationalization. Then, it examines Proexport's<sup>1</sup> approach to internationalization and explores how English and bilingualism fit into Colombia's internationalization plans. The chapter also looks briefly at some of the programs that Colombia has implemented to internationalize the productive sector and promote bilingualism. Finally, it emphasizes the need to reevaluate the role of English in corporate contexts and addresses the importance of developing carefully designed language training programs.

## 1.2

### The Internationalization of Developing Country Firms

Nowadays, it is common to see how companies from all around the world attempt to achieve further growth by delving into foreign markets. In “Lessons Learned from Unsuccessful Internationalization Attempts: Examples of Multinational Retailers in Chile” (2006), Constanza Bianchi and Enrique Ostale discuss how major U.S. and European companies such as Walmart and Carrefour have shifted their attention to developing economies since the 1990s. According to them, “These companies are driven by the opportunities in

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<sup>1</sup> Colombian institution in charge of promoting tourism as well as exports from Colombia. It offers professional assistance for Colombian and foreign investors that are interested in doing business in Colombia.

developing countries, such as high growth rates, growing middle class, and weakness of local retailers,” (p.140). As time has shown, many of these companies have managed to succeed internationally; H&M (UK), Zara (Spain), and Parmalat (Italy) are a few good examples.

Some time ago, the privilege of penetrating foreign markets was exclusive to developed countries. Fortunately, that is no longer the case. Companies such as Telmex (Mexico, <http://www.telmex.com>) and Leonisa (Colombia, <http://www.leonisa.com>), to name just two, clearly show how developing countries are in fact able to create businesses that succeed at a transnational. As Alvaro Cuervo-Cazurra shows in “Sequence of Value-Added Activities in the Multinationalization of Developing Country Firms” (2007), the global expansion of companies from developing economies has increased dramatically during the last few years: “While in 1992 there were only 3,100 transnational firms from developing countries, by 2005 there were 20,238 (UNCTAD, 1993, 2006). Some have even become leaders in their industries, like the Mexican cement producer Cemex, which is the second largest cement producer in the world” (2007, p.259).

Within the context of internationalization, the future of Latin America seems very promising. Cuervo’s study shows that between 1992 and 2005, “transnational firms from Latin America more than doubled, going from 1.55% of all transnational firms in 1992 to 3.90% in 2005” (2007, p.261). Indeed, countries like Brazil, Chile, and Colombia have enjoyed great economic prosperity in the last few years. For these reasons, Latin American countries most likely will continue to establish themselves as key participants in the world of international business.

Despite this bright panorama, Colombian companies that wish to succeed overseas cannot take their internationalization process lightly. As Bianchi and Ostale state, “empirical evidence shows

that success in the home countries does not guarantee success internationally” (2006, p.140). Therefore, companies that intend to expand abroad and do business with foreign partners or clients need to carefully elaborate an internationalization plan.

Internationalization plans must take several elements into consideration if failure is to be avoided. Bianchi and Ostale mention various studies in international business, marketing, and retailing that attribute internationalization difficulties to governmental, cultural, and psychological differences between markets (p. 141). They observe that,

Internal factors of the firm, such as the small size of the subsidiary, senior management’s weak commitment to international markets, disappointing performance in the host market, and difficulties in transferring retail experience from domestic to international markets are identified as drivers of divestment. Likewise, external elements such as environmental differences, unstable trading conditions and political and economic instability of international markets are also identified in these studies (p.141).

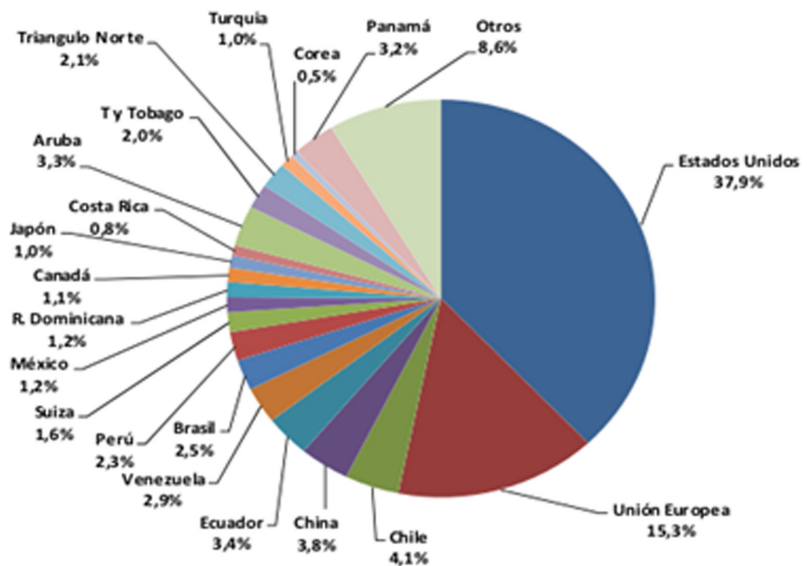
In a Colombian context, companies very often fail to do business internationally due to a much simpler reason: the inability to communicate effectively in a foreign language. The need to develop second language skills has motivated many government initiatives, some of which are supported by Proexport (<http://www.proexport.com.co>). We will now examine Proexport’s approach to internationalization to better contextualize English and bilingualism in Colombia’s internationalization plans.

## 1.3

## Internationalization Strategies and the Role of English

In 2012, Proexport published a set of internationalization guidelines for Colombian companies that are interested in doing business abroad. The document begins with a series of very interesting graphs. For instance, one of them shows that the number of Colombian exports (in millions of U.S. Dollars) went from 23,696 in 2005 to 46,297 in 2011, signaling a remarkably significant increase in exports. Another graph, reproduced below, confirms that the main importers of Colombian goods are in fact the United States (37.9%) and the European Union (15.3%).

**Figure 1.1**

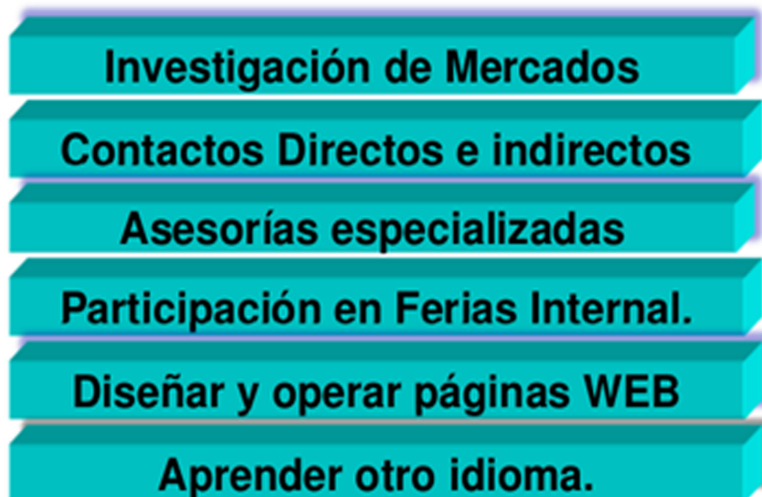


Derechos reservados Proexport Colombia 2012

Source: Proexport (January-October 2011)

Considering that most of the countries that import products from Colombia are not Spanish speaking countries, the need to learn (and use) English becomes even more apparent. That is why Proexport recommends, from a marketing perspective, that companies focus on the following activities as a part of their internationalization process:

**Figure 1.2**



Source: Proexport.

As we can see, learning another language (“aprender otro idioma”) appears on the list of key activities that companies must perform to succeed internationally, from a marketing perspective. However, Proexport does not discuss exactly *who* should learn a foreign language (CEO? managers? secretaries?), *how* they should learn it (before they are hired? while they are at work? abroad?), and what we should understand by learning (speak it fluently? communicate basic ideas? only writing?). In the present book, we discuss some of these questions in an attempt to help managers make communication in English more effective and influential.

Indeed, the ability to communicate in a foreign language can represent a serious impediment in a business context. In “Lingua franca: The Role of English in International Trade,” Ku and Zussman (2010, p. 250) state that “The language barrier —the fact that different countries have different native languages— has been documented in numerous studies as adversely affecting international trade.” Not being able to communicate ideas clearly can in fact cause all kinds of imaginable problems in a business context. When native speakers of Spanish and English do business together, misunderstandings often take place because of language-related difficulties, specific cultural differences that affect the speakers, or both. In fact, a language cannot be separated from a culture, and there is such a thing as a “linguaculture” (Agar, 1995)<sup>2</sup>, a term coined by the American anthropologist Michael Agar to refer to the impossibility of distinguishing languages from cultures.

Still, in spite of the various problems that communication in English can cause, studies have shown that it can also play a key role up when employed in business collaborations among non-native speakers. Ku and Zussman’s study (2010, p. 251) examine language-related problems in business contexts and posit that English should be studied as a “vehicle language.” They argue that “for countries in which English is not a native language the acquisition of English language skills can promote foreign trade primarily by improving communication with potential trading partners.” Beyond this quite obvious remark, Ku and Zussman’s study (2010 p.251) study explores new ground when it claims to “demonstrate that English proficiency has a strong and statistically significant effect on bilateral trade flows, above and beyond its effect as the common language of the native English speaking countries.” This means that using English as a lingua franca among non-native English speakers

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<sup>2</sup> Agar, Michael (1995) *Language shock: Understanding the culture of conversation*. New York: William Morrow.

could actually lead to excellent business opportunities that are, paradoxically, less frequently explored.

One of the many advantages of speaking English is being able to communicate with the 750 million people in the world who are believed to speak English as a foreign language (British Council, 2012). In many countries around the world, more and more people are starting to learn English or deciding to improve their English skills; they see it as an opportunity to improve their careers and grow as professionals. Globalization and technology are also increasing the need to speak and understand English, creating new business opportunities and leading many countries, like Colombia, to focus on promoting bilingualism through government-funded educational programs.

## 1.4

### **Initiatives to Promote Bilingualism and Internationalization**

Next, we will look briefly at some of the most relevant programs that Colombia has implemented to promote bilingualism and internationalize the productive sector. These initiatives have sought to articulate the efforts and activities of academic institutions, the state, and the private sector.

In the past few years, Colombia has designed and implemented various programs to increase the country's productivity and competitiveness. Globalization has opened great opportunities, but it has also increased competition, creating new challenges for the national market. "The National Bilingualism Plan" (also known as "Bilingual Colombia") (2004-2019) was developed in an attempt to respond to the demands of the globalized world. Its major goal has been the development of communication skills in a second

language in accordance with international standards---The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages<sup>3</sup> (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006).

By the end of 2019, the program stipulates that specific sectors of the population should reach the following language proficiency levels:

**Table 1.1 Expected results (by 2019)**

Sectors of the Population	Language level
Primary and secondary education English teachers	B2
Primary and secondary education English teachers from other areas	A2
11 <sup>th</sup> grade students	B1
College graduates who majored in Languages	B2-C1
College graduates	B2

**Source:** Ministerio de Educación Nacional (2005).

Whether the target sectors of the population reach these proficiency levels by 2019 is yet to be seen. Regardless of the final results of “Bilingual Colombia,” the program has contributed to Colombia’s internationalization process by clearly establishing the need to develop people’s English at all educational levels. So far, it has also succeeded in raising the interest of the business sector, which has also become involved in this program.

The second initiative that we would like to examine briefly as a major contribution to the development of bilingualism and internationalization in Colombia is the “National Policy for Competitiveness and Productivity” (2009). This policy seeks to promote

<sup>3</sup> The description of each language level can be consulted here: Council of Europe (2012) Education and Language, Language Policy. 23/11/2012. Retrieved from [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre_en.asp)

foreign investment as well as the development of the country in terms of infrastructure, logistics, technology, etc. (Ministerio de Comercio, Industria y Turismo, 2011).

Bilingualism, of course, also occupies a very important place in this policy and has led to the implementation of very interesting programs. In 2009, the Ministry for Commerce, Industry, and Tourism created *ispeak*, a program that seeks to evaluate and certify the level of English of Colombian people and offers a database to companies that require bilingual employees (*ispeak*, 2012). In addition, the National Council on Economic and Social Policies published a document entitled “Conpes 3527,” which proposes other related strategies to strengthen bilingualism in Colombia (DNP, 2008).

## 1.5

### Bilingualism in a Business Context

The private sector needs to take very seriously all the recent efforts that the Government has made to promote bilingualism in Colombia. Bilingualism is in fact the key to development and international success, but it cannot be achieved without the support of academic institutions and businesses. In *English at Work: An Analysis of Case Reports about English Language Training for the 21st-Century Workforce*, Anthony Fritzpatrick and Robert O’Dowd look at the contrast between how English is taught in various European and Asian countries and the actual needs of employees at their workplace.

For the past two decades, a great deal of attention has been paid to the English language skills necessary for work and business. This focus has resulted in a large industry of courses and textbook materials for business English and ESP.

However, the new millennium has seen some studies that suggest there may be a mismatch between the functional, work-specific language being taught in this area and the actual communicative needs of workers in the 21st-century workforce (Kassim & Ali, 2010; Roberts, 2010).

As Fritzpatrick and O'Dowd suggest, education needs to be reoriented to respond to the needs of the business world. Companies and universities have to start to work collaboratively and give each other constant feedback; otherwise, academic institutions will never know exactly how they should prepare their students---the employees and managers of the future.

*Using English in Colombian Companies: A Pathway to Internationalization and Increased Productivity* provides managers (and future managers) with all the information they need to know to help their companies make a smooth transition into bilingualism. *Chapter 2* focuses on the need to rethink how English training programs should be viewed. It introduces readers to “Activity Theory” so that managers can better understand their companies’ modus operandi and their employees’ motivations. *Chapter 3* offers recommendations on how to design an English training program, based on a company’s behavior. *Chapter 4* examines the advantages and disadvantages of mandating English as a corporate lingua franca and gives specific recommendations on how to succeed at it. *Chapter 5* carefully explains the translation process and discusses the mistakes that managers often make when hiring translators in Colombia.

The chapters end with a set of activities to help managers better understand the strategies and main concepts that are presented in the book. For those interested in reading further, we also offer a list of recommended resources.