Focus on Venezuela

Capital: Caracas
Population: 23,916,810
Size: 352,143 sq. mi. (912,050 sq. km.)
Location: northern part of South America, between Colombia and Guyana, bordered by the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean
Climate: 4 zones, namely, tierra caliente (76 to 96 degrees Fahrenheit), tierra templada (50 to 77 degrees Fahrenheit), tierra fría (average temperature 75 degrees Fahrenheit), and paramos (average temperature 59 degrees Fahrenheit). The climate varies from tropical humid to alpine and is more moderate in the highlands.
Monetary Unit: bolivar
Urban/Rural Life: 74% urban, 16% rural
Religion: 92% Roman Catholic, 2% Protestant, 6% Judaism and Amerindian religions
Languages: Spanish, various indigenous languages
Ethnicity: 68% mestizo, 21% Caucasian, 10% African, and 1% Amerindian
Government: democratic republic

Personal Snapshot

I was teaching English as a second language in Caracas, Venezuela one summer. Being from the United States where time is of the essence, I had always felt that it was extremely important to be exactly on time or early for all appointments. I quickly learned, though, that it was necessary to adapt to a more relaxed sense of time in Venezuela, because there were often circumstances that made it impossible to be on time. One morning, it was raining very hard, and the traffic was much heavier than usual. I had a driver who took me to work, and since he was very late, I knew that I would be late as well. I decided at that moment not to worry about getting to class,
because I knew that many of my students would probably be in a similar situation. As expected, I arrived at class about 30 minutes late. My students were very unconcerned, but one of the American interns I was supervising was very distraught. She told me that she had been very worried because I wasn’t there and that she had wanted to make sure that class began on time. She said that she had gone frantically to the office and asked the secretary what she should do. The secretary had been very unconcerned and had simply said, “Tranquila!” [Don’t worry!]. The secretary’s next utterance really brought the issue of cultural difference home to the intern. “Quieres café?” [Want some coffee?], she inquired.

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**Cultural Closeup**

- Christopher Columbus first came to Venezuela in 1498. During the early 19th century, Venezuela declared independence from Spain with the help of its greatest hero, Simon Bolivar, often referred to throughout South America as “the Liberator.”
- The Venezuelans are very hospitable people. They show affection openly and are extremely friendly toward strangers. They will go to great lengths to make a stranger feel welcome in their homes.
- Families are very close in Venezuela. The concept of family extends beyond the traditional nuclear family, and people depend on their families for support and guidance. Family values are strong, and family is the center of people’s lives. It is not uncommon to see several generations of people living under the same roof.
- Venezuelan men can be very charming. Like their fathers before them, they believe that they are expected to take care of women. They show special respect to women in public and in private.
- Life’s problems are solved as they come; at least, this is the philosophy of life for many Venezuelans. They believe that life is to be lived day by day. Venezuelans no se enrollan; that is, they do not get upset about things. By the same token, they may not plan too much for the future.
- Venezuelans are hard workers, but they like to play hard, too. There is a sense of balance in their lives.
- Venezuelans are very concerned with their physical appearance at all levels of society. Venezuelan women, in particular, have a highly developed aesthetic sense. They are proud to claim that Venezuela produces more Miss Universe Pageant winners than any other country in the world.
- One of Venezuela’s most important industries is oil refining. The country enjoyed a remarkable economic boom when the price of oil was high. Since the decline of oil revenues in the 1980s, Venezuela’s economy has declined, and its poverty has increased.
• The impact of oil on the social and economic structure of the country has been significant, especially with regard to profound changes in the labor market and the creation of a strong middle class. Nevertheless, the middle class remains small. Most Venezuelans are either very affluent or very poor.

• The middle class is the most dynamic group in the country. It consists of teachers, industrialists, government workers, and professionals. This group is mostly urban. Many women have opted to work outside of the home to help their families obtain middle-class status.

• Venezuelans enjoy eating very much. It is very common to go out to dine with friends and families. The national dish in Venezuela is pabellon criollo, which is made with steak, black beans, rice, and fried plantains.

A Closer Look

Policy

• The Venezuelan constitution and the Law of Education establish that every individual is entitled to receive secular basic education provided by the state free of charge. The Ministry of Education is the government organization that oversees, plans, and coordinates all educational activities in the country.

• The educational system is undergoing profound philosophical changes. One change is toward a greater degree of constructivism, or an emphasis on critical thinking. This change is creating some problems in schools, because teachers are more accustomed to serving as the main source of information in their classes. Another shift concerns teacher competencies; in the past, teachers in elementary schools taught multiple subjects, but teachers now specialize in a chosen field. Thus, students have different teachers throughout the school day.

• There are no electives in the Venezuelan educational system. Students take prescribed courses according to both the curriculum and their chosen track. All students take such classes as home economics, physical education, and art. Students who choose the professional track in high school are prepared to enter the workforce after graduation.

• The Venezuelan government has nutritional programs for low-income children, although it is not common for schools to have student cafeterias.

• Venezuelan students enjoy many scheduled holidays, including Semana Santa, or Holy Week, the week right before Easter.

• The government provides free uniforms to public school students; some books and supplies are also provided free of charge.

Teaching Style

• Most classes are teacher-fronted—the teacher serves as the provider of knowledge, and learning takes place through the delivery of lectures,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level/Age</th>
<th>Hours/Calendar</th>
<th>Curriculum</th>
<th>Required</th>
<th>Class Size</th>
<th>Exams</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Classroom Setup</th>
<th>Homework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preschool, ages 3–5</td>
<td>Oct.–July, 7:00 A.M.–11:00 A.M. or 8:00 A.M.–12:00 P.M. Mon.–Fri.; breaks for Christmas, <em>Semana Santa</em>, and national holidays</td>
<td>Play; basic courtesy; physical exercise; basic skills; teamwork; motor dexterity; cognitive, social, and emotional skills</td>
<td>Yes, but children in lower socioeconomic groups may not attend preschool.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Students sit in circles. Rooms are decorated with students’ work.</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary, grades 1–6, ages 6–12</td>
<td>Oct.–July, 7:00 A.M.–12:00 P.M. or 1:00 P.M.–6:00 P.M. Mon.–Fri.; breaks for Christmas, <em>Semana Santa</em>, and national holidays</td>
<td>Language arts and literature; math; social sciences; natural sciences; health education; work ethics; physical education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>35–40</td>
<td>Students take summative, formative, and diagnostic tests in every subject. During the first 6 years, an average of all subjects taken is calculated. During the last 3 years, a grade is given in every subject.</td>
<td>0–20. The minimum grade to be promoted to the next level is 10.</td>
<td>Desks in rows, facing the teacher, who sits at the front of the room. There is a blackboard in every room. Some private schools may have media equipment.</td>
<td>Most teachers assign homework daily.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary, grades 7–12, ages 12–17</td>
<td>Oct.–July, 7:00 A.M.–1:30 P.M. or 12:00 P.M.–6:00 P.M. Mon.–Fri.; breaks for Christmas, <em>Semana Santa</em>, and national holidays</td>
<td>Basic cycle takes 3 years to complete. Students who finish basic cycle enroll in 1 of 2 tracks: the diversified track takes 2 years to complete and has 2 specialties—humanities, arts and sciences. The professional track takes 3 years to complete and has 4 specialties—industrial, agricultural, business and administrative services, health services.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>35–40</td>
<td>There are diagnostic, formative, and summative tests in every subject. The school year is divided into 3 semesters, and students take subject finals at the end of each semester</td>
<td>Same as above. Students must pass each individual subject to be promoted. Remedial final tests are given to students who do not pass a subject.</td>
<td>Same as above. Media equipment is limited.</td>
<td>Homework is expected on a daily basis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University, age 18+</td>
<td>Oct.–July; breaks for Christmas, <em>Semana Santa</em>, and national holidays</td>
<td>Students may attend technical universities for 3 years to obtain technical degrees or can attend universities to study any number of careers in sciences and humanities. It normally takes 5 years to obtain a university degree.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>Written tests (short answers, definitions, not many multiple-choice items)</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
<td>Varies, research papers, oral presentations, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
although group discussions are common. During group exchanges, teachers encourage students to participate actively.

- There is a high level of formality in the Venezuelan classroom. For example, students raise their hands when they have a question, and they must wait for the teacher to call their names before they can answer. Students also stand up to greet visitors and teachers. Nevertheless, the atmosphere is cordial and comfortable.

- At the beginning of the school year, students get a program of study that details all the assignments, activities, and tests for the trimester per subject, including due dates. Thus, a student always knows, for example, when a test will be given.

**Learning Style**

- Many students work individually. Group assignments and exercises are not very common, although group discussions led by the teacher may be a familiar practice.

- Many Venezuelan students learn well by hands-on activity, such as undertaking projects. Students in secondary schools may be assigned science projects, and some schools require that their students conduct research to graduate.

- Memorization of material is very common in basic education and secondary school.

**Instructional Setting**

- Students sing the national anthem every day in most schools. It is considered an honor to be asked to raise the flag. This is done every time the national anthem is sung.

- Some public school buildings are in need of extensive repair.

**Activities**

- Venezuelan students are accustomed to taking plenty of field trips, such as visits to museums, national parks, and other educational or recreational sites.

- Students participate in many extracurricular activities, such as debate clubs, band, and various sports and music competitions. Many schools select a queen each year.

- High school students can participate in a very popular musical activity in which *gaitas*, the traditional Christmas music of Venezuela, is performed. Students take this opportunity very seriously and audition for parts. Selected students compete against students from other schools until a national winner is selected. The competition is televised nationally.

- Most schools have two celebrations at the end of the school year: a Christmas pageant and an end-of-semester celebration.
Discipline and Class Management

- The teacher is responsible for controlling his or her class, and students tend to hold their teachers in high esteem. Students know and fear the consequences of bad behavior.
- There is no physical punishment in Venezuelan schools. Students are expelled or suspended for violations of the student code of conduct, such as the physical or verbal abuse of another student or of a teacher.
- Some schools have their students keep a libro de vida (literally, “book of life”). In this book, students write down any bad behavior they themselves may have exhibited. For example, if a student misses homework, he or she will write that fact down in this book.
- In many schools, teachers weekly select a student to fill the role of semanero or semanera, whose titles come from the Spanish word for week (semana). The semanero or semanera is responsible for helping the teacher in the classroom for an entire week. He or she gets chalk, erasers, materials, and anything that is needed. All students get an opportunity to serve as the semanero or semanera.

Teacher-Student Relationship

- Students recognize that their teachers are in a position of authority, but this does not prevent them from forming close relationships with faculty. The relationship between teacher and student is warm and cordial. Students feel free to consult their teachers about problems or if they have questions of any kind. The relationship is open but formal; that is, it would not be common for teachers and students to socialize after class.
- Students are assigned a homeroom teacher, and any special requests on the part of the class or problems that may require negotiation are brought to that teacher by a designated student leader. For example, the student leader may intervene on a student's behalf if there is a question about the appropriateness of a particular grade or assignment.

Student-Student Relationship

- Students often form very close friendships that last a lifetime, although, unlike in other Latin American countries, classes do not normally stay intact throughout students' years of schooling.
- There is a great sense of camaraderie among Venezuelan students. It is common for them to study in groups and to complete their assignments together.
Protocol

Nonverbal Behavior

- Venezuelans are not known to be particularly punctual in social situations. They jest about this among themselves by referring to hora venezolana, or “Venezuelan time.” In business situations, the people of Venezuela are generally more conscious of time.
- Women greet each other as well as men with a kiss on the cheek in nonbusiness environments and when there is a high level of familiarity. In business situations, men and women greet each other with a handshake.

Images

- Venezuelans protest publicly about all kinds of social and political situations. It is very common to hear people making noise with their pots and pans in the middle of the night as a sign of protest.
- Venezuelans love to eat arepas, fried corn or wheat pancakes filled with meat, cheese, or eggs. Arepas are eaten throughout Venezuela and at all times of the day. Hallacas are a very important dish eaten at Christmas time. Much like a tamale, they consist of ground meat plus olives or raisins, surrounded by a cornmeal breading and boiled in banana leaves.
- Crime is very high, especially in Venezuela’s cities, so people are careful about going out late at night. If they do so, they stay attuned to their surroundings, and go out in groups.
- There are many legal holidays in Venezuela, so the school year is frequently interrupted by minivacations. Students are not required to go to school on January 15 (Teacher’s Day), May 1 (Labor Day), October 12 (Columbus Day), July 24 (Simon Bolivar’s birthday), during Carnaval and Semana Santa (Holy Week), or on many other special occasions.
- The Roman Catholic Church has tremendous influence in the affairs of the country. It is not uncommon to hear priests talk openly about politics or for the Church to side with political parties.
- Most towns in Venezuela have a patron saint, whose image is displayed in many public places. The country also has a patron saint, the Virgin of Coromoto. Virtually every city in Venezuela has a Plaza Bolivar in the center of town, in honor of Simon Bolivar, “the Liberator.”

Forms of Address

- Students address their teacher with profesor or profesora plus last name in secondary school and with maestro or maestra (teacher), either alone or with last name, in primary school. Students never use the teacher’s first name.
• Spanish has two pronouns meaning “you”—informal tú and formal usted. The latter is used with anyone who is in a position of authority, including teachers.

• Venezuelans may address strangers informally. For example, it would not be surprising for a taxi driver to refer to a client with the phrase mi amor, meaning “my love.” In such a case, this expression has no romantic meaning and is used to show openness and friendliness.

DRESS

• Students wear uniforms to school. The same uniform is worn in both public and private schools. For girls, the uniform is a skirt and blouse bearing the school’s insignia. Boys wear long pants and a shirt sporting the school’s insignia.

• Traditional dress is reserved for festive occasions or for cultural events. For all other occasions, European or North American styles are popular.

POLITE/IMPOLITE TOPICS AND BEHAVIORS

• Venezuelans consider themselves to be very open-minded people. They enjoy a variety of topics of conversation, including politics, the economy, unemployment, the U.S. dollar, and all manner of social issues.

• It is considered impolite to discuss salary, age, and weight. It is not considered taboo to talk about sex, but this particular topic is normally discussed when there is a high level of familiarity between or among the interlocutors.

• People normally call ahead before visiting someone. Suddenly dropping in on a friend may be frowned on.

• When meeting someone for the first time, Venezuelans keep a polite distance. Demonstrative gestures, such as kisses and hugs, are considered inappropriate on such occasions.

• It is acceptable to drink alcohol in business situations, and it is common to go to restaurants to meet business associates.

GIFT GIVING

• Gifts are given only for special occasions and events, such as Christmas, Mother’s Day, Teacher’s Day, and birthdays.

• People normally bring dessert, wine, chocolate, or flowers when visiting someone or when having dinner at someone’s home.

• Students exchange presents at the end of the school year. Teachers also get presents from their students.
Problem/Solution

Problem
I am having problems concerning my Venezuelan students' writing style. They have a hard time understanding how process writing (brainstorming, revising and rerevising, etc.) works. How can I best introduce them to the process approach?

Solution
To your Venezuelan students, the process approach is alien. They have been taught to write papers with introductions and conclusions, examples, transitions, and so forth, but their training has been product-oriented. They may not see the benefits of adopting an approach that focuses on progressive iterations of a single piece of writing, and they may resent what they perceive to be criticism of the writing process that they were taught. Talk to the students about the advantages of a process approach to writing. Bring clear examples to class, or use the students' own writing to point out areas that could benefit from a more reflective treatment of the topic.

Problem
A couple of my Venezuelan students actually take out their notes when they are taking tests. They usually try to hide them, but last week, a student opened her book right in front of me during a quiz. When I told her that her behavior was unacceptable, she laughed and said, "It's nothing, Teacher." It seems that my students do not understand that this behavior is considered cheating. How should I handle this problem?

Solution
Venezuelan students have to memorize a great amount of information in school. Some students bring notes to a test and are very creative about hiding them from the teacher. This is a very common practice, and even good students may engage in it. Although students expect to be punished if they are caught with these notes, they will not be terribly embarrassed. To help your students, try to create tests that do not rely on the memorization of material. Also, talk with your students about the limitations of memory in sustained learning. Train them to use alternative learning strategies that de-emphasize memorization. In addition, define the notion of academic honesty in the context of the host institution, set some boundaries, clarify the consequences to be expected if students break the rules, and follow through with sanctions if violations occur afterward.
Problem

I am very sociable and easygoing with my students in and out of the classroom. I enjoy teasing them and joking with them. My Venezuelan students, though, don’t seem to make the distinction between being friendly and being friends. I sometimes feel that they cross the line. How can I better define our relationship?

Solution

Most Venezuelans do not see their teachers as their potential friends. There are clear boundaries in Venezuelan classrooms, and your students may be a little bit confused because, to them, you are not maintaining the expected level of formality. If you are uncomfortable with this situation, it may be a good idea to prepare a lesson on cultural differences in the classroom. You could compare classrooms in your country with those in Venezuela. Through role play, you could simulate appropriate classroom behavior and thereby convey your expectations to your students.

My Observations