

Best Practice
Spanish Immersion Days – Jamaica
Spanish Jamaican Foundation & Ministry of Education, Skills, Youth & Information
(2012–Present)

Why was this initiative created?

Spanish Immersion Days in Jamaica are annual events, typically held in March or April, designed to support students preparing for the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) Spanish Oral Examination, administered each year by the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) typically taking place from mid-April to early May. For the past 13 years, the initiative has offered 5th Form (11th grade) students an invaluable opportunity to strengthen their oral proficiency through interactive workshops with native Spanish speakers.

In Jamaica, students speak English and Jamaican Patois as their primary languages, with Spanish studied as one of the foreign languages in school. Despite this, students, particularly those in public schools, have traditionally had very limited access to authentic speaking practice and few immersion opportunities to build the confidence and fluency required for their oral exams. *Spanish Immersion Day* was created to address this gap, providing a realistic, supportive environment that simulates exam conditions while also enriching students' cultural and linguistic learning.

A central factor in the sustainability and success of the programme over more than a decade has been the strong network of partnerships among the Ministry of Education, the Spanish Jamaican Foundation, Hispanic Embassies, tertiary and cultural institutions. Equally important has been the committed team of tutors who return year after year to guide the sessions. These tutors, who include Spanish-speaking teachers and facilitators trained in Jamaica, lead both the virtual and face-to-face components. Many have been involved consistently across the years, ensuring continuity, quality, and a sense of familiarity for the students. Their role is to simulate the different sections of the oral exam, provide corrective feedback, and encourage spontaneous communication in Spanish. This steady involvement has been a key element of sustainability, allowing the programme to grow while maintaining its quality and reputation.

What are *Spanish Immersion Days* about?

The initiative prepares Grade 11 students (ages 15–17) for the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) Spanish Oral Exam through a hybrid model:

- In-person *Spanish Immersion Days* (6 hours): Held annually across Jamaica, students practice reading aloud, responding to real-life situations, and guided conversations with native and fluent Spanish speakers.
- Virtual Preparation Sessions (4–5 online workshops- 3 hours): Delivered before exams, focusing on each oral exam section with live instruction, practice, and feedback.

In both modalities, *Spanish Immersion Days* recreate the CSEC Spanish Oral Examination environment by immersing students in authentic communication settings, guided by native Spanish speakers and trained facilitators. Using past papers as practice tools, students rotate through different rooms, completing activities while facilitators provide guidance and feedback. During in person workshops, participating embassies enrich the experience by sharing cultural insights, with students “traveling” between countries and having their passports stamped at each stand.

The programme covers all three sections of the oral paper, each lasting 30 - 40 minutes:

- Reading Aloud: Students practice pronunciation, fluency, and clarity with native Spanish speakers.
- Responses to Situations: Role-play exercises in real-life contexts aligned with the syllabus topics, including Home and Family, School and Career, Sports and Recreation, Daily Routines, Shopping, and Travel.
- Guided Conversation: Simulated interviews led by Spanish native and Jamaican teachers on familiar everyday topics, encouraging spontaneous expression and vocabulary recall.

To ensure equitable access, the initiative is hosted in geographically diverse locations across Jamaica to reduce travel barriers and ensure regional representation. Each site hosts students from surrounding schools, with transport often coordinated through local school districts to support participation from rural or underserved communities. The programme lowers existing accessibility barriers by offering:

- Free participation
- Resources tailored to students with limited oral practice opportunities
- Exposure to Spanish native speakers, authentic scenarios, and structured feedback aligned to exam rubrics
- Digital learning tools and post-event materials accessible even with limited bandwidth

Special efforts are made to include schools with fewer resources, such as those without a full-time Spanish teacher or advanced language lab facilities. This levels the playing field, giving all students a fair chance to succeed in the oral exam regardless of school infrastructure or geographic location.

In 2025, regional face-to-face events were held in 6 educational regions across various parishes in Jamaica:

- Happy Grove High School (Portland)
- Simón Bolívar Cultural Centre & Shortwood Teachers’ College (Kingston)
- Glenmuir High School (Clarendon)
- Sam Sharpe Teachers’ College (St. James)
- Brown’s Town Community College (St. Ann)

- Church Teachers' College (Manchester)

These immersive sessions bring together over 2000 students annually from public and private institutions, with particular attention to underserved or rural areas, reinforcing Spanish as a tool for mobility, employability, and regional integration through tourism.

Virtual Preparation Sessions (4-5 sessions, 2-3 hours each):

To complement the in-person experience, the initiative offers 4 to 5 virtual sessions in the months leading up to the CSEC exam (March -April). These two to three-hour online workshops each focus on the different sections of the oral paper, with live instruction, interactive examples, model answers, and Question & Answer segments.

Each session engages more than 200 students, not only from Jamaica but also from other Caribbean countries, including Barbados, Trinidad & Tobago, Saint Lucia, and Grenada. This broadens the initiative's regional impact and aligns with CAF's SOMOS programme goals of promoting linguistic and cultural integration.

Post-event resources, including recordings, rubrics, vocabulary lists, and conversation prompts, are made available to teachers and students through digital platforms to support ongoing preparation and curriculum alignment. In addition, the Spanish Jamaican Foundation covers the cost of the CSEC oral examination for students in regions 3 and 4, which form part of Jamaica's "golden belt" of tourism, right in the north of the country, where a workforce proficient in Spanish is especially needed.

Who makes it possible?

The initiative is coordinated by the Spanish Jamaican Foundation (SJF), a non-profit organization established in 2006 and funded by Spanish investors in Jamaica chaired by the Spanish Ambassador in partnership with the Jamaican Ministry of Education, Embassies of Spanish-speaking countries present in Jamaica, the National Association of Spanish Teachers, universities, colleges, and private sponsors.

Spanish Immersion Days are a joint venture supported by a public-private partnership model. Approximately 60% of contributions are in kind (facilities, transportation, and academic personnel provided by the Ministry of Education and schools), while around 40% are cash donations or direct sponsorships from private sector partners and embassies, covering logistics, printing of materials, and participation tokens for students and volunteers. Companies below have contributed financially or through in-kind donations:

Seprod Foundation: Actively supports the Spanish Immersion programme, promoting the teaching and learning of Spanish as a foreign language. They provided snacks and juices

for students during a Spanish Immersion Day organized by the Spanish Jamaican Foundation.

Lasco Manufacturing, Wisynco, and Jamaica Biscuit Company: These companies are listed as major sponsors or with additional support for the Spanish Jamaican Foundation.

What are the phases of *Spanish Immersion Days*?

The initiative takes place every year following the phases below:

- Planning (January): Stakeholder meetings, resource development, embassy coordination. Lead: Spanish Jamaican Foundation & Ministry of Education
- Promotion (February): School registration, media campaigns, sharing virtual invites. Lead: Spanish Jamaican Foundation, Ministry of Education, & venue leaders per region
- Delivery (March-April): Regional immersion days + online sessions.
- Lead: Spanish Jamaican Foundation, Ministry of Education, & venue leaders per region
- Follow-up (July-August): Collection of feedback, teacher debriefing, post-event resources shared, performance evaluation against CSEC rubrics. Lead: Ministry of Education

What makes the *Spanish Immersion Days* unique?

- Hybrid model: Combines in-person immersion with digital tools to ensure wide access.
- Native speaker engagement: Students interact directly with Spanish speakers, gaining authentic exposure.
- Collaborative teaching: Activities are co-facilitated by native speakers and Jamaican teachers, blending cultural authenticity with local pedagogical expertise.
- Cultural integration: Music, dance, and everyday expressions bring Spanish to life.
- Inclusive approach: Free participation, regional hosting, and digital resources reduce barriers for underserved schools and rural communities.

What difference has it made?

The *Spanish Immersion Day* has made a notable contribution to improving students' readiness and performance in the CSEC Spanish Oral Examination. According to the CXC Report on Candidates' Work in the CSEC Examination – Spanish (2023), while the number of candidates sitting the January exam in Jamaica declined from 237 in 2022 to 164 in 2023, the quality of results improved significantly. The percentage of candidates achieving Grades I–III rose from 52% in 2022 to 66% in 2023. This rebound in performance reflects both the recovery from COVID-19 disruptions and the positive impact of targeted initiatives such as the *Spanish Immersion Day*.

Outcomes and results observed:

- Improved oral proficiency: The CXC report noted an improvement across all assessment profiles in 2023, including Listening, Reading, Speaking, and Writing, with the most noticeable gains in oral interaction.
- Greater exam confidence: Immersion Day participants engaged in realistic conversation practice on CSEC topics such as Sports, Shopping, Daily Routine, and Travel, mirroring actual exam requirements. Examiners have observed that students who attended displayed more spontaneity, fluency, and accuracy in their responses.
- Better pronunciation and intonation awareness: Activities focused on live reading, role-play, and interaction with native speakers helped address common weaknesses identified by CXC, such as incorrect stress placement, anglicised pronunciation, and lack of intonation variation.
- Motivation to pursue further opportunities: Exposure to authentic language and culture has encouraged some students to consider scholarships, travel, or careers where Spanish is an asset.

Quotes from the CXC Report on Candidates' Work – Spanish, 2023:

“Several excellent readers exhibited a solid knowledge of the Spanish sound system, and they appeared well acquainted with the rules of stress and accentuation. Their competence in reading aloud was highlighted through good fluency and intonation.”

“A few candidates with excellent competence managed to converse easily and with great accuracy. Their answers were spontaneous and tended to be extensive, demonstrating that they possessed a wide range of vocabulary and grammatical correctness.”

What insights and takeaways does the Spanish Immersion Day offer the Caribbean?

The success of Spanish Immersion Days lies in its hybrid model, which combines in-person sessions with virtual workshops, extending access to students across Jamaica and the wider Caribbean. By simulating the CSEC Spanish Oral Examination and integrating cultural elements, the programme provides authentic practice and motivation while strengthening communication skills.

The Spanish Immersion Day model is highly replicable in other Caribbean countries that face similar challenges in foreign language instruction. Its modular structure allows for contextual adaptation while maintaining its core focus on oral language proficiency and exam readiness. For effective transfer, it is recommended to:

- Establish partnerships with educational institutions and Spanish-speaking embassies.
- Identify accessible regional hubs to host in-person activities.
- Develop digital materials tailored to local contexts to ensure ongoing learning.
- Provide training and pedagogical support for Spanish teachers.

- Include monitoring and evaluation tools to measure student progress and programme impact.

Contact Information of Organizers

Spanish Jamaican Foundation – H.E. José María Fernández López de Turiso

emb.kingston@maec.es +1 (876) 926-7734

Ministry of Education, Skills, Youth & Information, Jamaica

Mrs. Ramonia Smith-Hamilton

ramonia.smith-hamilton@moey.gov.jm

Spanish Immersion Days Testimonials

– Ministry of Education, Skills, Youth & Information

<https://www.facebook.com/MOEYIJamaica/videos/we-recently-hosted-our-spanish-immersion-days-a-huge-success-in-preparing-studen/1059467119407812/>

-Our Spanish Immersion Days were a resounding success .

<https://www.facebook.com/MOEYIJamaica/videos/our-spanish-immersion-days-were-a-resounding-success-giving-students-a-strong-bo/1421338242389729/>

- Seprod Foundation- Spanish Immersion Day with the Spanish Jamaica ...

<https://seprodoundation.org/portfolio/spanish-immersion-day-with-the-spanish-jamaica-foundation/>

- Jamaicans Encouraged to Learn a Second Language

<https://jis.gov.jm/jamaicans-encouraged-to-learn-a-second-language/>