

The most and the least successful ELT in Latin America

Paul Davies
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The focus of this article is on ELT in institutions or systems such as schools, institutions of higher education, language centres and company courses, not on the ELT of individual teachers, though they're obviously an essential element in successful ELT in institutions and systems.

Successful ELT: What is it and where is it?

ELT is clearly successful where it consistently and continually helps most students in a system of English courses progress towards an adequate functional level of English. That level varies for different people: around B1 level may be adequate for people who need and want English only occasionally and for basic communication in international travel, brief encounters with foreigners and such, but those who use English a lot in their higher studies, their work and their lives in general need higher levels of proficiency.

Successful ELT, producing good learning results, starts by helping most beginners in English courses progress to low elementary level (A1.2), then mid elementary (A2.1), then high elementary (A2.2), then low intermediate (B1.1) and intermediate (B1.2). Around then, where CEFR 'independent user' levels begin, and sometimes a bit earlier, many people develop their English further simply by using it, but others choose or have to take more courses to push their progress forwards. That kind of progress in English happens consistently in courses in some educational institutions or systems but not in others, which is the case in far too much ELT in Mexico and the rest of Latin America.

Assuming that the success of ELT is reflected in learning results, most ELT in Latin America hasn't been and isn't being successful. Although English has been a compulsory subject in all lower secondary and upper secondary schools in most Latin American countries for over 50 years, in many universities for 20 or 30 years, and now progressively in more and more public primary schools, the most reliable estimates of the percentage of adults with a functional command of English are very low. They vary greatly from country to country, of course, with Argentina almost certainly highest, possibly at around 20%. Below are examples of surveys for Mexico, Peru, Brazil and Chile. It isn't clear what "speak English", "know English", "have some knowledge of English" and "speak [English] with relative fluency" mean below, but we can assume it's around B1, where CEFR 'independent user' levels begin, or higher.

- 11.6% of the adult population of Mexico speaks English (Consulta Mitofsky 2013)
- In Peru, "only 8% of those surveyed declared that they knew [English]" (GfK Perú 2015)
- "In Brazil, 5.1% of the population aged over 16 state that they have some knowledge of the English language" (British Council 2013)
- "A study by the Universidad de Chile and Ministerio de Educación reveals that only 2% over 15 year olds has an advanced level of English and 6% speaks with relative fluency" (Economía y Negocios Online 2008)

The above percentages, ranging between around 5 and 12%, are almost certainly below what can be considered the percentage of successful ELT in different countries because many people who eventually attain a functional level of English have a mixed experience along the way, at times stagnating or going backwards instead of forwards. For example, four siblings may learn quite a lot of English in a lower

secondary school (successful ELT), stagnate in English in a different upper secondary school (unsuccessful ELT), forget much of their little English after leaving school, and then two of them eventually get to and beyond B1 level in a university language centre (successful ELT) while the other two don't and stay among the mass of Latin American adults without a functional level of English or with virtually no English at all.

Though it's very far from sufficient, successful ELT in Latin America is extremely important: with even less of it than now, the percentages of adults with a functional level of English would be even lower, with negative consequences for individual people and for countries.

Here are five types of place where ELT in Latin America is usually notably successful:

- 1 **Bilingual schools**, with several curricular subjects taught in English or partly in English.
- 2 **Schools with 'value-added' ELT**, with a team of competent and well-coordinated teachers, possibly more than the minimum of 3 hours (or three 50-minute classes) of English a week, and even a little CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning, i.e. subject teaching in English)
- 3 **Language centres**, in universities and other institutions of higher education, bi-cultural centres, commercial language centres.
- 4 **Curricular English in higher education**, for example in degrees in Tourism, International Relations, International Commerce, and, of course, ELT, where students often start with very low level English.
- 5 **Company English courses**, in a company language centre or for different staff areas.

A degree of success in ELT is also achieved in other places, of course, both in some institutions, especially schools, and by good individual teachers. In fact, outstanding teachers may achieve some success even in quite unfavourable conditions such as schools with large groups in isolated towns or disadvantaged areas of large cities. However, their success is usually only with exceptional groups and with some highly motivated and linguistically gifted students in other groups, and if the other English teachers in the institution or system are doing bad and/or unsuccessful ELT, the ELT in the institution or system as a whole is unsuccessful.

The successful ELT in the five above-mentioned types of place almost certainly provides a major portion of the adult population in Latin American countries that 'speaks' or 'knows' English, though some get their English from other sources or experiences. These include temporary residence in the USA or elsewhere (particularly in the case of returnees to Mexico and Central America), an environment of English speaking parents, relatives and friends (like in my family and perhaps yours), informal work with foreigners (for example, in international tourist centres like Cancún, Cuzco/Machu Picchu and Rio de Janeiro), and, as mentioned above, classes with outstanding teachers in schools that aren't very favourable or are distinctly unfavourable for ELT.

Why is ELT in certain types of place generally successful, and in others not?

Good ELT depends on competent and diligent teachers and good coordination of courses, along with appropriate syllabuses, methodology and materials. When all those elements come together, successful ELT might be expected, with most students moving steadily ahead in their learning of English, course by course. However, that isn't always the case, as many a competent and diligent teacher knows well after working in difficult conditions, such as all the other English teachers not being competent and

diligent and large groups of unmotivated students. Successful ELT depends on other things apart from good ELT, most of them related to context, and while very good teachers can improve on inappropriate syllabuses, methodology and materials by modifying them, they can't usually change the context within an institution much, and they can't change the wider context beyond the institution at all.

Consider first the very different contexts for ELT within two schools in Mexico, the first one generally positive for ELT and the learning of English and the second one generally negative:

INTERNAL CONTEXT P

- The school principal is fluent in English, and all of the academic and most of the administrative staff have at least B1 level English.
- Most parents speak English, some very well, many being ex-students of the school.
- There's a 50-minute English class daily, i.e. 4 hrs 10 mins a week, and three subject teachers are required to do a 15 to 20 minute activity in English each week.
- Maximum group size is 30 students.
- The principal and other staff often use English around the school, including with students.
- Students in lower years see students in the years above them learning more and more English and leaving school fairly fluent in it.
- Because of all that, almost all students' initial expectations and motivation about learning English well are high and increase continually.

INTERNAL CONTEXT N

- The school principal and the staff, apart from the English teachers, have no more than false-beginner English.
- Almost no parents know English, though most had at least 3 years of English at school.
- There's a 50-minute English class three days a week, i.e. 2 hrs 30 mins a week, and virtually no English at all is used in the school outside the the English classes.
- Maximum group size is 40, occasionally more.
- The principal and other staff are uncomfortable when English is spoken in their presence.
- Students in lower years see students in the years above struggling with English, learning little, and most leaving school quite lost in English.
- Because of all that, almost all students' initial expectations and motivation about learning English well are low and fall continually.

Now consider the wider context around those two schools, the first one again generally positive for ELT and the learning of English and the second one generally negative:

EXTERNAL CONTEXT P

- The school is in a historic metropolitan city with major industries, and there's an international airport not far away.
- The city receives many foreign visitors and there are services and provisions for them.
- The city has many institutions of higher education and vocational training.
- There are many employment opportunities in the city that require English or could use it.
- Because of all that, English is often heard in the the city, quite a lot of local adults know English

EXTERNAL CONTEXT N

- The school is in a fairly large but quite isolated town in a mainly agricultural area with a little domestic industry.
- The town very rarely receives foreign visitors and there are no services or provisions for them.
- There's only a regional technological institute a 2-hour bus ride from the town.
- There are virtually no employment opportunities in the town or area that require English.
- Because of all the above, English is very rarely heard in the town or area, very few local adults

and use it in their studies, work and lives, and most older school students recognize its possible importance in their future lives, as in the lives of the parents and older siblings of some.

know English, those mostly returnees from the USA, and most school students, even older ones, see very little likelihood of English being important in their future lives.

Imagine for a moment that all the English teachers in both schools are very similar in terms of their command of English, their ELT competence, and their diligence. Even in that case, much better English learning results are to be expected in the school with Contexts P than in the school with Contexts N, not because of the ELT itself in each school but because of the contexts of the ELT, internal and external to each school.

But the above hypothetical similarity between the English teachers in both schools is very unlikely in reality, of course. The school with Contexts P is clearly Type 2 in the list of five types of place with successful ELT above – a school with ‘value-added’ ELT. As such, it almost certainly has English teachers with strong English and ELT competence, and also strong ELT coordination – otherwise the school wouldn’t really have ‘value-added’ ELT. And the school with Contexts N, is very unlikely to be able to attract highly qualified and ambitious English teachers, so most are likely to have rather weak English and to be not very competent in ELT, or very motivated. Put those different teachers and the resulting different ELT together with the different contexts, internal and external, and you almost certainly have very successful ELT in one and generally unsuccessful ELT in the other.

Like the above example, a school with ‘value-added’ ELT, the other four types of place in my list of where ELT in Latin America is usually notably successful – bilingual schools, language centres, curricular English in higher education, and company English courses – also usually have the advantages of both fairly high quality ELT and contexts favourable for ELT and English language learning,.

Bilingual schools, for example, usually have all the advantages of that school with ‘value-added’ ELT, and more, especially more exposure to and focus on English through more hours of subject teaching in English and more extra-curricular activities and events.

Language centres usually have high quality ELT, an environment in which English is seen (in posters, notices, etc.) and heard (among staff and more advanced students), and most of the students are studying English voluntarily, motivated by need and/or high expectations of learning English well, like the more advanced students around them; the wider context, usually in a city, generally includes opportunities for higher education studies and then professional work that require English.

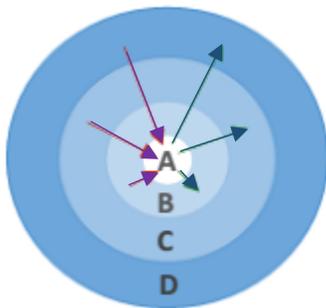
Curricular English in higher education degree programmes is even more firmly set within the context of higher education and then professional work requiring English, and usually has at least an element of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), responding to the students’ needs in their present and future life contexts and ambitions.

Company English courses are usually carefully thought out to serve the needs of the company and its employees, and most employees are motivated to learn English not only because success will further their careers in the company but also because failure will jeopardise them.

All five types of place, then, usually have good ELT (and often more hours of ELT, perhaps including CLIL or ESP, than in regular schools) as well as favourable contexts for ELT and English learning, both within the institution or system and around it. In addition, many such places exploit the internal and external

contexts in order to favour the success of the ELT. For example, bilingual schools usually have extra-curricular activities and events in English involving not only English teachers and students but also other English speaking staff and English speaking parents, and relationships with institutions of higher education and local employers where English is widely used, perhaps involving visits by students to those places and talks in the school by representatives of those places. English courses in universities, either in a language centre or curricular courses in degree programmes, may have a strong element of academic English (EAP), as opposed to purely English for general purposes, and/or ESP related to the degree studies and future professional work of the students.

Most successful ELT, then, is not only of good quality in itself and, ipso facto, appropriate for specific types of student, but it also usually benefits from a favourable context within the institution that's doing the ELT and a favourable the wider context around it, and it exploits the potential synergy across the ELT, the internal context and the external context:



- A – Students, as individuals, groups, and populations (age, nationality, etc.)
- B – English courses, in classrooms and beyond (homework, online, etc.)
- C – Institutional context: school, higher education, language centre, etc.
- D – Wider context, local, regional, national
- ↙ – ‘Messages’ to students, positive and negative, from B, C and D
- ↘ – Reactions of students, positive and negative, to ‘messages’ from B, C and D

The ‘messages’ to students from B, C and D may include:

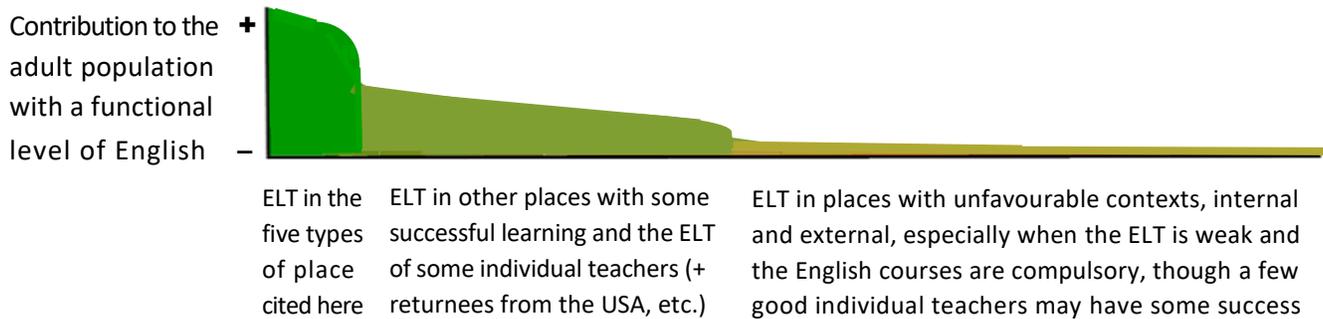
- “These English classes are for your real lives” OR “English is just another compulsory subject”.
- “All the staff know English, it’s important” OR “Only the English teachers know English, it doesn’t matter”.
- “Students in higher courses know English well” OR “Students in higher courses don’t know much English”.
- “Most people in your family know English” OR “No one in your family knows English”.
- “Most successful people around here know English” OR “Even successful people don’t know English”.
- “You’ll need English in most jobs you aspire to” OR “There are no jobs requiring English around here”.

The reactions of students to ‘messages’ from B, C and D may include positive or negative expectations and motivation, which are keys to successful learning of another language:

- “I see how English could be useful for me” OR “I don’t see how English is likely to be useful for me”.
- “It’s normal for people to know English” OR “It’s rare for people to know English, even professionals”.
- “I expect to learn more and more English in higher courses” OR “I don’t expect to advance in English”.
- “English can help me be successful in life” OR “I can be successful or OK in life without English”.
- “English will get me a much better job” OR “English won’t get me a job around here”.

What about all the ELT in Latin America that isn’t notably successful?

I’ve focused so far mainly on five types of place where I believe ELT in Latin America is “notably successful” and which I believe “almost certainly provide a major portion of the adult population in Latin American countries that ‘speaks’ or ‘knows’ English”, while also noting that some people get their English from other sources and experiences, including individual good English teachers, sometimes even in quite unfavourable contexts. That paints a picture something like this for ELT in Latin America:



In other words, most of the ELT in Latin America is largely or almost totally unsuccessful, even where some teachers are making a laudable effort and doing the best job possible under the circumstances, and it contributes little to the creation of adults with a functional level of English. Most of that unsuccessful ELT is in public schools and weaker private schools, especially in local and regional contexts where English is hardly ever used and there's very little higher education and work requiring English.

The results of ELT in less successful places can usually be improved a bit, sometimes substantially. ELT itself can be improved almost anywhere, though usually at some cost, and the contexts within institutions and systems can also be made more favourable for ELT and English learning. For example, that can be done where almost nobody except the English teachers have more than false beginner English by establishing a policy of giving bonuses to existing staff who go back to studying English and pass a recognised proficiency test at B1 level or higher, and giving preference to candidates to join the staff who have such a certificate. However, the context around the institution or system can't be changed much at all: if there are lots of higher education and work opportunities that require English in the local area or region, splendid, if there aren't, bad luck. In some contexts, ELT is simply doomed to general failure largely because, in those contexts, English is usually hardly used or needed at all.

Summing up and concluding

ELT in institutions and systems is clearly successful where it consistently and continually helps most students in English courses progress towards an adequate functional level of English, which for most people is at least B1, where CEFR 'independent user' levels begin. Assuming that success in ELT is reflected in the percentage of the adult population with a functional level of English, most ELT in Latin America hasn't been and isn't being successful since there's only between around 5 and 12% of adults at that level in most countries according to surveys and estimates, with Argentina a high outlier at around 20%.

Success in ELT depends on the quality of the ELT itself (competent and diligent teachers, good coordination of courses, appropriate syllabuses, methodology and materials) but also and very significantly on the contexts around the ELT and the students (as well as the language learning capacity and motivation of individual students, of course). The internal context within an institution can be very favourable (most staff members knowing English, English being used around the institution, students in higher level courses showing they've learnt a lot of English, etc.) or very unfavourable (only the English teachers knowing English and some not very confidently, no English being used in the institution outside the English classes, students in higher level courses showing they've learnt little English and don't like the 'subject', etc.). The wider context outside the institution can also be very favourable

(many English speakers in the community and region, many opportunities in higher education and work requiring English, English used a lot with foreign visitors, international industry and business, etc.), or very unfavourable (very few English speakers in the community and region, almost no opportunities in higher education and work requiring English, very few, if any, foreign visitors, etc.). The internal context within an institution can sometimes be made a little more favourable by promoting English among all the staff or similar, but the wider context can't.

The internal and external contexts tend to have a great impact on the expectations of students about actually learning English and their motivation to work at it. That affects the results of ELT enormously, making some very successful and some very unsuccessful and hardly worthwhile at all. In the latter case, which is mostly but not only in schools, few students are likely to ever need English in their lives, because of the wider context in which they find themselves, and those that eventually find they do need English are far better served by language centres, which usually have generally successful ELT.

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