

What's special about English language teaching in Latin America?

Part 1: Latin America in a diverse world of ELT

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Globalized ELT

English language teaching is a worldwide activity, from English language centres for foreign students and immigrants in English-speaking countries (Britain, the USA, Canada, Australia, Ireland) to primary and secondary schools in countries far away from where English is spoken as the national language, Argentina and Chile being almost as far away as you can get. Teaching English as an additional language (foreign, second, third or whatever) is always English language teaching, wherever and in whatever conditions it takes place, in spite of enormous differences in teaching-learning contexts.

In all cases, the students already have a first language, and sometimes a second one, that can both help and hinder them as they study English. In all cases, the English language has its particular characteristics, with variations of pronunciation, dialect and register, which students around the world, in different contexts, have to grasp, acquire and assimilate adequately if they're to be successful learners. All around the world, most of the literature on ELT methodology, widely used teaching-learning materials, and widely recognized proficiency tests come from the major English-speaking countries, mainly Britain and the United States, directly, or indirectly through imitation in different countries.

The historical reasons for the British and American dominance of ELT (with important contributions from Australia, Canada and elsewhere) began with English language teaching in British and American colonies (British in Africa and Asia, American in the Philippines and a few other places). Then came the spread of ELT beyond that, with many British and American teachers working abroad. In the USA and Australia ELT centres for immigrants were opened. Since the 1960s, there have been English language centres for foreign learners in Britain, the USA, Australia, and many people from abroad go to study English in them. All that produced a mass of English language teaching theory and methodology and materials development and textbook publication, and a lot of serious learning and teaching research. That historical and current thinking and activity is the bedrock of ELT around the world today.

Naturally, with British and American dominance of ELT, there's tended to be a one-size-fits-all character to much, if not most, ELT around the world, though not for all ELT methodologists and EL teachers, of course. Since the 1990s more and more theorists and methodologists have questioned the general uniformity, or conformity, of ELT and "native-speakerism", that is, the native-speaking teacher as the model for teaching and native-speaker English as the model of English to be taught and learned (Phillipson 1992, Holliday 1994, Pennycook 1994, Canagarajah 1999). All these people, and others with similar observations, had taught English or worked as ELT consultants in different countries and contexts around the world, Canagarajah in India at first.

Recognizing and responding to important differences in ELT contexts

Those theorists and methodologists (and, no doubt, many native-speaking EL teachers who had taught in two or more countries) recognized important differences that had been largely ignored. They included not only differences in ELT contexts, but also in the target English to be taught and learned.

Why, they asked, should students around the world be expected to learn to speak and write like native Americans or Britons, when most of the English speakers they'll meet speak non-native English, with notable German, Japanese, Chinese, Scandinavian, Brazilian or other features? They saw English as an international language with many acceptable non-native variations (after all, there are many marked native varieties too – Irish, Scottish, London, New York, Mid-western, Texan, Australian, and so on).

But our focus here is on the very different contexts of ELT, in particular Latin American contexts. Obviously, teaching English to foreign students in Cambridge (England or Massachusetts) or to immigrants in New York or Sydney, is very different from teaching English in a technological institute in Rio de Janeiro or Lima, which again is very different from teaching English in a state secondary school in Beijing or Tokyo. Many differences have probably leaped immediately into your mind, perhaps including the following:

English language centre in Cambridge or Sydney: The students come from different countries and have different first languages, all their teachers are native-speakers of English who may not speak any of the students' native languages let alone all of them, the students have been placed in the course level they need, outside the classroom they're surrounded by English speakers.

Technological institute in Rio de Janeiro or Lima: The students are virtually all native speakers of Portuguese or Spanish, all or most of their teachers are Brazilian or Peruvian speakers of English, many students, if not most, are in a beginner or low elementary course for the third time in their lives, outside the classroom they have little contact with English unless they seek it out.

State secondary school in Beijing or Tokyo: The students are virtually all native speakers of Mandarin or Japanese, all or most of their teachers are Chinese or Japanese speakers of English, most students are in a beginner or elementary course for the first time, or, at most, the second time, outside the classroom they have little contact with English unless they seek it out.

Obviously, those different contexts call for marked differences in the English language teaching, apart from those inevitably imposed by the different contexts. Different approaches to ELT are required not only by the age of the students (young children, older children, teenagers or adults) and the type of teaching institution (basic education, higher education, language centre in an English-speaking country, language centre in the students' own country), but also by regions and individual countries. Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking Latin America is one such region, and the Arabic-speaking Islamic nations of North Africa and the Middle East constitute another, while another is Scandinavia (where 80+% of the population speak English, including virtually all the parents of the school children).

Responding to the different native language (or languages) of the students

The native language (or languages) of students is an important element in the learning of English, or any language. In one type of situation, English courses in English-speaking countries, there is little teachers can do about native languages (they usually have native speakers of many different languages in a group), and English is inevitably the language of communication in the classroom from the start, along with sign language and demonstration. Something similar occurs in many parts of Africa and Asia, where there are several local languages (in Nigeria or India the parents of some students may communicate in English because they have different mother tongues). That's not normally the case in

Latin America, of course, where all the students and teachers usually have the same native language, Portuguese or Spanish. The temptation for students, and teachers, is to use the native language too much, and English not enough, especially for real communication. But there are other important considerations about native speakers of Portuguese or Spanish trying to learn English. Here's a question for you: Is it likely to be easier or more difficult for Latin Americans to learn English than for native speakers of German, or Russian, or Turkish, or Chinese? We'll look at the answer to that question, and others, next month in Part 2 of this series of articles.

References

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