

## ***Context and learner centred ELT training***

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This article arose from a talk I gave at IICIFEL at the Benemérita Universidad de Puebla, Mexico, in March, 2019. It focuses on training in Latin American university licenciaturas in ELT, but considers other types of training too. Courses vary greatly in their approaches and practices, but there's a general and probably natural tendency to focus on "the teaching of the English language (to anyone, anywhere)" and neglect "the teaching of appropriate English to specific types of student in specific types of context", sometimes almost completely. Obviously, principles and practices for teaching English grammar, vocabulary, functions and discourse patterns are fundamental to ELT, but they (the principles and practices, and the grammar, vocabulary, functions and discourse patterns) should obviously be rather different for young children, older children, teenagers and adults in different contexts, e.g. public school, bilingual school, higher education, company courses, beginner courses, intermediate courses. This article kicks off from there.

### **Types of ELT training course and their focus**

There are many types of ELT training course in Latin America. In Mexico, they range from short courses (100-200 hours) requiring B2+ English (e.g. the Anglo TTC), to 4-year licenciaturas, some requiring almost no English on entry. They all deal with 'ELT basics', and a few focus on a specific type of student and context (e.g. normal superior licenciaturas for teaching in lower secondary school), but most deal with 'general ELT'. Some ELT is indeed very general with diverse learner needs and wants, e.g. in commercial language centres, where groups may include older teenagers still at school, higher education students in different degree programmes, people working in different jobs, and well-off people who frequently holiday abroad. However, most ELT in Latin America is in basic and higher education and it has fairly defined types of student in fairly specific contexts. A 4-year degree programme really should prepare graduates for some of that.

Even some shorter general ELT courses pay some attention to ELT for certain types of student in certain types of context. In 2003, I designed a new version of the Anglo's TTC. The plan included the usual 'ELT basics' (the English language, teaching language items, teaching listening skills, teaching speaking skills, teaching reading skills, teaching writing skills, lesson planning, etc.), but the very first 'topic area' was 'TEFL contexts, programmes and environments'. The first 2 of the 5 modules of that topic area are on general aspects of ELT contexts and programmes (+/- factors in TEFL, teaching objectives and stages/cycles, establishing and developing classroom English – as part of a 'positive learning environment'), but the last 3 are on specific contexts and types of student: different types of TEFL contexts and responses to them, adolescent vs. adult learners and groups (the Anglo has a separate training course for teaching children), different levels (beginner / false beginner / elementary / intermediate), analysis of real TEFL situations and responses to them (situations and responses the trainees in a given group are interested in).

Some 4-year university ELT degree programmes in Mexico include one or more context and learner related courses. I found the following in different university programmes: English-Spanish comparative

linguistics (learner-centred because most Mexican students of English are native speakers of Spanish, not German, Turkish, Arabic Indonesian or Japanese), teaching children, teaching adolescents, teaching adults, teaching in basic education, English for specific purposes. However, many licenciaturas don't have any such courses at all, even as options. Graduates go out into the world and suddenly find themselves facing groups of 5-6 year old children in a school, or groups of 50+ teenagers in a school, or groups of university undergraduates in 'general English' beginners' courses for the third or fourth time, or groups of medical students or business students in A2-level ESP courses, or groups of over-worked business people in company classes, or...

## **Incorporating context and learner centred ELT into a licenciatura in ELT**

One way to attend to context and learner centred ELT in a licenciatura is to have a course specifically on that – 'Context and learner centred ELT' – probably best given in the last half of the licenciatura. Another, or additional, way is to have courses on common context and learner centred situations – 'Teaching children', 'Teaching adolescents', 'Teaching adults', 'Teaching in basic education' (i.e. English as a compulsory school subject), 'English for specific purposes' (which should be the commonest ELT in higher education, though it isn't yet). Yet another way in certain cases is to integrate some attention to context and learner centredness into other courses.

Every licenciatura in ELT focuses quite a lot on the English language: English grammar, how it works and how to teach grammatical items (as such, or as exponents of notions and functions), English vocabulary, how it works and how to teach lexical items, the English language in discourse, how it works and how to teach it. But the fact that ELT for young children, for older children, for teenagers, for business people, for medical students and doctors, for globe-trotting playboys and girls, etc., should involve some different grammar, vocabulary and discourse is usually neglected. Perhaps it's simply not even considered as something to pay attention to in ELT training. I disagree: see my articles in ELTinLA:

- English for different types of student and in different contexts – everyday colloquial, more formal spoken English, academic and technical written English, etc. (July 2018)
- Teaching verb patterns specifically to our Latin American students, taking their native language into account (October 2018)
- Selecting vocabulary for different types of students in different contexts, for example in different university degree programmes (January 2019).

Let's take vocabulary as an example. Should a 4-year licenciatura in ELT leave graduates with the impression that it's only *how* to teach it that matters, not *what* to teach because the textbook of a course determines that? Well, here's some of the vocabulary in the Book 1 of a widely used textbook: *aunt, beard, blouse, bracelet, carpenter, cashier, chef, cook (verb), dance, cousin, disco, furniture, game, guess, hate, jeans, lawyer, necklace, mustache, pants, ring (noun), shopping, singer, shower, supervisor, toy, wear*. Suppose that was the textbook for a beginners' course for medical students that you were giving. How many of those words would you *not* actively teach or put in a course test? What other words *would* you actively teach the medical students?

As a teacher trainer, how would you deal with this issue of English for general purposes vocabulary and groups of students who have vocabulary for specific purposes needs?

Some aspects of context and learner centred ELT that aren't related to the English language and English in discourse can be integrated into a methodology course if enough time is given to it or if it's divided into two parts, Methodology I and Methodology II, or into a Syllabus Design course that some university licenciaturas in ELT have. That may apply to teaching different age groups (children, adolescents, adults), teaching different levels (beginners, false beginners, elementary, intermediate and upper intermediate/advanced), and English for Specific Purposes. It may however, be better to attend to them in separate courses.

ESP, for example, involves many things: some kind of needs analysis and selection of appropriate English discourse types and vocabulary (which can be drawn to some extent from ESP textbooks and websites). For different ESP areas, it may be appropriate to pay more attention to some skills than to others, e.g. spoken discourse (listening and speaking) for business and tourism, but not so much for medicine and chemistry, where reading is perhaps more important. Appropriate ELT in higher education contexts should mostly be ESP (Davies 2008).

### **A definition of “appropriate ELT”**

Appropriate ELT =

- teaching selected English language: selected for specific types of student in specific types of context (see below)
- to specific types of student: young children, older children and teenagers, adults who will never travel outside their own country (the vast majority of Latin Americans, who may be sub-divided into present or future non-professional and low-skilled workers, doctors, engineers, business people, etc.), adults who will frequently travel outside their country for work and pleasure and perhaps live abroad (a minority of Latin Americans), etc.
- in specific types of study context: English as a compulsory subject in primary school, lower secondary school, upper secondary school, higher education, bilingual school, etc.), and voluntary study of English in a language centre, private class, company course, etc., and study of English in Latin America (as opposed to the Netherlands, Germany, Turkey, Thailand or China)

4-year degrees in ELT should work on appropriate ELT, not just what's covered by a traditional concept of ELT, which tends to focus on teaching “the English language” and neglect teaching specific types of student, in specific types of context, what they need or most likely will need.

### References

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