

***ELT in a Mexican university's language centres:
Interview of Celso Pérez, Director of the Facultad de Lenguas,
Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Mexico***

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Paul: Thank you very much for fitting this interview into your agenda, Celso. I really appreciate it.

Celso: My pleasure, Paul.

Paul: I believe the BUAP has compulsory English courses for undergraduates and also English courses in several language centres.

Celso: That's right. There are English courses up to A2 level in each BUAP faculty or school, which undergraduates have to take if they don't have A2+ English on entry. Most, in fact, go into beginner's courses at first. Then there are courses that BUAP students and staff can take voluntarily in the Centro de Lenguas Extranjeras (CELE), and also courses for the general public in Cursos de Extensión Universitaria (CEU).

Paul: The low level of English of students entering the university no doubt reflects the generally poor results in schools. That makes English in higher education and in language centres very important. I imagine that some of the students in the CELE courses also have compulsory English classes in their faculty.

Celso: Yes, I'm afraid most of the university's faculty English courses have poor conditions, often over 50 students in a group, for example. In contrast, the groups in the language centres have a maximum of 25 students, and sometimes under 10. As they're optional, the atmosphere in language centre courses also tends to be more positive. So students in faculties who seriously want to learn English often enrol in CELE courses.

Paul: Right. How many language centres does the BUAP have?

Celso: Well, between CELE and CEU, in Puebla City we have three sites with language courses, not just English, but other languages too, but naturally most students are in English courses. They are here in the Facultad de Lenguas, in Ciudad Universitaria, the main campus, and in the Complejo Cultural Universitario. We also offer CEU language courses in three other cities in Puebla State.

Paul: That must mean a lot of students of English.

Celso: Well, in CELE courses, for BUAP students and staff, we have about 4,000 students, and about 4,500 in CEU courses in Puebla City, with another 500 or so in the other three cities. Overall, about 80% of the students are in English courses, followed a long way behind by German.

Paul: Some 9,000 language students, then, most of them in English courses. That's a lot of people. From my experience with language centres of all kinds, I imagine that most of the students are in beginner and elementary courses. Is that the case in the BUAP language centres – a sort of flat pyramid with a very wide base of beginner and low elementary courses and just a few advanced courses at the top?

Celso: Yes, it is. Most students start at beginner or low elementary level. And then many drop out after a few courses, up to half of them before completing the basic courses. Only about a quarter of our students are in intermediate and advanced courses. I think the difficulty of learning English to a high level, the lack of time and the cost are among the main reasons for that, but we must obviously keep on working at getting more students to continue to higher levels. Students in the CELE courses for BUAP students and staff tend to stay through more courses than students in the CEU courses for the general public.

Paul: Yes, it's easy to say "Quiero aprender inglés", but it takes more work and persistence than most people expect, and when the courses are optional, not compulsory... well, dropping out is always an option. Has that pattern – the flat pyramid – always been the case, and is it changing now? I mean, is the proportion of people in intermediate and advanced courses increasing in relation to those in beginner and elementary courses?

Celso: No, unfortunately the pattern hasn't changed much. School ELT doesn't seem to be producing significantly better results yet, and, as I said, we need get more students to continue to higher levels in our language centres.

Paul: Yes, that's the endless challenge with optional courses, getting students to continue. Even when they start off motivated, that motivation often runs out. I believe you have courses for teenagers and for adults. What's the approximate proportion of each?

Celso: Well, the students in the CELE courses for BUAP students and staff are adults, of course, but in the CEU courses just over 60% are teenagers and just under 40% are adults.

Paul: That's interesting, a very high proportion of teenagers. It may be another indication that school English often isn't working well.

Celso: Right. Like other students, most teenagers enter at beginner level, and many drop out after a few courses. That may be partly because Course 4 gets them to the end of the secondary school program, A2 level, and many are taking extra English just because their parents want them to improve their school grades!

Paul: Yes, motivation should be generally better in voluntary study in a language centre, but it may not always be so voluntary for teenagers! How do you try to create a favourable environment for English language learning in the BUAP language centres?

Celso: Well, we have self-access centres, conversation clubs, and occasional events in English. And lots of people speak English outside the classroom here in the Faculty, of course, and in the other language centres too, so students hear that around them. The people speaking English outside the classroom include students in higher level courses, and they're positive models and good examples for the lower level students. As I said before, we'd like many more students in higher level courses, but we do have up to 2,000 of them.



- Paul: Right, and that distinguishes your language centres from most schools, where often nobody but the English teachers has A2+ English. Apart from teaching English, and other languages, certification through proficiency tests is one of your big activities, right?
- Celso: Yes, we give English proficiency tests to a lot of people each year. Last year, it was about 3,700, mostly at A2 and B1 levels, but some at B2, C1 and even C2 levels.
- Paul: I noticed on a BUAP website that you offer TOEFL ITP, Trinity and Anglia proficiency tests, but not Cambridge or TOEFL iBT. My guess is that's because of cost – Cambridge tests and TOEFL iBT are quite expensive, especially for public university students. Is that the case?
- Celso: Yes, cost is an important consideration for us, and our students. Another is that getting teachers certified as Cambridge examiners and having them do oral testing would complicate life for us.
- Paul: Well, thanks for all that information, Celso. The BUAP language centres are clearly doing a lot of important ELT work, serving a lot of people, both university students and staff and the general public. I understand from experience the challenges you and your staff face, especially trying to get people to stick at learning English and not give up too soon. Of course, what finally gets people to learn a language well, in most cases, is the actual need to use the language, immersion in communication in the language. That's the idea behind The BUAP's House of English, isn't it?
- Celso: Exactly. The House of English is for students who really need or want to reach an upper intermediate or advanced level in English, and it has culture courses, conversation courses, business English courses, and others, according to demand, not just regular English courses. The teachers are all native or native-like speakers of English, and we try to maintain an immersion-in-English atmosphere. There are about 700 more students in the Casa Inglesa to add to the numbers I gave before. And we have a Casa Alemana and a Casa Francesa too.
- Paul: That makes it about 10,000 students in BUAP language centres, then, most in English courses. That nice, big, round number is a good note to end on. Thank you very much, Celso.
- Celso: Thank you, Paul. It's been a pleasure.

Celso Pérez Carranza has a Doctorate in Educational Sciences from the Universidad de Camagüey, Cuba, as well as an MA in Higher Education and a BA in TEFL. He is currently Director of the Facultad de Lenguas of the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Mexico. He has had articles published in journals such as CIEX and HOW, and has given talks at academic events in Mexico and other countries. His research interests include teacher education, the development of competences, and curriculum design in the field of language teaching-learning.

