

Teachers' perceptions of ELT in public secondary schools

Paul Davies and Rosalina Domínguez

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Background

It's generally recognised that the results of ELT in Mexican public secondary schools, and many private ones, are very poor. Evidence of poor results exists in estimates of adult Mexicans who speak English, and the level of English of students entering public universities, and some private ones. Most enter still at or little above beginner level, even with 3 years of upper secondary (Prepa) English courses in addition to the 3 years of (lower) secondary courses. Most universities have 'common core' English courses from beginner to A2 level (higher in some cases), and most students go into the beginner course – they start studying English from scratch again, for the third time, or even the fourth if they had English in primary school.

There are many possible negative factors that may contribute to these poor results in secondary schools (and other levels of schooling below higher education). They may include teachers without adequate English and/or training, inappropriate syllabuses and textbooks, excessively large groups, insufficient time for English courses, poor school conditions for learning English, and low expectations (e.g. because very few adults in the school and the children's environments have successfully learnt English at school).

We thought it would be interesting and useful to explore those and other factors as perceived by English teachers in their own schools, and we invited graduates from the 4-year degree course in ELT of the Universidad Autónoma de Tlaxcala, Mexico (where Rosalina works and Paul has worked) who are now teaching in a public secondary school to answer a questionnaire. As graduates from an ELT degree, the teachers could be discounted as one of the negative factors, more likely being an above-average positive factor. Thirty-three teachers responded. This article reports and discusses the data and indications in their answers.

The questionnaire, the answers, and some comments

We were very aware of the risk of personal feelings affecting the teachers' answers – the natural tendency to see things you like (or wish to feel good about) more positively than they are and to see things you don't like more negatively – and also of the risk that busy teachers might answer the questionnaire too hastily for accuracy. We tried to make the teachers also aware of these risks through this introductory comment: "The questions refer to 'your perception' of factors related to ELT in your school, but we need your answers to be as objective and true as possible, so please think carefully about each one. Thank you again." The generally high degree of agreement among the teachers suggests that they took the comment to heart, and real differences among the schools probably account for most of the markedly contrasting answers

The questionnaire contained 16 questions, two of which were discounted in the analysis, leaving the 14 given below. Here they are, with the number of teachers for each option in **bold**, comments on the question, and comments on the answers.

1. *Approximately what percentage of students **enter** your school with some English (from primary school, etc.)?*
0% **x3** 10% **x17** 20% **x4** 30% **x2** 40% **x3** 50% **x1** 60% **x1** 70% **x2** 80% **x0** 90% **x0** 100% **x0**
Comments: Most public primary schools now have at least some curricular English courses, and where many students have had English in primary, results in secondary should be better. Among our 33 teachers, 20 have only 0-10% of students who've had English in primary, though 4 have over 50%.

- 2 Do you have students in your classes who speak English quite well because they have lived in the USA or Canada?
Always **x0** Often **x0** Sometimes **x2** Very occasionally **x15** Never **x16**

Comments: There are many people in Tlaxcala State who've lived in the USA (usually 'undocumented') and have returned, speaking some English, sometimes quite good English. They include some children and teenagers. Where there are many in a school, it might help the English teachers' efforts. Among our 33 teachers, none usually have such students.

- 3 How would you characterize the motivation for learning English of most **3rd year** students in your school?
Very high **x2** High **x3** Medium **x16** Low **x9** Very low **x3**

Comments: Motivation is generally considered an important or even essential factor in foreign language learning, and success or failure tend to have an impact on it, success in an endeavour lifting or sustaining motivation, and failure depressing it. Among our 33 teachers, most (16) feel that their students' experience of English classes in 1st and 2nd year hasn't impacted on their motivation much, either way. The other 17 teachers go in both directions, but more (12 against 5) feel their students have low motivation. It may be much the same with most school subjects, except when specific students are good at them, instinctively like them, or have very motivating teachers: all compulsory school subjects may be just that for many students – compulsory.

- 4 What expectation of leaving school speaking English fairly well do you think most **1st year** students have?
Very low **x5** Low **x14** Medium **x11** High **x3** Very high **x0**

Comments: Expectation of success or failure often has an impact on motivation, and probably few students entering secondary school see many examples of success in learning English at school among their parents, older siblings, relatives, acquaintances, or school staff. That seems to be what most of our 33 teachers generally perceive, with most (19) answering low or very low, and only 3 above medium.

- 5 What is student participation in your classes like in general?
Very good **x1** Good **x17** So-so **x12** Poor **x1** Very poor **x2**

Comments: Most of our 33 teachers consider participation to be good, and only 3 consider it to be poor or very poor. That generally positive perception may reflect the good work of the teachers (possibly in spite of the 'less good' work of other teachers in the school and the school environment) and the resilience of most Mexican teenagers!

- 6 Approximately how many **effective** hours of English class do students receive per year?
Under 80 **x1** 81-90 **x4** 91-100 **x11** 101-110 **x8** 111-120 **x3** Over 120 **x6**

Comments: The norm here was set by the Secretaría de Educación Pública: "Given that a school term has 200 working days (40 weeks), the three weekly sessions (45-50 minutes each) make a total of 90 to 100 hours of study per grade" (SEP 2005). 28 of our 33 teachers estimate over 90 hours, with only 5 estimating under that.

- 7 How many students are there in your English classes?
Under 25 **x2** 25-30 **x8** 31-40 **x21** 41-50 **x2** Over 50 **x0**

Comments: Group size in Mexican public secondary schools varies greatly and can be over well 50, especially in large cities, with smaller groups common in small towns and rural areas. In the schools of our 33 teachers, 31 have groups of under 41, and 10 of those groups are under 31. Note that Tlaxcala State is largely rural and has no large cities.

- 8 How many English teachers are there in your school?
Only you **x1** 2-3 **x18** 4-6 **x14** Over 6 **x0** (Comments below question 9)

9 If there are 2+ English teachers, how much ELT coordination or collaboration is there among them?

A lot **x4** *Some* **x14** *A little* **x10** *Virtually none* **x5**

Comments on 8 and 9: The lack of coordination among English teachers in a school, with different teachers doing different things (e.g. some establishing English as the main classroom language and others not), can have a substantial negative impact on the courses and the overall results. Only one of our 33 teachers is working alone, and 14 are working with 3 or more other teachers. Only 4 report a lot of ELT coordination and 15 report little or none.

10 In your opinion, how appropriate for the students in your school are the English syllabuses and textbooks?

Not at all appropriate **x14** *Not very appropriate* **x9** *Fairly appropriate* **x8** *Perfectly appropriate* **x2**

Comments: The feeling of 23 of our 33 teachers is that the syllabuses and textbooks aren't really suitable for the students, with only 2 of them fully satisfied. Lines of thought and research leading out of that might be 'Why not?', and 'What kind of syllabuses and textbooks would be suitable for public secondary school students in small city and rural central Mexico?'

11 How well-supported is your ELT, e.g. school CD player, computer projector, etc.?

Not at all **x9** *So-so* **x18** *A lot* **x6**

Comments: Technology and aids for ELT, and other subjects, in Mexican public schools have been improving, but only 6 of our 33 teachers are happy with the situation in their schools, and 9 are very unhappy, presumably having to take their own CD player, etc., to their classes.

12 To your knowledge, apart from English teachers, how many members of the school staff have B1+ level English?

Over 10 **x1** *6-10* **x0** *3-5* **x4** *1-2* **x14** *None* **x14**

Comments: Where many members of staff in a school speak English, especially if the school principal is one of them, it's probable that students are more likely to learn the language, like in bilingual schools. Supposedly all the members of staff studied English at school, and if they didn't learn it they're poor examples for the students. Close to half our 33 teachers work in schools where only the English teachers know English, and most of the rest where only 1 or 2 other members of staff do.

13 To your knowledge, how many students in your school have English speaking parents or relatives?

Many **x0** *Some* **x3** *A few* **x19** *Almost none* **x7** *None* **x4**

Comments: This is yet another question related to environments with examples of successful learners of English, like questions 1, 2 and 12. A significant number of our 33 teachers (19) think a few students have English speaking parents or relatives, which isn't as good as we'd expected in a state like Tlaxcala, with a lot of emigration to the USA and re-immigration, but better than almost none or none.

14 In your estimation, what percentage of students leave your school after 3 years at A2+ level in English (ready to pass the Cambridge A2 Key Test)?

0-1% **x8** *2-10%* **x15** *11-20%* **x7** *21-30%* **x2** *31-50%* **x1** *51+%* **x0**

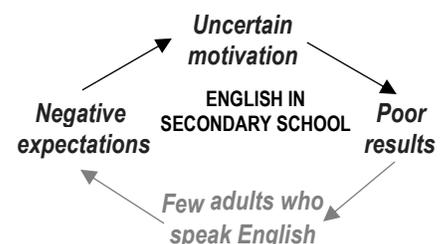
Comments: This level was set by the Secretaría de Educación Pública as the goal for secondary school leavers: "...it is expected that by the end of basic education students should reach, as a minimum, a level equivalent to A2, Waystage" (SEP 2005). Having clearly failed to achieve that, the SEP is now aiming at B1+ in its latest plans, with ELT in public primary schools aiming at A2+. 23 of our 33 teachers consider that only between 0 and 10% of their students achieve A2+. They may consist at least partly of students who came to secondary school with some English from primary school (see Question 1), or from residence in the USA (see Question 2), or who have studied English outside school in a language centre.

General conclusions and reflections

The following conclusions apply directly to the 33 State of Tlaxcala teachers and schools in our survey, and by extension probably to most other public secondary schools in that small central Mexican state. While they may also apply to some, or even a large, extent to most schools in the rest of Mexico, there are almost certainly some very marked differences. Mexico stretches from the US to the Guatemalan border, from the Pacific to the Gulf coast, from wealthier states to much poorer ones, and from large cities to small towns and countryside, and many more surveys of this kind, and surveys going beyond this one, in different parts of Mexico are needed to discover the similarities and differences in ELT conditions and ELT results.

Our first general conclusion is that students entering secondary school with some English from public primary school (Question 1) and students with English from living in the USA (Question 2), even in a state like Tlaxcala with a lot of emigration/re-immigration across the US border, appear to be contributing little or nothing to the improvement of ELT results in secondary schools. There are very few of the latter (fewer than we anticipated), and very few schools have more than 20% of their new students entering with some English from primary school, either because they didn't have English classes there, or the classes were ineffective.

The expectation of students entering secondary that they'll actually learn English at school (Question 4) is medium to very low, with the largest number ranked as low. This almost endemic expectation of NOT being likely to learn English at school is probably linked to what they see around them: usually few or no members of staff, apart from English teachers, who speak English (Question 12), few relatives, etc., who speak English (Question 13), perhaps including older siblings, ahead of them at school. This negative expectation must impact on motivation, but the motivation of 3rd year students, as perceived by teachers, is not as bad as we'd anticipated (Question 3) and participation of students in general is quite good (Question 5). That may be credited to the teachers and the resilience and/or conformity of the students. However, the results are still poor, and we consider that a vicious circle (in the diagram) needs to be attacked, e.g. by requiring all secondary school staff, or at least all new staff, to have, B1+ English (see the comment on Question 12 above). More effective ways to achieve better results also need to be explored, perhaps experimenting in some schools. As popular wisdom has it, "Nothing succeeds like success" and "Lead by example, not by force".



Teaching-learning conditions in the secondary schools in the survey are not as bad as we've experienced personally and have observed in the past. Most teachers reported 90 to over 120 hours of effective class time (Question 6), which is at or above the SEP norm, and groups of under 40 students (Question 7), which is well below the 50 students Paul once taught for two years and the 60+ he observed on several occasions many years ago. Support for ELT, that is, basic technology and aids like CD players and a computer projector (Question 11), varies enormously, with 18 schools indicating some, and 6 a lot, but 9 none at all. Overall, the conditions are not always very good (groups of under 30 and basic modern technology would be nice in all schools), but usually not very bad either.

In terms of methodology and materials used by all the teachers in a school, the general picture isn't very bright. All but 1 of the 33 teachers work with other teachers, some with more than 3 others (Question 8), but in 5 schools there's virtually no coordination of ELT, so different teachers may be doing very different things, in another 10 schools there's little coordination, and there's a lot of coordination in only 4 schools. Coordination of teaching in a school is very important because otherwise students may be confused and disconcerted by very different approaches in their 3 years of secondary school. On top of that, 14 of the 33

teachers consider the syllabuses and textbooks not at all appropriate and another 9 consider them not very appropriate, while only 2 teachers consider them perfectly appropriate. A big question here is: What syllabuses and materials *would* be largely appropriate for teenagers in public secondary schools in small cities, towns and the countryside of central Mexico, 1,000 kilometres from the nearest US border, and very unlikely ever to travel or stay outside Mexico except to join a largely Spanish-speaking family and community in the USA? Note (as 23 of our 33 teachers may have) that Tlaxcala is very different from a large, industrial, financial and business centre like Monterrey, or a large international vacation and convention centre like Cancún.

What matters most in ELT, of course, is results, and 23 of our 33 teachers estimate that under 10% of students leave their school with A2+ English, the SEP target until recently, but now actually being put higher (Question 14). Another 7 teachers estimate between 11 and 21%, and, surprisingly, 2 estimate between 21 and 30%, and 1 between 31 and 50%. These are estimations, of course, and the students would have to be reliably tested for us to be sure, but the difference between 8 schools estimated at under 1% and 1 school at over 31% is striking and possibly extremely significant.

Specific cases

Each of the 33 teachers who answered the questionnaire describes a specific situation and tells a specific story, but, as was to be expected, most situations and stories are very similar, hence the general conclusions above. However, some situations and stories are notably different. Here's data for three of them, with strikingly different levels of English for students leaving the school (remember, these are the teachers' estimates and they might not correspond to results in the Cambridge A2 Key Test).

	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C
Students leaving school with A2+ English	0-1%	11-20%	31-50%
Students entering school with English from primary	70%	0%	40%
Students with English from residence in USA	Never	Never	Very occasionally
Expectations of learning English of 1 st year students	Low	Very low	Medium
Motivation for learning English of 3 rd year students	Medium	Medium	Medium
Participation in classes of students in general	Good	Good	Good
Effective hours of English class	Over 120	111-120	91-100
Number of students in groups	31-40	31-40	41-50
Support with basic technology and aids	Some	Some	None
Amount of ELT coordination and collaboration	Some	Some	A lot
Appropriateness of syllabuses and textbooks	Fairly appropriate	Not at all appropriate	Fairly appropriate
Members of school staff with B1+ English	3-5	None	Over 10
Students with English speaking parents or relatives	A few	A few	Almost none

We'll leave you to examine that data and form your own ideas, but we note that the best results here (as estimated by the teacher) go together with over 10 members of school staff with B1+ English and a lot of ELT coordination and collaboration in the school, as well as groups of over 41 students and no support with technology and aids (teachers presumably take in their own CD players, etc.). We're left with many questions, which may lead to more research. What about you?

Reference

Secretaría de Educación Pública (México). 2005. *Educación Secundaria. Inglés. Programas de Estudio*. SEP.

Rosalina Domínguez Ángel has a PhD in ELT from the University of Essex and an MA in Applied Linguistics from the Universidad de las Américas, Puebla. She works full time at the Universidad Autónoma de Tlaxcala, where she teaches on the Licenciatura de Enseñanza de Lenguas, as well as giving courses on academic writing in English, action research, and others. She is a member of the Sistema Nacional de Investigadores (SNI). Her research interests include learning strategies, especially for vocabulary.

