

# ***ELT lessons from Europe***

Paul Davies  
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Throughout the European Union, English language teaching in public schools has long been relatively similar in terms of syllabuses, methodology and materials, though it naturally varies from country to country, institution to institution, and teacher to teacher. The main guiding instrument for this degree of homogeneity has been the Common European Framework for Languages (CEF), with syllabuses, textbooks and proficiency tests based on it, but convergence has also come through meetings of ELT experts from different countries, the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) and other European organizations, processes and forums. In addition, socio-economic conditions and educational standards are relatively similar throughout the EU, again with variations due to socio-cultural traditions, national budgets (the poorest countries have a much lower per capita GDP than the richest ones) and other factors.

All that makes what I will call “The European ELT Experiment” (TEELTEX) extremely interesting for ELT specialists everywhere: When we compare, for example, Swedish, German, French and Spanish school ELT, we are comparing similar ELT in similar school conditions, and the notable differences in results pose highly significant questions for ELT around the world.

By TEELTEX I mean the concerted effort to successfully teach English as the main lingua franca of Europe to all school students. It began around 1970, precisely when the first work was being done on what turned into the CEF. Before then, French, German and Russian were the main foreign languages taught in schools in many European countries and they, and English where it was the foreign language, were usually not taught in all schools, only in the ‘academic’ schools from which students might go on to higher education. Before 1970, only a small minority of people in each European country (with the obvious exception of the UK and Ireland) knew English. The enormous gap that exists today between English speakers in Sweden and in Spain, for example, has opened up over the past 40 or so years, that is, since TEELTEX began.

TEELTEX has been like an organized experimental project even more because a measurement system has accompanied it, Eurobarometer and Eurostat. We have been able to measure the results of school ELT in different EU countries from time to time, indirectly, at least. Eurobarometer is a series of surveys and reports that have been carried out for The European Commission since the 1970s. A number of these surveys and reports have been specifically on foreign language proficiency, which is especially important for the European Union as a multilingual union of countries. They look at the foreign language proficiency of the adult population (15 years old and above) of each country, which is obviously related to the effectiveness of foreign language teaching in schools. Eurostat draws on Eurobarometer and other data.

## **Eurostat 2019**

The most recent data on languages in Europe, Eurostat 2019 (based on 2016 data), does not focus on individual languages, but on foreign languages in general (for data specifically on English as a foreign language in Europe we have to go back to the 2012 Eurobarometer report – see below). However, Eurostat 2019 notes that “English is by far the most widely spoken foreign language in the EU”, and it is therefore now the first foreign language of almost all Europeans, certainly all young ones. The data in Eurostat 2019 shows that there was little increase between 2007 and 2016 in the percentage of

people who knew only one foreign language (almost always English). That suggests that an increase in percentage of EFL speakers is hard to achieve, even in generally favourable circumstances like in the EU, after a country has notably improved foreign language proficiency over many preceding years, which most EU countries had indeed done over the two decades before 2007, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries to an impressive level. It is worth noting that much of that improvement was achieved before most countries had extended ELT to the early years of primary school, and many countries to primary school at all.

A few countries, however, did achieve a significant increase in the percentage of people with a functional command of just one foreign language (almost always English) from 2007 to 2016 – +11% in Hungary, +10.1% in Czechia, +7.8% in Italy and +6.6% in Portugal – and that suggests that it might be possible to achieve significant, though small, improvements in some other countries. Of course, Russian was the main foreign language taught in schools in Hungary and Czechoslovakia until after 1989.

## Eurobarometer 2012

The 2012 Eurobarometer Report, using 2012 data, is now rather old but it still came after 30 or more years of TEELTEX in most EU countries. Note that the development of the Common European Framework began in the early 1970s, *The Threshold Level for Modern Languages in Schools* was published in 1976, *Waystage English* in 1977, and other documents were published and discussed in meetings and congresses periodically after that, with the first full version of the CEF coming out in 2003. All that work on foreign language teaching, especially ELT, for The Council of Europe, and more work in different countries, is clearly reflected in Eurobarometer 2012. Here is a sample of data:

PERCENTAGE OF ADULT POPULATION WITH A FUNCTIONAL COMMAND OF ENGLISH (2012)			
Netherlands	90	Greece	51
Denmark	86	Estonia	50
Sweden	86	France	39
Austria	73	Italy	34
Finland	70	Portugal	27
Germany	56	Spain	22

TEELTEX (that is, the CEF and all the work associated with it) was fully justified by Eurobarometer 2012. Only one country, Romania, came out lower than Spain, at 20%, and I'd guess that the improvement over the 20 to 40 years before 2012 in both Spain and Romania was around 100%, that is, from under 10% to 20-22%. In all the other countries, the improvement from a small minority of English speakers before 1970 was even more extraordinary, and from Estonia up it was absolutely phenomenal.

However, the range between the top countries and the bottom ones is enormous. I asserted above that it cannot be explained by very different ELT in very different conditions in different countries because ELT and conditions are relatively similar throughout the EU, and I will now argue that the above data, as well as other facts, support that assertion.

The range in the table above generally goes steeply downwards from north to south, and popular wisdom (often wrong and foolish, of course) may tend towards stereotypical North-South explanations

such as that Scandinavians are innately better, brighter and more ambitious language learners (and, therefore, teachers) than Mediterraneans. That idea should be immediately rejected, noting that many less developed 'South' nations, particularly in Africa and Asia, have largely multilingual populations while many of the more developed 'North' nations have (or recently had) largely monolingual populations, and also that Greece in the south of Europe did almost as well in the Eurobarometer survey as Germany in the north, and far better than France.

Another North-South hypothesis might be that schools and education in the north are better than in the south, benefitting from more spending permitted by higher GDPs and larger government budgets. That might just be the case in the most extremely different countries, but there is far less difference within the EU than in the world in general, and the 50% of Estonia and the 51% of Greece (both among the lower per capita GDP countries of the EU) compared to the 39% of France (with around double their per capita GDP) do not fit with that hypothesis, which would predict that foreign language proficiency in France would be well above that in Estonia and Greece.

There are some other puzzles in the table above (and more in the complete table of the 25 EU countries where English was a foreign language in 2012 – there are now 26 of them). For example, why does Austria have 73% of English speakers and Germany 56% when they are neighbouring countries with the same national language, and why does Finland have 70% of English speakers and Estonia, across just 70 kilometres of sea, 50%?

Anyway, I repeat that the percentage range of adult English speakers between the top countries and the bottom ones cannot be explained by very different ELT in very different conditions in different countries, or only perhaps in part in some cases. It must generally be the result of other variables.

### **Possible key factors in the different degrees of success of ELT in Europe**

Assuming, then, that curricular factors (syllabuses, methodology, materials, etc.) and systemic factors (school and classroom conditions, teacher competence, etc.) are not the main causes of the enormous differences in the percentage of adult speakers of English, what are the main causes? Let's look outside or beyond curricular and systemic factors, that is, at extra-curricular contexts and the learners (as well as the students who are *not* learning much).

In the table above, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden are the countries with by far the highest percentage of English speakers, almost all the adult population, in fact. Also, Greece and Estonia are well above what might be expected of two of the poorer European countries. What do those countries (and Finland, also high-ranking) have in common? At the bottom of the table, far, far below, are Spain and Portugal. What do they have in common? Well, one notable thing is that those six high-ranking countries have national languages that are very little used outside the country, on the Internet, in scientific and technical publications, and in international business and trade, and the lowest-ranking country, Spain, has a national language that is widely used outside the country (including the United States and most of Latin America), on the Internet and elsewhere, and Portuguese is also the national language of Brazil, Angola and Mozambique, and largely cognate with Spanish in its written form.

That takes us to learners (or students) of English. Learner motivation (and the lack of it in many people who are forced to study a foreign language) has long been considered a major factor in foreign language

learning, and therefore teaching. That has been supported by a lot of research, and the data presented and discussed above also supports it. Dutch and Scandinavian students of English (among others) have much more need of English and therefore motivation to learn it than Portuguese and Spanish students of English. The result is 86-90% of English speakers versus 20-27%. French could be said to come after Spanish in international use (hence more English speakers in France than Spain, 39%), and German after French (hence even more English speakers in Germany, 56%).

No doubt there are many other factors apart from greater or lesser international use of a country's language that contribute to need/motivation and success in EFL learning. Perhaps, apart from the extremely low international use of Greek, Greece's dependence on shipping and international tourism has contributed to its surprisingly high 51% of English speakers. Perhaps the smaller and less industrialized economy of Austria, along with the many international organizations based in Vienna, has contributed to its 73% of English speakers compared to Germany's 56%, even though they are neighbours, both with German as their national language. The length, intensity and effectiveness of different countries' national ELT programmes may have contributed also. For example, where serious work was started in the 1960s or 70s and a high percentage of English speakers was achieved by 2000, as in the Netherlands, Scandinavia and even Germany, it becomes more and more embarrassing and career-inhibiting not to know English.

## **The future of ELT and English in Europe**

The British Council recently published *The Future Demand for English in Europe: 2025 and Beyond* (2018). Among its key findings (or evidence-based predictions) are the following:

- English will continue to be the dominant lingua franca in Europe for the foreseeable future.
- There will be a fall in the number of people studying English in Europe. This will be due in part to demographics (declining birth rates) and in part to less study of English outside schools because school ELT will continue to improve, though only slowly.
- That slow improvement in school ELT will continue to be inadequate for the demands of 'requirers of English speakers' (institutions of higher educations and employers) and individuals' aspirations.
- There will be a small increase in older people studying English, especially those over 55 years old. This will be due in part to demographics (ageing populations), in part to inadequate English when leaving school, and in part to some people's need for higher level and/or specific purpose English later in life.
- The use of technology for teaching and learning English will continue to grow, mostly developing current services in more flexible, personalized, purpose-specific and time-effective ways, and trying to provide 'a smooth learning journey'.

Perhaps the most significant predictions are that school ELT will continue to improve, but only slowly, that there will be an increase, albeit small, in older people studying English, and that current ICT services will be developed in more flexible, personalized, purpose-specific and time-effective ways. Those last two predictions suggest that post-school or adult EFL learning options, especially learner-centred and specific purpose ones, will be important in Europe, perhaps as much as the improvement of English for general purposes in schools.

## ELT lessons from Europe

There are possible lessons from the last 30 to 50 years of ELT in Europe (what I have called “The European ELT Experiment”, TEELTEX) for ELT around the world, and certainly for ELT in Latin America, which is what interests me most. Here are the main lessons for national ELT programmes in Latin America that I have drawn from this exploration of TEELTEX.

- EFL learning is highly dependent on real and perceived need of English and the motivation that usually arises from them. Many factors may affect real and perceived need of English and motivation, but they seem to be much lower in countries with strong international languages (e.g. Spain, Portugal and France) and much higher in those with languages that are little used internationally (e.g. the Netherlands, Scandinavian countries and Greece). Therefore, Latin American countries should look at Spain and Portugal as indicators of what they might achieve with their own national ELT programmes, i.e. 20-30% of English speakers in the adult population. On the evidence of TEELTEX, aiming at the 80-90% of the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries, or even the 50-60% of countries like Germany, is probably a colossal error.
- The level of English speakers in a country required to meet individual and national needs, whatever that level may be in each country, can be achieved without extending ELT to the early years of primary school, though that may improve results further where good results are already being achieved in the last years of primary school and in secondary school. That is the case in Sweden, where English is taught from 1<sup>st</sup> year (age 7) in some schools but not until 3<sup>rd</sup> year (age 9) in others, and in the Netherlands, where English is not a compulsory school subject until age 10. English is “in the family and the air” of most children in those countries, of course, but good results have been achieved by other European countries without taking English down to age 8, 7 or 6. Poor quality ELT in primary schools (especially when inserted before generally failing ELT in secondary schools as in most of Latin America) is most likely an enormous waste of time and money, and it may be counterproductive later, lowering expectations and motivation among older EFL learners.
- In spite of the enormous success of school ELT in some European countries and considerable success in most others, many Europeans study English as adults, often to lift their ‘fair’ or ‘good’ English to higher levels, but sometimes to get from ‘weak’ or ‘barely-existent’ English to a level that serves their real needs. They may attend language centres in institutions of higher education or independent languages centres, including British Council ones, and some countries have government run or sponsored language centres, e.g. Spain. The British Council predicts that the number of adults studying English will rise slightly over coming years. Most of the 20-30% of adults who really need English in most of Latin America do not realize that they need it until they are teenagers, many until they are young adults, and some until they are older adults. Latin American countries should look seriously at incorporating adult EFL (and other FL) centres into their national ELT programmes, shifting some of their investment in primary school ELT, especially early primary ELT, in that direction. Some of the adult ELT should be for specific purposes, especially in institutions of higher education.

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