

## ***Aspects of ELT management***

### **Part 1: General considerations and questions for ELT operations of all kinds**

Paul Davies

April, 2019

There are many different types of ELT management situations, and roles within them, each with its own features and challenges, and different possible responses to them. By trying to cover virtually the whole of ELT management in this series of 4 articles, I'm taking on a lot and may end up being too general and superficial for many readers. However, for two reasons, I am going to take a broad, general approach, but dealing with *aspects* of ELT management, not very specific management situations and roles.

My first reason for taking such an approach is that most ELT management situations and roles don't stand alone but are connected with and dependent on others. In most cases, other situations and roles, above or below, should be taken into account. For example, in Mexico and other Latin America countries, public basic education ELT syllabuses, guidelines and sometimes textbooks, are produced at national level; norms for the employment and supervision of English teachers are established at national or state level; those norms are ignored by some school principals, who may also take key ELT decisions even though they can't speak English; in some schools there's ELT coordination, but in others teachers use different methodology (in spite of the national syllabuses) and give different tests. Imagine the challenge facing a teacher in a newly created ELT coordination post in a school with the worst combination of the above who wants to improve ELT for the specific students in the school and the local context. Perhaps you don't have to imagine!

My second reason for taking a broad, general approach is that almost every ELT management situation is unique in some ways and continually changing, so fixed formulas and prescriptions, even for a specific type of ELT operation, are seldom enough in practice. Good ELT management requires astute observation and analysis of the specific situation, followed when necessary by adjustments or changes. These may require considerable creativity and agility on occasions, as well as steadiness in general. For example, setting up and running a branch of an ELT institute is likely to be significantly different right now in São Paulo and in Porto Alegre in 2030. In the public sector, ELT programmes in Mexican secondary schools should be different (but aren't), or be implemented differently, in Mexicali (state capital on the US border), León (industrial and commercial city in central Mexico), Cancún (international beach resort, with tourist sites nearby), and Comitán (small town near the Guatemalan border). ELT managers have to deal with quite different situations in those different places, and at different moments in time.

Apart from those two reasons for taking on virtually the whole panorama of ELT management (or aspects of it, and focusing on Latin America) rather than focusing on one or two specific ELT management situations or roles, I'm emboldened by the wide range of ELT management work I was involved in, directly and indirectly, over some 50 years.

### **What is ELT management?**

*"The organisation and coordination of the activities of an ELT enterprise or operation"*. We could argue out a more detailed definition, but I'll take the one above as my starting point. What can organising and

coordinating the activities of an ELT operation involve? Well, in the private or independent sector for example, when setting up a new ELT enterprise or trying to radically change and improve one that's working very poorly, it can include all the following, while with an ELT operation that seems to be working quite well it would probably start at number 5:

- 1 Researching and analysing the context of the proposed ELT enterprise (with the target students at its heart) and the resources available, and establishing objectives.
- 2 Developing a plan for the ELT enterprise, including types and design of the EFL courses to be offered, as well as other services, like certification through proficiency tests, and premises, promotion, etc.
- 3 Finding and organising the requirements and resources for implementing the plan.
- 4 Promoting and launching the ELT enterprise.
- 5 On-going organisation and coordination of the ELT operation, partly routine and cyclical (periods or dates for promotion, timetabling, enrolment, course starts/tests/results, proficiency tests, teacher workshops, etc.), and partly reactionary, trouble-shooting and developmental (teacher substitutions, students' complaints, staff problems-firing-hiring, on-going teacher development, change of textbooks, etc.).
- 6 Evaluation of the ELT operation, which might lead to modifications, or even to radical change, perhaps meaning a return to 1 above.

The different aspects or components of ELT management above can include many sub-components.

### **Initial and fundamental questions in ELT management**

Researching and analysing the context of a proposed ELT enterprise or operation and the resources available, and establishing objectives (1 above) can mean very different things in different ELT cases. For example, if two or three English teachers, either with their own resources or with a business sponsor, are considering setting up an ELT centre or school, they should answer questions like these:

- Where are we going to aim our offer of courses – at adults, teenagers, children, all those, other?
- Is there room in our city/area for such a commercial ELT centre or is the market already saturated?
- If there is room, where would a good location be, are premises available there, and what might start-up costs be, and then running costs?
- How much should/can we charge for courses (checking existing language centres' fees), how much income might that generate (compare that with estimate of running costs)?

After answering such questions and more, the teachers might abandon the project, or they might move on to detailed and costed planning (2 above).

If, however, a new private primary-secondary school is being set up, some of the above questions would apply to the school as a whole, but ELT of some kind would be predetermined – you simply can't run a private school today without English classes throughout the curriculum. The first question that should be asked specifically about ELT might be: Should we aim at 'ordinary school ELT' or should we make 'high quality school ELT' a feature of the school? In other words, who are we aiming at – parents mostly only just able to pay for a private school or those able to pay, within reason and market norms, "whatever it takes to get the best"? According to the answer to that question, other questions follow.

ELT management in basic public education is a very different matter from the two examples above. In contrast to those examples of ELT operations, ELT in national public education is non-profit and, from the evidence, distinctly loss-making in Latin America in terms of 'profit-in-kind from investment'. That profit-in-kind, or benefits arising from the ELT, includes:

- Satisfied parents and school-leavers. (Currently, most parents and children in Latin America recognise that little English is learnt in public schools – or in many private ones.)
- Satisfied 'requirers' of English speakers. (Currently, institutions of higher education, employers in areas where English is needed, etc., find that most students from public schools – and from many private ones – start higher education, vocational training or work with little or no English).
- Improved national or regional economy. (All Latin American countries have foreign trade, investment and tourism, but they could be increased with more good English speakers, as could the quality of a country's scientists and other professionals.)

Also, in public education in Latin America ELT is never now a completely new operation (like a new language centre or private school) because there has been ELT in secondary schools for many decades. ELT in public education could, however, be radically changed (even virtually re-started). The most fundamental question then would be: How can we significantly improve on the results of our current ELT in public schools (which most honest ELT managers in public basic education in Latin America would recognise to be, not only unsatisfactory, but very poor)? That question, and different answers to it, is the topic of the next article, Part 2 of this series.

## **Management of up-and-running ELT operations**

Setting up or radically modifying an ELT operation is an occasional or one-off project or challenge, while keeping an ELT operation running well is the continuous challenge of ELT management. Again it will be significantly different for different ELT situations, with some roles existing within certain situations and not others. Just consider the ELT in all the different schools, public and private, in the different cities and regions of your country; add the different institutions of higher education; add the different language centres, commercial and non-profit, individual or part of a chain of language centres; add the ELT management decisions taken by educational authorities in your city, state or nation. What can I say about up-and-running ELT management that applies to most of those – and in just half a page or so?

Well, let's go to the last point at the top of page 2, point 6: "Evaluation of the ELT operation, which might lead to modifications, or even to radical change, perhaps meaning a return to 1 above." Too many ELT operations do little or no evaluation of how they're working and, obviously, the management of the on-going ELT operation is usually weak or worse as a consequence.

Some ELT operations do have built-in evaluation instruments or systems (from occasional questionnaires for students and other stakeholders to boards or committees that meet regularly and consider results), or even pay for periodic external evaluations. However, some don't pay much or any attention to what's revealed. The consequences can be fatal for some ELT operations and chronically unhealthy for others.

Without continual evaluation and effective responses to it, ELT operations that depend on their clients' voluntary support (the income, recommendations to other potential clients, etc., that they provide) usually soon go into decline and eventually have to be terminated. In commercial and non-profit but

self-supporting ELT centres or institutes and private bilingual schools, there are powerful incentives for good ELT management: profit/sustainability vs. loss/closure, employment vs. unemployment from the staff's perspective. Poor or conflictive ELT managers are usually soon 'let go' by such ELT operations or, if they're owner-managers, their ELT enterprise sickens and dies under them.

In contrast, ELT operations not dependent on the students' and other stakeholders' support and the vital financing they provide can continue endlessly with poor (or worse) results and unhappy or indifferent students and stakeholders. Such is the case in many 'ordinary' private schools, where English is just one of many subjects and one in which parents are used to pass (and even high) grades in English even when their children clearly remain far from being able to communicate in the language. It's also the case in the massive ELT operations in public education.

To maintain or improve the quality of their ELT management, operations dependent for their survival on student/stakeholder satisfaction must answer questions like the following two, and operations not dependent on student/stakeholder satisfaction (nor learning results) *should* answer such questions:

- 1 Are our English courses and related services good enough to make the time students invest in them worthwhile? For example, Cambridge Assessment estimates up to 200 hours of guided study (in-class and required out-of-class study time) for each CEF level, so courses should generally achieve something not too far from that.
- 2 If our 'customers' (students, parents, institutions of higher education, employers requiring speakers of English, etc.) are not satisfied with our courses and services (irrespective of 1 above), what can we do, within our budget, to satisfy them?

## **Next article: Part 2**

The next article in this 4-part series will look at ELT management in basic education, mainly in public schools, not private ones. This is by far the largest area of ELT in Latin America, with more students, teachers and resources than all other ELT combined. In general, it's working extremely poorly, in spite of occasional attempts to improve it in different countries, including the recent extension of ELT down into public primary schools in many countries.