

ELT coordination: why and how

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Solo and collaborative ELT

When we teach English, we normally teach it alone, that is, alone in a classroom with our students. However, only teachers of private classes and those who are the only English teacher in a school really teach alone, without colleagues to turn to for ideas and support, or to offer them ideas and support. The vast majority of English teachers work with some other English teachers, often many of them.

Unavoidable solo teaching (private classes or as the only English teacher in a school) can be satisfying and worthwhile for teacher and students, but it tends to be professionally isolated unless an effort is made to read about ELT a lot (now facilitated by the Internet) or attend ELT association events, and can be a struggle for inexperienced teachers and be unfavourable for their development.

Solo teaching in schools or institutions with colleagues is unnecessary, unprofessional and bad, but it happens a lot. In extreme cases, where all or most of the teachers, perhaps 5, 10, 20 or even more, are solo teaching, typically behind closed classroom doors, it can be very disconcerting and discouraging for students and severely impede their progress in English. It can mean that some teachers use only English in class while others use the students' native language a lot, some teachers insist on correct English all the time while others accept errors in communicative activities, different teachers use different textbooks (or no textbook), different teachers give their own different tests, and so on.

Working as a novice teacher in a school or institution without coordination, or with scant or poor coordination, can also be discouraging and severely impede a teacher's progress in ELT, though some do manage to develop fairly well anyway. Two and a half of my first four and a half years in ELT were in such institutions (6 months in 1960 in an English institute in Zaragoza, Spain, while I was still at university, and 1965-6 in the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla's Prepa or high school – now much improved). Fortunately, before my two years in Puebla I'd had two years in two well-coordinated institutions in Madrid (particularly the British Council institute), so I had ideas and criteria to work with. Also, while teaching in Puebla, I attended several teachers' seminars at the Instituto Anglo Mexicano de Cultura (now The Anglo Mexican Foundation) in Mexico City, another very well-coordinated institution, which gave me more grist for my mill.

In 1967, I began work at the Anglo as director of its branch in the south of the city, required, like all branch directors, to give a number of classes as well as run the branch. I was suddenly in ELT management and coordination as well as teaching, but with guidance and support from head office and the main institute. After a year or two there, on top of my previous experience, I was very aware of the enormous benefit of coordinated ELT within an institution, both for the teachers and the students. The teachers benefit from the consistent approach, the carefully selected materials, the teachers' meetings, the feedback on class observations, the common tests, and the teamwork in general. The students benefit from the fruit of all that, the consistency and quality control of the courses in general.

Obviously, to be really good for teachers and students, the coordination should promote current best practice in ELT, taking the specific students and contexts into account (which may sometimes mean quite conservative methodology and unambitious goals, e.g. with groups of 40+ unmotivated students).

How coordinators actually coordinate

As a past EFL teacher (without and with coordination), ELT coordinator (and general manager, in a good English institute) and EFL teacher trainer and ELT consultant (seeing all sorts of schools, universities and other institutions, without coordination and with good and bad coordination) I've seen a broad panorama of ELT coordination, in Mexico at least. And I've seen many different specific scenes or situations, from different perspectives. Here are four scenes, painted for me again and again by trainees on teacher's courses, particularly Cambridge COTE (which, if you didn't know, preceded ICELT):

- A *My coordinator won't listen to our ideas and suggestions. It's her way or the highway. That wouldn't matter if her way were good, but she's really old-fashioned. Most of the things we've seen in this COTE course are anathema to her. She sometimes visits our classes and tells us to stop doing those things! And the tests, which she writes...*
- B *My coordinator doesn't really coordinate at all apart from doing the timetable and allocating teachers to courses. Well, we do all use the same textbooks, but in different ways. It's chaos, except for a couple of teachers and me. We get on well and exchange ideas. But that's just three out of nineteen teachers. The teachers write their own tests. Except the three of us, who share our tests.*
- C *My coordinator's really good. She has a nice manner for a start, very friendly and open, but professional and, when it comes to it, clear and decisive. I'm really happy at my school, and proud of the results we get – all of us together, the school, the coordinator, the teachers, the students. Oh, I must rush – we've got a teachers' meeting this afternoon!*
- D *I'm the coordinator, since last month. And, frankly, I'm lost. The one before me was terrible, and he was so conflictive. The atmosphere among the teachers is very bad still. That may be the first thing for me to work on. But how? Two teachers were his friends – the last coordinator's – and the rest weren't, to put it mildly. At least he's left the Language Centre. If he'd stayed as a teacher!*

As a teacher or a coordinator, or both, you may recognize those scenes and recall others. They can make you nod approvingly, smile, laugh, groan, or cry.

The good news is that C is quite common nowadays, as more and more trained teachers enter ELT and fewer untrained ones. But it depends on character, of course, not just professional training: "She has a nice manner... very friendly and open... when it comes to it, clear and decisive". Also good news, and partly for the same reason (more and more trained teachers), is that bad coordination or absence of coordination in institutions can often be corrected fast if there's the will, either from above (owners, management) or below (teachers, even students).

The bad news is that there's still a lot of bad coordination and absence of coordination around, for all sorts of reasons, some of them contextual and difficult to overcome (e.g. a poorly funded school in a marginalized area – though amazing things sometimes happen in marginalized communities) and some of them political, in the broadest sense.

Any institution that wants the improved ELT results that can come from good coordination should aim to make it a part of the culture of the institution: once an institution (and the people in it) has enjoyed good ELT coordination and the results from it, any fall in the quality of the ELT coordination begins to sound alarm bells. It also means that the next coordinator can be apprenticed to the present one.

What to coordinate and work on

Institutions with English classes, and those dedicated to teaching English, vary in many ways, and what some can insist on is beyond others, e.g. just a few institutions in Latin America have the luxury of employing only educated native speakers of English and non-native speakers with C1+ level certification in English. However, good ELT coordination should try to push the English courses in any institution to the highest level possible for that institution. The following guidelines and suggestions, based on current best ELT theory and practice, should be interpreted in that light, more completely in favourable ELT contexts and more modestly in less favourable ones. My recommendations and suggestions are:

- 1 Teachers' English. Most Latin American English teachers need to work at maintaining and improving their command of English. Coordinators can promote that by having regular teachers' meetings and workshops in English – and even conversation and book club sessions over drinks and snacks! This can be especially useful where English is rarely spoken, outside EFL classrooms, in your town or area.
- 2 English as the main classroom language. Coordinators should establish this as strict policy, and help teachers achieve it, with techniques and ideas. There may be exceptions for some circumstances or aims, e.g. technical reading courses for higher education students with little or no English (or time).
- 3 Selection and use of textbooks. Coordinators should involve teachers in the selection of textbooks, and get agreement on how to use them, especially giving importance to the communicative work in the books and not putting excessive time and emphasis into the language work and consequently neglecting communicative work. Again there may be exceptions for some circumstances or aims.
- 4 Learner-centredness. Coordinators should help teachers see clearly who they're teaching English and why (often there's no good reason, so classes must at least be interesting or fun), and therefore the appropriate methodology (e.g. very game-like for children, and inductive in higher education), and the appropriate adaptation and supplementation of the textbook, e.g. local and national examples and references for general English, and medical reading texts for medical students.
- 5 Class observation and feedback. Coordinators should, if possible, periodically observe teachers' classes, discreetly and empathetically, and talk about the class with (not just *to*) the teacher afterwards, focusing a lot on how students responded and participated (or didn't). If teachers can be persuaded to visit one another, it's a positive thing; a start to that can be made if the coordinator invites teachers to visit (by arrangement) his or her classes.
- 6 Tests. Coordinators should ensure all teachers give the same tests, or key ones. The teacher's guide or website of the textbook may provide them, or the coordinator can adapt them from some other source; if proficiency tests are a goal, e.g. Cambridge KET, PET and FCE, parts of them can be used.

The actual teaching in an institution can be coordinated, moulded and developed by all six elements above.

Self-coordination

The post of paid ELT coordinator doesn't exist in many institutions and is unlikely to be created, but English teachers without a coordinator can get together and coordinate themselves. When two or more English teachers are working together, collaboration and coordination are always possible.