

What's special about English language teaching in Latin America?

Part 4: Conclusions

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Concluding that story

Part 3 of this series of articles ended with an unconcluded story:

Imagine an English teacher in a public secondary school in a Latin American city (perhaps you can just think of yourself!), with a school principal or head teacher who doesn't speak English but would like to, and just one other person in the school who speaks English (the other English teacher). One day, the principal asks that first English teacher if she would give her classes. The teacher agrees. The principal then suggests forming a group of school staff and parents interested in learning English, and involving the other English teacher. The principal and the two English teachers put their heads together, prepare a plan, and announce the English course, to be held in the school in the late afternoons. Now you continue the story, which I'll pick up in the 4th, and last, part of this series.

If you read Part 3 and did your homework, you'll have your own continuation and conclusion of the story – it might even be a true story, about your school, and you. Different readers will have different versions, of course. Here's mine:

The course started with the school principal, her secretary, three subject teachers and four parents. That was three years ago. There are now three courses, at A1, A2 and B1 levels. Several people have passed Cambridge KET and two are about to take PET. Also, results in English for students in the school are notably better than three years ago and several have passed KET.

That's a 'happy ending', but it really is possible in some parts of Latin America, especially where there's a lot of professional and skilled work available, some in international companies, and/or international travel and tourism. The authorities could help by giving preference or bonuses to teachers and school staff (especially school principals) who have passed recognized English proficiency tests.

However, that happy ending isn't so possible, or at all likely, in schools in most parts of Latin America, urban as well as rural. First, it requires one or more English teachers capable of getting students up to B1 level, and that isn't the case in many Latin American schools. Second, English is simply not needed by many people in many parts of Latin America because there are few or no jobs or opportunities there for people who speak English. That brings me to an important general matter, with political, educational, economic and human facets.

Latin American countries need more appropriate ELT plans and strategies

Many Latin American countries have embarked on and invested heavily in a national bilingual plan (national language + English), and some countries have made that explicit: Colombia Bilingüe, Panamá Bilingüe, etc. These are plans on the European model but without European economic and human resources or European contexts and school conditions, and with other more pressing needs crying out for more investment and more effective systems, like the reduction of poverty and the improvement of really key subject results in basic education. Compare these results in native language literacy, mathematics and science:

	Science	Reading	Mathematics
Germany	506	503	509
PISA average	493	493	490
Chile	447	459	423
Argentina	432	425	409
Colombia	416	425	390
Mexico	416	423	408
Brazil	401	407	377

PISA, 2015

The fact is, English is not high priority for most people in Latin American countries, though it is, of course, for a very important minority. That's true also for many European countries: in France less than half the population speaks functional English (39%), in Portugal 27% and in Spain only 22%. Those statistics for France, Portugal and Spain come after over half a century of almost universal ELT in schools and almost three decades of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. But the fact is that most people in those countries simply don't need or want English. That's even truer for Latin America, though it does need many more people who speak English than at present – the 22% of Spain would be good, the 27% of Portugal even better.

Canada is an illuminating example of monolingualism vs bilingualism. It's a rich country with two official languages, English (the world's current lingua franca) and French (also internationally important, especially for Canada, which naturally has a special relationship with France). It may surprise you then to learn that only 17.9% of Canadians are English-French bilinguals (Statistics Canada, 2017). In dominantly English-speaking provinces the figure is lower (e.g. 11.2% in Ontario, 6.8% in British Columbia), though everyone has French classes at school. In dominantly French-speaking Quebec it is highest, but still below 50% (44.5%), even though everyone has English classes at school. Conclusion: when people really need a second language and have classes in it, they usually learn it, and when they don't really need it, most don't learn it, even with years of classes, even with the generally excellent school conditions of a country like Canada.

Latin America isn't Canada or Europe, yet most Latin American countries apply European-type foreign language teaching plans and strategies in basic public education, and seem to expect better results than those achieved in many European countries, e.g. Portugal and Spain. There must be plans and strategies that are more appropriate for Latin America, which recognize Latin American socio-economic realities, including the reality that most Latin Americans don't and won't need English, while many that do need it or could benefit from it are not being taught English effectively during their school years.

If, for example, such unrealistic plans for universal bilingualism (6+ years of English classes for everyone in basic education) were not pursued and were cut back to 3 or 4 years, and much more were invested in high quality ELT for the 20-30% of the population that really needs or wants English, particularly through language centres with free classes for children and teenagers as well as paying classes for adults, the results might be a lot better, both for individual people and for the nation (Davies, 2009). In Latin America, language centre results tend to be much better than ordinary school English results because people themselves have chosen to study English, they are more motivated, and the conditions and atmosphere of language centres are usually more conducive to successful language learning.

Summing up

Over Parts 1, 2, 3 and now 4 of this series of articles, I've noted and discussed a number of special aspects of ELT in Latin America in some detail and made some suggestions for ELT plans, strategies and teaching, the last one immediately above this. They don't all apply to all ELT institutions and teachers in Latin America, but they do apply to most. Here's a summary:

- While some English teaching-learning contexts in Latin America are suitable for globalized Anglo-American ELT or top European country ELT and excellent results are achieved (good bilingual schools, for example, get most of their students to B2 level or above and through international proficiency tests), ELT in the vast majority of Latin American contexts can benefit enormously from the recognition of Latin American realities and the specific realities of each context, and the adaptation to them of ELT plans, strategies, materials and teaching.
- One important Latin American reality is that the native language of the students is Portuguese or Spanish, languages that are relatively similar to English, while the international or international-type textbooks they use don't (and can't) take the L1 of students into account. ELT managers and teachers in Latin America should take L1 into account, giving teenagers and adults much more reading, especially fairly formal texts*, from beginner level than is usual in textbooks, and helping them notice and exploit similarities between L1 and English, in grammar and particularly in vocabulary.
*The more formal and technical the texts, the greater the similarity between English and Portuguese or Spanish.
- A second important Latin American reality is that, especially compared with European countries, very few Latin American students, or even successful learners, of English will travel and use English outside their own country, while the international or international-type textbooks they use tend to focus on everyday social and transactional communication in English-speaking countries or international travel. ELT managers and teachers should make sure students also (or instead) get practice of communication in the situations they're really likely to encounter, from talking about their own city and country with foreign visitors (perhaps as a tourist guide) to talking business with foreign executives, experts and customers in their place of work, and reading for professional development. The English appropriate for such situations is likely to be more formal than the colloquial native-speaker English in some textbooks, and many foreigners will not be native speakers of English.
- A third important Latin American reality is that most schools and many institutions of higher education don't have 'an English speaking community' in and around them; often the English teacher or teachers are the only people who speak English in a school, and the students naturally expect *not* to learn English, just like the school principal, other subject teachers, administrative staff, parents and their older siblings. This is a reflection of another, fundamental, reality: most Latin Americans simply don't and won't need or want English, and the 20-30% that do tend to be in contexts where there's work and opportunity for English speakers (international manufacturing and business, travel and tourism). Where possible, educational authorities, ELT managers and teachers should try to create an English-speaking community in and around schools. Where not possible, English probably doesn't matter, except to the few students with ambitions beyond their immediate environment, and special provisions should be made for such students, at least when they reach upper secondary education.

References

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