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# Time for New Thinking about ELT in Latin America and Elsewhere

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English Language Teaching (ELT) in Latin America and elsewhere in public schools and higher education and parts of the private sector has long been failing badly. The coronavirus pandemic should focus minds on changing that situation. Going back to Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) business as usual should not be an option. In this article areas where radical change is needed are discussed and ideas for change proposed.

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## INTRODUCTION

I am an 82-year-old British retired English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher; EFL teacher trainer; EFL center manager; EFL textbook and methodology book author; and EFL curriculum and course design consultant. When I retired, just three years ago, my head was full of thoughts about TEFL, especially in Latin America, where I have lived and worked for the past 55 years. During the past year (and counting) of the COVID-19 pandemic, those thoughts have developed further. My overriding thought, already strong before COVID-19, is that TEFL business as usual should not continue. You might respond that it *cannot* continue, but I fear it could, with only minor changes (particularly, more distance TEFL).

Even before the pandemic, many TEFL professionals questioned how TEFL business was being run—by teaching institutions, by educational authorities, and by governments, all strongly influenced by TEFL “resource providers” (mainly publishers, and those mainly based in the UK and USA) and TEFL consultants (mainly UK and US universities and government agencies). Developing countries were persuaded that 100% of their children would need English in our brave, if foolhardy, new world. Almost 40 years ago an article with a weird title, “The World for Sick Proper,” was published in the *ELT Journal*. This is the abstract of that article:

Should we continue to teach English to great numbers of children who then believe that they are entitled to a ‘better’ future? It may be dishonest to do this. Only a small percentage of English learners will ever use English for international communication. Very few school leavers actually need English for tertiary studies overseas. English is not the only means of access to Western development and ‘progress’; it may not even be the best means. A lot of English is taught, but not enough is learned. University teachers throughout the world complain about their students' lack of skills in English. This article

explores the arguments for and against teaching English on a wide scale at secondary-school levels and below, and suggests some of the questions that course organizers and teachers should be asking themselves. (Rogers, 1982, p. 144)

It should be noted that Rogers was writing from experience in the third and developing worlds and in English as a Second Language (ESL) as well as EFL. Also, only the early groundwork for the European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) had been done at that time: The miracle of 90% of Dutch adults being functional, or better, in English; 86% of Swedes; and 56% of Germans (according to Eurobarometer 2012) was still over a decade away, though those countries had already got ahead of the European Commission's plans. However, the account Rogers gives fits Latin American and many other countries today; in fact, it flatters the reality in most Latin American countries, where most students entering higher education need a false beginners' course in English. Also, at the other end of the scale from the Netherlands and Sweden, only 39% of French adults, 27% of Portuguese adults, and 22% of Spanish adults were estimated to have a functional command of English by Eurobarometer in 2012, and the percentage is probably only a little higher today. Even in Western Europe 100% L1-English bilingualism is unrealistic (and unnecessary) in most countries.

Having mentioned "our brave new world," as well as massive worldwide TEFL, my mind turns from that reference to Shakespeare to one from Wordsworth. One of his sonnets, published in 1807 begins:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

We humans certainly do have powers: just consider technological and other human achievements in 1807, in 1982 (when Roger's article was published), and now in 2021. Our successful use of those powers has led us to pursue ever greater ambitions, some realistic and worthy, but others unrealistic and sometimes dishonest, especially when there is a refusal to recognize failure for one reason or another, including because a failing project is highly profitable for some stakeholders. How much of the massive amount of TEFL done in Mexico, the Latin American country I know best, and in other countries, is realistic and worthy? In this article, I try to identify where there is dysfunction and inappropriateness in that TEFL and suggest corrections.

First, I examine ELT as a profession (now highly globalized and with a very large workforce), then national English programmes (established in many countries over the past 10 or more years, e.g., in 2004 in Colombia and in 2009 in Mexico), and finally providers of ELT materials and services (textbook publishers, suppliers of online materials and resources, which include publishers, testing and certification services, training institutions, consultants, and so on).

## **THE ELT PROFESSION IN MEXICO AND OTHER COUNTRIES**

On the surface, the ELT profession is flourishing in Mexico. Vastly more ELT is done than in the past, and there are many more EFL teachers, managers, and experts or scholars. Among

those ELT people there are many more with professional training, and with BAs, MAs and PhDs in or related to ELT than in the past, and many more ELT training programmes and trainers. There are long established ELT associations, journals, and conferences in Mexico, as elsewhere in Latin America (e.g., MEXTESOL, founded in 1973, and BRAZ-TESOL, founded in 1986). The ELT scene was very different in 1960, in 1980, and even in 2000, compared with now, 2020.

Much of the difference is in quantity, with some in quality also, and some in English learning results. Sadly, results do not always match improved quality in ELT and, even more, increased quantity of ELT. That fact is reflected notably in the enormous difference of ELT results in Europe referred to above: the estimated 90%, 86%, 56%, 39%, 27%, and 22% of the adult population that has a functional command of English in different countries. The six European countries mentioned all follow common standards, as proposed in the CEFR. The enormous differences in results, therefore, are surely not mainly due to differences in the quality of the ELT, or the slight differences in the quantity (in fact, ELT does not begin in most Dutch primary schools until age 10, later than in the other countries, which have much lower learning results). It is probably significant that Dutch and Swedish are not internationally used languages while French, Portuguese and, even more, Spanish are. The higher socioeconomic levels of the northern European countries and their citizens' greater desire and ability to travel may also be factors. Dutch and Scandinavian people need English, and probably recognize that they need it, and are motivated to learn it, more than most Portuguese and Spanish people.

Mexico and other Latin American countries can be put alongside Spain and Portugal with respect to the potential effect of the international use of the learners' L1 and their real and perceived need of English and, therefore, their motivation to learn it. Added to that is the distance of Latin American countries from countries with different languages, let alone English, as the national language (even Mexico City is almost 1,000 km from the nearest part of the US border, Texas), and also the much lower economic level and greater inequality of most of Latin America compared with most of Europe (in 2019 GNI per capita in Mexico was US \$20,340 and in Spain US \$43,510 according to The World Bank). English is much less needed for tourism, study, and other travel and stays abroad in Latin America than in Europe; in fact, travel abroad apart from desperate emigration is out of reach of the vast majority of Latin Americans. Need of English and consequent motivation surely lift ELT results and lack of need depresses them.

Also, ELT results in Mexico are far below what was hoped for as a consequence of the massive increase in the quantity of ELT in public education (rising from six years of school English prior to higher education up to 2009 to 13 years since then) because the national English programme can reasonably be considered to be inappropriately designed (Davies, 2009, 2020, 2021) and still does not cover a lot of schools, causing problems for ELT in higher school levels due to the still patchy coverage in lower levels. The generally improved quality in ELT (especially many better trained teachers) does not extend to all teachers either, and many poorly trained and even untrained English teachers are still working in both public and private education.

All the above—students' L1, their real and perceived need of English, their resulting motivation, ELT coverage of schools, and fairly standardized quality in teaching—may impact learning results for better or for worse. So, while the ELT profession appears to be flourishing in Mexico, when judged by its results, most of it is not. After what are now supposed to be almost 12 years of ELT from last year of preschool to the end of lower secondary school (though the last one and a half years have been catastrophic, of course), most upper secondary

school programmes still start at beginner level again, and so do most common core English programmes in higher education.

Apart from the issues discussed above, the globalization of ELT may be affecting ELT in countries like Mexico negatively as well as positively. Much global or outside influence on the ELT in any country is usually positive—shared experience, research, knowledge, resources, etc.—but the global or external often needs to be adapted to local circumstances and needs, sometimes quite radically, and local research and development addressing local issues needs to be done. That means, for example, the adaptation of international textbooks and other resources or the production of local ones, and research on important local success, failure, and issues, rather than on topics unrelated to them, for publication in international journals.

National and local ELT associations and their journals have tended to “go global” and neglect major local issues. For example, the *MEXTESOL Journal* currently has five people based in Mexico, four in the USA, and one in Argentina (with two positions), Japan (the current editor, who has never worked in Mexico), and Thailand on its Editorial Board. Of the 96 reviewers, only eight are based in Mexico and the others are from the USA (33), Egypt (seven, almost as many as Mexico), Argentina, Brazil, Canada, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Czechia, Hong Kong, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Libya, Malaysia, Norway, Philippines, Portugal, Qatar, Serbia, Turkey, the UK, and Yemen. Of the 17 articles in a recent number, three were from Iran; two from Iraq and two from Mexico; and one from Canada, China, Colombia, Ecuador, Egypt, Latvia, Philippines, Portugal, Turkey, and the USA. Here are some of the titles: “From European Heritage to 21<sup>st</sup> Century European Pro-active Citizenship: Luko’s Journey” (from Portugal), “The Impact of Using Input Enhancement Techniques in the Use of Frequent Collocations via Reading on Restatement in Writing of Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners” (from Iran), “Applying Cooperative Development in Exploring College English Teaching in a Large Class Format in China” (from China), “Changing identities: From troubled youth to educated citizen” (from Mexico). All the articles published in *MEXTESOL Journal* may be fairly good and some very good, but “national” ELT journals like this seem to be much more about being notably *global* and providing anyone in the world with a vehicle for academic publication (and enhancement of their CV) than about improving ELT in the journal’s country, in this case Mexico.

The above sketch of some of the major features or aspects of the ELT profession in Mexico says little about “the best of the ELT profession in Mexico.” Another whole article could be written with that title, and it would be very positive: ELT about as good as anywhere in the world is done in Mexico. The problem is that there is far from enough satisfactory and high quality ELT for the needs of Mexico and Mexicans, and far too much low quality and unsatisfactory ELT. Also, an excessively globalized focus of the profession and insufficient close attention to local contexts and issues can lead to a dearth of reliable information and insufficient research and published papers about a nation’s own ELT, which seems to be the case in Mexico (Davies, 2020).

## NATIONAL ENGLISH PROGRAMMES

The national English programme of Mexico shows the influence of globalized ELT, as do those of most other countries: The CEFR, popular international trends (e.g., aiming at universal national L1-English bilingualism, starting school ELT very early), international consultancy (American and British), and the use of textbooks and other resources produced by international publishers (American and British). Some of those globalized resources and

references are undoubtedly appropriate and have a positive effect, but they all probably need some local adaptation or interpretation, and some may have really negative effects unless radically adapted or replaced by local resources.

Mexico's national English programme, launched in 2009, was originally called Programa Nacional de Inglés en Educación Básica, PNIEB, and was for preschool and primary school only (seven years of extra ELT on top of the three years in lower secondary that had existed for over 50 years). In 2017 it was renamed Programa Nacional de Inglés, PRONI, and extended to integrate lower secondary school ELT into the programme (until then lower secondary school ELT had started at beginner level again, even after seven years of ELT in more and more preschools and primary schools). The stated aim was that "by the time students complete their secondary education, they will have developed the necessary multilingual and multicultural competencies to face the communicative challenges of a globalized world successfully" (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2011, p. 85), and the justification for starting ELT at age 5-6 was that students at that age "are known to have plasticity and understanding in the early learning of languages" (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2011, p. 90). PRONI is based heavily on the CEFR, and aims to get students to A1 level English by the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> year of primary school, age 9-10, to A2 level English by the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> and last year of primary school, age 11-12, and to B1 level English by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and last year of lower secondary school, age 15-16. The implementation plan consisted of testing PNIEB-PRONI and then phasing it into all schools cycle by cycle.

It should be noted that PRONI's 10 years are followed by three more years of curricular English courses in upper secondary school, making a total of 13 years of school ELT before students go on to work, occupational training, or higher education. However, as mentioned above, the upper secondary ELT is still not part of PRONI and neither linked to nor consistent with it in terms of curriculum and goals.

In July 2020, the eleventh school year of PRONI should have concluded, and all graduates of Mexican lower secondary school should have had all 10 years of PRONI behind them. However, the implementation timetable was far from being fully met (not to mention strong indications of generally very poor results), and full implementation is probably now years away, how many depending on how the pandemic goes, and on whether the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) re-starts PRONI without change, or significantly modified, or replaces it with a completely new programme. It is to be hoped that a lot of serious thought has been put into appropriate change over the past year or so.

The real impact of PRONI, with all young people supposedly entering their first job, occupational training, or higher education with 13 years of school English behind them (10 years of PRONI + three years of upper secondary school), and B1+ level English, was not due until 2022, and under present circumstances that will not occur, if at all, until well after that. Anyway, most Mexican public institutions of higher education have been pessimistic up to now, not anticipating that students will enter with more than very elementary English in the foreseeable future: From 2013 to 2018, I led a team at a public Mexican university that produced revised ELT programmes and customized materials and online resources, including English for General Purposes (EGP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and English for Special Purposes (ESP) starting at—yes—Beginner Level, and ending at B1 level, which PRONI sets as the level for the end of lower secondary school.

What has gone so wrong with PRONI, and with national English programmes in other countries? Logically, each national English programme should be designed and implemented specifically for the nation it is intended to serve: Sweden's national English programme would clearly not be suitable for Colombia, or Mexico, or Egypt, or Japan. Unfortunately, this is often

not the case in our globalized world, and national English programmes may materialize largely because of “political pressure backed up by plausible but flawed assumptions,” not based on “research and careful evaluation of alternative options” (Cummins & Davidson, 2007, p. xxii). That seems to be largely the case with Mexico’s PRONI.

The results of ELT in Mexican schools prior to PNIEB-PRONI were generally extremely poor, as discussed above, with the exception of the better private schools and a few outstanding public ones (the latter with ELT in secondary school only at that time). That in itself might justify a national English programme aimed at bringing radical change. The poor results were reflected in a 2004 study of the English of students entering nine different institutions of higher education in Mexico City, where 76.1% of 4,690 students failed the basic section of a modified placement test; without the students from the three private institutions included in the study, two of them very prestigious—Colegio de México and ITAM—failure of the basic section of the test was around 90% (González et al., 2004). Extremely poor results of ELT in Mexican basic education were still clearly apparent in 2012, three years after PRONI had begun, and were reflected in a survey of the adult population of Mexico which found that only 11.6% could “speak English” (Consulta Mitofsky, 2013, p. 7).

Accepting that a national English programme (NEP) was indeed needed to radically change that situation, the key question would be, What kind of NEP? The first obvious response might be one to improve the existing six years of ELT in public lower and upper secondary schools. However, the Mexican Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) had introduced new lower secondary school English curriculums in 1993 and in 2005, and ELT training had been improved in Normales Superiores (Teacher Training Colleges) and teachers were being employed in public secondary schools with BAs in ELT from universities, and, with all that, results had not improved noticeably. Consequently, the SEP probably rejected that kind of programme or plan—trying to improve existing ELT—out of hand. That may have been realistic thinking, but any kind of national English programme would eventually have to radically improve ELT in secondary schools if it was to succeed, so not doing that as PNIEB/PRONI or a central part of it was just postponing the inevitable. When the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands started taking ELT down into primary schools, the ELT in their public secondary schools was not a general disaster like Mexico’s, it was quite good and effective, simply not adequate to achieve the very ambitious targets they aimed at.

Instead of focusing on the essential improvement of existing school ELT, Mexico’s SEP followed the international trend of taking ELT down to younger learners. That trend was, and is, based on some strong research and theory, but the success or failure of early age ELT appears to depend heavily on the quality and context of the ELT. Brewster et al. (1992), Rixon (2001), and others strongly suggest that, as positive factors, the quality of the ELT, the linking of primary school and secondary school ELT, the importance of English in the country, and the importance of English to the children themselves, all far outweigh early age English learning in itself. In Mexico, like many other countries, most children need and want other things that they do not have far more than English; most adults will never travel abroad nor need English for study or work; and the original national English programme was not linked at all to secondary school ELT, which was, and still is, achieving extremely poor results, and though some PRONI ELT is of satisfactory or even good quality, especially in individual teachers’ classrooms, too much is of poor quality and/or in very unfavourable conditions.

It is still too early for a definitive verdict on PRONI as a fully implemented and operative national English programme, especially since it has fallen far short of the planned implementation period due to poor organization and insufficient resources, economic and human (Ramírez-Romero & Sayer, 2016), and has been interrupted by the COVID pandemic,

but its prospects seem extremely poor. Could there be a radical modification of PRONI after the pandemic or when it settles at a low endemic level? Could that be on the lines proposed by Davies (2009)? That is, no ELT in primary school, or only in the last year or two and linked to significantly improved lower school ELT, and that linked to significantly improved upper secondary school ELT, plus free or very low cost national English programme language centers for older adolescents and adults, building on existing language centers open to the general public in public institutions of higher education. That would change the PRONI aim of universal functional Spanish-English bilingualism (though anyone really needing and wanting English should be able to achieve it after between six and eight years of school ELT) to ensuring that all adults who really *need* or *want* English have learnt it at school or can learn it later. It would also shift the investment of very large but limited financial and human resources from quantity of ELT to quality of ELT, especially ELT for the Mexicans who really need and want it.

## WORLDWIDE PROVIDERS OF ELT MATERIALS AND SERVICES

Ministries of Education often seek and receive consultancy from international organizations when planning, implementing, and evaluating their national English programmes: for example, The British Council provided consultation for Colombia's programme and Cambridge English for Mexico's. Clearly, consultants are not responsible for decisions taken by Ministries of Education nor for the national English programmes they end up with but, unless Ministries of Education do enough solid thinking and research into their national, regional, sector, and citizens' needs, and into conditions and resources around their country, global perspectives and trends may be inconveniently strong. That, I believe, is definitely the case of Mexico's PRONI, and of the national English programmes of some other countries.

Concern about the excessive influence and effects of globalized ELT and international providers of ELT materials and services on the ELT in very different countries is not new. Cummins, Davidson, Pennycook, and Phillipson are just four among many ELT experts who have long seen the dangers of the globalization of English and of ELT which exist alongside the considerable benefits:

That English language teaching (ELT) is inextricably bound up with multiple power relationships is indisputable. English did not spread globally as if it had a capacity to take over the world without human help. It was pushed by many forces that saw an interest in its promotion and pulled by many who also perceived value in acquiring it. (Pennycook, 2016, p. 26)

[Phillipson (2009) asserts that] ...linguistic imperialism is concerned with the ways in which English is constantly promoted over other languages, the role played by organisations such as the British Council in the promotion and orchestration of the global spread of English (it was far from accidental), and the ways in which this inequitable position of English has become embedded in ELT dogmas, such as promoting native speaker teachers of English over their non-native speaker counterparts or suggesting that the learning of English is better started as early as possible (a trend that is continuing worldwide, with English language teaching occurring more and more at the primary and even pre-primary levels. (Pennycook, 2016, p. 31)



The issues [of local ELT in a globalised world] are considerably more complex than the rush to English would suggest. (Cummins & Davidson, 2007, p. xxiii).

International EFL textbooks and other resources have an enormous effect on ELT around the world. They are often partly inappropriate or inadequate, and sometimes largely so, for different countries' contexts and needs. Very few Mexican school children or adults will ever travel abroad or socialize with foreigners who do not know Spanish, and on the other hand, most of those that do need English need it more for study and work purposes than for social and travel purposes. Unfortunately, international or globalized English for General Purposes (EGP) textbooks are much better business than textbooks for a single region or country, or textbooks with a lot of English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), or English for Special Purposes (ESP) content: Business is business.

Even proficiency tests should have variations to suit different regions and countries, or rather the people in them: Why should someone fail to get a scholarship or a job because they failed a test of English for everyday social and transactional life in an English-speaking country when they need English for medicine or engineering in their own country?

## CONCLUSION

Most Latin Americans do not and will not need English (and they have other urgent needs), but an important minority do or may. ELT in basic education in Latin America has in general never served well those who do need English (a need that is most often not clear until late adolescence or adulthood), the exceptions being a good number of private schools and very few outstanding public ones (and note that public schools serve about 90% of all children). The establishment of national English programmes in most Latin American countries early this century has done little to improve that situation, and after up to 12 or so years of those programmes now, with up to 13 years of school English classes, most students still enter higher education, especially public higher education, with little or no English. That is largely because of inappropriate and poorly implemented and managed national English programmes, but also because of the globalization of almost "everything ELT" and the consequent neglect of regional, national, and local contexts, conditions, needs, and other considerations and issues. The globalization of EFL teacher training and development, of national English teacher associations and their journals, and of ELT consultancy, etc., often with a much more academic than practical approach, has led to a dearth of research into and publications about regional, national, and local ELT (Davies, 2020). Until much of that changes and there is radical new thinking about ELT in Latin America, in individual Latin American countries, and in other countries, far too much largely failing, useless, and costly ELT will roll on like a zombie horde. The long pause created by the COVID-19 pandemic should have given time already for a lot of new thinking, and there is still time ahead before ELT can seek some kind of normality again with, it is to be hoped, significantly more appropriate ELT producing much better results.

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