

## **Strategic Management of ELT in Public Educational Systems: Trying to Reduce Failure, Increase Success**

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### **Abstract**

*English as a foreign/second language teaching (ELT) is notably successful in some national public educational systems and unsuccessful in others. Holland, Singapore and Sweden are outstanding examples of great success in the strategic management of ELT in their public educational systems. General failures abound, particularly in countries that rank well below Holland, Singapore and Sweden socio-economically. The focus of this article is on the English language situation in Mexico, one of those countries, and representative of most of Latin America and other parts of the developing world. After providing evidence that the results of ELT in the Mexican public educational system are indeed generally extremely poor, the article addresses two main questions: Why is that so? How could that general failure be shifted to significant success? Two alternative responses to the general failure of ELT in the Mexican public educational system are suggested. They might be worth considering for some other countries' public educational system ELT also.*

### **Introduction**

The main concern of this article is the teaching of English in the Mexican public educational system, which serves over 90% of Mexicans. For conciseness, 'ELT in the Mexican public educational system' will henceforth be referred to as 'Mexican public ELT'. ELT in Mexican private education is also mentioned because some of the studies discussed in this article include it, and the comparison between private education and public education in Mexico is significant in a number of ways. ELT in public education in other countries is mentioned because some comparison between the case of Mexico and other countries is obviously relevant, and the conclusions of this article may have implication not only for Mexico but for many other countries also.

The title of the article is drawn from Graddol (2006): "The key to understanding the impact of global English probably lies in how well and how strategically its implementation is

managed in each country. There is scope for great success but also for great disaster” (p. 118). This article is not concerned with ‘global English’ as such but with ELT working with any conception of English, and Graddol’s observation is taken here to apply to any kind of ELT within a public educational system. However, the specific place of Mexico in today’s world of ‘global’ English and other international languages (including Spanish) is considered among the factors that may contribute to the general failure of Mexican public ELT.

That general failure does not mean the ‘strategic managers’ of Mexican public ELT are unique in their unsuccessful management or mismanagement of ELT. Rajagopalan and Rajagopalan (2005) considered that the extension of ELT to all Brazilian state schools in the 1990s “suited the interests of the bureaucrats at the top, who could celebrate steady statistical progress in their annual reports” while “those numbers only helped to camouflage the actual appalling conditions of teaching in [the additional] schools, and the growing disenchantment among students and teachers alike” (p. 5). Cummins and Davison (2007) went beyond individual national educational systems, saying that “policies and practices relating to ELT are, unfortunately, just as likely to be motivated by political pressure backed up by plausible but flawed assumptions as they are by research and careful evaluation of alternative options” and that “the issues are considerably more complex than the rush to English would suggest” (p. xxii).

This article addresses some of these complex issues in relation to Mexican public ELT. It first presents objective evidence which confirms the widespread anecdotal perception of general failure, and also considers some of the consequences of failure. It then explores the possible causes of the general failure and factors that might contribute to it. Finally, it proposes two alternative courses of action that might reduce the general failure and produce more success.

The repeated modification of ‘failure’ with ‘general’ is not incidental. While an essential premise of this article is that Mexican public ELT is a failure, the author has found good, effective English teaching and learning in all corners of Mexican public education, primary, secondary and tertiary. That success (or relative success, given conditions) may be cause for hope. Unfortunately, it is far from enough to avoid a verdict of general failure.

### ***Is Mexican Public ELT as Unsuccessful as is Commonly Believed?***

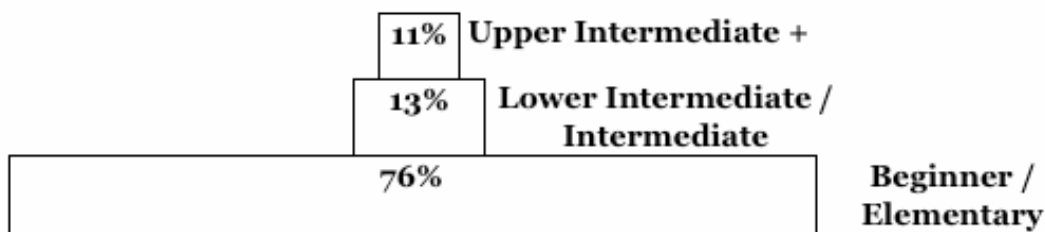
Mexican public ELT currently consists of English courses of some kind for an ever-increasing proportion of students in state primary schools, for all in state secondary schools (lower secondary and upper secondary), and for most in higher education (particularly compulsory English courses for undergraduates). In a few cases this now means up to nine years of English study by lower secondary school leaving-age (usually 15 or 16), up to twelve years by upper secondary school leaving-age (17-19), and up to fourteen years by graduation from higher education. More typical; however, is 5-6 years by the end of high school and 7-8 years upon graduation from higher education. Clearly, the investment in Mexican public ELT is enormous, and it is growing.

The success or failure of English language teaching and learning in a national educational system becomes crucial when students leave school and progress to higher education or work. If most have enough English proficiency to begin to meet their study or work needs, or at least a good foundation to quickly develop whatever specific English they need for study or work, the money, time, and effort invested in teaching and studying English over many years will have been well spent. If these individuals have not reached the necessary proficiency level, the money, time, and effort will have been a costly and possibly demoralizing waste. The English level of students in higher education may indicate better than anything else whether ELT in an educational system is a success or an expensive failure.

González, Lima and Castillo (2004) reported on a study carried out among students who had just entered nine Mexico City institutions of higher education (IHEs).<sup>[1]</sup> The included six public and three private institutions; two of these in the top rank of IHEs. The study had 4,960 students complete questionnaires with information about their socio-economic and educational backgrounds. The results unsurprisingly showed a strong correlation between socio-economic variables and type of IHE. The vast majority of the students at the two most prestigious private IHEs (over 86%) had parents with a degree, often post-graduate, while the vast majority of students at the two least prestigious public IHEs (over 70%) had parents with less than upper secondary school, including over 35% with primary or less. The overwhelming majority of students at the two top ranking private IHEs (over 76%) attended private schools only prior to higher education, while most of the students at the two bottom ranking public IHEs (over 64%) attended state schools only and another 30% attended a combination of state and private schools.

An EFL placement-type test was given to the students. It was divided into what are described as basic, intermediate and advanced sections (with 24, 24 and 16 items respectively), but it appears to reach only upper intermediate level according to the language content of most major international textbook series, which are now generally scaled according to Council of Europe Framework (CEF) standards. The test can be criticized on a number of counts (recognition items only, mostly in minimal contexts, and only 64 items in all); however, it did require understanding of usage and reading comprehension, not just formal accuracy. Despite these limitations of the test, the type and scale of the study is unique in Mexico.

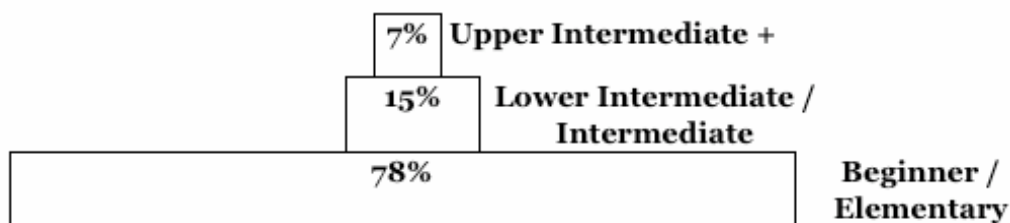
As is to be expected, the results of the test correlate strongly with the status of the IHEs and the socio-economic status of the students at them, but there is possibly one surprise: the best public IHEs come out better than the weakest private one. The overall results most relevant to this article are summarized in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Approximate English level of students entering an institution of higher education in Mexico City (sample of almost 5,000 in three private and six public IHEs)**

This extremely broad-based pyramid clearly presents a far from satisfactory picture of the English of students entering Mexican IHEs. The pyramid for the six public IHEs alone would have an even broader base, and that for the bottom four IHEs, which include the lowest-ranked private one, just a beginner/elementary platform. These results constitute a bad failing grade for ELT in most Mexican schools, both public and private, with the broadest failure by far being in state schools. It is reasonable to assume that the distribution by level applies not only to the students but also to the schools they attended, with a few producing most of the students at the top level (some of those, no doubt, private bilingual schools, or even international schools teaching mainly in English) while the rest produce most of the students at the bottom level (mainly state schools).

Clearly, most students leave Mexican schools and enter Mexican IHEs with very little English. The optimistic question arises as to whether most make up for that while in the IHE, acquiring a much stronger command of English by the time they graduate. The enrollment statistics for English courses in a public university (Universidad Autónoma de Tlaxcala) and in a private university (Universidad de las Américas, Puebla) in central Mexico, obtained for this article, suggest that the difference in English levels (much higher on entry at the private university) continue right through to graduation. In fact, there seems to be considerable improvement in English at the private university and very little at the public one. The distribution of levels at the public university (based on the levels of international textbooks used) is presented in Figure 2.

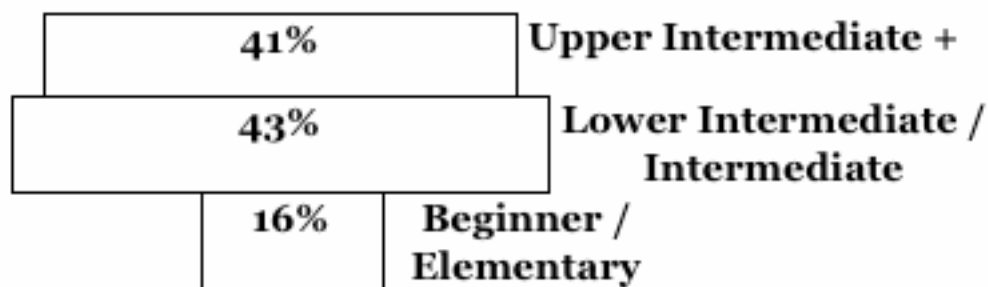


**Figure 2. Distribution by level of undergraduates and general public in English courses at a Mexican public university (average enrollment around 1,500)**

Three distinct segments of the EFL student population at the university are conflated in Figure 3: a relatively small number of undergraduates majoring in Applied Linguistics (essentially ELT), a larger number of Language Centre students (general public and undergraduates studying English voluntarily) and an even larger number of undergraduates in the common core English courses provided in all faculties. The distribution from low to high level is 40-40-20% for the Applied Linguistics students (to graduate, students are supposed to reach upper intermediate level) and 60-25-15% for the second group, while almost all the students in the third group are at beginner/elementary level (few department English courses go above that level). There is probably some negative distortion of reality in the final group because a few undergraduates no doubt enter with better English than the low-level courses offered to them in their department, and some reach a higher level before graduation through language centre courses.

In spite of these provisos, Figure 3 paints an accurate picture of the English levels of undergraduates and graduates at a Mexican public university, a very wide-based pyramid, very similar to that in Figure 1, and equally unsatisfactory. Most students enter with little English, only around 22% graduate with lower intermediate level or better, and only around 7% with upper-intermediate level or better (including those majoring in Applied Linguistics/ELT). That goes a long way towards answering whether most students entering an IHE with little English make up for that while in the IHE, before graduating: in public universities, a few do, but most do not.

The statistics for the private university (Figure 3) reflect the much higher socio-economic status of most students and the correlation with higher levels of English (as in the two top ranked IHEs in the González et al. study, both prestigious private institutions).



**Figure 3. Distribution by level of undergraduates enrolled in English courses at a Mexican private university (average enrollment around 1,400)**

There is significant negative distortion of reality in Figure 3 because about 40% of the undergraduate population is not required to take English courses since they enter with advanced level English. Including those exempted students, the distribution, from low to high level, would be around 10-27-63%, a very broad-topped inverted pyramid in total contrast with the very broad-based pyramid of the public university. That contrast indicates how English is more quickly and effectively acquired by the upper socio-economic levels of the Mexican population, and correspondingly more slowly in the much larger, lower socio-economic levels of the population, e.g., in the public university (not to mention the larger segment of population which does not advance to upper secondary school, let alone university).

The general failure of Mexican public ELT in lower secondary school was acknowledged by the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) in the new programmes instituted in 2005-2006:

An exploratory study conducted during 2001-2002 in over 100 state secondary schools in Mexico showed little ‘change in [teacher] practice’ has occurred since 1993 [the last time programmes were changed]; ...teachers’ ‘most common practices’ [were] reading aloud, translating, making lists of vocabulary, repeating in chorus; students who complete secondary education cannot communicate in English, (2005, p. 7)

ELT was introduced in public primary schools on the state level starting in 1992, and only fairly recently has the federal SEP started trying to coordinate efforts. Overall results of public primary ELT are impossible to assess since some states (e.g., Coahuila) are working with English from first to sixth year while others (e.g., Nuevo León) only in sixth year, and some (e.g., Nuevo León) have almost complete coverage of all schools in the state while others (e.g., Coahuila) have only partial coverage (creating problems when students progress to secondary school). Castañeda and Davies (2004) surveyed the situation in 2003-2004, noting such discrepancies and asserted that “few [programmes] appear to have paid much

attention to the extensive [public primary ELT] experience, positive and negative, of other countries, or to have seriously considered the enormous implications for ELT in public secondary and high school” (p. 1). Among the most recent initiatives in states not wanting to be left behind (politically as much as educationally) is the teaching of pre-packaged English lessons by non-English-speaking primary school teachers.

Mexican public ELT is clearly a general failure, affecting most of those Mexicans who cannot afford good private education and are not lucky enough to attend one of the best state schools or to be taught by some of their best English teachers. It is important to remember that this majority is well over 90% of the Mexican population: the percentage of children attending private primary and secondary schools in 2005-2006 was only about 8% (SEP 2008).

This rather extended effort to objectively confirm the general failure of Mexican public ELT may seem excessive or unnecessary to some readers, leading as it does only to “what every Mexican already knows”—that students will be extremely lucky to learn much (or any) English through Mexican public ELT, even if they have English courses from primary school to university. However, it would seem to be needed because the ‘strategic managers’ of Mexican public ELT rarely, if ever, officially acknowledge the failure (the SEP recognition cited above is an exception), and even less the degree, scale, and cost of the failure.

The history of strategic managers’ responses to the failure of Mexican public ELT is revealing, and a major concern of this article. Mexican public ELT began when English was established as a compulsory foreign language in lower and upper secondary schools more than half a century ago. Virtually from the beginning, ELT in public upper secondary schools has covered the same material as ELT in public lower secondary schools. In the 1980s and 1990s, when it was impossible to ignore the fact that, in spite of 5-6 years of English at school, the vast majority of students were entering higher education with little or no English, the public universities began to establish compulsory English programmes. Most of these simply go over beginner and elementary English yet again. From the 1990s to the present, with the continuing general failure of existing public ELT evident, and the global trend towards ELT in primary school beckoning, ELT was introduced into public primary school curricula. That is the present position of ELT in public schools.

The strategic management of Mexican public ELT has mainly been little more than a “rush to more and more English” (to repeat Cummins & Davison as cited in the introduction), increasing quantity at both ends (higher education and then primary) without a thorough consideration of the appropriateness, the quality, and the real results of existing programmes. This may have been good for some politicians’ and ELT experts’ CVs and a bonanza for publishers, but it has not served most Mexicans or Mexico well.

### ***What are the Consequences of the Failure of Mexican Public ELT?***

Serious consequences of the failure of Mexican public ELT are: vast financial and human resources (much needed elsewhere) wasted on ineffective public ELT, underdevelopment of educational and occupational lives, a shortage of proficient English-users needed by Mexican higher education and Mexican business, and the widening of the socio-economic divide between the elite (who attend good private schools), and the rest of the populace (well over 90%) who attend public schools or lower ranking private schools).

There are other consequences, which may be less tangible but are equally serious, especially for the future of Mexican public ELT itself. These include what might be called affective consequences. Rajagopalan and Rajagopalan were previously cited in the introduction describing “the growing disenchantment [about English as a school subject] among students and teachers alike” in many Brazilian schools, and this disenchantment could be equally applied to many, perhaps most, Mexican state schools. Disenchantment with subjects and programmes is a serious condition for teachers and students, not only reflecting past and present experiences but also casting a shadow over future possibilities.

Johnson (2006), in a study of young adult Mexicans taking beginning English courses (yet again), this time at university, found that those who had more positive experiences in school English courses (even though they learned little English) and more favourable impressions of their English teachers did significantly better in their new attempt to learn English at university than those who had more negative experiences and more negative impressions of their teachers (p. 300). Ineffectual or bad ELT may do much more than just waste the time of students: it may reduce their chances of learning English in the future, or at least make future learning of English considerably more difficult.

Another consequence could, eventually, be that Mexican public ELT will suffer a total loss of credibility: why try to really learn English at school when you know you will eventually have to pay for courses in a language school. The teaching side of that coin would be: why try to really teach English at school when most of the students make little or no effort to learn. We may be closer to that situation than we would like to think.

However, there is one kind of public ELT that is clearly much more effective than most, that actually competes successfully in the marketplace with commercial language schools in Mexico. University language centres are run like language schools and usually cater to the general public as well as to university students and staff. In these centres lies some comfort and some hope.

### ***Why Does Most Mexican Public ELT Produce Very Poor Results?***

Unquestionably and unsurprisingly conditions contribute significantly to the general failure of Mexican public ELT, especially in lower secondary, and primary schools: low student socio-economic status, large group size, poor classroom facilities, and low teacher



competence. Based on the experience of running two 36-hour teacher training courses in Tamaulipas, a Mexican state bordering Texas, one course with seventeen private secondary school teachers and the other with seven state school teachers, Dietrich (2007) reported that the state school teachers worked with groups of between 30-50 students (the private school teachers generally with fewer), the state school students could often not afford the uniforms they were supposed to buy, some came to school having eaten little or no breakfast, some of the state schools had very rudimentary classrooms that let in rain, cold and noise (though other state schools had reasonably good, quite well-equipped classrooms), most of the students (in both state and private schools) lacked motivation, and most of the state school teachers confessed to using Spanish extensively in class.

This account by an American teacher trainer working in northern Mexico largely matches the experience of those of us who have worked extensively in Mexican state schools across the country, actually teaching, and doing teacher training and classroom observation. In fact, class sizes in state secondary schools generally range from 40-60 students. There are, of course, some better state schools and some better teachers, [2] but the work of the better teachers tends to suffer from the school environment, crucially the lack of colleagues (i.e., principals and teachers of other subjects) who speak English.

Johnson (2006) also found that some students were unhappy with the mixed-level classes typical of school ELT: while most students still begin first year secondary school with no English, second and third year courses become increasingly mixed-level, with school principles, and even the SEP, requiring many students to be passed even when they have not reached the pass level. With some students now receiving English classes in state primary schools and others not, even in first year secondary school English groups may be mixed-level. The adverse conditions in which most state school ELT is carried out have also been reported and discussed by Davies (2007), as well as how a demoralizing ‘tradition of failure’ may affect expectations and results.

However, the picture just painted for state lower secondary schools does not apply to all Mexican public ELT. Most Mexican lower secondary schools have rather better conditions than the worst that Dietrich reports. In addition, in many upper secondary schools, especially those attached to public universities, the teachers are better prepared (many, often most, now Applied Linguistics/ELT graduates), average class size is smaller, and there is often a self-access centre. The same is true of compulsory English programmes for undergraduates. The explanation for the general failure of these English programmes must then involve other factors.

It has long been fashionable among the Mexican middle classes, and beyond, to assert that “everybody needs English now.” However, that is clearly not the case and most people realize it. In addition to the weaknesses in Mexican public ELT itself, the status of English in Mexico and the national environment in which it is taught may contribute to the general failure of Mexican public ELT (and other Mexican ELT).

As we have seen, the status of English in the top ranking IHEs in Mexico is now equivalent to its status in top ranking IHEs elsewhere in the world, or in almost any IHE in the wealthiest countries. Students who do not have a good command of English are very unlikely to be admitted to a top ranking private IHE. The ELT in the schools they came from must, therefore, be generally as effective as in the same types of school elsewhere in the world, or as ELT in the state schools in some of the wealthiest countries. However, the status of English among the other 90+% of the population of Mexico is very different indeed.

The situation in most Mexican public IHEs (and lower ranking private ones) is the opposite of that in the higher ranking private IHEs: very few graduates have a good command of English, as do few members of the staff. Considering the entire population, the situation is worse still, with only a very small percentage of Mexicans able to use English effectively. Whereas most members of staff in most European schools, state or private, now have a fair command of English, in Mexican schools that is rare, and in state schools, very rare indeed. Note that the European comparison is relevant because Mexican public ELT is increasingly modeled on the CEF.

The status of English in Mexico appears to create high expectations and success in the top socio-economic 5% or so of the population, and very low expectations and general, endemic failure in the rest of the population. Some European countries have established a virtuous cycle in ELT and effective English learning across the nation, but Mexico continues to struggle with an enormous, intractable vicious cycle (with a tiny, elite, virtuous cycle within it). It is easy to appreciate why things are this way, but very difficult to change them, except perhaps with a radically new strategic management of ELT in the educational system.

A comparison of Mexico (and other Latin American countries), where ELT in the educational system is a general failure, with European and other countries where it is a general success, must take into consideration the following: Holland and Sweden (to mention two prime examples) are wealthy countries with relatively stable populations, national languages with little or no chance of being major lingua francas around the world, and very well-established and well-funded systems of governance and educational management. Mexico (like most Latin American countries) is an emerging country, still with relatively low per capita income (dramatically low by contrast with Holland and Sweden), and with a population that has more than doubled over the past forty years, causing considerable migratory and social turbulence. Their national language connects Mexicans with eighteen other countries in Latin America, with Spain, with some 30-40 million Spanish speakers in the USA, and others elsewhere. Increasingly, Mexicans can navigate the Internet, professional journals and the world in Spanish, without English. Graddol (2006) included Spanish among the rising world lingua francas, along with Mandarin Chinese and Arabic. Governance and educational management have faced a difficult process of national integration, population explosion, turbulence, and shortage of funding for public services among other challenges. All this explains much about the situation of English in Mexico and countries like it.

Although a small but growing number of Mexicans are members of the cosmopolitan world where English is the main lingua franca, they live, in a fairly real sense, in a world apart. Mexico in general is a very long way indeed from widespread Spanish-English bilingualism. In fact, the possibility of Mexico and most other Latin American countries ever becoming generally L1-English bilingual, largely through ELT in the educational system, is very slim, in spite of some grand plans, such as the Colombian Ministry of Education's 'National Bilingualism Programme' (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, Colombia, 2005). Before L1-English bilingualism is achieved, English will most likely lose its status as virtually the sole global language, and Mandarin Chinese and, significantly for Mexico and Latin America, Spanish, and perhaps Arabic, will rise alongside it (Graddol, 2006). While English continues to be the world's principal global language (not much longer according to Graddol), Mexico might still manage with only a tiny minority of the population as Spanish-English bilinguals of some kind, concentrated largely in the upper middle class, in companies engaged in international business, in international tourist areas, in some areas of industry, and in a few areas of higher education. Though the number of effective users of English really seems far too small currently for Mexico's best interests, and for the interests of many individual Mexicans, most Mexicans really do not need to learn English.

This situation is apparent to most state school students because, their English teachers aside, few or none of the teaching staff, including the principal, speak English, even though they have passed right through the educational system. In too many cases, it is even apparent to discerning students that their English teachers' English is weak. They (and their parents) must also be aware that very few of the people around them in society at large speak English, including most of the professionals they have contact with (teachers, doctors, dentists, engineers, accountants, lawyers—mostly graduates of the public IHEs reported on above). Many students in public higher education see a similar situation in their IHE and society around them. This all suggests to most students of English that English is far from being as important for 'getting ahead' as is suggested. Such an environment is clearly unfavourable for EFL learning.

The argument developed in the preceding paragraphs is based largely on assertions based on subjective observations and impressions. However, the credibility of the assertions is supported by the following comparative data. Graddol (2006, p. 93) presents data from a 2005 Eurobarometer survey which gives the following approximate percentages, by country, of people claiming to be able to hold a conversation in English: Sweden 80%, Germany 50%, France 30%, Spain 18%. On that basis, under 10% would seem a very realistic estimate for Mexico, including people who studied in good private bilingual schools at one socio-economic extreme and some, but far from all, migrants returning from the USA at the other. Could the fact that both Spain and Mexico's national language is Spanish, a rising international language, be significant?

Other factors that probably contribute to the general failure of Mexican public ELT, apart from the teaching-learning conditions and the status of English in Mexican society (plus the

growing international status of Spanish), are the poor strategic management it has received, and the inappropriate application of international ELT trends in Mexican public ELT. These are discussed in the next section.

### ***What Has and Has Not Been Done About the Failure of Mexican Public ELT?***

A brief history of the spread of ELT through the Mexican public educational system was given above. It will be extended here, emphasizing what has *not* been done that might have avoided some of the failure in the first place or reduced it significantly later. It is relevant to observe that some of the decisions taken by the SEP and the autonomous universities may have been inspired by what has happened in private education, and attempt to level the playing field for the vast majority of the population that is educated through the public system. Unfortunately, ELT and teaching-learning conditions in public primary schools are usually a far cry from the better private schools. Social equity in Mexico is a bigger, more intractable issue than public ELT.

Soon after English was established more than half a century ago as a compulsory subject in secondary schools, it became clear that upper secondary school ELT was little more than a review of lower secondary school ELT, and even after that most students were still entering public higher education with little or no English. The main response of the SEP to the general failure of public lower secondary school ELT has been three reforms of the 3-year lower secondary school curriculum. In 1972-1973, explicit grammar based programmes were replaced by structural-situational ones; in 1992-1993, those were replaced by so-called communicative programmes; in 2005-2006, those were brought further in-line with European standards—"The scope and breadth of this programme have been determined taking time available for study into consideration, together with the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, developed by the *Council of Europe* and *Association of Language Testers in Europe*" (SEP, 2005, p. 13). These reforms have followed international trends, but appear to have had little or no impact on results. There have also been sporadic teacher development programmes (the author of this article was a coordinator and a trainer for one in the Federal District in 1973-1974 after the 1972-1973 programme was introduced, and has been involved in others since then), but again their impact has been negligible.

That is what has been done. What has *not* been done is the large-scale measurement of results, especially after programme reforms, as has been done in China. Wang (2007) reported that two large-scale studies showed a marked improvement in the English levels of high school graduates between 1985 (first study) and 1999 (second study). One can surmise that the Mexican SEP has not done that, fearing no ELT improvement, and being at least as concerned about results in other subjects, but unable or unwilling to fund large-scale studies for each of them. Other possible and potentially useful research that has not been done includes the identification of the teachers and schools that are more successful in ELT and the examination of what they are doing, compared with what less successful teachers and schools are doing. The 2001-2002 study mentioned above in which teachers were observed in over

100 schools (SEP, 2006) was a small step towards that kind of research, but, instead of changing the programme in the direction of the most effective ELT currently practiced in Mexican public secondary schools (and clearly feasible in them), the programme was made to conform more to the model used in the European Union (EU), based on the CEF. This continual pursuit of international trends has meant that something else has not been done and perhaps should have been—a radical rethinking of public secondary school ELT in terms of the Mexican reality, learner needs (insofar as they can be defined at the secondary school stage), and feasibility. These three aspects are dramatically different in Mexican public secondary schools as compared to schools in the EU, for which the CEF was designed.

Another response to the failure of public secondary school ELT (including upper secondary school ELT), was the establishment of compulsory (common core) basic English courses for undergraduates in public universities and other public IHEs. These generally go over what is supposed to have been learned in lower and upper secondary school, typically working with books one and two of an international textbook series. Some universities go beyond that low level by requiring or encouraging undergraduates to take classes in the university's language centre, where they can enter at the course level appropriate for them and study up to a higher level. The atmosphere in those courses tends to be different from the common core English courses—essentially a more positive atmosphere—because courses go up to higher levels, and undergraduates are mixed with members of the general public, studying voluntarily and paying. These university language centres have already been mentioned as a possible cause for hope, and could be a much better option for undergraduates than compulsory, low-level, common core English programmes.

What has *not* been done much in public IHEs is research on the lines suggested above for school ELT. This is troubling for at least two reasons. First, most Mexican autonomous universities have well-established Applied Linguistics/ELT degree courses, many now have master's courses, and most are pushing the teaching staff in these programmes to pursue a Ph.D. [3] The consequent opportunity for research, and actual requirements of research, are great. However, most of the first master's in Applied linguistics/ELT, and most of the Ph.D.s, have been provided by foreign universities, and these have tended to encourage theses on universal topics (vocabulary learning, learning strategies, communication strategies, good learner case studies, and so on) rather than urgent and vital local topics. Ramírez and Moreno (2007), in a survey of research on ELT and learning in Mexican IHEs, suggested more work on longitudinal studies, with larger samples, and “topics that focus on institutional, regional or national requirements and needs, as well as the promotion of collaborative research work among various teachers and students from diverse regions” (p. 44).

A second reason why the lack of research into public universities' ELT is troubling is that most of the upper secondary schools from which many, if not most, of the universities' undergraduates come, actually belong to the autonomous universities. The English teachers in these upper secondary schools are largely graduates of the universities' Applied

Linguistics/ELT degree courses. It does not make sense that universities should be providing compulsory beginner and elementary English courses for their undergraduates instead of making a greater effort to improve the ELT in their own upper secondary schools from which most of the undergraduates come. It would be in the interest of public universities to turn ELT research and development towards those schools, and indeed towards lower secondary schools. Too much thesis research at public IHEs appears to be ‘inward looking,’ focused on teaching and learning English in the Applied Linguistics/ELT degree courses, where students have thousands of hours of English in EFL classes and degree course subjects taught in English (and still seldom attain above CEF B2 level), compared to the hundreds of hours of most ‘ordinary’ ELT. It is in the ‘ordinary’ ELT, in the universities’ courses for undergraduates, in their own upper secondary schools and in lower secondary schools, and now many primary schools, that the real challenge for Mexican public ELT resides.

Another area where very little has been done in public IHEs is ESP. This again is odd because the universities’ own Applied Linguistics/ELT degree courses usually focus on learner needs, learner-centredness, course design and often on ESP. However, when graduate English teachers begin teaching in the universities’ own English courses for undergraduates (students of medicine, engineering, business administration and so on, who could easily be given ESP courses), they are usually required to teach English for general purposes based on an international textbook series to groups of students with different majors. The students are expected once again (as in lower and upper secondary school) to “describe people’s personalities,” “describe a neighbourhood,” “talk about lifestyles,” “describe the weather” and so on, [4] which few of them will ever do in English. They are not offered the English they are more likely to need, for medicine, engineering, business administration, and so on. This goes against the principles of course design that ELT graduates will have studied, which require attention to learner needs and interests and to local context (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986; Nunan, 1988). The strategic managers of Mexican public lower secondary school ELT should also be at least as aware of these same principles of course design as they are of the CEF.

The most recent initiative (or assortment of initiatives) in Mexican public ELT was the introduction of ELT into public primary schools. It started in 1992 at Mexican state level, and the federal SEP has only fairly recently become substantially involved. It was, presumably, intended to reduce the general failure of Mexican public ELT: what public lower secondary school, upper secondary school and university common core ELT had got wrong, public primary school ELT would help set right. To do so (and assuming for a moment that the hypothesis that ‘earlier is better in language acquisition’ is generally valid), many thousands of effective children’s English teachers would have to be found/trained and employed, and the bills for that and more (e.g., coordination and materials) paid. The number of such teachers per state might vary from a few hundred (e.g., around 400 in Nuevo León, with English in the sixth year of primary school only) to several thousand (e.g., around 2,500 in Coahuila, Nuevo León’s neighbour, with English from the first to the sixth year).[5] There are thirty-two states in Mexico plus a Federal District which amounts to about 50,000 teachers ultimately, and attached costs.

The enormous variation in programmes (number of school years, percentage of schools covered, experience and training of English teachers employed) has been indicated earlier in this article, and corroborated by the observations of Castañedo and Davies. Some programmes have certainly been set up and developed by competent and realistic ELT professionals and are, no doubt, being monitored quite carefully, but most appear to have been poorly planned and developed as part of the 'global rush to English.' An evaluation of how the different state programmes are working today and an account of what has and has not been done in them and by the Federal SEP is beyond the scope of this article, but a few observations on the original planning of two contrasting projects may be illuminating.

When the first public primary ELT projects were started, among the literature available was Ellis, Brewster, and Gerard (1992, originally published in French in 1991), in which there was a section titled, "The Lessons of the Past." In this section, the authors mention a ten-year longitudinal study carried out in Sweden between 1970 and 1980: "It was decided not to start teaching at the age of seven but to make it universal at the age of nine, a decision which has clearly played a part in making English practically a second national language in Sweden" (p. 19). Ellis et al., among other points, also indicate that the optimal age for starting to learn English can vary according to country and language circumstances and that the language and teaching skills of the instructors are two of the most important factors. Quality of ELT, specifically for children, appears to be much more important than early ELT in itself, which can actually be prejudicial. This confirms the previously mentioned findings of Johnson (2006), that young adult Mexicans taking beginner English courses at university who have had negative experiences with English classes at school and negative impressions of their teachers did worse in their university attempts to learn English than those with more positive experiences and impressions.

With Ellis et al., and the other literature on primary ELT available, two neighbouring states, both bordering on the USA, reached totally different decisions. In 1993, Nuevo León began teaching English in the last year of public primary schools, and by 2004 had covered 81% of all schools, employing just over 300 teachers (Castañedo & Davies, 2004). In 1995, Coahuila began teaching English from the first to the sixth year in public primary schools, and by 2004 had covered 29% of all schools, employing about 700 teachers (*ibid.*). The Nuevo León project can hardly have done much harm, and may have done some significant good, at relatively low cost. The Coahuila project was a matter of much higher stakes: it may be doing significant good, or equally it may be doing significant harm, or a mixture of good and harm for different students; in any case at extremely high cost.

Surveying all public primary ELT projects today, as Castañedo and Davies did in 2004, it is most probable that the findings would be that even the most recent projects and those about to start have not done their homework well, or hardly at all, and that results of those projects that have been running for several years (up to seventeen years) are very mixed and mostly negative. A survey of Mexican public primary ELT and thorough research into the different projects are urgently needed. These would be a much better investment than the extension of

most existing projects or the start of new ones. They would certainly be elements of intelligent strategic management of Mexican public ELT.

### ***What Should Be Done About the Failure of Mexican Public ELT?***

After this whirlwind, though inevitably incomplete, survey and discussion of the immensely varied and loosely articulated Mexican public ELT, the first recommendation that springs to mind is to call a temporary halt to the rush to English, think carefully about the current situation (or situations), and do planned research that can inform the next series of moves forwards (and in some cases, no doubt, backwards).

The research (and consequent ‘education’ of all of us, including policy makers, strategic planners and strategic managers involved in Mexican public ELT) should include more attention to public ELT in other countries, especially those in a similar socio-economic situation to that of Mexico, and to current public ELT in Mexico, at all levels.

The search for successful models of public ELT, appropriate for the socio-economic and political situation of Mexico, in other countries may be disappointing. The success of public ELT in countries like Holland, Singapore and Sweden has already been noted, along with the observation that they operate in a different ‘world’ from Mexico. The advance of ELT in China is much lauded, especially by outside observers and ‘contributors’, but China is very different politically from Mexico, and Chinese ELT experts themselves are not all so optimistic. Wang (2007) reported that “in many secondary schools, beginning students have to relearn what they have learned in primary schools, wasting resources and meanwhile damaging student motivation” (p. 93) and considered that “there is still a long way to go in order to make the aspirations a classroom reality” (p.105). From Argentina, Tocalli-Beller (2007) reported that there is a long tradition of ELT in Argentinean private schools, many bilingual, but “the discrepancies between public and private sectors . . . seem insurmountable at the present time” (p.119). Indeed, a common perception in the literature on the spread of English and ELT is that good quality ELT in good conditions (typically private) versus poor quality ELT in poor conditions (typically public) “can make the rich richer more easily than it can improve the conditions of the poor” (Graddol, 2006, p. 120), “reinforcing an economic and cultural chasm [in Brazilian society]” (Rajagopalan & Rajagopalan, 2005, p.9), as in that of Mexico and many other countries.

Public ELT in Mexico itself may be the most profitable area for research, initially in the field rather than in the literature, though there may be more literature available than is immediately or easily found. As has been emphasized almost from the start of this article, there is “effective English teaching and learning in all corners of Mexican public education, primary, secondary and tertiary,” and “that success (or relative success, given conditions) may be cause for hope,” though, “unfortunately, it is far from enough to avoid a verdict of general failure.” The research recommended here should focus on those patches of success, sometimes courses given by specific teachers, sometimes extending to several teachers in the



same institution, occasionally well-established in a whole institution, as in a good number of the language centres of public IHEs, especially the autonomous universities. However, there should also be research into high-cost ELT that is producing poor results, including, almost certainly, many and possibly most of the public primary ELT operations.

An example of what research might find and then explore further is to be found in the González et al. study (2004), referred to previously. In the questionnaires, they asked which upper secondary schools the students came from. They were then able to relate results in the test to the schools. Students from the following upper secondary schools, among others, passed section one of the test (from elementary to lower intermediate) in the percentages noted:

*From UNAM 'preparatorias incorporadas' (private): 49.9%*

*From UNAM 'preparatorias' (public): 32.9%*

*From UVM 'preparatorias' (private): 23.9%*

*From SEP 'preparatorias' (public): 7.9%*

It is worth noting that students from UNAM public schools did better than those from UVM private schools and enormously better than those from SEP public schools (32.9% vs. 7.9%). Though 32.9% of upper secondary students (mostly 17 to 19-year-olds) reaching lower intermediate level in English is far from what a national educational system might be aspiring to, in the Mexican context, UNAM public upper secondary school ELT is clearly worth examining more closely.

The SEP and the autonomous universities could establish research programmes, which many individuals could choose to contribute to when deciding on their B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. thesis topics. In a few years we could know much more about the realities of Mexican public ELT than we do now.

### ***Alternative Lines of Development for Mexican Public ELT***

One option for the strategic managers of Mexican public ELT is a course of inertia—the continued extension of public ELT through the educational system, especially downwards, where there has even been talk of English in public pre-primary, and the continued globalization (or Europeanization, on the basis of the CEF) of programmes and methodology. The prospects for that course of inertia, based on experience and results to date, appear very poor in Mexico.

A second course, one of definite action against inertia, has already been proposed above: a temporary halt to the rush to English, and planned and coordinated research to understand the current situation better and to inform the next series of moves forwards. Cost-effectiveness

and feasibility should come under scrutiny in the research. With this scrutiny, appropriate moves forward might include the limitation of public primary ELT to just the last year or two, a Mexicanization of programmes and methodology, based on current most effective practice in Mexican public ELT, and provision for the periodic evaluation of results. The reform of curricula (particularly the pivotal lower secondary school curriculum) could usefully involve many of the more effective teachers and institutions (identified through the research) as well as the traditional strategic planners and managers of Mexican public ELT (at the SEP and autonomous universities). This course of action might improve Mexican public ELT significantly.

However, the improvement might be too little to justify the continuing high investment in public ELT. Trying to make virtually all children and adolescents in public schools become functional users of English (as in Sweden and Singapore) is probably doomed to be a costly failure in a country like Mexico. Universal curricular ELT also appears to seriously reduce the chances of successful learning of English by those students that really do want and eventually need to be functional users. There must be other approaches, to provide effective public ELT to every Mexican who really wants or needs English, that are feasible, and that would cost no more (and perhaps less), than universal curricular ELT from primary to higher education. Here is one such radical proposal, based on the information and ideas presented in this article, and on previous proposals (Davies, 1987, 2004, 2007).

A basic premise for this proposal is that, in today's evolving world (with Spanish advancing as an international language), only a minority of Mexicans need (or want) English, possibly between 15-30%. Unfortunately, with current public ELT, English is clearly not being learned satisfactorily by a sufficient number of Mexicans (it has been estimated in this article that less than 10% of adults are functional in English, including those who acquired the language through private education). The current approach to ELT is neither providing Mexico with all the proficient English users it needs, nor providing individual Mexicans with the English they need. A radically new approach to ELT in the educational system seems called for.

Davies (2007) presented a proposal, far more in hope than in expectation, because it was likely to face strong socio-political opposition (a refusal, or at least reluctance, on the part of both parents and authorities to retreat from universal ELT in schools because they do not understand that low-quality ELT can do more harm than good). The proposal was for universal English in the last year or two of primary school and in the first year of lower secondary school, which would give everyone a taste of English (a pleasant one, it is to be hoped). Then there would be optional English in the two remaining years of lower secondary school, and low-cost (or free) English courses available for the general public (adolescents and adults), which, initially at least, could be in secondary school premises outside of school hours.

An even more radical version of that proposal might be more appropriate: English in the last two years of state primary school and no curricular English at all in secondary school and after, only the option of English courses in one of the public language centres proposed.

Johnson (2006, p. 301) has indicated the general advantage of voluntary study (in the current proposal, in language centres) over compulsory study (in the current case, in the school curriculum and in common core IHE courses). Those language centres could develop, as those at the public universities have and alongside the university language centres, into a far superior provider of ELT than in state secondary schools now. They should be set up carefully to ensure a good standard of teaching and learning from the start. Obviously, any radical project like this should be piloted and evaluated in one or two smaller-scale projects (in a single city or in a small state) before being approved for wider application.

With that ELT infrastructure before students in Mexican state schools (and lower ranking private ones) progress to public IHEs, public university language centres and curricular English courses for undergraduates would be able to develop further. ELT at most university language centres already appears to be as effective as at most commercial language schools, with almost all teachers now holding B.A.s in ELT and/or Cambridge ESOL teacher training courses. The distribution of students by level reported for the Autonomous University of Tlaxcala Language Centre—around 60% in beginner/elementary, 25% in lower intermediate/intermediate and 15% in upper intermediate/advanced—is close to that of The Anglo (the ELT division of a bi-national institute, The Anglo-Mexican Foundation, which teaches up to top level Cambridge ESOL examinations) back in the 1970s. The current broad base and narrow top of the pyramid in the University of Tlaxcala and most university language centres is due largely to the low level of English of the general population entering the centre, like the level of English of the middle class population entering The Anglo over thirty years ago. The Anglo now has a stack of levels instead of a pyramid—32%, 34%, 34% (based on a total population of almost 9,000 students)—because ELT has improved greatly in most private schools, and because commercial language schools and public university language centres are now catering to people with low level English at a lower cost. Like The Anglo over past decades, and now many commercial language schools, the public university language centre distribution by level should slowly become a steeper pyramid, with ever more students (from the university and the general public) in intermediate and advanced level courses. That process might not be so slow if there is a radical and appropriate reform of ELT in the public educational system, on the lines suggested here, or with some other research-based and carefully thought-out strategic plan. EFL courses specifically for the undergraduate students in public universities could then also be strategically redesigned, with more ESP (Davies, 2008).

### ***Conclusion***

Obviously, Mexican public ELT can continue its present course, with its patches of success, its probable slow improvement, its general failure, and its very high cost. However, other courses are likely to be distinctly better for Mexico as well as individual Mexicans. Two have been suggested here, with the second, more radical one (reducing compulsory curricular English and increasing voluntary language centre English) much preferred over the first. The most urgent need, undoubtedly, is research to evaluate and explore current Mexican public

ELT. We need to know much more about where we are before we can confidently decide on a reasonable destination and how best to get there. This applies to public ELT in many countries.

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### **Notes**

[1] The IHEs in the González et al. study were: Colegio de México, ITAM and Universidad de Valle de México (private); Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, UNAM, UAM, Instituto Politécnico Nacional, Universidad Pedagógica Nacional and Instituto Tecnológico de Tlalnepantla (public).

[2] The level of the better teachers in state lower secondary schools is indicated by those who have taken and passed COTE or ICELT, Cambridge University TESOL certificate courses delivered by British Council Mexico in Mexican public universities since 1992, which requires a minimum of Cambridge First Certificate level English, at least one year of ELT experience, and basic competence in ELT for entry into the course. A small but significant number of teachers in state secondary schools are at or above COTE/ICELT pass level.

[3] Figures for teachers needed for 100% coverage of public primary school ELT extrapolated from Castañedo and Davies (2004).

[4] Functions in public university common core English programmes taken from *Touchstone I* (McCarthy, McCarten & Sandford, 2005), one of a number of international textbook series used in Mexican IHEs

[5] ‘Autonomous universities’ are the main and largest public universities, usually one in each state. There are many other public universities and IHEs mostly belonging to systems

governed by the SEP, e.g., universidades tecnológicas, universidades politécnicas, institutos tecnológicos.

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