ENGLISH IN LATIN AMERICA
An examination of policy and priorities in seven countries

MEXICO
ARGENTINA
BRAZIL
COLOMBIA
ECUADOR
CHILE
PERU
Research Objective

With the aim to support policy and programme development, this research provides an in-depth, holistic assessment of English language learning in each of seven Latin American countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Peru. The work seeks to establish the following:

• The impact of historical and current education and English language policies
• Levels and perceptions of English
• The primary factors which influence levels of English in each country

This has been achieved through a multi-phased and multi-layered research plan including a study of government policy impact, an English language learning analysis, two nationwide surveys and interviews in-country with local stakeholders. The research was carried out from April 2014 to May 2015.

Discussion

Latin America is comprised of a number of heterogeneous nations and peoples, but in our study of seven countries we found some similar factors at play with regards to English language learning. Firstly, English is a priority and a concern in all seven countries. English language learning has a positive association with wealth, education, managerial employment and international industries; this is probably true in all countries globally. However, these diverse populations also share similar challenges, including access to English language, the provision of high-quality education and shortages of skilled English teachers.

These issues, when considered by governments concerned with providing tools for personal and national economic growth in the unique context of their own country, have inspired dissimilar approaches, priorities and policies. It is clear that a monolithic approach cannot be taken in the region and as these distinct reforms continue to be implemented in each country, we can only gauge the factors influencing uptake in order to ascertain opportunities and challenges in the sector.

Access the Reports

To download all seven country reports, please visit: http://ei.britishcouncil.org/english-in-latin-america.
ARGENTINA

NATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE POLICY

The federal government advises on curriculum, provides training to representatives and encourages communication between provinces. Teaching a second language is mandatory both in primary and secondary education though the law does not specify which foreign language is to be taught, while the central government policy promotes linguistic diversity, in practice most provinces mainly promoted English. The national Core Learning Priorities (known as Nucleos de Aprendizaje Prioritario, or NAPs) include objectives, approaches and some content for foreign languages so that provinces can develop curriculums based on this foundation. One of the recently introduced aspects to language reform is intercultural competencies as a goal for language education.

1,001 people and 130 employers in Argentina were surveyed on their views of English language:

- English learners largely acquired English in secondary school because it was mandatory, many English learners stated they learned at a private language institute.
- Those who have not yet learned English stated they did not due to costs and because it was not mandated in primary school, or was not started from a young age.
- Sixty-five per cent of English non-learners stated they would learn the language to improve their employment prospects.
- Survey respondents indicated that English was to be viewed as a tool for greater inclusivity and equity.
- Most employers stated that it was important for managers and directors to speak English.
- Fifty-five per cent of employers stated they did not provide corporate English support.

According to stakeholders, the major influences currently affecting English language learning in Argentina are:

- There are not enough properly trained teachers to support demand for English.
- A volatile economy can affect English language learning and foreign direct investment.
- There is no a required level of English for university entry and the biggest loss of English is between high school graduation and university.
- Increasing digital access has had a big impact on English teaching and learning with ICT being incorporated for use in the classroom.
- Most jobs require English fluency, even if it’s not used.
- English is a highly-politicised topic.
- Standards for secondary schools and teacher training coleges have been made equal, regardless of ‘teaching and learning’ conditions.
- Cultural associations with English persist in certain communities.
- Most national policies aim at working towards a multilingual and multicultural perspective of the English language teaching.

BRAZIL

NATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE POLICY

In Brazil, the government builds language policy on the fact that the teaching of multiple foreign languages, not English alone, will allow for equity and inclusion in an increasingly globalised world. As such, there is no national policy for English language learning alone and federal guidelines for foreign language provision are implemented via National Curricular Parameters (PNs). At the provincial and municipal levels, however, policies may vary.

2,002 people and 116 employers in Brazil were surveyed on their views of English language:

- There is a positive correlation between level of education and English as well as higher incomes and English learning.
- Respondents mostly took English lessons at secondary school as it was mandatory, private English language schools and primary school.
- Most Brazilians who had not learned English stated it was due to the language lessons being too expensive or not having enough time to devote to the language.
- While 48% of respondents learned English for better employment prospects just nine per cent stated the skill was actually necessary for their current job.
- English is needed more in Brazil’s internationalised industries, including Financial and Professional Services, and in less in those that are largely local, such as Property Real Estate, Construction and Engineering.
- Just under one third of employers surveyed offer English language training for their staff.

According to stakeholders, the major influences currently affecting English language learning in Brazil are:

- Brazil’s sovereign, non-interventionist approach permeates foreign policy, investment and education policy.
- Portuguese has become a symbol of national pride due to its unifying role in Latin America’s biggest and most diverse country.
- In Brazil, all foreign languages hold equal status.
- Clear positive relationship between levels of education and English ability.
- English language abilities are a decent indicator of socio-economic status, as the Brazilian middle class continues to grow.
- Brazilian businesses could be a disadvantage in the global economy due to limited English fluency.
- Brazilian universities are eager to internationalise, but only recently has the process been institutionalised.
- Technology usage is increasing in tandem with growth in the middle class and social media is very popular.
- Younger generations are more open to English language.

AREA: 2,780,400 sq km
POPULATION: 43,024,374
- 0-4 years: 15.7%
- 5-9 years: 15.6%
- 10-14 years: 16.2%
- 15-19 years: 16.5%
- 20-24 years: 18.0%
- 25-54 years: 38.9%
- 55-64 years: 9.1%
- 65 years and over: 11.4%
GDP PER CAPITA (PPP): $22,100

NATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE POLICY

AREA: 8,514,877 sq km
POPULATION: 202,656,788
- 0-4 years: 23.8%
- 5-9 years: 16.5%
- 10-14 years: 16.5%
- 15-19 years: 16.5%
- 20-24 years: 18.0%
- 25-54 years: 38.9%
- 55-64 years: 8.4%
- 65 years and over: 7.6%
GDP PER CAPITA (PPP): $15,200

AVG. IELTS SCORE
(Academic, General Training, 2014)
- 7.0, 6.6

AVG. TOEFL SCORE (2013)
- 93

AVG. IELTS SCORE
(Academic, General Training, 2013)
- 6.3, 6.5

AVG. TOEFL SCORE (2013)
- 83
CHILE

NATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE POLICY

The English Opens Doors Programme works to ensure every citizen develops a degree of fluency in English and Chile becomes a bilingual state. The programme aims for children to learn English from grade 5 to grade 12, for three hours a week, with the goal of reading at an A2 by the end of grade 8 and at B1 by the end of grade 12. At the same time, teachers are required to raise their proficiency to C1 through increased training and professional development.

1,000 people and 100 employers in Chile were surveyed on their views of English language:

• Academic requirements were the strongest catalyst for English learning, the most popular reason for English language learning was due to it being mandatory in secondary or primary school or that it was necessary for university
• Chilean students who were confident in their English writing, reading and speaking skills were so as a result of self-motivated, personal language practice
• The largest barriers to learning English were cost and a lack of access to government-funded programmes
• English learners and non-learners alike most viewed English as a tool for greater employability
• Thirty per cent of surveyed employers offered English professional development to their employees
• Chilean employers largely stated that it was essential for those at management-level to speak English

According to stakeholders, the major influences currently affecting English language learning in Chile are:

• The remote nature of much of Chile together with uneven distribution of resources and infrastructure has made equal provision of English challenging
• Education reforms abolishing co-payments in schools, promoting access and implementing transparent admittance criteria will affect English language learning
• There is currently a shortage of qualified English teachers in Chile
• The government looks to FDI and the internationalisation of its industries to generate further growth
• Chile has one of the highest levels of national income inequality
• Testing and diagnostic processes for English language teaching and learning are not uniform
• Technology is a tool for internationalising the population and increasing exposure to the English, leading educators to use technology for teaching and professional development
• There is little opportunity for the majority of Chileans to speak English on a day-to-day basis, even in workplaces
• Perceptions of culture associated with English language vary in different communities

According to stakeholders, the major influences currently affecting English language learning in Colombia are:

• The Colombian government, employers and the population believe English is a skill for human capital that can lead to a better job
• The time and resources spent on education to a four-year university degree directly relates to English language attainment
• There is a clear correlation between income and English language ability with those in the wealthier socioeconomic strata
• The services sector, which comprises the bulk of Colombian industry, increasingly values English skills
• Historically, highly-educated Colombians have migrated overseas for opportunities but this is no longer the case
• Limited training and resources, as well as large class sizes, impede effective English teaching in many schools
• Colombians, increasingly connected via the Internet and social media, are tapping new modes of English language learning
• If given the opportunity, Colombians want to learn English
• The internationalisation of higher education is incentivising staff and students to engage in English language acquisition
• There remain populations and geographies within Colombia that are isolated and therefore do not have ready access to English language provision

COLOMBIA

NATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE POLICY

The National Bilingual Programme, renamed the Foreign Languages Competencies Development Programme, was launched in 2004 with the objective of cultivating Colombian human capital in order to further the economic development of the country. The goals of the policy include mandatory English in schools and, by 2019, fluency at a B1 level of secondary school graduates, a B2 level of university graduates and a B2 or C1 level for teachers of English language. The Ministry of Education supports these goals with complementary programmes but there is no national or standardised curriculum in Colombia.

1,000 people and 78 employers in Colombia were surveyed on their views of English language:

• The most popular reason for English-language learning was to fulfil university requirements, followed by to improve employability prospects and because it was mandatory in secondary school
• English language learners mainly attributed high levels of English to self-motivated practice and English-speaking media and low levels to lack of practice
• Colombians who have not learned English have not due to costs and lack of access but would undertake learning for the sake of greater employability, travel abroad or improving quality of life
• The majority of survey respondents and employers stated that English is a skill for greater employability, however eight per cent of English learners stated it is needed for their job
• Sixty-eight per cent of employers stated that English is an essential skill when hiring new staff and 81 per cent of employers stated that on a scale of one to ten, one being an unimportant skill, learning English was a seven or above

According to stakeholders, the major influences currently affecting English language learning in Colombia are:

• English teachers in Chile
• The Ministry of Education
• The government looks to FDI and the internationalisation of its industries to generate further growth
• Technology is a tool for internationalising the population and increasing exposure to the English, leading educators to use technology for teaching and professional development
• There is little opportunity for the majority of Colombians to speak English on a day-to-day basis, even in workplaces
• Perceptions of culture associated with English language vary in different communities

According to stakeholders, the major influences currently affecting English language learning in Colombia are:

• The Colombian government, employers and the population believe English is a skill for human capital that can lead to a better job
• The time and resources spent on education to a four-year university degree directly relates to English language attainment
• There is a clear correlation between income and English language ability with those in the wealthier socioeconomic strata
• The services sector, which comprises the bulk of Colombian industry, increasingly values English skills
• Historically, highly-educated Colombians have migrated overseas for opportunities but this is no longer the case
• Limited training and resources, as well as large class sizes, impede effective English teaching in many schools
• Colombians, increasingly connected via the Internet and social media, are tapping new modes of English language learning
• If given the opportunity, Colombians want to learn English
• The internationalisation of higher education is incentivising staff and students to engage in English language acquisition
• There remain populations and geographies within Colombia that are isolated and therefore do not have ready access to English language provision

AREA:
756,102 sq km

POPULATION:
17,363,894
0-14 years: 20.7%
15-24 years: 16.3%
25-54 years: 41.2%
55-64 years: 9.4%
65 years and over: 9.9%

GDP PER CAPITA (PPP)
$23,200

AVERAGE IELTS SCORE
ACADEMIC, GENERAL TRAINING, 2014
6.6, 6.1

AVERAGE TOEFL SCORE (2013)
85

AREA:
1,138,910 sq km

POPULATION:
46,245,297
0-14 years: 25.3%
15-24 years: 18%
25-54 years: 41.6%
55-64 years: 9.3%
65 years and over: 6.7%

GDP PER CAPITA (PPP)
$13,500

AVERAGE IELTS SCORE
ACADEMIC, GENERAL TRAINING, 2013
6.3, 5.8

AVERAGE TOEFL SCORE (2013)
81
ECUADOR

NATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE POLICY

In 2012 the Ministry of Education launched a new National English Curriculum and a number of associated measures, including targets for functional competence aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, new evaluation parameters for English teachers, and scholarships for students to study abroad. The curriculum guidelines make English optional for grades two to seven and mandatory from grade eight, with the aim of students graduating high school with a B1 proficiency. Mandatory English from grade two will soon be implemented in Ecuador to help reach this goal.

1,000 people and 100 employers in Ecuador were surveyed on their views of English language:

- Students learned English mostly in secondary school, undergraduate study and primary school, with the highest percentages of students saying they studied the language because it was mandatory in secondary school and they needed it for university.
- The largest barrier to English language study was the lack of access to government-funded programmes followed by the costs related to studying the language.
- Fifty-nine per cent of respondents who had not learned English stated they would for better career prospects and all respondents stated that English is a tool for greater employability.
- Seventy-eight per cent of employers agreed that English is an essential skill for their company provides English language training.
- According to stakeholders, the major influences currently affecting English language learning in Ecuador are:
  - President Rafael Correa has made education and English a priority.
  - Increased international cooperation, foreign direct investment and attention to specific industries are stated government priorities.
  - Use of digital technologies has led to ICT being an integral part of government education and English policy.
  - A minimum level of English is required to get a university degree and to pursue a career in academia.
  - There is a high demand for English in certain jobs and industries and many positions require an intermediate to advanced level of proficiency.
  - Many teachers are unprepared to teach English, leading to government interventions including scholarships for study abroad and online professional development.

NATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE POLICY

In 2009, the Secretariat of Public Education launched the Programmea Nacional de Inglés en Educación Básica (PNIEB), or National English Programme in Basic Education (NEPBE). The initiative was aimed at teaching English to Mexican students starting at a younger age. As part of the programme, the government has looked to invest in 35,000 current English teachers and train an additional 80,000 English teachers so students leave ninth grade of school with B1 English proficiency.

1,000 people and 110 employers in Mexico were surveyed on their views of English language:

- English is most widely learnt during mandatory school education, undergraduate study and via private tutoring to improve employment prospects.
- Mexico has a substantial English learning market, with around 20% of the population accessing English tutoring via public or private means.
- The greatest motivations for beginners to undertake English lessons are to improve their employment prospects, to improve their quality of life and to travel abroad.
- Exposure to English-language entertainment and media has led to better language proficiency.
- First exposure to English can set a learner’s attitude towards the language.

According to stakeholders, the major influences currently affecting English language learning in Mexico are:

- Perceptions that the possibility of emigrating overseas is a motivating factor for Mexicans to learn English may be exaggerated.
- Limited numbers of qualified teachers is viewed as the greatest challenge to the success of the English language policy.
- Exposure to English-language entertainment and media has led to better language proficiency.
- First exposure to English can set a learner’s attitude towards the language.
- Mexicans view English as a skill needed for greater employability.
- As the Mexican economy continues to liberalise, the demand for English language skills will rise in growth industries.
- There is a clear correlation between higher levels of educational attainment and previous study of English.
- Higher education levels and English proficiency are more common in wealthier Mexican families.

AREA: 283,561 sq km
POPULATION: 15,654,411
- 0-14 years: 28.5%
- 15-24 years: 18.6%
- 25-54 years: 38.9%
- 55-64 years: 7.1%
- 65 years and over: 6.9%

GDP PER CAPITA (PPP) $11,400

AVERAGE IELTS SCORE (ACADEMIC GENERAL TRAINING, 2014)
6.5, 6.1

AVERAGE TOEFL SCORE (2013) 80

MEXICO

AREA: 1,964,375 sq km
POPULATION: 120,286,655
- 0-14 years: 27.9%
- 15-24 years: 19.8%
- 25-54 years: 40.4%
- 55-64 years: 7.1%
- 65 years and over: 6.6%

GDP PER CAPITA (PPP) $17,900

AVERAGE IELTS SCORE (ACADEMIC GENERAL TRAINING, 2013)
6.4, 6.1

AVERAGE TOEFL SCORE (2013) 86
NATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE POLICY

On July 28, 2014, President Ollanta Humala announced that bilingual education was a priority and set the goal for the country to achieve bilingualism, with English as the priority, by 2021. The National English Plan goals have been announced and include professional development of teachers as well as guidelines on how English should be taught in secondary school and, soon, primary school. An initial aim is to increase school and English-language hours and invest in public school infrastructure. Further, the Ministry of Education in Peru signed a Memorandum of Understanding in late 2014 with the UK for technical assistance with its English language programme.

1,002 people and 137 employers in Peru were surveyed on their views of English language:

- The most common place to study English was secondary school, followed by during undergraduate study and at a private language school.
- Students mainly learned English as it was mandatory in school though 40 per cent of respondents said they needed it for university study.
- The biggest barrier to English language uptake is costs, followed by a lack of time.
- English learners and non-learners alike agreed that English is a tool for greater employability.
- Seventeen per cent of surveyed employers indicated that English language training occurred in their company.
- Most employers stated strongly agreed that English is essential to the growth and progress of Peru.

According to stakeholders, the major influences currently affecting English language learning in Peru are:

- There is a significant relationship between income and English language learning and cost was the biggest deterrent to studying English.
- Peru’s multiethnic and multilingual population has been a key driver for inclusive education and access to language learning.
- The government faces challenges in reaching and connecting diverse as well as remote areas of Peru.
- Through training, scholarships and increased access and quality, the government is committed to English language learning.
- With increased English teaching hours, more teachers must be trained.
- English enables keeping up-to-date with technology and the use of technology facilitates improving English.
- Data collection has not been a priority in Peru and national diagnostic numbers are hard to find.
- Peru’s resource-rich lands have ensured that FDI remains at robust levels.
- English fluency is seen as a means of enhancing employment prospects.
- Scholarships are widely available for students who fulfill the English requirements.

NOTES

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DATA SOURCES:
CIA World Factbook, Educational Testing Service, IELTS
British Council Education Intelligence