

Contextual factors that affect the English learning process of students in Mexico.  
Factores contextuales que afectan el proceso de aprendizaje del idioma inglés de los  
estudiantes en México.

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**Abstract:**

Learning a new language always takes a considerable amount of time, constant effort, practice and commitment. It is a process in which the learner is influenced by different aspects, such as school factors (under teacher's and institution's control) and contextual factors (external factors that are not under teacher's and institution's control). For this reason, talking about the challenges during the English learning process requires noticing the background of the students. Through this article, different situations and problems are exposed in order to ponder about the contextual factors of the students in Mexico. It is presented the definition of contextual factors and the aspects that compose it. Afterward, an overview of general education in Mexico is presented, as well as the current English teaching situation and the low level of English in Mexican students. The relationship between the socioeconomic level and the level of English of the students is also shown. Moreover, the influence of parents on the academic performance of their children is also addressed. The article incorporates the changes in the perceptions of English learners through the past years and the new perspective towards the English language. This article culminates with a conclusion of the contextual factors and a reflection about the changes that could be done.

**Keywords:**

*Contextual factors, education, family, economy, learners, perceptions*

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**Resumen:**

Aprender un nuevo idioma siempre requiere de mucho tiempo, esfuerzo constante, práctica y sobretodo compromiso. Es un proceso en el que el aprendiz es influenciado por diferentes aspectos, entre estos factores encontramos los relacionados con la escuela, los cuales están bajo el control del maestro, y los factores contextuales, es decir, aquellos factores externos que el maestro no puede controlar. Por esta razón, al hablar de los desafíos durante el proceso de aprendizaje del inglés, se requiere prestar atención a los antecedentes de los estudiantes. A través de este artículo se exponen diferentes situaciones y problemáticas con el fin de reflexionar sobre los factores contextuales de los estudiantes en México. Se presenta la definición del término factores contextuales y los aspectos que lo componen. Posteriormente, se presenta un panorama de la educación general en México; así como la situación actual de la enseñanza del inglés y el bajo nivel de inglés en los estudiantes mexicanos. De igual forma, se muestra la relación que existe entre el nivel socioeconómico y el nivel de inglés de los estudiantes. Además, se aborda la influencia de los padres en el rendimiento académico de sus hijos. Después, se presentan los cambios en las percepciones de los estudiantes de inglés a través de los últimos años y la nueva perspectiva hacia el idioma inglés. Este artículo culmina con una conclusión de los factores contextuales y una reflexión sobre los cambios que se podrían hacer.

**Palabras Clave:**

*Factores contextuales, educación, familia, economía, aprendices, percepciones.*

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## Introduction

Nowadays, the interest in the realm of learning English as a second language has grown. This is due to the fact that English has become an international language used in many countries in different sectors (Mohammed, 2018). In the global market, English language has become a key for the employability all over the world (Clement and Murugavel, 2018). English seems to be a passport for better opportunities (Ahmad, 2016). It helps to communicate with people around the world and know new cultures and lifestyles (ETS Global, 2020).

El inglés es la lengua con la que personas de los orígenes más diversos pueden dialogar y entenderse, por lo que impulsar que los estudiantes de México lo aprendan significa abrirles la puerta hacia nuevas oportunidades; hacia nuevas maneras de entender el mundo y de aproximarse al conocimiento. [Through the English language people of the most diverse origins can communicate and understand each other. So, encouraging students in Mexico to learn English means opening the door to new opportunities, for new ways of understanding the world and approaching knowledge] (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2017)

However, the process of learning a second language always presents challenges. Spence (2022) mentions that some of the most common language learning challenges are: shyness and fear, lack of motivation, and the English level. Learning a new language is a journey with highs and lows and it is normal feel fear and uncertainty about the next step. The challenges mentioned by Spence can be classified as classroom context. But, sometimes challenges are also influenced by external factors. Challenges are related with the context of the classroom and the social context of students (Palfreyman, 2006). Family, teachers and peers are part of our social context, and their assumptions towards English language affect our perceptions about learning English (Despaigne, 2010). Hence, this article aims to reflect on the different contextual factors that have affected English learning in Mexico, such as the educational system, family circumstances, and perceptions.

## Contextual factors

When we talk about education and the challenges to teach a language, commonly, we associate the problem with the teaching performance, materials, tasks, books, approaches, et cetera. These factors are related with the classroom context, which are under teachers' control. However, the contextual factors, such as parents, society, economy (Bahia, Janeiro, Duarte, 2007) and education system are related to the learning process of students too (Cole and Griffin, 1987). The contextual factors are variable (Vermunt, 2005) and the teacher has no control over them (figure 1).

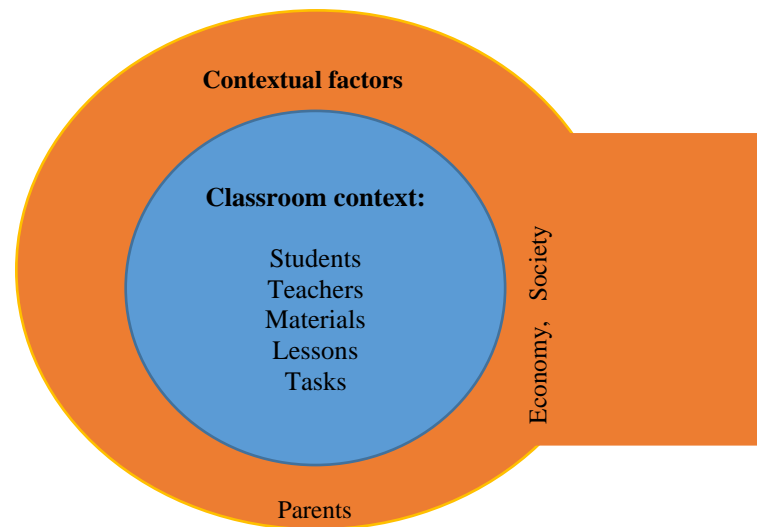


Figure 1. Contexts

Source: Embedded contexts by Improving science and mathematics Education for minorities and women: Contextual factors in education.

Adapted by: Ana Ruth Iturria Cedillo.

Australian curriculum (n.d.) defines contextual factors as a set of factors that can influence in different aspects of our live. These factors are personal, social, cultural, economic and political factors. For purposes of this article, contextual factors will refer to education system, economy, society, and family.

## Education System in Mexico

Throughout the past of the years, it has existed an interest in improving and raising the quality of education in Mexico. As mentioned by Guichard (2008) “only in the early 1990s did quality move to the top of the agenda. However, these reforms have been insufficient and their implementation has proved difficult. “(p. 35) Despite the effort of Mexican government, the problem persists in the country.

According to The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (2018) students in Mexico performed a deficient score in reading, mathematics and science. Based on the results, Mexico is placed lower than the OECD (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) average in those subjects (figure 2). The low and poor quality education in Mexico is widespread-affecting both the public and the private educational systems. International Community Foundation (2022) shared an alarming fact: in academic terms, the poorest children in Vietnam are more prepared than the richest children in Mexico.

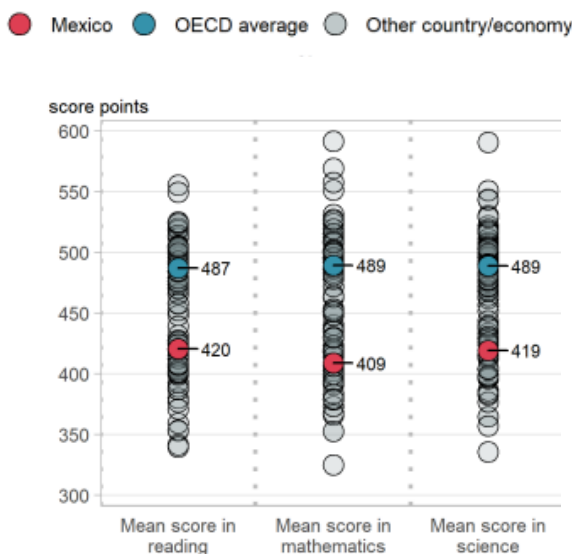


Figure 2. Snapshot of performance in reading, mathematics and science.

Note: Only countries and economies with available data are shown.

Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Tables I.1 and I.10.1.

Regarding the level of English in Mexico, the EF English Proficiency Index (2022) reported that Mexico is in 88th place of 111 countries with a very low level on a scale that goes from “very high”, “high”, “moderate”, “low” and “very low” (figure 3). As stated at the beginning of this section, the government has committed to raising the academic standard and the standards of English language education, but these educational reforms do not represent a real help. For instance, the Programa Nacional de Inglés (PRONI) in 2017 had the vision that in 5 years the 50% of students enrolled in primary, secondary, and high school would graduate with an A2 or B1 English level, under the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). It was a great objective, but the reality was different.

Following data from the Estrategia Nacional de Inglés (2017), 50% of the secondary English teachers failed the performance evaluation, and though the majority graduated from the B. A. in English Language Teaching, they did not have the level to teach in basic education, which is: C1. Five years have passed, and the objective has not been achieved yet.

Nowadays, the requirements for teaching English at primary schools are relatively easy. For example, the Secretaria de Educación Pública de Hidalgo through the Subsecretaria de Educación Básica, the Dirección General de Educación Básica, and the Coordinación del Programa Nacional de Inglés (2022) launched the call for becoming preschool and primary English teachers. Some of the requirements are:

1. Having a degree, preferably related to teaching. Graduated professionals from other careers are also taken into consideration.
2. Graduated professionals from the B.A. in English Language Teaching need to have a minimum of 30 hours in teaching methodology. Graduated professionals from another career need a minimum of 120 hours in teaching methodology.
3. Prior teaching experience at basic education (at least 1 year)
4. B1 English level (in accordance with the CEFR)
5. Writing an essay about: the teaching approach of the English subject based on the social practices of the language.
6. Knowledge of the latest Plan and Study Programs implemented in Basic education.

Taking all the above into consideration, I am wondering: How many “teachers” are teaching English without being real English teachers? As indicated by Despagne (2010) in Mexico:

English teaching is known to be deficient as the teachers have no specialized didactical training; moreover, some of them do not even speak the language at an advanced level. Consequently, teaching is based on repetition drills, rote learning and memorization that do not help motivate nor develop communicative abilities in the language. (p. 62)

The role of the teachers is relevant in learning a new language. They have to guide students, provide a pleasant atmosphere and facilitate the process of learning English language (Mohammed, 2018).

The education system in Mexico has allowed untrained teachers with zero knowledge about teaching methods and teaching strategies teach English in the classrooms. Therefore, not only should we take into account the classroom context or the teachers' performance but also the whole educational context as one of the difficulties that affect the process of learning a language.

### Family circumstances

Currently, the term “whitexicans” refers to the people who are part of the elite in Mexico. Elite means: “richest, most powerful and best-educated group in a society”. (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.). They study in private bilingual schools, have the opportunity to study abroad, complete a master’s degree in a foreign country, *et cetera* (Despagne, 2010). Then, in their context, learning and speaking English is normal.

On the other hand, the rest of the population, depending on their economic situation, have the option to attend to a public school or a private school (Despagne, 2010). Generally, for these students who attended public school, the classroom is the only place where they can use the English language. Their context is different; they do not have many opportunities to practice their English language skills.

Davies (2009) disclosed a study carried out by González, Lima and Castillo in 2004. This study included six public and three private institutions, in which 4,960 university students were tested. The results showed a strong correlation between socio-economic variables and English level. Only 7% of students from public universities obtained an upper-intermediate level of English (figure 3).

On the other hand, the 41% of students from private universities obtained an upper intermediate level (figure 4).

It seems that students with higher economic status are more likely to get higher scores on the English test.

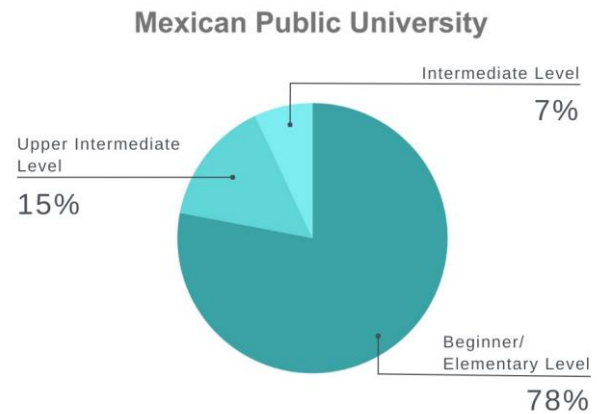


Figure 3. Distribution by level of undergraduates enrolled in English courses at a Mexican Public University.

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

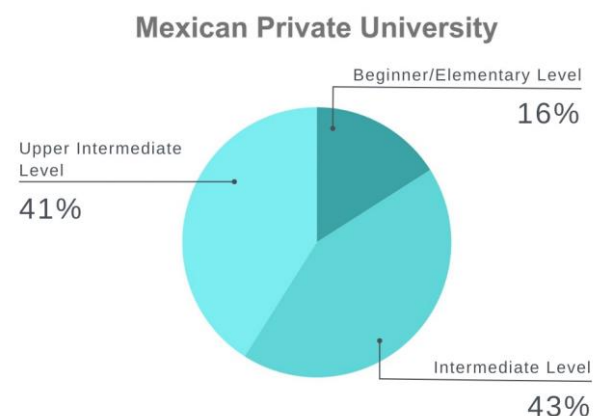


Figure 4. Distribution by level of undergraduates enrolled in English courses at a Mexican Private University.

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

It is important to mention that “many students of lower socio-economic status have lower self-esteem and confidence when it comes to education, because they fear that they will not have the same opportunities for success in the future” (Hanus, 2016, p.19). Parents have a huge responsibility; they can be a positive or a negative influence on their kids.

In other countries, such as Shanghai, parents pressure their children to learn English because English is more than a school subject, it is an opportunity to ensure their future (Zou and Zhang, 2011). It does not matter if they are poor or rich, education is first. Unlike parents in Shanghai, parents in Mexico, due to background and poverty, do not give importance to learning English. Family context is a crucial fact to consider during the process of learning. Parents are the role model for many kids, they raise them according to their own knowledge and experiences (Cole and Griffin, 1987). Unfortunately, in Mexico the family situation is complicated, especially in families with a low socioeconomic level.

Violence and the absence of parents, are common situations in the lives of Mexican children. When kids are exposed to violent environments not only their attitudes are affected but school performance too (Heissel, Sharkey, Torrats-Espinosa, Grant, and Adam, 2018). In Mexico there is limited literature about the advantages of parental participation in their child’s education. And for this reason, parents and teachers are not aware how important is their participation for the academics succeed (Escobedo, 2006). Parsons (as cited in Ruiz de Miguel, 2001) states that family, student and school share a social function: the development of the learner.

Having these two perspectives (families who are part of the elite and families with a low socioeconomic level) we can prove that family circumstances are a relevant factor that not only guide but affect the learning process. The background of families influences the point of view of each student. For some of them, the English language is a door to new opportunities, a way to accomplish success. But, for some others, English is a subject that they need to pass.

As teachers we cannot control the family context of our students. We do not know their background or the situation they are living in their home. Maybe the reasons behind their low performance are due to the problems they are living at home or the absence of their parents. For this reason, we cannot judge or assume that students do not learn English because they are lazy or do not care.

## **Perceptions towards English language**

In the same line with the previous section, studies done on the perceptions towards the English language (i.e. Dörnyei, 2003 and Despaigne, 2010) imply that attitudes are influenced by our parents, teachers, and partners’ perceptions. For this reason, language teaching different from the mother tongue has several drawbacks because sometimes it is rejected either by the students or by the parents (Carvajal -Portuguez, 2013).

Despaigne (2010) conducted a study in 2008 with the purpose to know the attitudes toward English. The participants were 300 UPAEP (Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla) students in A1 and A2 English classes. This study concluded that UPAEP students were aware of the importance of English in the work environment.

Nevertheless, results showed that negative perceptions were predominant because learners associate the English language with the problems between Mexico and the United States. In this particular study, we can observe that perceptions go further into family and classroom contexts. Politic and Historical contexts are also making an impact on the conception of the English language.

According to Villegas, García-Santillán, and Escalera-Chavez (2016), learning is easy when students are interested in the language and its culture. In the past, research (Chasan and Ryan, 1995) demonstrated that students from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) were not interested in learning about the culture of the USA or England. Chasan and Ryan also showed that Mexican students had negative perspectives toward English due to discrimination, racism, and the treatment of immigrants. Something representative of Mexico is the love of their cultural identity. Mexicans have preserved the country’s history through cultural traditions (Evason, 2018). And it seems that language and culture loyalty is unshaken (Hidalgo, 1988).

Despite the love and passion for culture, globalization and technological innovations have become a reference for new generations. Nowadays, the internet has become a window to see the world.

Unlike in past years, people are interested in learning English. According to Mexico Daily Post (2022), in 2022, Mexico had more than 24 million people studying English. And now, more people are immersed in the North-American culture.

Social media, music, tv shows, artists, and awards are examples of North- American references around the world. It is time to take advantage of changing paradigms and start implementing new strategies to improve the level of the students.

Although the level of English is low, there is still hope. Carlos Aravena, CEO and founder of Poliglota.org. (as cited in Forbes, 2022) said Mexicans have great enthusiasm to learn, but their knowledge is stopped due to a lack of practice, concentration, and conscious learning of the new language.

Nowadays, there is a thought among learners: it is possible to achieve fluency and mastery over English language quickly. According to British Council Mexico (2020) and the Common European Framework, it takes more than 1,000 hours of study to learn the language at an advanced native level (table 1).

CEFR Level	Number of hours (approximate)
C2	1000-1200
C1	700-800
B2	500-600
B1	350-400
A2	180-200
A1	90-100

Table 1. Common European Framework Guided Learning Hours (from beginner level)

Source: British Council Mexico

### Conclusion

The teaching and learning process does not take place in an isolated environment (Escobedo, 2006), but it is influenced by aspects that affect the individual. Hence, it is necessary to take into account all the contexts that

surround the individual when explaining their school performance. We cannot limit ourselves to the consideration of school factors (teacher, student, teacher characteristics, methodologies) but it is necessary to make an analysis of other factors that directly affect the student, such as contextual factors (education, family socioeconomic level, society perceptions). Through this article, some considerations and analysis of information were addressed in order to point out the situations that could be affecting the English learning process of students in Mexico.

Firstly, the educational context in Mexico. Unfortunately, Mexico is going through a difficult time at the academic level. Students' performance is deficient in core subjects, such as science, Spanish, mathematics, and English. Several sources of information (i.e. PRONI, 2017; Pisa, 2018 & the EF English Proficiency Index, 2020) have informed the decline of the educational system in Mexico. Despite the government's attempts to improve student achievement, the reforms and strategies implemented have not yielded positive results (Estrategia Nacional de Inglés, 2017). It is not fair to blame English teachers when the government is the one who allows people with no experience or knowledge about teaching strategies to teach in public schools (Coordinación del Programa Nacional de Inglés 2022). The economic situation in Mexico is also not good. Then, people are looking for jobs even though they are not related to their expertise area.

Following the line of economic situation. In Mexico, there is inequality in the economic aspect. On one side, the families that conform to the elite, and on the other side, the families with a low socioeconomic status (Despagne, 2010). It has been proven the strong correlation between socioeconomic variables and English level (Davies, 2009). In 2004, González, Lima, and Castillo conducted a study in which results showed that Mexican Private Universities have higher English levels than Mexican Public Universities. Apart from this, the context of the family influences the outlook of the learner. According to Heissel, Sharkey, Torrats-Espinosa, Grant, and Adam (2018) violence and the absence of parental participation affect the learning process of students.

Thereby, it is important for teachers to know the context of the family, as well as its socioeconomic status, in order to know how to get parents involved in education.

The final factor is related with the perspectives towards English language. Carvajal-Portuguez (2013) states that sometimes the language goal is rejected either by the learners or by the parents. Attitudes and perceptions can be associated with the point of view that students have about the culture of the country. For instance: The USA.



Chasan and Ryan (1995) mentioned students from the UNAM had negative perspectives toward the English language due to the behavior of north Americans regarding immigrants. In 2008, Despaigne carried out a study in which the majority of UPAEP students had a negative impression of the English language because of the political and historical problems between The USA and Mexico.

Nowadays, more than 24 million people are interested in learning English (Mexico Daily Post, 2022); the image of culture and the English language has changed due to the influence of North America. For this reason, people are looking for quick ways to learn English. However, learning a new language is a process that requires time and practice. The acquisition of a foreign language is a long-lasting process, in which students experience various stages of development and gradually acquire more proficiency in the language (Escobedo, 2006).

Mexicans have motivation, but their process to learn English is stopped because of the lack of practice and concentration (Forbes, 2022)

English has a new role in the world: communication (ETS Global, 2020). It helps to communicate with people around the world. Sectors such as business, science, education, technology, *et cetera* have made English an international language (Mohammed, 2018). Currently, many international companies are looking for people who speak and write English in order to create business around the world. Learning English brings better opportunities (Ahmad, 2016).

Overall, English is a helpful language to have better opportunities. However, it is a reality that in Mexico there are factors that dull the English learning process. There is much work to be done, but with the correct focus and guidance Mexico could overcome the challenges.

It is necessary to redesign school English language teaching programs taking into account the needs, culture, and characteristics of the family of Mexican children. I believe that focusing on the Mexican context, understanding the country's situation, and designing educational programs based on the context of the country will have a positive effect on the English language learning process.

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