
EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Why Some In-Country English Language Training Programs Do Not Work: What Every Security Assistance Training Officer Should Know

By

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Introduction

Since its founding, the Defense Language Institute English Language Center (DLIELC) has conducted hundreds of surveys of overseas English Language Training Programs (ELTP). In reading the survey reports, one finds that there are no uniquely bad or uniquely good ELTPs. Effective and ineffective ELTPs around the world share common characteristics. The primary purpose of this article is to describe the principal characteristics of ineffective ELTPs so that security assistance offices (SAO) can assist host-country officials to improve their ELTPs. But first, a little background information about DLIELC.

When we tell people we work at the Defense Language Institute, they generally ask how we like living in Monterey, California. When we look out our office windows, we do not see seals and sea lions frolicking in Monterey Bay; we see the bluebonnets of Texas. We are the “other” DLI, located on Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. Just as Lackland Air Force Base, because of its basic military training mission, is called the Gateway to the Air Force, so DLIELC is, for many international military students (IMS), the gateway to America. It is the first stop on their U.S. odyssey.

In its almost fifty years of existence, DLIELC has evolved from an “out-of-the-box” concept, to a tentative experiment, to a world-renowned and fully accredited, indeed preeminent, English language training (ELT) institute. Wherever one goes in the world, one encounters DLIELC alumni, who recall their DLIELC instructors and experiences with nostalgia and gratitude. The faculty and staff of DLIELC take enormous pride in the knowledge that military and ministry of defense hierarchies throughout the world are full of DLIELC graduates, who communicate with their U.S. and international counterparts in English they learned at DLIELC.

A comparison of the modern DLIELC campus with the jerry-built, ramshackle, Korean-War vintage campus of just a few years ago, gives tangible evidence of DLIELC’s evolution. However, the most significant, but less visible, evolution has taken place in its cadre of professional personnel. The average level of qualifications, experience, and professional competence has grown exponentially. The Commission on English Language Program Accreditation, after a grueling evaluation process, has recognized DLIELC’s professional competence by granting it full accreditation.

DLIELC's Resident Mission

Because the primary focus of this article is to identify the types of failings we find in conducting surveys of overseas ELTPs, I will limit my description of DLIELC's resident program to just a few words. Over the past several years, DLIELC has provided English language training at its Lackland Air Force Base campus to an average of about 2,500 students per year. About 1,900 of these students were IMSs and the other 600 were U.S. Army non-native English speakers. Most of our IMS graduates proceed from DLIELC to follow-on training sites throughout the United States. The most significant exception are our IMSs who attend DLIELC to take English language instructor courses. They return to their homelands after completion of their DLIELC training. Our U.S. Army enlisted graduates proceed to U.S. Army basic training and the officer graduates to U.S. Army basic officer courses.

DLIELC's Nonresident Mission

DLIELC has a multifaceted mission. In addition to its resident mission, DODD 5160.41 charges the DLIELC Commandant with responsibility for:

- Providing, when necessary, Mobile Training Teams (MTTs) and Language Training Detachments (LTDs) to assist in the operation of ELT programs in the CONUS and overseas;
- Performing field evaluations to assess mission accomplishment.

In fulfilling its global mandate, DLIELC deploys MTTs and LTDs to provide instructional, advisory, and managerial services to friendly nations around the world. In order to support its far-flung operations, DLIELC requires all newly hired professional personnel to sign a mobility agreement, according to which they acknowledge the right of the DLIELC Commandant to send them anywhere in the world for up to three years. DLIELC personnel are carefully vetted before being assigned to represent the United States in an overseas position and must possess secret clearances before deployment.

During fiscal years 2000 and 2001, DLIELC deployed 240 personnel, representing 3,741 man weeks, to 49 countries: Bahrain, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Albania, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Congo-Brazzaville, Czech Republic, Croatia, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Gabon, Georgia, Germany, Honduras, Japan, Jordan, Korea, Krgystan, Kuwait, Latvia, Lithuania, Malaysia, Mali, Mauritania, Mexico, Moldova, Mongolia, Namibia, Nicaragua, Niger, Oman, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, Qatar, Romania, Sao Tome and Principe, Slovakia, Slovenia, Switzerland, Taiwan, Togo, United Arab Emirates, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Venezuela. Thus far in fiscal year 2002, the pace of non-resident deployments is projected to exceed that of fiscal years 2000 and 2001.

Most often, the first DLIELC deployment to an overseas location is a field evaluation or survey. The purpose of a survey is to evaluate the host-country's English language training capabilities and make recommendations to improve them. Usually a survey is requested because a country has been unable to meet demands for personnel who are proficient in English. These demands may involve a need for personnel to do any of the following: serve as interpreters and translators, attend U.S. military schools, participate in international peacekeeping missions or joint exercises with U.S. and international forces, function as a member of NATO, etc. Depending on the survey findings, the host-country, through the security assistance officer, may request that DLIELC deploy a team, on a temporary duty or permanent change of station, basis to provide instructional, managerial or advisory services. DLIELC's primary overseas mission is to help countries become self-sufficient in meeting demands for English-language-qualified personnel.

Common Failings of Overseas ELTPs

Below is a brief description of some of the most common failings that DLIELC survey team members have identified over the years.

- **Poor Instructional Quality.**

The quality of instruction is perhaps the single most important variable in the effectiveness of an ELTP. Some of the principal instructional failings observed by DLIELC personnel in overseas ELTPs are:

- Lack of English language proficiency on the part of instructors.
- Conducting classes primarily in the native rather than the target (i.e., English) language.
- Too much lecturing at the expense of student participation.
- Poor instructor motivation, frequently attributable to poor pay and working conditions.
- An emphasis on literature before the student can handle basic conversational English.
- Trying to teach specialized language before the students have mastered basic English.

- **Poor Utilization of Instructors**

In many countries there is a legacy of assigning very few class hours per week to instructors. This apparently stems from the university academic tradition, according to which instructors spend a great deal of time preparing for each hour of class. It is not uncommon for English language instructors in intensive ELTPs to be assigned only five or six platform hours per week. Contrary to this tradition, if DLIELC's American Language Course is employed as a core curriculum, relatively little instructor preparation is required. At DLIELC, instructors teach twenty-nine platform hours per week. It comes as no surprise that ELTPs that underutilize their instructor workforce are chronically short of instructors.

- **Inefficient Utilization of Resources**

Many countries utilize their scarce resources ineffectively and inefficiently because they do not have clear ELTP output objectives. Countries have only limited resources to spend on ELT. In order to use these resources wisely, they must identify their requirements for English-language-qualified personnel. At the extremes, there are two basic approaches that a country can take toward expending its ELT resources: give a little ELT to a lot of people or give a lot of ELT to a few people. Most countries do not have the resources to give a lot of ELT to a lot of people. In general, to meet demands for English-language-qualified personnel, countries require relatively few personnel with fairly high levels of proficiency. It does a country little good to expend scarce resources to produce many personnel with low levels of proficiency because their linguistic effectiveness is not cumulative. That is, in the mathematics of linguistic proficiency, five people with Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) scores of 1 don't equal, in terms of effectiveness, one individual with an OPI score of 2.

It is axiomatic in the ELT world that, unless, personnel are subsequently to be trained to a high (i. e., functional) level of English proficiency, it is a waste of resources to train them to a low (i.e., nonfunctional) level of proficiency. An individual, for whom quintessential linguistic prowess

consists of pointing to a menu and uttering a heavily accented, “Bring me soup” is not going to be a great linguistic asset to his country.

A perusal of DLIELC survey reports reveals that many countries, with the best of intentions, launch their ELTPs programs by attempting to train the entire population of potential candidates. This initiative is usually manifested in a host of nonintensive ELTPs in which many students learn little English. When the country requires a few personnel with a high level of English proficiency, it finds it has many personnel with very low English proficiency. Given limited resources, it would generally be preferable for a country to establish a strong, intensive ELTP to train relatively few students to a high level of proficiency. The goal of training everyone to a functional level of English language proficiency, while commendable, is most often not practically attainable because of a lack of ELT resources. This is not an argument against nonintensive ELTPs which, if managed well, can be very beneficial. It is rather an argument that, given limited resources, priorities must be established.

- **Lack of Viable Standards**

One of the most common causes of an ineffective ELTP is the lack of viable standards. Viable standards should be clear, measurable, attainable, promulgated and approved. Standards of ineffective ELTPs generally lack one or all of these characteristics as defined below:

- **Clarity**

The standards should be stated in terms of what a student should be able to do after a given period of time. Perhaps, the simplest way of setting out clear standards is to state them in terms of standardized test scores. For example, “After 360 hours of instruction, the student will be able to achieve a score of 40 on the American Language Course Placement Test (ALCPT).” In poorly managed ELTPs, not only are standards unclear, but they are most often lacking altogether.

- **Measurability**

There is little point in formulating clear standards if they are not measurable. One of the keys to measuring the attainment of standards is the use of standardized tests. Poorly managed ELTPs frequently use instructor-made tests to measure student achievement. Instructor-made tests, which can play a valuable role in the training process, shouldn’t be used to measure attainment of ELTP standards. As we all know, tests prepared by different instructors on the same subject matter vary greatly in focus and degree of difficulty. A score of 80 on one instructor’s test might indicate a greater degree of achievement than a score of 90 on another instructor’s test.

- **Attainability**

Standards that are crystal clear and eminently measurable are of little value if they are not attainable. Demanding that students achieve high levels of English language proficiency in very short periods of time is a common characteristic of unsuccessful ELTPs. Unrealistic expectations create an air of cynicism and sap the motivation of instructors and students alike. It is also ultimately impossible to enforce unattainable standards.

- **Promulgation**

Standards that are clear, measurable, and attainable serve no purpose if managers, instructors, students are not aware of them. In unsuccessful ELTPs, no matter what the quality of the standards, they are frequently not promulgated. The ELTP directors may even produce documentation that sets forth standards, but subordinates are often unaware that the standards

exist. Documentation of standards is sometimes a paper exercise that takes place between ELTP directors and higher headquarters, but has little basis in reality. There can be no enforcement of standards unless trainers and students know what the standards are.

- **Approval**

In order to implement standards that are clear, measurable, attainable, and promulgated, they must be approved by the command structure. Approval is the key to accountability. ELTP directors can generally not hold students accountable for achieving standards unless higher headquarters has approved the standards.

- **Lack of Attrition**

One of the most common characteristics of poorly managed ELTPs is the lack of attrition. This lack is attributable to either a lack of standards or a lack of enforcement of standards. In either case, retaining in training students who are devoid of the motivation and/or ability to learn English in a reasonable period of time is an extravagant expenditure of resources. Non-achieving students occupy seats that could be occupied by more capable students. Moreover, non-achieving students tend to pollute the learning environment. The nonachievers frequently try to drag achievers down to their level. The old adage, "Misery loves company," is frequently verified in learning environments. To be effective, an ELTP manager must view attrition as a benign phenomenon that purges the system of inefficiencies, creating an aura of seriousness of purpose.

- **Lack of Standardized Curriculum and Testing**

Unsuccessful ELTPs generally lack standardization of curriculum and testing. In many poorly managed ELTPs, instructor-generated instructional and testing materials are used. These materials are generally inferior to those written by professional curriculum writers. They also lack standardization. In general, a high degree of standardization is desirable because it enables managers to predict outcomes. An ELTP manager has to be able to predict how long it will take a typical student to achieve a given standard. Lack of predictability creates chaos in a training environment and lack of curriculum standardization creates lack of predictability. Lack of standardization of curriculum and testing also prevents managers from making evaluative comparisons among several ELTPs. In fact, it is precisely because standardization of curriculum and testing enable comparisons among ELTPs, that managers and instructors alike often fiercely resist this necessary reform.

Poor Utilization of Language Labs

Language laboratories are often viewed as electronic marvels that are the foundation of an ELTP. Frequently language labs are equated with language programs. In reality, language laboratories are a nice supplement to a functioning ELTP. They are not the main course; they are the dessert and should be served only after the main course. There are many excellent ELTPs that do not have language labs, and, conversely there are many poor ELTPs replete with language labs.

Often language labs are underutilized, poorly utilized, or not utilized at all. A few of the anomalies our survey teams have observed over the years:

- Regarding the purchase of language labs as an ipso facto solution to ELT problems.
- Trying to use language labs as substitutes for instructors.
- Using language labs as classrooms, thereby impeding vital interaction among students.
- Limiting the use of language labs because students tend to break them.
- Installing language labs as "eye-wash" in headquarters, where they are utilized only to impress visiting dignitaries.

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- Acquiring language labs without the software necessary to operate them.
 - Acquiring language labs without having the infrastructure to support them (e.g., a reliable source of electricity, qualified maintenance technicians, properly ventilated installation sites etc.)

There are a number of preconditions that should be met before a language lab is acquired for an ELTP:

- Classrooms dedicated to the ELTP.
- Classrooms with adequate, lighting, heating, and ventilation.
- High level support for the ELTP.
- A full-time, paid (i.e., not volunteer) professional faculty member.
- An ELTP program manager who is accountable to higher authority for ELT results.
- A systematic enrollment of students into the ELTP and compulsory class attendance.
- An effective, efficient program for measuring student achievement and proficiency.
- Consequences for student failure (e.g., elimination from training, recycling).
- A well-defined ELT syllabus, designating the use of specific instructional materials.

If the minimal conditions above are not in place, it is probably premature to order a language lab. The money spent on purchasing a lab would be better spent on training instructors and managers, buying instructional materials, establishing a testing program etc. DLIELC's experience around the world has shown that the effective way to view language labs is as a reward for establishing a successful ELTP, rather than as an incentive to establish one.

The ELTP failings cited above are typical of those that DLIELC professionals find when they conduct surveys around the world. As those involved in the security assistance training business know so well, lack of English language proficiency can be a "show stopper." The most cost-effective way of developing English language proficiency is to establish and maintain a successful in-country ELTP.

If readers have any questions about this article, they can contact the writer at telephone number (210) 671-2531 or e-mail thomas.molloy@lackland.af.mil. If readers would like to explore the possibility of having a DLIELC team conduct a survey, they should contact Mr. Ken McFarling at telephone number (210) 671-3790 or email Kenneth.mcfarling@lackland.af.mil.

About the Author

Thomas W. Molloy is currently the chief on Institutional Relations at the Defense Language Institute English Language Center (DLIELC) in San Antonio, Texas. He joined the DLIELC faculty some thirty-six years ago after serving for two years in the Peace Corps. He has spent eighteen years of his DLIELC service on permanent change of station tours overseas, serving in Germany, Morocco, Iran, Somalia, Turkey, and Yemen. He has also done consulting work in twenty other countries. His last two jobs before assuming his present position were Chief of the Evaluation Division and Chief of the Programs Division.