

Beyond the Brochure: a Critical Guide to Evaluating English Courses and Teachers

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It is a truth universally acknowledged, as Jane Austen puts it, that today, more than ever, a sound grounding in the English language is of immense importance for all young people in this country who want to "get ahead". Whether you are a secretary or a student, a scientist or a surgeon, in commerce or in air traffic control, the need to speak and in many cases write good English is the same.

It is also at this time of the year that the public at large turns to studying the various possibilities offered by different teachers and institutes. Unfortunately, people who start courses very often take very little care indeed in selecting the best course for themselves. It has always seemed strange that the law is so quick to denounce the quack doctor, that is one who practices fraudulently, yet accepts almost anyone as a "teacher", whether they have experience and/or qualifications or not.

Perhaps this is because there is nowadays a general and growing tendency not to attach much esteem to the teaching profession in Argentina, and when one considers the number of fly-by-nights, cowboy organisations that spring up overnight one, can see why. There would seem to be no trade descriptions act to cover the fraudulent offer of services which are in some cases non-existent, and in many cases the poor public is not in a position to evaluate an organisation on any other than the purely cosmetic criteria of how it "looks".

Well, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, as they say, but it could be an expensive way to learn you've made a mistake. So, as many people reading this column may be thinking of English language study this year, either for themselves or their family or friends, I would suggest the following checklist with which you can evaluate courses and so-called "teachers" of English, before committing yourselves to a heavy and mistaken investment.

1. There is no quick and easy way to learn a language.

Claims that promise you quick returns are as valid as the claims made by diets to lose enormous numbers of kilos overnight. Learning a language is not a question of memorizing a number of facts but internalizing a system. You don't become an expert pianist or painter overnight, and may never become one at all; the same can be said with proficiency in a foreign language. We all have a different learning profile, and the claim that you, i.e. the public at large, will "know" English in 2 weeks/10 days etc. are rubbish. If one can generalize at all, assuming no contact with an English-speaking country, perhaps an average student can reach a basic level of communication after approximately 120 class hours, but that is only communication with a very patient listener in a highly controlled situation.

2. Materials do not teach - teachers do.

It is very fashionable nowadays to sell courses through hi-tech, promoting the use of video and computers. No-one wants to go to an institute to watch something on television that they can equally well do at home. Video and computerised branching programmed-learning activities are very good for consolidation material, but should only be a small part of a balanced course. There is no substitute for the authoritative teacher; a squat black box with dials and lights can't react to the blank look of incomprehension on the student's face.

3. Are the teachers "teachers"?

This is not a semantic poser, but a serious problem. The training of teachers in the *profesorados* is

long and rigorous and covers a wide range of aspects of the profession: psychological, pedagogical and practical. Just because a person went to a bilingual school or lived a while overseas doesn't necessarily make him prime material for the teaching profession. Ask to see the curriculum vitae of your teacher - it's a reasonable request. You may be in for a surprise. And if you find advertisements in the press for teachers which say something like "no experience required" you know what to expect from that particular institute.

4. The fallacy of the "native" teacher.

It is considered very chic to offer the services of native speakers of English as teachers. This is fine up to a point if they are "teachers", but the fact of their being native speakers is no qualification for them to work as teachers. Think of it in terms of your being in England and accepting work as a Spanish teacher and people paying good money under the belief that you are a qualified teacher. Given the choice between two highly trained teachers, one a native-speaker and the other not, the native-speaker might have the edge, but faced with the choice between an untrained native-speaker and a trained and experienced non-native speaker, the latter is a much better bet. However, there is a certain cachet in offering native-speaker "teachers", who may be students hitch-hiking their way around South America (I know, I used to do it myself) which matches the cosmetic aspects of the organisation.

5. Read all the publicity material carefully.

As I have said in this column before, a publicity brochure for an institute written in poor English is as good an advertisement for their professional services as a dentist with bad teeth. Of course, the learner cannot always be aware, but he can try to get assessed by someone who does speak the language. If you have an English-speaking friend then take him or her with you to the interview too, to see if the director/teacher is competent in communicative English. But a poster displayed on walls and hoardings all over the city with grammatical and spelling mistakes is an indication of either ignorance or sloppiness, or both.

6. Is the management of the Institute professionally competent?

Commercially speaking, teaching English is big business, but it's not quite like running a boutique or boîte. There is an inherent problem in all private institutes in the balancing of commercial realities and pedagogical ideals, and a short conversation, perhaps on teaching methodology, should enable you to see where the priorities of the management lie. Unless the institute has an academic director who is competent in relating students' needs to available courses, and is not averse to telling the prospective student that the institute has no suitable course for them, there would seem to be a lack of ethical professional guidance here.

7. Look at the school programme.

From the student's point of view, they want to be in a class with other students at their own level. Unsurprisingly, this is in the interests of the school too, and the implications of this are that the school needs to operate a number of staggered levels. An institute that offers only two or three levels cannot possibly fine tune their courses to the requirements of the students. Depending on the frequency of classes and excluding 'immersion' courses a reasonable number of levels/years would seem to be five or six up to First Certificate and for those who can make it about nine up to Cambridge Proficiency. But any school which offers courses in these exams and only has three levels in the school will have a serious problem balancing language levels in the classes.