

Choosing a language institute

Martin Eayrs

Published in the *Buenos Aires Herald*, 1983

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. At all levels, in all professions, the ability to speak and write good English is fundamental; for secretaries and students, scientists and surgeons, the need is the same.

And there is no shortage of places to study. A multitude of self-styled 'English teachers', of fly by night 'institutos' y 'academias', seems to rise each autumn on every street corner like mushrooms after the rain. How to choose a serious establishment from the plethora of institutions available, however, is a great problem for the would-be student or, in many cases, their parents.

Choosing a place to study

Well, as the saying goes, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Unless you're American – they don't seem to need to eat it. But, as a general guideline, if you are considering a language school you could do worse than check off the following points:

- Are the teachers 'Teachers', and do they speak a variety of English worth acquiring. Remember no student is likely to be better than the model he is exposed to. Speak to the teachers in English if you can, or take an English speaking friend if you have one. 'Taste and try before you buy' is not a bad guideline - above all, remember you are the customer and it's your money you're spending.
- Is the person in charge of the organization professionally involved and experienced in his field, or is he merely a businessman, selling his product in the same way as he would sell peanuts or pizza? There is a fundamental conflict in Institutes between what is pedagogically sound and what is commercially viable, but it certainly helps if the management has some pedagogical training.
- Does the school have a coherent syllabus and curriculum, with clearly defined aims at each level, and does progression from level to level depend on performance rather than attendance? Does it teach a balanced mixture of language skills and does each session follow logically from the previous one? Beware of purely conversational methods based around the day's newspaper - they may reflect the teacher's disinclination to waste time on lesson preparation.
- Does the school have an adequate range of levels to accommodate students of different abilities, and does it use a placement test to ensure that students are assigned to a class at their level? Does each student get a personal interview before being allocated to a class or course? Without such consideration of their level and needs and a reasonable range of levels to choose from it is hard to assign the student to a homogeneous class.

- Are the methodology and materials up to date? Look at the date of publication in the front of the course books - if the material was produced more than five or six years ago it could well indicate that the organisation makes no attempt to keep up to date with current developments in their field.
- Is only English spoken in the classroom? Chalk and talk, and reading and translation should be things of the past - the only valid way to learn a language nowadays is by using it.

Finally, stay a hundred miles away from anyone who calls himself a *particular* teacher ; he or she is likely to be no more than an intermediate student. *Private* teachers, however, are often a solution for busy people. Take care here that your teacher is a teacher. Teachers come from Teacher Training Colleges (Profesorados); does yours? The native speaker who is bumming his way around South America or can't get a job doing anything else may be great for conversation practice, but as far as structured teaching goes may be completely at sea. Ask yourself how much you know about the structure of your first language, or how to teach it, and whether you would like a person with your experience teaching you, and you'll see what I mean.

On the other hand, the native speaker backpacker may be a born communicator - some of the best Institute teachers I have ever met have been born of experience rather than qualifications, and not every graduate of every teacher training college is God's gift to teaching. Nevertheless, despite the undeniable cachet involved in having a native teacher these are not necessarily any better than a well-qualified local teacher and are quite likely to up and go with little warning, disturbing the continuity of your classes.

Don't allow yourself to be fooled with the story that 'we don't believe in assigning one teacher to a student or group - it's better to give them variety'. It is true that exposure to a variety of accents can be beneficial, but that can be supplied on tape. An essential part of any teaching is the rapport that develops between a teacher and his students. Institutes that give you this line are those which for one reason or another have difficulty in keeping teachers - often because they pay so appallingly badly - and where morale is so low results are unlikely to be satisfactory.

What kind of course do I want?

Most commercial institutes offer 'general courses', many of which prepare students for international examinations, such as those of the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom which offers a wide range of examinations in the English language. These offer a bit of everything; reading, writing, structure practice and conversation and are probably fine for most everyday purposes.

Some students have a clear idea of what they are looking for. Perhaps they want to sit for the TOEFL examination in order to study in the United States. Perhaps they just want to keep up their level with some 'conversation classes'. Or perhaps they want something more specific.

A receptionist who is learning English may want to concentrate almost exclusively on listening and speaking skills for dealing with enquiries either face to face or over the phone.

A telex* operator, however, might require nothing more than reading and writing skills, as well as the somewhat arcane ability to encode and decipher that special kind of abbreviated language so beloved by misers who encode such cryptic gems as YR TLX ADLON RCD STOP ETA EZE JUN 14 1800 STOP PLS RPLY ASAP.

A secretary may well need to handle formal and informal correspondence and perhaps translation skills, while the executive she works for is required to summarize lengthy technical reports but never to speak in English, and so on. And obviously the English required by a doctor for diagnosis bears no relation to that used by an engineer in an oil refinery or an operator in Air Traffic Control..

A whole sub world has grown up of English for Special (or Specific) Purposes (ESP), designed to cater for such needs. In the right hands ESP courses can be extremely useful, but only when they are designed around the needs of the client. When you buy a pair of shoes you look for one that fits; unlike Cinderella's ugly siblings, you don't mutilate your feet to force them into any old shoes you are offered. In general, be wary of any institute which attempts to sell you a course without first listening to what it is that you want.

Intensive courses

It is generally accepted that one of the best ways of learning a foreign language is to travel to a country where that language is spoken, undertake intensive instruction and also live in an environment where you are obliged to use the target language and have little or no chance to use your own.

An alternative which is superficially attractive is doing an 'intensive course' at home. By intensive, I mean a course of some twenty-plus hours per week although there are organisations in Argentina which offer 'intensive' courses of fewer hours. Be that as it may, the following points may be of interest to anyone considering enrolling on an intensive course now or at some time in the future.

First of all, let's consider just how a Summer School in the United Kingdom or the United States goes about things when it runs intensive courses. First of all, it typically has about a hundred students to work with, all of whom have already agreed on the timetable, the number of hours they wish to study, the course they wish to pursue, the cost, etc. They are tested on the first day and the results graded, classes being formed by dividing the people who did the test into reasonably homogeneous groups of approximately the same number of students at the same level, probably in seven or eight levels, depending on how large the classes are. An additional factor here of course is the possibility of having a national and linguistic level balance in each class to make English an essential medium of communication between the students in the class.

That procedure is certainly common to most language schools in the United Kingdom. But let's turn now to the situation here in Argentina, and the variables that we have to manipulate if we are to produce something comparable. First of all, we need to find a sufficient number of people who can all turn up at the same place at the same time, for the same number of hours, have the same basic needs, have levels similar enough to study together, can afford the same prices, want to study for the same length of time, etc. It

becomes a programmer's nightmare, and in a large number of cases the only way to do it is to stick them all in the same class and hope for the best.

Sadly, some institutes in fact do this, but then again there are quacks in every profession. Perhaps the best solution is to tackle this on an individual level unless you have the good fortune to encounter a group of people who share enough of the above-mentioned variables to make it worthwhile. But it is certainly worthwhile bearing in mind the preceding points if you are considering spending a large amount of money on intensive courses. It may even in some cases make more sense to combine the cost of classes with a holiday studying abroad, which, with the prices some institutes are asking for tuition these days, may not be as farfetched as it sounds.

Class sizes

A language class in many places lasts for fifty minutes which, at beginner levels is probably a suitable maximum concentration span, although certainly could be longer at higher levels. If we assume, unlikely as it is, that the teacher doesn't open his/her mouth, and, even less likely, that the class begins and finishes on time, this will give twenty-five students an average of two minutes per student per class to hold the floor. Two classes a week, thirty weeks per year, gives the magnificent total of two hours per student per semester speaking practice. Great, isn't it. And twenty-five is far from being the largest class size around.

An institute that has any conscience at all must see that this can't work. To take the money off fee-paying students or their parents in such cases may be good for business, but good for little else. Any serious language institute will have a number of students ranging from seven to twelve in the class, perhaps as many as fourteen or fifteen in the case of summer schools where students study up to six hours a day. In this way, with a judicious blend of pair work, group work and teacher/class interaction a reasonable amount of communication can take place. But the system of putting thirty, forty, fifty students into a vast hall, fine as it may be for lectures on psychology or logical positivism, just won't work for language learning.

Learn English in 60 hours.

Everyone, especially in Argentina, wants things done yesterday, preferably without effort, and language learning is no exception. How many times have you seen one of those seductive advertisements which promise you that you can learn a language, (usually English), in a short period of time (often, for some unknown reason, 60 hours), with some super new method? Tempting, yes, but it might perhaps be instructive to take a few moments to think about some of the implications.

The first problem of course is to define what exactly we mean when we talk about 'learning' a language. I myself have been 'learning' Spanish since 1966, and living in Buenos Aires since 1980. Although I get by fine these days I still have a lot to learn before I shall, if ever, fully come to terms with the intricacies of Borges or *Humor*[®] magazine, or fully comprehend the Porteño world in which I live. I shall always be in any case a kind of Don Fulgencio, having no cultural or linguistic 'childhood' here. Yet, on the other hand, way back in 1976 I could get by to a limited extent, e.g. order up a couple of beers, and manage to say 'how much?' and 'thank you'. But learning to handle a few situations is hardly learning the language.

And in any case, how do we quantify language 'learning'? Educational institutions that actually care about such things work with a concept of 'estimated terminal behaviour', which, in layman's terms, means 'what, at the end of the period of instruction, should the student be able to do that he could not do before it?' This can then be checked out, measuring performance against expectation, which over time gives a sense of perspective and leads students to more realistic expectations. To have reached the top of one 'level' in an institution is merely to have reached the foot of the following one; the student has not so much 'learned' the language as fulfilled the requirements of that part of the course.

Language institutes can make meaningless promises like 'Learn English in 60 hours' because they never have to define just exactly what they mean by the expression 'learn English'. Stop and think just what 60 hours is. Many people work a 40 hour week, so in terms of time 60 hours is one week and a half of the time they spend in the office. To think of acquiring a new language in the same time span might perhaps seem a little optimistic. Even if you spent a week and a half studying in a foreign country, living with a host family, in infinitely more conducive language learning conditions, could you really come back saying you'd 'learned' the language?

And is this miraculous 60 hour course going to be equally suitable for all people and all needs? After all, if a respectable language institute has at least eight or nine years between its lowest and highest levels, 60 hours would hardly cover even the first year. And of course the people who enroll on this super new course will not all have the same starting level. Does this, I wonder, entitle some of them to a discount on learning time? Because if John knows considerably more than Peter, and Peter can 'learn' in 60 hours, then John should require less time than Peter. Maybe some people who already know a lot need only ten, five, or even a single hour to 'learn' the language properly.

If we say a person has 'learned' a language, on the analogy of one who has learned the alphabet, learned to talk, learned to walk, learned not to believe all he reads in the newspaper, etc., we are implying that he has finished that particular learning process. My experience as a teacher of English and learner of Spanish is that learning a language is an ongoing process. I certainly have a lot of Spanish to learn and it's even a full time job keeping track of all the changes taking place in my first language.

* Telex was all the rage in 1983 – most young learners today will have no idea what it was.