

The Many Opportunities of



EFL

Training

By David Egan



English as a Foreign Language training is a common denominator for change. And it's a new market that promises to be big business.

In an era of 24-by-7 work weeks and global strategy, it has become commonplace to talk about the internationalization of business and the need for cross-cultural work teams. Implied in those concepts is a presumption that co-workers share a common vision, as well as a dependable way to share ideas and solve problems—and a common language. So, how do businesses decide on what that common language will be? And how do they work to ensure wide, expert adoption of what is arguably the most critical single factor affecting the success of their enterprises—that is, the ability to communicate?

Since the end of World War II and, more recently, fueled by the dramatic growth of high-technology markets and the advent of the Internet, English has emerged as the world's language for business, for technology, for medicine, and (some argue) for diplomacy. For those of us native to English-speaking countries, that has been a natural, if self-centric, evolution. For the vast majority of the world's workers, proficiency in the English language has become both challenge and opportunity—yet another job requirement to be met but at the same time a key competitive differentiator for individual workers, corporations, and entire economies.

Many global market watchers assert that for people in the non-English speaking world, English language proficiency means opportunity, better jobs, higher salaries. English symbolizes freedom. Bill Fisher, president of Englishtown, an online training company for English as a Foreign Language (EFL), says, “Doubling your English proficiency score in China results in tripling or quadrupling your salary. India has become a favored outsourcing destination not just because its people are technically capable, but because they speak English.”

Specific aggregate numbers are hard to come by, but knowledgeable analysts size the worldwide market for language education at US\$12 to 15 billion per year. And according to many analysts, including Fisher, the epicenter for English language training may well lie in Asia; 20 percent of the world's language training market currently resides in Japan. South Korea spends more money per capita on English language training than any other market in the world. In China, an estimated 150 million people are eager to learn English. Earlier this year, the Chinese government announced a program targeted to teach English to 5 million workers to serve the Olympic Games, scheduled there in

2008. The significance of this challenge is made more apparent by Fisher's comment that “today, there are no more than 5000 native-English-speaking teachers” in all of China. In recognition of that challenge—and opportunity—Fisher made the decision last year to move his company from Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, to Hong Kong.

Importance to business

How much importance do major multinational corporations place on English language proficiency as a critical success factor? At Japan's automaker Toyota, a specific and rigid requirement for an employee's advancement from one mid-management ranking to the next, across all of the company's worldwide locations, is a minimum required score on a company administered test of English, based on the widely standardized TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) exam.

International Data Group, a \$2 billion plus global IT publisher and information services organization, focuses on localized markets with local-language offerings, and local operating staff in 85 countries around the world. Yet, English is the unifying language of business at IDG. “As I visit our operations in dozens of countries, I'm always struck by how well our best local managers speak English,” says president and CEO Patrick Kenealy. “We always do business in the local language, but it's English that ties the company together worldwide.”

Training opportunities and challenges make English language training big business. There are thousands of schools, language programs, and tutorial services in non-English speaking countries around the world. These businesses range from globally recognized brand-name organizations, such as Berlitz and Swiss-based EF Corporation, to walk-in studios on the streets of Zhuhai, China, and Bangkok, Thailand.



As in any services market as diverse (and oftentimes chaotic) as EFL training, there's a wide spectrum of trainer skills and student success. In many instances, traditional language training techniques that emphasize rote memorization, or less flexible nonparticipative approaches, have yielded program graduates who have seemingly met the criteria to pass but who haven't, in fact, developed proficiency in the language they've been taught. Englishtown's Fisher comments that in China, for example, “[many students] learn to pass English tests but not to speak the language.”

As EFL training has become more prevalent and gained wider credibility as a defining skill for individuals, as well as for private enterprise and the public sector, standardization and certification have taken hold as differentiating factors



Yangzhou Polytechnic University, Guangdong Province, China

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One Teacher's Experience

Monday: It's the first day of my teaching assignment at Yangzhou Polytechnic College in Guangdong Province, China. The week prior, I sat with the dean of the English department—both of us trying our best to communicate with each other in English. He'd asked me to submit a semester plan. I thought it best to have the entire semester planned before the first class, but I didn't know my students' level of English skills. I hadn't a clue of what to expect as I was walking to class that morning, and I suppose the students didn't either. The morning sky was hazy, as it is most mornings in China. I reviewed my weekly plan sheet, trying to simplify the puzzle handed to me. I would teach 24 classes per week, a bit more than the standard teacher workload. But I never considered that schedule would be such a jumble. Among my seven assigned classes, none has a consistent schedule throughout the whole term. During the semester, some classes will meet twice per week, others only once. Other classes will meet regularly over a series of weeks, then not at all for two weeks, then return to a regular schedule. I can't yet fathom the thinking that drove this intricate scheduling, but I know what a confusing and time-intensive effect it has on planning a syllabus.



Sean Farley with some of his class

As I was walked up the stairs to the classroom, Chinese voices—mostly female—became louder as I got closer to the top floor. My 45 new students were waiting for me by the door—all very polite and pleasant as I weaved through to unlock the room and begin class. But the door wouldn't open and the lock was jammed. A minute passed, no success. My embarrassment grew, as did my sensitivity about awkward first impressions for both teacher and students, separated by the language

barrier I was here to help address. I tried to exhibit calm and humor, but I was running low on ideas about how to resolve this quandary. Then, a female student came forward with a pocketknife from her key chain. She wanted to help, and I was delighted to welcome her efforts. She worked the door problem for less than a minute and success! Problem fixed, communication established, ice broken—and we weren't even speaking the same language yet.

The students filtered in and the semester of classes began.

Such glitches, small and large, form the reality of teaching in some areas of China. Day to day, I am confronted with nonsensical semester schedules and uncooperative door jams. But an experience in teaching—and learning—English as a Foreign Language is like no other. Unlike the old saying about taking the bad with the good, the EFL training experience clouds the black-and-white paradigm of “good” and “bad.” Rather, it is a world of difference and continuous interpretation of an unfamiliar milieu. In the end, you struggle to express all you have begun to understand—and you learn as much as you teach. **TD**

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for both trainers and trainees. Among several claimants, the two certified methodologies most widely recognized around the world are CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) and TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language).

Bruce Veldhuisen is managing director of TEFL International, a nonprofit EFL teacher training and certification program with centers throughout Asia and Europe. A former TEFL teacher and teacher trainer, Veldhuisen founded TEFL International to help “upgrade the standard of performance for EFL teachers and improve the success—and enjoyment—of learning a new language that is decidedly foreign and challenging for non-English speakers.”

The EFL trainer

The typical overseas EFL teacher is a native-English speaker from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, or Australia, with a college degree and a distinct desire to live and work abroad. Many aspiring EFL teachers are multilingual, but most are not. Both CELTA and TEFL methodologies rely heavily on an “immersion” training approach, in which English is the only language spoken in the classroom.

“Our training approach is highly interactive,” says Veldhuisen. “Our success relies on the balance between a stable, proven teaching methodology and the teacher’s personalized approach to engage students by relating lessons to pop culture and by creating a ‘safe’ environment for individual participation.” In many Asian cultures, where traditional classroom behavior has typically been authoritarian and teacher-oriented, the TEFL methodology and approach often takes new students by surprise. But, Veldhuisen notes, “Our approach has produced teachers who are successful not only at teaching EFL, but also in helping their



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students learn how to think beyond their own past cultural limitations.”

EFL training certification

In recent years, Veldhuisen has noted an increased importance placed on teacher qualification by the hiring schools. “Today, any school that is considered high quality—and virtually any school that we deal with—demands that its teachers have a TEFL certificate as proof of their teaching skills.”

Steven Baker, head of Teacher Recruitment at ILA-Vietnam, a gleaming nine-story school in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), with state-of-the-art classrooms and EFL programs for grammar-school children through working adults, says the demand for qualified, certified teachers is, “insatiable. I could hire new teachers all day, every day.”

Fisher echoes that sentiment: “There’s a dire need for good EFL teachers in the world; we simply can’t get enough.”

Yet, the process for connecting qualified teachers to the schools that need their skills remains disjointed. Larger schools such as ILA do some direct recruiting. Dozens of Websites all over the world act as clearinghouses of sorts, where teachers can respond to online job postings. The largest is likely Dave’s ESL Café, based in Calabasas, California. By some estimates, the site gets up to 100,000 visits per month from would-be teachers and employers. But even when a qualified teacher has been connected to a hiring school, taking on an overseas EFL teaching assignment can be daunting for the heartiest adventurer. EFL related Websites and online chat rooms are full of reports and warnings about shoddy schools and substandard working conditions, misrepresentations of pay and contract terms, and loneliness.

◀ [www.daveseslcafe](http://www.daveseslcafe.com)

Implications for training

The need to establish a more dependable process to find, place, and support EFL teachers in overseas teaching assignments has created some intriguing new partnership opportunities. One example is a partnership between TEFL International and U.S.-based LanguageCorps. Jointly, the two companies recruit, train, and certify new EFL teachers, place these certified teachers into paid assignments with qualified partner schools, and provide local support staff to assist in such areas as contract negotiation, medical insurance, accommodations, work visas, and the like.

◀ www.languagecorps.com

“Working together, we can now match up the most highly qualified teachers with the highest quality assignments,” says Veldhuisen. “In one holistic system, we can find the right candidates, certify them as TEFL teachers, put them into assignments with our partner schools, and manage all of the moving pieces in a way that a new visitor to Thailand or China would be hard pressed to do on his or her own.”

Fisher’s firm Englishtown takes a different, more technology-based approach by creating teaching and mentoring interactions online. “We employ teachers where they are abundant, qualified, and inexpensive,” he explains, “and we deliver them over the Internet for about 25 percent of the cost of a face-to-face session. That means you either save 75 percent or you take four times as many lessons. Either way, it’s more efficient.”

Fisher insists that “Englishtown was not made to replace teachers or teacher-led training. A blended combination of online teacher-led discussions and interactive self-study tools, local face-to-face coaching sessions, and intensive study abroad is what we’re seeing most customers opting for,” he says.

There is wide agreement that the EFL training market would grow much larger, much faster except for what Fisher describes as a “drought” of qualified teach-

ers. He blames a critical shortage of teachers for pushing EFL training costs up, while keeping quality low—thus restricting the expansion of the EFL training market and its predicted positive effects on working professionals and businesses around the world.

Cultural confusion?

A key part of most EFL training methods, particularly as practiced with school-age children or young adults, is attaching lessons to many visual and auditory aids that are readily recognized as American or Western European, such as movies, music, pop idols, and business brands. EFL students not only learn a new language, but also reinforce a generally positive view to emulate Americans or Brits, work for their companies, or visit (emigrate to) those countries. Whether such Westernization creates issues of cultural conflict or confusion among non-English speakers, it’s clear that EFL training accomplishes more than creation of new speaking skills. It also helps generate an important common denominator, by which people with different cultural backgrounds can relate socially.

Training planners and managers would do well to observe the processes and successes of EFL teachers, and to begin thinking creatively about how to apply some of these lessons in a sort of reverse application. As incentive, consider two intriguing trends: 1) The largest population of native English speakers in the world resides neither in the U.S. or U.K. but in India. 2) Census experts predict that within less than five years, the world’s largest population of Spanish speakers will reside in the United States.

 Trends (December T+D) TD

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