

# TDF (Teacher Development Forum) Speaker Event

## *"Teaching through a Global Recession"*

On **Wednesday, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009** at **7 pm**, TDF hosted a discussion panel on "Teaching through a Global Recession". 3 guest speakers talked about different aspects of how the financial crisis is affecting teaching and teachers in China as well as the Chinese government's new directions in education. The speeches were delivered in a discussion group manner with questions and comments being given as the talk went on.

### 2 of 3

**Mr. Paul Murphy**, the second speaker, talked about the changing attitudes in corporate training – the move from budget allocation to looking for results – a return on the investment not without the influence of the present financial crisis. Mr. Murphy is Beijing Manager of Language Key Ltd, a training facility with training centers in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Beijing. He also touched on issues regarding trainers and the criteria for selection.

#### **Mr. Murphy's talk - Executive Summary**

Paul began by adding a couple of personal comments to the previous talk by Mr. Wang regarding the Confucian philosophy in China relative to education.

He began his talk by talking about contradictions in ELT education in China – a contradiction of quality versus cost per head and putting as many people in a class as they can. As well, there's the contradiction of having a good trainer versus the trainer with the right look for the client (white, young, good looking, Caucasian from the US, Canada or the UK). He mentioned that on the student's side there are also contradictions.

He went on to talk about issues regarding trainers and getting qualified trainers into China. Since the demand for ESL trainers in China is so high, the requirements to be a trainer is almost zero and many trainers lack the professionalism and expertise needed to teach in a corporate environment. Combined with negative stories of certain trainers has led to a perception of the ELT trainer as being non-professional.

Paul answered a question about qualifications from the audience which brought on the discussion of what type of qualifications and what are their values. He mentioned that at the end of the day, even with low qualifications, it's supply and demand that rules.

He mentioned that in the last 5 years, he however, has noticed a change towards looking towards value in the training and having a return on investment. Stating that multi-nationals are moving toward that direction but are not there yet, government organizations we're still more 'old school' and simply had a budget to spend on English training. SOEs are more interested in the satisfaction of their staff rather than meeting achievable goals.

New opportunities resulting from the financial crisis are in-house trainers (rather than contracting out) and 'out-placement training' – the training of some staff who will be leaving the company due to layoffs.

He mentioned at the end of his talk that English training centres are affected by the current economic situation in that smaller ones are closing, bigger ones are heading towards public training markets and other specialised ones are doing the corporate trainings.

Paul then went on to answer a question from the audience.

One question was if it was a good idea or in demand to incorporate English with skills training. Paul replied that although in the 'English for entertainment' situation, it's not going to work since there is no specific focus except to spend the English training budget. But other than that, there is a growing demand for English with sales or law for example. One danger he pointed out was the danger in this blended training of a trainer trying to teach a director how to run a business which is not the aim. We need to find the right trainer for the right 'fit' for that course.

Paul then talked a bit about the difficulty to show 'measurable' results in a 30 or 40 hour course. This is something that is sought after in budget-aware results-oriented companies. There is a difficult triangle of clients wanting measurable results, trainers wanting to deliver quality training and learners wanting more or less to be in the course.

He afterwards elaborated some more on what exactly they look for in trainers (certification, experience, business background and character) and also how they support them with evaluations. He explained their step-by-step process in hiring a trainer and their initial training (TTT). Following another question, he explained how his school tries to help the trainer not get 'jaded' with teaching by supporting them in mechanical aspects of training (like transportation and on-time payments). He confirmed that since finding a good trainer is difficult, when they do have one, they will try and keep them with support.

He finished his talk by answering a question regarding what a client's needs are. He spoke that although they give the client a report of their needs analysis, the client may often have something else in mind. However, he stated that after several contracts with a client, an element of trust grows and the clients listen more.

### Talk Notes

This is a set of notes following the progress of the presentation. It includes questions from the audience. Note that any text that is placed within quotation marks are not necessarily the exact quote. This set of notes complements the recording where everyone was looking at the slides. The recording, if you did not receive it is available on the TDF site – [www.tdf-esl.com](http://www.tdf-esl.com).

Paul Murphy: very good points there (talking about Wang Xiaoyang's talk). "One thing that comes to mind", he said regarding the central government and their policies "is a very good Chinese idiom that can relate to that. Translated, it says '*the sky is high and the emperor is very far away*'. So, the local government want to be seen to be achieving things whether they are achieving them or not is another matter and so taking *that* into account, we really have to see *how* people are approaching things"

Another thing regarding changing the philosophy is that the Chinese have thousands of years of Confucianism teaching where you *don't* challenge your parent, your teacher, your leader... One thing I always try and remember as a foreigner is that coming into China, you also have to respect Chinese philosophy as well as western philosophy and understand that those things aren't going to change and there are many benefits to finding those philosophies and finding a balance.

...

But, I'm digressing before I even begin – Thank you Keith for your eloquent introduction.

Today, I'm going to talk to you about teachers, trainers in my experience, some of the things I've seen and some of the approaches that myself and the company I work for - 'Language Key' - that we take when we're looking to work with the ESL industry.

In my experience in China, education, especially ELT is kind of full of contradictions. We have HR managers who say that 'at the end of the day, we want quality' but then try and put say 80 students in a class and pay 200 kuai an hour. And you must make them understand that there's value and there's cost and they don't necessarily go together. They also say that at the end of the day, they just want the best trainer (going back to quality) but that trainer has to be Caucasian, has to be handsome, has to be from the USA, UK or Canada only – we don't want any other native speaker. This narrows down your margins.

I even had one ask me for someone specifically from Boston (a member of the audience went "Yeah!") – oh you're a Boston man. If I had known that at that time, I would have won the contract – ha ha.

So, these are some of the problems that we bump into with clients – making people understand that they have to be realistic about their expectations and that ourselves, the professionals often have a deeper understanding of what these are and we make our recommendations on these judgements ... because we are looking for long-term partnerships.

Another deep-seated problem is a problem of trust. At the end of the day, people don't trust each other. Overcoming these trust issues is very very difficult in China and it really makes it a struggle to push your agenda that we really want quality and that we believe in education.

Some other contradictions on the student's side, we've had some students, directors of major banks ask us to make them dance (one of our trainers takes the client salsa dancing for English training). Another big director once asked us to find him a mistress ... but that's another story.

On supply and demand for ELT in China, there's such a massive demand that the requirement for trainers out there in China is almost zero. Things have improved in that respect because of the Olympics ... the restrictions and also tied in with the financial crisis. Companies will be made to 'tighten up their belts' – make them understand that they can get value and that will improve things further and cut out some of the dead wood.

Regarding trainer issues that is always a problem and one issue in that respect is professionalism. Many trainers don't have the right approach towards their profession, many are transient and don't really care. There are many horror stories of trainers such as sleeping with students and others. The problem is that now, people have a perception of ELT trainers, and I must say, rightly so, that they are not professionals.

The problem on the client side is that traditionally in China, I found, especially in the public regions that foreign trainers are really there for marketing purposes more than anything else. They want a white face in there so they can sell to all the new parents. That is a problem because as we don't see a value and they don't see a value then there's no value in it at the end of the day.

So those are some of the problems (Paul then gave a story of a bad situation with a teacher in Shanghai towards female students). This is a two-way street.

**Question from the audience:** Do you think that actually making qualifications in ELT or making people more aware in China of what valid qualifications in ELT are... from *outside* China, would be good.

**Paul:** Well, yes and no ... ELT qualifications obviously are good but it's also a question of 'what' ELT qualifications. Some of the best trainers I've seen have CELTAs – some of those intense longer term qualifications have strict requirements on them. (in contrast) My ELT qualifications, to be honest, is a 2-day TEFL in which (at that time), I was drunk on both days and I still got that TEFL. (so) ... if we have a certificate, which certificate is more important...

**Audience:** yes, that's what I meant. It's clearer what different qualifications actually mean.

**Paul:** definitely, the problem is that when you come back to supply and demand, something I always tell my clients is that 95% of resumes we get, we would never use these people. But it comes back to supply and demand. If the demand's there, it doesn't matter what you have, you could have a two-day TEFL, a CELTA, even an MBA – do they really want it?

Another problem is the Chinese perception of things. Working as a recruiter once, I gave a client a series of resumes for them to choose from – one was a Chinese-American lady who had a PhD in linguistics (if I remember well) along with ELT qualifications – she was highly qualified. Another was a 23 year old guy just out of university but he was a good looking Caucasian male ..... she went to the Caucasian male. Why? – we want that particular person in our room, we don't want the American-Chinese because they're perceived as being Chinese.

As these, coming back to the Confucian thing and overcoming some of these issues, ... it's not something that we can solve. It will change over time but not change overnight.

But in the 5 years that I've been working in corporate training, I've noticed that there is a move ... people are moving away from these pre-conceptions of 'cost-per-head' and that they want a particular type of trainer ... etc. (now they're saying) we want a return on investment, we want quality. It's moving there, but it's not there yet.

Regarding the financial crisis, in corporate training, we've definitely seen an effect especially with multi-nationals. As the Chinese word for 'risk' is also 'opportunity', it does ring true in some respects. Now, they're not doing this simple wide-spread training without achievables at the end.

They're going into specific workshops or a small course only for managers (the ones the company wants to retain). They're being more selective. I feel that over the next few years, that companies will start to look at the results rather than just 'spend the budget'. – That's with multinationals.

My experience with Chinese organizations is a bit more 'old school'. Our major client in Beijing, a China policy bank simply have a budget for English training and that's it. This is where we get the request for singing and dancing and so on. They're looking more at the satisfaction of their staff rather than meeting those achievables.

Some opportunities, we found that has come out of the financial crisis and tightening of budgets are having in-house trainers rather than contracting companies like us. Yet another aspect of ELT training that has appeared in corporations is 'out-placement' training. (This is when laying-off a hundred staff, you need to give them training, such as resume writing and interview skills. It's also all around English training but just a question of moving your focus to meet the current scenario and expectations.

That's a bit about our personal opinion on the current financial crisis. So, in the corporate English training industry, there are changes. Smaller institutions that can't really pull their weight are dropping by the wayside. Some of the bigger organizations (English First, Wall Street ...) tend to be moving into the public training markets leaving some of the more 'boutique training centres to manage the corporate training.

Any questions?

**Question:** Regarding training in China, I seem to have noticed that companies are wanting to mix English training with something else. Do you think that academies and schools should try and encourage that by replying and saying that they will try and find the trainer who has English and say..., law or English and building bridges (for example) or do you think they should separate ELT and other skills ... would that help ...?

**Paul:** Good point, I'll separate the two things – one, English as the entertainment factor – it's not ideal, not focusing on key issues that you're trying to teach. We have to remember as well, the Chinese style of learning – the rote learning – 'the teacher says something, you write it down' approach. But for the people we deal with, adult education, it has to be motivating, not see only the benefits but must also be interesting. So if you can incorporate entertainment with the English teaching in an effective way, it's all fair and good.

From the other side, the English with skills, it's a very dangerous game to play. There's a danger of a junior ELT teacher for example to start teaching the director of a company for example, how to run a company which the director doesn't appreciate. But for English with law or sales for example, there's a growing demand for it.

We have to find the right trainer for the right 'fit' for the course. I've seen an excellent 'writing' trainer do a one-to-one with a director and totally 'bomb' it. "A key may open a door, it may however, not open this particular door". We always try and look for the right trainer and we remind our trainers not to overstep the mark.

I'll move on...

In terms of companies and the expectations of trainers, we used to submit trainer profiles with photos but the company was choosing according to the photo or age bracket... So, we have to try and make our clients understand that we're here for their best interest.

In the beginning, several years ago, the client's main interest was 'cost per head' but now, they're looking more for results. One problem is how do we measure results? Although there are international benchmarks, it's difficult to show results in a 30 or 40 hour course as a group – It's difficult to show, in numbers, any improvement. People are looking for a 10% or 20% improvement – they want numbers to report the results of the training. On the one hand, we have trainers who are trying to deliver quality training, the client who needs to show that the budget has been well spent and you have the students who want to learn or not want to learn or be entertained and we're in the middle of this triangle making sure that everyone's happy and balancing their needs. So, there's no perfection in these courses as such.

When we look at teachers, we look at four things: do they have an ELT certification or a background in this area? Two, the teaching experience, especially in China, also. We're looking for business background, if they have any, that's a plus. Fourthly, and most importantly, is

character. Are they committed, motivated, are they full of passion for teaching? Some may have been teaching for 40 years but are faded. Similarly, some have 40 years business experience but don't have the teaching ability – they will go into a class and lecture on business skills.

In a class, you have to balance between teaching something useful and motivating the students because they've been learning English for 20 years in school and they work from morning to evening and then have to go into the class – you have to keep them motivated. So, a final decision will weigh on character.

**Question:** How do you evaluate whether you'll employ a teacher or not?

**Paul:** For pre-enrolment, we go through resumes, then we do the interview and try and discover the trainer. Then they do a 45 minute demo with out Chinese staff. Then we'll take them through a teacher training of our materials and methods. We design our own material and it's not a straight page-by-page 'Market Leader' for example.

After the TTT, we put them into a course where the training manager of that company will be in that class. If they're not happy, then they come to me. In the meantime, we'll give them feedback with trainer observation reports. If things are not good, then I will attend a class and see if we should give this trainer some intensive training or other. As well, there's client and student evaluations.

**Question:** from experience, some schools or institutions, 'help' the trainer get 'jaded' by sending them all over Beijing, making them take the subway, paying them late and more. I'd like to ask you, what efforts do you put into training your trainers and making sure they stay on top of it?

**Paul:** That's a very good point – teacher support. It's true that you can't expect a teacher to be motivated if the company they go to or the school they work for doesn't really care. We do try and give the trainer support. The 'observation' is not there to mark him down but see how we can help.

The travel issue problem is that Beijing is simply huge. Since I mentioned that finding a good trainer is difficult, when you do find one, you want to keep him and thereby support him. The trainer is everything. We can design material but good material with a bad trainer is still a bad course but bad material with a good trainer can still be a good course.

Since, because of the Confucian principle in China, students don't criticize the teacher, you don't find out about a problem until it's too late.

**Comment from the audience:** I'm pleased that you refer to your staff as 'trainers' and not 'teachers' because there's a misconception between a schoolteacher and a trainer. A schoolteacher is a schoolteacher; a trainer is a trainer. Training in a school is different than training in a corporate environment.

**Question from the audience:** I've been training in Beijing for many years now and the pay rate for corporate trainers over these years has hardly changed at all. What can be done if we expect trainers to be more professional but cannot pay them more?

**Paul:** that's a good point, we have good trainers who ask for and deserve more but it's due to sales and the fact that there are so many vendors out there. The client is good at playing around that. So, actual sales caps in terms of of courses haven't risen that much either.

What we do for our full-time staff is that we pay them even when there's a trough such as around spring festival time and also pay them bonuses around their evaluations.

**Question from the audience:** How do you , when a client comes to you for training, evaluate what the client 'really' wants?

**Paul:** he he – true. We have an evaluation of what the client needs (a needs analysis) through interviews and we go to the client and tell them 'this is what you need'. The client often turns around and says 'no, this is what we want...'. Fortunately, once we build our client's trust, they can begin to listen to our suggestions more over time – but not often on a first-time contract.

Things are improving and I really have seen things improve.

Thank you