The difficulties of evaluating English courses for the public

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Many times have I been asked by my relatives, friends or friends of my friends for my recommendation of a good general English course. 'You know, it should be a really good course, I don't want to be disappointed like last time' was a sentence they often concluded with. Such questions made me feel ashamed, since despite being regarded by them as an expert in the field, I was not able to give them a more competent answer than 'I am not aware of any good course, I can just give you names of teachers I personally find excellent'.

Nevertheless, facing similar questions more and more frequently provokes me to think deeply about the topic: What makes a good English course for the public? In other words, the purpose of this contribution is to suggest some answers to this question. It is also worth mentioning that the Ministry of Education and other institutions, e.g. Scio, are concerned with the evaluation of primary and secondary schools (their ratings are occasionally published), but I am not aware of any project involved in evaluating general English courses. In the city of Ostrava, there are, besides the state language school, at least the following schools or agencies providing language courses: Aarcadia, Asortis, Cloverleaf, Eddica, Hello, Fishnet, Laros, Slůně, Svět, T.E.A., and Teburg.

The language of their promotional material promises

- an individual approach;
- highly qualified and experienced tutors;
- a friendly learning environment;
- a limited number of students in a group;
- emphasis on speaking skills.

Two facts are obvious. Firstly, copywriters always work with hyperbole, and secondly, without any valid investigation everyone is bound to feel lost among a wide range of possibilities. This is the main reason why deeper research into the issue could be beneficial for society. Much frustration would be avoided if a student felt that their money and time was reasonably invested.

In my opinion, the key problems of such a study would be

- defining valid criteria for the evaluation;
- evaluating each criterion in relation to the others, i.e. attaching fair importance to them;
- examining all the circumstances which if ignored could lead to a false interpretation.

Since I am limited by time, I am going to present only a selection of criteria I find relevant and mention possible dangers which could result in unreliable results of the evaluating report. Nevertheless, at the very beginning I am going to mention characteristics of language courses for the general public.

Unlike English lessons at primary and secondary schools, English courses for the general public have these specifics:

- they are usually held only once a week and take the form of two or three 45-minute lessons with a short break in between;
- students pay for the course;
- attendance is voluntary;
- students are not usually graded;
- if acceptance is based on passing an entrance test, it is largely formal;
- participants present a heterogeneous group in term of age, job, education, motivation, expectations, language aptitude, learning styles, language learning strategies, knowledge of mother tongue and skills to use it.

All these characteristics put a load on the teacher since it is undoubtedly more rewarding in terms of results to teach a group of 16-year-old students, most of whom you meet regularly three times a week and who all wish to pass the final exam than to teach a class consisting, for example, of a grammar school student, a mother on her maternity leave, a tram driver, a French teacher, a temporarily unemployed shop assistant and a pensioner.

This fact must be taken into consideration when the most strategic question of the evaluation process is set, i.e.: Did the course meet its goal(s) formulated in harmony with personal goal(s) of the student, the customer?

Conclusion 1

Schools which carry out a needs analysis, formulate the goals of the course, design the syllabus and select the textbook according to their findings are more likely to satisfy their students.

An interesting point is whether the criterion of low drop-out can provide reliable evidence of students' satisfaction or the effectiveness of the course since drop-out may be the result of many variables, e.g.

- the level of the course; higher dropout can be observed with beginners who easily lose their initial motivation than with fairly advanced proficiency levels;
- changes in lifestyle (e.g. the decision not to continue may be connected with the fact that the student is at the same time graduating from their main educational institution and moving house);
- financial difficulties; this can also be one of the reasons, although not the most decisive.

Conclusion 2

If the drop-out rate is taken as one of the evaluating criteria, it must be carefully understood in its wider context.

Another largely formal criterion may be the teacher's education, including their university degree. University graduates in the language and its methodology should teach more effectively than those without such qualifications, though my pilot investigation shows that the public may rate teachers who have not completed university even higher. My

informal interviews confirm my hypothesis that personal characteristics such as empathy, dynamism, creativity, carefulness and responsibility are more important than the so-called cognitive variables, provided that a necessary critical level has been reached.

Conclusion 3

The statement 'We employ highly qualified teaching staff' is no guarantee of providing good courses.

The next criterion for evaluation may be an achievement test. Nevertheless, achievement tests as a research tool measuring teacher's success can be reliable only if they are administered in parallel groups, not only for individual levels but also taking into account other personal characteristics such as age and the achieved level of education.

Even so, many other variables are involved and the gap between the teacher's input and learner's output is affected with a number of external factors, for example the time each student is willing to devote to out-of-course studies and their exposure to the language as such.

Conclusion 4

If an achievement test is used to evaluate the effectiveness of the course, the existence of the same or similar conditions is critical.

Summary

Those who evaluate the effectiveness of courses may use a checklist of criteria, some of which are more tangible than others. For example, the criteria this paper mentions focus on data which is more easily statistically processed. However, if the issue is not considered from as many points of view as possible, the results may be distorted and the final interpretation false. The methodology of evaluation of English courses for public still provides space for investigation, the results of which would be beneficial for both individuals and society.