

# The slavery of teaching English

**The job is tedious, the salary appalling and the prospects nil. Sebastian Cresswell-Turner laments that 'no one with a scrap of ambition' would choose to teach English as a foreign language**



'A pretty sad lot': Most teachers are cowed by the language schools, which are 'miserable bucket shops' that take 'a whacking great commission'

By Sebastian Cresswell-Turner

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Signora Pazzi shifted her bulk in the leather armchair, adjusted the position of a chunky gold bracelet on a fat wrist, and switched off her smile. "So what I want from all of you in 2004 is *massima disponibilita*, *massima flessibilita* and *massima professionalita*," she said, surveying the desultory band of English teachers assembled in front of her the morning after the school's Christmas party.

She paused to let the message sink in. "Any questions?" We stopped doodling, daydreaming and sizing up each other's hangovers, and a few of us made vague mumbling sounds.

Maximum availability, maximum flexibility, and maximum professionalism . . . It was, of course, a preposterous demand. We all knew it, and so did our boss, who, sitting there dressed in a startling orange outfit and covered from head to toe in expensive gold jewellery, looked exactly like a large nesting hen.

None of us called her bluff, however. How could we? We were beggars, after all - the lowest of the low.

What this shrewd signora, who spoke not a word of the language she so profitably sold to various ministries and corporate clients in Rome, actually meant, was: "OK, you pathetic bums, this is the score. I'm not promising to give you any work at all, and if I do give you the odd hour here and there, you'll be paid peanuts . . . but, all the same, I want you to be fully available for

anything and everything. Plus, you're all going to pretend that you are immensely privileged to be doing this grotty little job. Geddit?"

Later on, a few of us assembled for a coffee in the bar round the corner. The mood was far from festive.

"Anyone know anyone who's got a room to rent?" asked the permanently broke and intermittently homeless 37-year-old Pam.

"I'm looking for a place, too," said someone else.

And so it went on, a litany of woes of the sort you would expect to hear among tramps in a doss-house. Only two people among the dozen-odd teachers at the school did not live in the most abject poverty: Nick, 42, who was shackled up with his management-consultant girlfriend; and Serena, 35, who was married to a prosperous businessman and for whom teaching was a convenient source of pocket-money.

Well, perhaps three: the author of this article occasionally translates film scripts that earn him as much in a fortnight as he gets in two months of teaching English. For which he thanks his lucky stars.

English is Britain's main cultural export to the rest of the world; but the industry that has followed in its footsteps is a bad joke on a colossal scale. The joke starts with the name: TEFL, as it's called in the trade, an ugly acronym that is pronounced "tefful" and stands for Teaching English as a Foreign Language. From here onwards, it's downhill all the way.

Let's take the pay and conditions first, and let's take Rome, where I have lived for the past eight years. Typically, an English teacher working flat-out for a variety of employers and private pupils might earn €1,500 (£1,000) a month pre-tax for 10 months a year: £10,000 annually, therefore.

Permanent positions are scarce, and there is no work in the summer; although if you are willing to sell yourself into servitude, there are plenty of 10-month contracts from September to June that leave you washed up and penniless at the start of the long hot holidays, and with little option other than to sign up as a teacher at some miserable summer-school in Kent, where once again you will be ruthlessly exploited.

All over Europe - in Paris, Madrid, Prague and Athens - it is the same. In London the constant flow of foreign students provides work throughout the year - but who can survive on the £12,000-odd a year that TEFL teachers earn there? Indeed, since British graduates now leave university with debts that rule out dead-end jobs with microscopic salaries, English schools everywhere are finding it harder to attract staff.

Increasingly, they take on the dregs. If the work were in any way rewarding, the pay might be tolerable. But unlike a job in a proper school, there is no pastoral side involved in being a TEFL teacher, and no variety, no career structure, no sense of progression. You spend your day rushing

from one lesson to another, endlessly drumming in the essentials and explaining the difference between, say, "I grovel" and "I am grovelling".

Sure, you dress it up a bit, you produce your own handouts, you try to have a bit of fun. But you are basically a busker playing the same tired old tunes. Even though most students are charming and receptive, it is an exhausting existence, a life of pure drudgery.

Nevertheless, you always have to be on form, ever the life-giver. And perhaps worst of all, you always end up using the omnipresent "Headway" textbooks, which make full obeisance to every modern piety, and whose pages are full of fatuous illustrations of wimpish little men in aprons doing the washing-up, while their briefcase-carrying womenfolk stride out of the front door to waiting limos.

So while teaching English is fine if you want to spend a year abroad, and great for meeting pretty foreign girls, considered as a career that might offer some degree of professional fulfilment, it fails on every count. No one with a scrap of ambition can possibly consider it. As the philosopher Alain de Botton says: "You become a TEFL teacher when your life has gone wrong."

The most objectionable aspect of this industry is not, however, the misery of those who work in it, but the posturing endemic to it. Typical of this is the pretence of professional credibility that surrounds the Mickey Mouse teaching certificate most teachers possess.

When, several years ago, I rang up International House in London and said I had a degree in French and Russian from Oxford and wanted to do their TEFL course, they sniffily told me that they might perhaps "consider" my application . . . later. The admissions tutor for the Harvard MBA programme could hardly have sounded grander; whereas all that was on offer was a passport to nowhere.

So I went to the Hammersmith & West London College, where I spent a month learning clownish "miming techniques" and making idiotic "flashcards" (silly bits of cardboard with little pictures on them). Comedy was never far off. Several people on the course were barely literate, and one of them was not even able to identify "I would of gone" as incorrect. As one of the coaches said to me: "I don't believe in half of this either. But just play the game, get your certificate, and then do what you want."

Every year, about 14,000 innocents pay £1,000-odd to spend four or five weeks acquiring a TEFL certificate from the two main examining boards that peddle them. I won't deny that I picked up the odd trick, but I wish I'd spared myself the hassle and sent off to Thailand for a fake certificate, as a friend of mine in Paris sensibly did.

Of equally questionable value are the language-teaching religions championed by the various "method schools", such as Super Rapid and Berlitz, where I once worked for two hilarious months. These are based on a narrow set of beliefs, zealously applied, about how English is learnt. In general, grammar and analysis are avoided, the methodology is highly formalised, and it is strictly verboten to address the students in their own language.

The result is classrooms whose normally bright occupants are comatose with boredom. In theory, there is a pedagogical justification for these methods, but they also happen to be highly convenient for the method schools, which are spared the expense of hiring bilingual teachers.

In my experience most language schools are miserable places, bucket shops whose owners shamelessly claim that the flotsam and jetsam they employ are highly-qualified, hand-picked professionals.

Indeed, many are not really schools at all, but employment agencies that send the workers on their books (freelance teachers) out to the premises of their clients (companies who have bought English courses) and take a whacking great commission (typically, about two-thirds of what the teacher is charged out at). As the "director of studies" of one such outfit once said to me: "If only you knew how much money we are making."

So the clients get fleeced and the teachers, cowed into submission, toe the line and nod eager assent when the boss talks of "standards" and "performance". Of course it's rubbish; but the charade keeps the proles in their place.

Some TEFL slaves have been so thoroughly defeated that they don't even realise what has happened to them. I can sniff out the "lifers" a mile off . . . scruffy figures, utterly out of synch with the modern world, any style or sex-appeal they once possessed squeezed out of them by years of drudgery, exploitation and poverty.

Pam, whom we met earlier, is constantly ringing home to cadge loans, which she can never repay. She subjects herself to the most squalid deprivations, regarding a meal in a pizzeria as a rare and extravagant luxury. Even though she lives in a prosperous western democracy, has a degree and works full-time, she has been so poor for so long that she doesn't think there's anything odd about her situation.

"No, I can't be bothered with all that shit," she said, in reference to pensions and mortgages and the future in general, last time she grabbed a coffee with me during a short break stolen from her hectic timetable.

After the age of 40, English teachers are burnt-out, skill-less and unemployable, their working lives a wasteland, their future oblivion. Suicide attempts are not unheard of. A former colleague of mine, a charming and talented but fatally lazy Scotsman who was well on his way to drinking himself to death, was recently found in a pool of blood, having tried to finish himself off by slashing his wrists.

"Our teachers are a pretty sad lot," said one informant right at the top of the TEFL teaching world, "and one or two are downright poisonous." According to the same source, the second-rate quality of the sector is harming Britain's reputation abroad. This view is echoed by James Stevenson, a London-based career counsellor and consultant psychologist: "I find it very distressing that foreigners wanting to learn English are exposed to the sort of people working in the teaching organisations."

Significantly, almost no writer who has worked in this industry - the list includes the writers Tim Parks, Matthew Kneale, Peter Robb and J K Rowling - has a good word to say about it. The definitive description of the TEFL bum's predicament is surely a passage at the beginning of *Cara Massimina*, a novel by Tim Parks in which Morris Duckworth, a young English teacher in Verona, is led to crime and, eventually, madness by his attempt to escape from the trap that his life has become:

No, it was awful. He was living from hand-to-mouth, from one day to the next, one month to another, week in week out. From the point of view of career, social advances, financial gain, the last two-and-a-half years had been completely wasted. More than that, they had left him physically exhausted and mentally addled by all these stupid lessons, besieged by boredom and mediocrity . . . He had reached the end of his tether . . . What was a language teacher in the end? A nobody. A mere failed somebody else.

Sad words, but all too true - and ones that should be inscribed above the entrance of every English language school.

Source: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/3325192/The-slavery-of-teaching-English.html>