

A Guide for Choosing the Right English Language Learning Solution for Corporate HR Managers as seen in EL Gazette, the only international trade newspaper for the global English language learning and teaching community.



A Perfect Blend For Your Staff?

By Simon Buckland

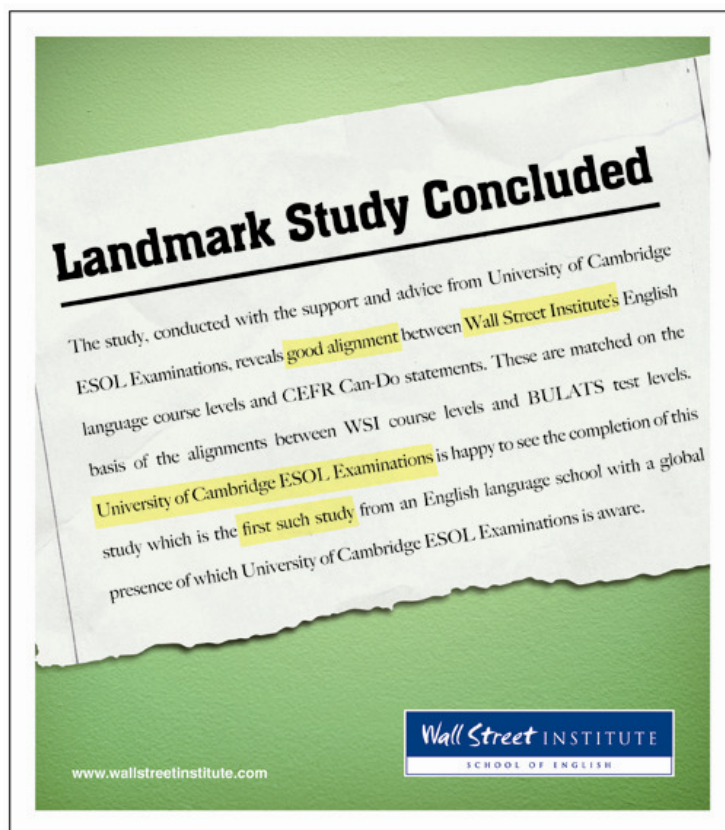
You're tasked with meeting a requirement for English language learning within your organization, and you want to use just one provider if at all possible. Amidst the claims and the counter-claims, the slogans and the jargon, how do you find the best-fitting solution, which will maximize your company's ROI (Return on Investment)?

Every organization and every situation is different, but you're probably facing some, if not all of these challenges:

- You need flexibility: many potential learners travel frequently, or have other commitments which may conflict with regular classes.
- The staff in your organization have widely ranging levels of English, ranging from near-beginner to pretty proficient.
- You probably don't have the time or the skills necessary to evaluate their abilities yourself.
- They also have differing needs: some of them will mainly be responding to and writing emails, while others will have to handle phone conversations in English, for example.
- You want them to acquire a real communicative ability in English, not just abstract academic knowledge.
- You want them to study in small

groups, not in classes of 16 to 20, but without paying a massive extra fee for this.

- Learning English demands sustained effort over a longish period of time, and you're concerned that staff may lose motivation before they achieve significant improvements.
- Among all the schools which claim to be able to meet your needs, how can you choose the one which will provide the staff in your organization with the best learning outcomes?



- There are English schools of all shapes and sizes around: is it better to go with a small, local provider or a large national and global one?

It's not an easy choice for an English language teaching expert to make, let alone a non-expert. So here are some tried and trusted guidelines to support you:

- You need an instructional system which truly supports and enables flexibility: one which is based around regular classes with teachers at fixed times obviously doesn't. The best fit may well be a modular "blended learning" system, which enables learners to do most of their study at any time which suits them, and which also includes lessons with teachers.
- Ensure that any potential supplier has an accurate and proven Entrance or Placement Test, also that they offer enough different levels of English to cope with your students' range of abilities. Many schools only offer 4 or 5 levels, for instance, while others have as many as 12 or 15.
- This is another aspect of flexibility: a blended learning system also allows people to focus on the aspects which are most important to them. People who learn only with teachers and at fixed times all end up studying exactly the same thing, whatever their individual needs.
- Two factors go to build genuine communicative ability: the curriculum and the teachers. Ensure that the school you choose follows a recognized communicative curriculum – one which sets communicative, rather than academic goals – and that teachers are trained to practice communication in classes.
- Ask any potential supplier how large their tuition groups are, and reject those with over 10 students per class.

- Lessons with teachers can be motivating in themselves, but it's important that all course materials should be motivating. "Edutainment"-based courses help to sustain learners' commitment and involvement by providing an element of entertainment.
- For verified learning outcomes, it's best to refer to a set of standards which are independent of any one school or institution; the most widely recognized today is the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). (I should disclose a personal interest in this issue, as Wall Street Institute has recently carried out a large-scale survey to validate its students' learning outcomes with reference to the CEFR).
- A global reach and a long track record are additional guarantees of quality: any organization which has survived and grown over many years and in many different countries must have been doing something right!

A couple of quick points to close with:

- You can achieve significant cost savings by opting for an "e-learning only" solution, with no face-to-face teacher lessons. If this is all your budget will permit, it's better than nothing, but your learners will achieve far less without the stimulus and validation provided by "hands-on" teaching.
- "Blended learning" isn't the same thing as mixed-media learning: in an effective blended learning system all the elements (teacher-led, online and print-based) are part of a closely integrated learning sequence. Before buying, you should make sure that your supplier is using materials originating from one source, and which were designed to complement each other.

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