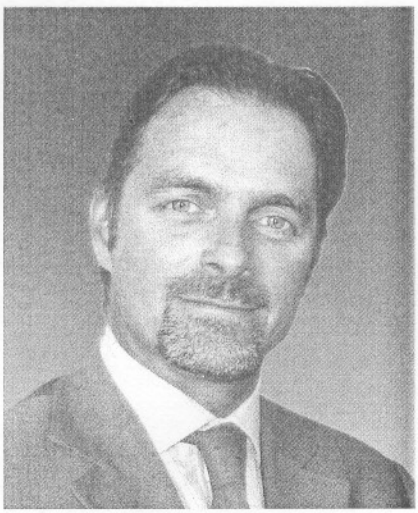

# Are we speaking the same language? Communication in EFL schools

**Andy Quin** reviews some of the ways in which organisations can create effective channels of communication.

This article aims to examine the value of communication at all levels in a language school, and looks at the various strands of verbal and written communication which can be employed to knit together staff and students into a harmonious, customer-focused business.

Many of us may work, or have worked, in small schools where communication is relatively straightforward: all admin staff work in the same office, which also doubles as a teachers' room; the students study in a small number of classrooms in the same building; and all business functions (marketing, admissions, IT, etc) take place within the school. In such a context, discussion of issues and dissemination of information might seem fairly easy matters.

However, when a school grows beyond a certain size, and/or is part of a larger whole, some thought needs to be given to communication strategy.
The risks of not communicating, or communicating badly, are manifold:

- staff not understanding what the school is trying to achieve;
- artificial barriers between groups of staff (e.g. admin and academic);
- negative attitudes towards management and towards the other parts of the organisation;
- lack of loyalty to the school, resulting in poor performance and high turnover;
- dissatisfaction in the job because "no-one listens to me".

In schools which are part of chains, or have head offices elsewhere, these risks are multiplied. Similarly, how we communicate with students has to be carefully managed if we want to satisfy both current customers and retain or increase future business.

*When a school grows beyond a certain size, some thought needs to be given to communication*

My starting point is that for many of us formalised communication may not come naturally: one would much rather chat on a 1:1 basis with staff, assuming that everyone can get on with their jobs without too much interference; that meetings are usually a waste of time; that all teachers want is steady employment and a supply of board pens; that if a member of staff has an idea or a problem, s/he will bring it to the right person at the right time; that while head office matters are of interest to me as a manager, they are not to those lower down; and that devising such things as annual school aims would be a waste of time and not the sort of thing an academic institution needs to bother with.

I was confronted with the need to question these assumptions when a second school was grafted onto the one I already managed. Suddenly, there were two staffrooms, two sets of students with differing needs, two admissions systems, even two offices for myself. However, there was a clear need for co-ordinating mechanisms, which I eventually realised was a human as well as a systems issue. At the same time, the school was growing, and while previously I could closely control most areas within the school (such as fee collection, staff recruitment & induction/training), suddenly I was having to delegate many areas. I could no longer boast that I knew each student by name. I was spending more time in my office writing and reading emails and less time with staff, leading to a feeling that the chain of communication between school management, staff and customers was weakening.

Unlike many other businesses, an EFL school can operate, at least on a superficial level, quite well and for quite some time with extremely negative staff attitudes. We all know teachers who are disillusioned with their school and all it stands for, yet are superb classroom practitioners whose students give glowing feedback. (However, these students tend to reflect the teacher's views, in that they may criticise other aspects of the school, and will generally not recommend the school to others. Such teachers therefore appear to be an asset, but in the long term will probably not be). Nevertheless, staff

who see themselves as part of a team – that is, a collective pulling in the same direction who understand the part they play in the group's success – will always be more productive than a collection of talented individuals. At the very least, teachers who enjoy a large degree of autonomy also require constant communication and consultation. Let's look at a few areas of communication.

## Face to face, individual verbal communication with staff

When I first saw the phrase Management by Walking Around (MBWA) in a business dictionary, I found it highly amusing, as this is what my then boss did, unfortunately to the exclusion of any other form of management. Of course, informal 1:1 chats are extremely valuable – but not always the most efficient (or even effective) way of communicating. They can work, for example, when a) there is a need for regular (daily) updates or exchanges of information, b) the personality of the member of staff is such that s/he finds this kind of communication most effective, and c) the members of staff are geographically close.

## Staff meetings

I know, I know – we've all sat through poorly-run meetings, where nothing is decided, where one person dominates proceedings, where no-one is prepared, or which could easily have been replaced by a memo. But a structured meeting is the most effective tool when discussion and resolution of issues is required. Such meetings can also be useful for co-ordination, where different functions can see the whole picture. In our organisation, which consists of nine schools (five language schools and four colleges) plus a large Head Office which takes care of marketing, sales, bookings, accounts and IT functions, there are various types of meetings:

- cross-centre meetings (for example, for accommodation officers or academic managers), generally rotating around schools, which also gives staff the opportunity to see how different schools operate;
- management team meetings, generally at Head Office;
- school meetings for all staff (for example, bi-annual meetings to look at financial results, feedback information, and school aims and achievements);
- school meetings for particular staff (e.g. teachers' weekly meetings, fortnightly school admin meetings).

*At the very least, teachers who enjoy a large degree of autonomy also require constant communication and consultation*

There is a high degree of commitment to these meetings, probably because people feel that they both get something out of them, and that the input they themselves provide is taken on board. There are also feelings of loyalty and belonging that these meetings engender, which can more than make up for the time "lost" in the meetings themselves.

I would like to highlight two particular meetings here, to which all staff are invited. The first looks backwards and is a review of the year. This takes in financial performance against budget and previous years, as well as other issues. It is open, in the sense that profit margins are shown and explained (although individual salaries are not). It also covers customer feedback (all students who leave our schools are asked to complete detailed feedback, which is entered onto a database, with targets for student satisfaction set in various areas), what has actually happened in the school that year, academic results, and so on. It aims to be an upbeat meeting at which staff feel that they are part of a (usually) successful business which also cares about its customers and their opinions. It also helps to break down some academic "anti-business" attitudes by involving such staff in the financial realities of the EFL marketplace.

The second meeting looks forward. Towards the end of the year, staff are invited by means of a memo and reminders in meetings to put forward ideas they think would improve the school, either for themselves or the students and other customers. At the same time, the management team of the school discuses the same question. The ideas are collected and put together into a framework of aims for the year. Of course, some ideas will be rejected as impossible or impractical, and this should be explained to the staff who provided them. Ideally, the remaining aims can be combined under various headings and given meaning by a superordinate goal, that is, *why* are we going to do such-and-such. Thus "Produce teacher guidelines for each level" is in order to "Induct and guide new teachers" which is part of "Ensuring staff are fully supported and developed"; "Achieve class ratio targets" is in order to "Ensure that budget targets are met" which is part of "Satisfying financial stakeholders in the school". These school aims should be reviewed once or twice during the year. If some aims are not achieved, fine – they may, for example, have become irrelevant during the year. Others can be carried over. One important purpose of the exercise is to push all staff to contribute to the planning of the school, and to see the school as an ever-developing organic entity, which has to grow and change in order to survive, and whose life they have to engage in.

## Staff newsletters

One way of ensuring that information is transmitted and that staff feel they know what's going on is a monthly or quarterly newsletter. This should be short enough to read in a break time, and whoever writes it should be satisfied if each issue contains just one item that will interest each reader, even if only slightly.

Content can include:

- staff news (get well soon, congratulations on babies/weddings, good luck on a training course,

hellos & goodbyes, promotions and the like);
- news from Head Office and from the other schools;
- course and other updates;
- information on student achievements (exam results, internships, university entry, etc);
- the social programme (successful events and upcoming trips);
- diary dates for the next period;
- a "how are we doing?" section telling people whether the school is hitting its targets; and so on.

The person writing it should be the person with the widest perspective on the school.

Most of us probably find that we spend our work life rushing around doing things, often tasks which are fairly menial in themselves. Few of us are lucky enough to have PAs; most of us want to be seen as doers, active people who do not distance themselves from the classroom or the front office. From this perspective, "communication" - meetings, newsletters, memos and the like – can be seen as irrelevant time-wasting. But it can serve to concentrate our minds on what is important rather than what is urgent, forcing us into a pattern of "plan – do – reflect" rather than simply "do – do again – do again".

## Student feedback

Getting good, regular qualitative and quantitative feedback from our customers is vital. While the vast majority of our customers do not give us repeat business, we can see students over time as having common feelings about the school and the services it offers.

**Quantitative feedback** (that is, feedback that can be used statistically) can best be gained from questionnaires. These should be easy and quick to complete, using grades or numbers, with ideally a separate comments section for fuller responses and explanation of grades. The grades can be then be entered on a database, and results pulled off at any time to show customers' opinions of the various elements of their course (transfer, teaching, accommodation, etc). Complaints about homestays can be put into perspective: is this a one-off, or is there a pattern of bad grades which suggests some action should be taken? Targets can be set for year-on-year improvements and weak areas can be looked at.

**Qualitative feedback** (subjective opinions on the school, which cannot be used statistically but which can give a fuller picture of what the students think) can be sought in all kinds of ways. Orientation questionnaires can help us understand what students think of the school after a few days, when their impressions are most vivid; mid-course progress chats with their teachers, particularly if these investigate non-academic matters, can also tell us how students think the school could be improved, with the school writing these suggestions up and giving a reaction on the students' noticeboard. Both of these questionnaires can also, of course, tell us whether a student is happy and whether we need to take any action to resolve issues. A suggestion box for reticent types can be productive; the Principal can have an "open-house" session, for example, once a week or fortnight, at which all students are invited to comment on the school. Focus groups can concentrate on one area: if the school gets poor feedback in the area of food, such a group can do research amongst their peers and make recommendations (there is a clear pedagogical outcome here, too).

***Communication meetings can serve to concentrate our minds on what is important rather than what is urgent, forcing us into a pattern of "plan, do, reflect" rather than simply "do, do again, do again"***

## Communicating with students

Apart from their daily interactions with their teachers, homestays and reception staff, the school itself may want to communicate with all students. The idea of an assembly may bring to mind singing the school song in younger days, but (space permitting) if combined with a leaving ceremony when large numbers of students are departing, this can be an ideal opportunity both to pass on information much more accurately than, say, asking a dozen teachers to tell their classes, and to engender a stronger spirit of togetherness in the school. Up-to-date information can be given, for example, information from the accommodation department about what to do if Christmas accommodation is required, or from the academic manager about a new course, students can be congratulated on completing their course, and prizes can be given for school competitions.

Similarly, a school newsletter can serve this purpose, as well as being a valuable marketing tool for agents, and encouraging repeat or word-of-mouth business, if it is emailed to students who have recently departed. Their email address can be requested on the end-of-course questionnaire then inputted into an email "address book". The newsletter should be written ideally by an enthusiastic teacher or member of the activity staff, and should be colourful, amusing and lively, including student achievements inside and outside the classroom, highlights from the social programme (with lots of photos), upcoming events, etc.

Finally, we are currently creating a school website: the initial idea is for a one-way conduit of information from us to our students. Most of them find the information they want by means of a PC these days, so why not use that to our advantage by putting as much as we can on there:
- information about the school (terms & conditions, FAQs, induction information, upcoming social programme, accommodation, self-study possibilities),

- local information (doctors, dentists, churches, pubs, restaurants, estate agents, tourist attractions, sports), welfare information (how to avoid problems, what to do if X happens, living in private accommodation).
- plus information from those teachers who want to communicate with their students in this way, with homework, extra activities, learning tips, links to useful websites, etc.

In these various ways, we can maintain a dialogue with all our students from the day they arrive to the day they leave and beyond, not simply have random individual contacts with some of them. The extra time and resources required for this type of communications strategy will normally pay dividends in positive word-of-mouth recommendations from students to other students and their agents at home; in problems being solved as they arise rather than once they have become too big to resolve easily; and in ensuring students have the information they need.

## Communications in language school groups

Many schools are now part of chains (see George Pickering's article "Living in Chains" ELT Management Newsletter Issue 30, IATEFL). This adds further layers of complexity to the picture.

First of all, the chain of communication between school and student needs to be carefully managed. While in a small, stand-alone school, the potential student will normally have several direct contacts with the school before s/he arrives, the situation in a larger organisation with a Head Office bookings department, and even Regional Offices around the world, may be more like this:

with far more potential for misunderstanding and mistakes.

Secondly, this kind of structure involves other levels of management, geographical distance, potential competition and rivalry between different parts of the organisation or different schools within the group, and other challenges. These can only be faced with a strategy which ensures that adequate communication takes place:

- thus, as mentioned above, cross-centre meetings both resolve issues, inform staff and have an important loyalty /team-building function (for the last two years, for example, there has been an annual Embassy CES teachers' conference, which about 50 teachers from the various school attend, exchange ideas, and socialise);
- visits by Head Office staff are regular, with senior managers coming to give information and canvas views, sales, marketing and bookings staff coming to understand what they are selling, and to meet the people they routinely communicate with by email and phone;
- a bulletin board on the company email system informs staff of job opportunities, staff changes, and the like;
- and in the near future, a Head Office newsletter.

Any organisation which grows beyond a certain size must examine how it maintains communication between its various parts. The assumption that everyone understands everything they need to know is dangerous, particularly as the years pass and systems, procedures, routines and roles become embedded. Communicating effectively binds staff and customers into a shared relationship which is open, creative and forward-looking.

## Reference

Pickering G (2001) Living in Chains in *ELT Management, Newsletter*, Issue 30, IATEFL.

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