

ELT in Barcelona: The current state of affairs

Introduction

The current study was conducted by members of Serveis Lingüístics de Barcelona (SLB), a cooperative of language professionals. Interactions between local members and teachers in the area indicated widespread discontent with the current state of affairs of ELT in Catalonia. Frequently cited issues included precarious working conditions, lack of transparency in hiring practices and pay scales, limited opportunities for professional growth and entrenched marginalisation of non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs).

An integral part of SLB's vision as a cooperative is to advocate for equal opportunities and fair working conditions in our profession. In order to gain a better understanding of the current situation in Barcelona, it was deemed necessary to go beyond anecdotal information and gather more detailed data from the ELT community by means of an online survey.

Method

The survey was drafted in relation to the following areas: teacher demographics, teaching background, working conditions and reflections on the ELT industry. This draft survey was first piloted with cooperative members in order to collect feedback and subsequently redrafted. The final version consisted of 26 questions, requiring a mix of quantitative and qualitative responses. The survey was published using the online tool SurveyMonkey and distributed among English language teachers working in the Barcelona area. Participants were recruited by word of mouth, email and via social media platforms (namely Facebook and Twitter). The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete and no monetary incentive was given.

Findings

A total of 190 individuals completed or partially completed the survey. This is a sizeable sample, however a degree of self-selection bias cannot be ruled out, as a participant's recruitment would likely rely on some engagement with the ELT community and an interest in the issues covered in the survey. Therefore, the findings should be viewed as indicative, rather than representative of the current ELT population in Barcelona.

Teacher Demographics

In terms of gender, around two thirds of respondents were female and one third were male. Ages ranged from early twenties to over sixties and the most numerous age group was 30-39. Nearly 80% of respondents described themselves as native speakers of English. Of these, 64% reported having a working level of Spanish (B2) or above, whereas only 14% had a comparable level of Catalan.

Teaching Background

Regarding qualifications, 78% of participants had a Bachelor degree and 23% had a Masters degree in a related field (e.g. education, languages, linguistics). Additionally, 68% had an initial teaching certificate (e.g. CELTA, TESOL) and 23% had an advanced teaching certificate (e.g. DELTA, DipTESOL). Years of teaching experience varied greatly, from less than one year up to 38 years, with an average of around 10 years. Lastly, about two thirds of respondents said that they had undertaken some form of professional development in the last 12 months.

Employment status

The second part of the survey explored the different teaching contexts of respondents, based on their type of employment, i.e. private school contracted, public school contracted, freelance or informal (cash in hand). As *Figure 1* shows, there was significant crossover between the different sectors, with many respondents belonging to more than one group.

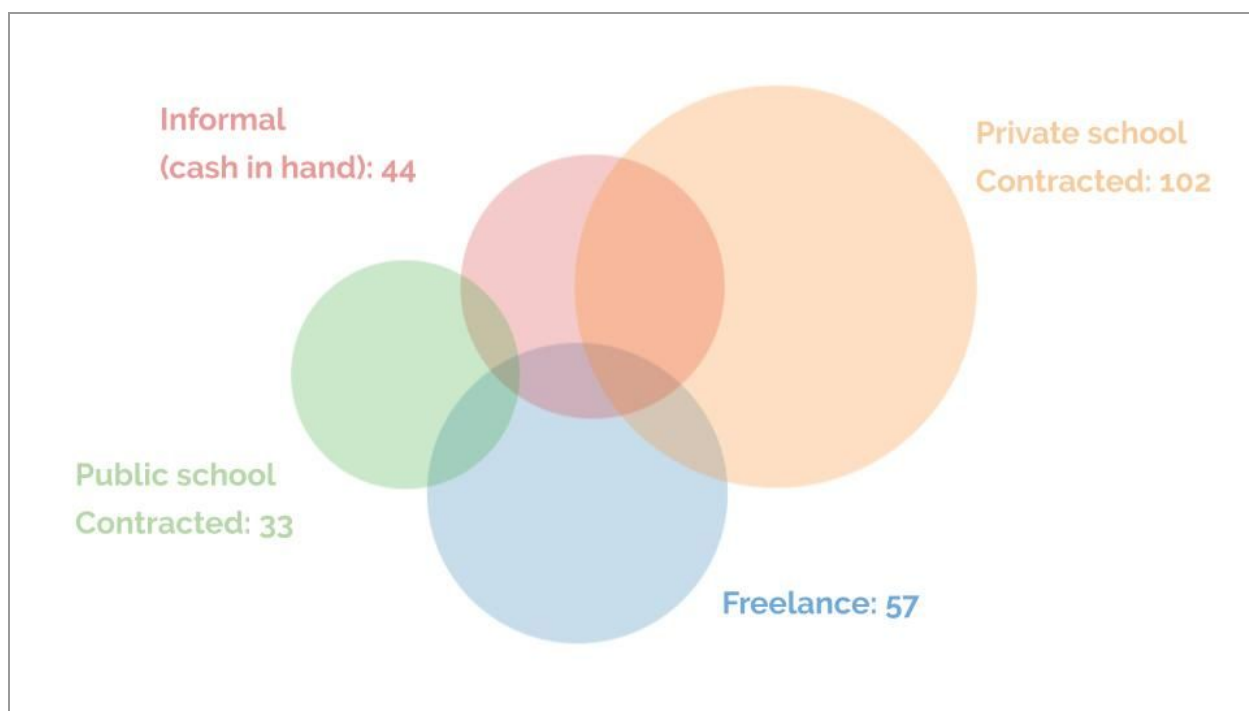


Figure 1. Visual representation of employment status of respondents

Teacher profiles

Private school contracted

Of the 102 participants formally contracted to a private school or language academy, only 25% had an indefinite contract (continuous), 47% earned between €11-15 per hour (net) and 51% supplemented their income with additional teaching.

Public school contracted

Of the 33 participants formally contracted to a public school or institution, 58% had an indefinite contract (continuous), 62% earned €11-15 per hour (net) and 23% supplemented their income with additional teaching. Furthermore, 23% did not receive any paid holidays.

Freelance

Of the 57 participants who were self-employed (freelance), 51% had seven or more different employers or clients, 65% worked in seven or more different locations, and 65% usually earned between €20-€30 per hour (gross).

Informal (cash-in-hand)

While only nine participants reported working exclusively on a cash-in-hand basis, 23% of all participants indicated that they did some informal work to supplement their income.

Teacher reflections

In this section of the survey, qualitative responses were collected about participants' experiences and opinions of working in ELT in Barcelona.

Participants were first asked to list the factors which led them to becoming English language teachers. Some common themes were a love of languages, opportunities to travel, flexibility in combining with other work and enjoyment of teaching people from diverse backgrounds.

Participants were next asked to describe any negative experiences of working as a language teacher in Barcelona. Here is a representative selection of the responses:

"I feel frustrated with the steady flow of seasonal or one year English teachers and the lack of regulations in the market"

"Zero hour contracts. nine month contracts. Early starts and late finishes. Occasional racism - you don't look like a Native speaker"

"We have no job security and schools often don't really care about professional development."

"Outrageous job offers (10-12 per hour), lots of unpaid administration work, being fired then rehired every year."

Finally, participants commented on the changes that they would like to see within the ELT industry. Some of their answers included:

“An open mind when it comes to different teaching methods and more acceptance of near-native teachers.”

“Salary rates on a scale linked to experience and what you offer.”

“A support system, especially for new teachers. A place where teachers can share lesson ideas, problems and solutions.”

“Mass unionisation of teachers first and foremost, followed by collective bargaining to improve pay, conditions, job security, etc.”

“Licensing and minimum educational standards for companies to operate as academies.”

“A higher entry-level standard to avoid a race to the bottom with wages in a saturated market.”

Discussion

As reported, responses were gathered from 190 individuals. It is unclear what proportion of Barcelona’s ELT population this sample constitutes, as the number of English language teachers working in the city is constantly fluctuating and thus very difficult to estimate.

Another caveat concerns the possibility of self-selection. Despite the fact that all responses were given anonymously, not everyone is forthcoming when discussing working conditions, especially when that work is unregulated or illegal. Therefore, it is likely that low-paid, informal workers are greatly underrepresented in our findings.

Rates of pay

Participants reported rates of pay ranging from €7/hour to €100/hour. This disparity in earnings is commonplace in many job markets and to a certain extent reflects the variation among practitioners, in terms of experience, qualifications and expertise. However, our data show that a significant proportion of respondents are on contracts

which provide less than the living wage of €1206.91/month for the Barcelona Metropolitan Area (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017). For example, 51% of respondents working in a private school or language academy and 28% of those working in a public school or institution indicated earning €1000 or less per month. Consequently, 51% of privately contracted and 23% of publicly contracted teachers opt to supplement their income by undertaking additional work.

Precarity

Besides unsatisfactory salaries, a general lack of job security was another key issue expressed in the qualitative section of the survey. From the responses, it is clear that workplace precarity can take on many forms. For example, some respondents reported being on zero-hour contracts, having no fixed hours and being “*fired and rehired*”. This was particularly evident for privately contracted teachers, as only a quarter enjoy the security of an indefinite contract.

As for freelancers, one respondent stated that “*going autónomo (freelance) seemed the only option to earn a professional wage*”, but went on to describe it as “*inherently precarious*”. Our findings indicate that teachers with freelance status are able to earn a higher hourly rate, but this does not take into account taxes, social security payments and cost of travelling to different locations.

Discrimination

Unfortunately, with only 21% of the participants in this study identifying as non-native speakers of English, there was not a great amount of data on the treatment of NNESTs in the workplace. However, eight respondents reported negative experiences of a discriminatory nature, including recruiters being less likely to hire teachers if they were not native English speaking teachers (NESTs) or, indeed, not “*looking like a native speaker*”; unreasonable preferences from schools and parents for NESTs, regardless of their

qualifications or experience; and, in general, a focus on providing students with NESTs over quality education.

Regarding desired changes to the industry, nine respondents from both groups reported that they would like to see more respect for NNESTs, an end to employers “*chasing a nonsense picture of a native speaker*”, and “*fewer unqualified teachers*” occupying positions, as they claim too many teachers are being hired “*solely on the basis they are native*”.

Looking forward

While limited in scope, this study portrays a fragmented industry, which fails to offer stability and a living wage to a large proportion of teachers. Nevertheless, approximately half of the respondents who answered the final part of the questionnaire said they see themselves continuing to work in this profession in the mid to long term.

Participants were unequivocal in discerning the main problems with ELT in Barcelona, but also vocal of what they would like to see change. From the analysis of the qualitative responses, four core areas were identified:

- ***Fairness and transparency*** - respect for and inclusion of NNESTs, transparent hiring practices, fair salaries and pay scales that are linked to qualifications and experience
- ***Collectivism and regulation*** - unionisation, collective bargaining, licensing of employers
- ***Greater collaboration*** - a support system, a place where teachers can share ideas, problems and solutions
- ***Higher professional standards*** - increased entry-level requirements to language teaching, opportunities for continued professional development

Conclusions

This study aims to highlight, in part, the current state of affairs and convey the opinions of the local ELT community. The issues of low pay, workplace precarity and discrimination are not exclusive to our profession, nor are they exclusive to the Barcelona area. However, it is our hope that this report may be the first step in documenting the issues many English teachers in Barcelona face, leading to greater awareness and eventually better working conditions. Of course, further research is needed, here and elsewhere, to compare the realities of practitioners in different contexts and share solutions to common problems.

References

Ajuntament de Barcelona. (2017). *Càlcul del Salari de Referència de l'Àrea Metropolitana de Barcelona*. Retrieved from http://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/premsa/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/SDR_AMB.pdf

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