



FEDERACIÓN ARGENTINA DE ASOCIACIONES DE PROFESORES DE INGLÉS

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Celebrating FAAPI's 35th Anniversary

Whenever I receive a new Voices issue, I cannot help thinking over how associations can be so disparate in spite of their concurring objectives: furthering the development of English teaching professionals all over this southernmost country and in so doing developing ever stronger friendships and collaborative teams. The Federation of Argentine Associations of English presently celebrating its 35th Anniversary is an umbrella organization of member TAs spread out all over the country .

Then the obvious truth hits hard. The differences are so great that they might have become a gap. First and foremost, IATEFL is based in the country where English is the first or mother tongue and where it acquired the prestige and qualifications that have made it the chosen medium for international communication thanks to the research studies and work of prestigious phoneticians, lexicographers, linguists, pragmatists, educators to mention but a few. But above all, thanks to the foresight and generosity of its patrons who funded it as a charity committed to linking, developing and supporting English Language Teaching professionals worldwide. On the contrary, FAAPI works in a community where the first language is Spanish and where English is both learnt and taught as a foreign language. Precisely because of that, thirty-five years ago, a group of ELT professionals from the University of Cordoba summoned colleagues from other states to convene in that centrally-located university town and invited them to establish TAs in their own places of residence. The main purpose was to provide instances of professional development that the educational administration had never had the chance or the drive to. Exhausting but exciting enterprise at a time when we lacked the global telecommunications we enjoy today. Too much red tape, too many difficulties to overcome in too little time, too much expense but always worth trying because we saw no other means to further our knowledge and teaching skills. However tiring and self-defeating it may sound from the current perspective, we made it and the most rewarding effect was the development of more professional acquaintances, friendships and partnerships growing out of the shared commitment to longer term goals.

Argentina has several Teacher Training Institutes that have turned centenarian and many others that were established over fifty years ago, either in universities or as post-secondary institutions which became prominent all over the country for their outstanding Faculties and graduates. Little by little as more and more graduates joined different local TAs and they, in turn joined the Federation, events became larger, more international and more comprehensive in a joint effort to satisfy the interest of both veteran teachers and recent graduates.

Perhaps the greatest difference lies in the fact that FAAPI is a non-profit professional organization in which all the work and the time required to carry it out is strictly voluntary. Moreover, it has no premises of its own. Although officially located in the city of Cordoba where all the paperwork was initiated and legally registered, the Executive Committee members come from different provincial states and convene for their meetings there. It does however count with the collaboration not only of English Teaching institutions, both privately and state run, but also of the British Council and the Fulbright Foundation who have undoubtedly contributed to the professional development abroad of ELT Argentine professionals all over the country with their scholarship award and exchange programs and with their constant willingness to sponsor our events.

In a country with such an extension, its varied regions account for sharp contrasts in relief, climate

and human concentrations that in their own turn impinge on every aspect of their cultural life. The greater population concentration in the metropolitan area around the port of Buenos Aires and neighboring states and the central area of Argentina can be clear cases in point. In a way every member TA is different from all the others in more than one sense since it reflects in itself the culture and the strength of its Executive Committee and its ability to develop a strong team spirit and to cater to the needs of its members which may differ greatly from those of other areas. Different regions in Argentina have deeply rooted cultural features setting each off the rest, but the fact that all the TAs have a chance to get together through their representatives at the annual Conference event organized by a volunteering TA provides the Federation and its members with a wonderful opportunity not only to comply with the foundational objectives but also to create and strengthen bonds. It is the time to drop the characteristic provincial singsong tunes in the native tongue to attune ourselves to that of our subject matter: EFL.

However, there are other basic differences which might have been seen as unsurmountable difficulties but somehow were not. Over its first thirty-five years, FAAPI has managed to grow stronger in spite of political, social and economic upheavals. The latest, the economic crash of 2001 hit the country very hard and some of the TAs were depleted of their most enthusiastic leaders and are trying hard to rally again. How could it have been otherwise since an institution is nothing but a gathering of committed people rallying around the vision that fuels them to action?

This time not only technology has been on FAAPI's side but also the unexpected but apparently felicitous government decision to debase our currency in 2002. The former because the telecommunications revolution has enabled us to keep more interconnected trying to rekindle hope and the strength to move on towards an ever elusive but more promising future since by the end of 2004 we had our website not only updated but also made more dynamic. The latter because it has helped the country to regain economic strength, by making it more conveniently attractive for foreign tourism and promoting better and more efficient exports. Nevertheless as there is still a huge internal debt to be paid off with equal and better educational opportunities all over the country, Argentina appears to be just a convalescent patient recently discharged from the Intensive Care Unit. Therefore, even though FAAPI has had no generous patrons nor income sources other than the yearly contribution of the TAs' and a percentage off the profits of the Annual Conference, circumstances have made the need for and the access to English as an international language more important. Thus, the Federation moves on because it is made up of teachers, teachers with a sense of a mission, that of the permanent quest to develop professionally and becoming more proficient at helping learners master a foreign language which means much more than just being able to use it to communicate competently- it means to acquire a broader view of the world and a more competent way of interacting in it. Teachers in general crave for professional development but primarily for encounters with others in the profession to share experiences and exchange ideas, as well. For we all need to feel "on the same boat" in the sense used by Sarah Hannam when commenting on her quote of astronaut Vladimir Kovalyonok's amazement at viewing the earth from space at the end of her report on Associates' Day 2006, "This quote stresses how absolutely connected we all are as human beings, and perhaps in relation to our own setting, in our task as educators."

Educators are and should be engaged in enabling the future, but to do that they must come to terms with their own reality in order to enhance it. Unfortunately the boat is rarely, if ever, steered by educators. There are others who set the course. However as long as we fulfill our task there will always be hope and the chance to envisage a better world.

In November 2004 FAAPI became an IATEFL Associate in its drive to continue growing and offering more varied services to its member TAs. For those who do not have a computer or Internet services the advantages may still be difficult to assess. Our aim is to facilitate their Associate status so they can join one or more of IATEFL's SIGs and thus become yet another link in the Special Interest Group of their choice. So far, because of the impossibility of receiving as many Voices issues as member TAs, our Newsletters have been relaying some of the news and interesting articles therein. The latest issue brought not only the comments of IATEFL's 2006 Conference but also the announcement of the 2007 one at Aberdeen which will appear in our next Newsletter issue due to come out next week.

Yet now that we have just received the wonderful news that our Wider Membership Scheme bid has been accepted together with the one hundred membership forms to be distributed among the members of our Associate TAs, we can envision a more interconnected expanding network of ELT professionals both nation and worldwide in the near future.

This year FAAPI's Annual Conference will be held in Rosario, the second biggest city in Argentina, on the banks of Parana river September 21 through 23. The organizing TA, APrIR will celebrate its 30th anniversary and its Executive Committee is forging ahead to make this year's event as memorable as those of the previous ones. They have mustered round them the most renowned English Teaching Training Institutions, Schools of English and other outstanding institutions of the community. The topic of the Conference is Multiple Literacies and over forty academic papers have already been accepted for the concurrent sessions. Not to mention the attractive list of plenary and guest speakers. The most prestigious publishing houses and all institutions engaged in education in English, such as specialized bookstores, international standardized exams, immersion programs abroad, performing companies will also convene to showcase their novelties and products. The British Council has pledged once more their generous sponsorship contributing not only with prestigious guest speakers but having the Conference Proceedings published, as well.

So as I go over the May-June and July-August Voices 191 and 192 issues I rejoice in the mere fact that even though FAAPI has faced varying circumstances throughout all its thirty-five years, it has managed to weather all the storms. As a veteran survivor I still hear the voices of the founding members, the former presidents as a sort of soft background music while reading the words of Tessa Woodward, Peter Grundy, Margit Szeztay, Sarah Hannam and other IATEFL executive members and I find the messages are in harmony with no dissonance at all.

Because despite the obvious differences in means, infrastructure and scope, I still find that we share dreams and as I look forward to our annual event during which we will celebrate FAAPI's 35th and APrIR's 31st anniversaries in the hope of an ever-expanding network of internal and international partnerships and with all the joy of sharing and restating FAAPI's vision and mission, we will be able to paraphrase IATEFL's motto with just the apparently minimal but deeply meaningful substitution of nationwide for worldwide.

For further details see www.faapi.org.ar or www.aprir.org.ar.

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