

Certificate to Adventure

Shanghai, China

I stumbled upon my first job as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher in Brazil in the fall of 1994. The necessary qualifications for me to get an English teaching job in that part of the world at that time were holding a B.A. and, more importantly, being a “native speaker.” Before I left for Brazil, I had attained a Master’s in Slavic and had a year’s experience of teaching Russian — at the time, it was more teaching experience than most new teachers in Brazil. In retrospect, if I had known of any short-term English language teaching certificate programs before leaving for Brazil, I would definitely have taken an intensive course to better prepare myself to teach.

Nowadays, the growth of English as an International Language (EIL) is driving the proliferation of English language schools worldwide. More and more people need English language as a skill to make them more competitive in their respective job markets. The demand for native English language speakers has accompanied this growth and many more people are looking to travel and teach English than ever before. Just the other day, a young lady called me asking me about a specific Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) or Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) teacher training program, asking me whether or not I could recommend it to her, which led me to wonder, what makes a good TEFL/TESOL teacher training program?

Whenever someone asks me what makes a good teacher training

program, I usually turn some questions back to them. Where are you planning to teach? When are you planning on taking off? Do you like online learning environments? I ask these questions to make sure that the person is really seeking a certificate program and not a higher degree and to direct them to the variety of learning environments that offer TEFL/TESOL. If future EFL teachers tell me they are interested in a particular program, I usually focus on a number of specific qualities they should look for in finding the right TEFL/TESOL program for them.

A recent arrival survey of my TEFL teacher trainees revealed that the most important factor for them in choosing their program was location. This makes a lot of sense as most people look for a place to study that is close by, recognizable, and affordable. They ranked affiliation with an accredited university as the second most important factor with quality of the program, quality of instructors and reputation following closely in importance.

While all of these are important factors, it is the credibility of the program that should be the number one consideration. An accredited program assures that all aspects of the program, including the administration of it, have undergone a rigorous process of self-analysis, and show that the program engages in a self-reflective process that assures its quality and ongoing development. Affiliation with an accredited university or professional organization can also lend this credibility,

While jobs are scarce in the U.S., a good way of gaining some international experience is to teach English abroad, so *Nicholas Ferdinandt* offers advice on choosing the right certificate program to teach overseas

and indeed, is an important factor for many trainees seeking this entry-level credential. More and more TEFL/TESOL programs have specific accreditation as well, so start by asking for this information.

The professors teaching in the TEFL/TESOL program should be masters of the profession (MA or higher in TESOL), and have teaching credentials and experience in both EFL and ESL settings. Furthermore, they should be active in professional organizations and pursuing professional development opportunities in teacher training. Simply perusing an informational website's teacher listing page will allow you to see the credentials of the instructors and help you see what quality of teacher you will find in the program.

The TEFL/TESOL curriculum is important and should be highly applicable, while affording a broad survey of second/foreign language acquisition theory, methodologies, and methods of assessment, among other elements. One important consideration is whether or not the program includes a practicum component, whereby trainees get valuable classroom observation and live teaching experience in a self-reflective environment. This portion is vital for novice teachers with little classroom experience. There is no substitute for the experience of teaching real live students in a real setting.

People often ask me what the difference between the 100- and 120-hour certificates is. While the industry standard has been 100 hours, more and more employers seem to be requiring the 120-hour certificate under the assumption that the more hours the better. However, it is safe to say that a 100-hour certificate from a credible program affiliated with an accredited institution with highly qualified instructors will be worth more than a 120-hour certificate from less reputable organizations.

Just as I counsel all of my trainees to ask prospective employers for references from teachers who have taught at their school when considering job offers abroad, I also recommend that potential trainees get references from teacher training programs before putting any money

down, so that they can be sure that the school delivers on what is promised in the marketing materials. Whether that's a guarantee of job placement or high quality instruction, there's nothing better than a person who's been through the program to tell you that it's all it was cracked up to be.

Most certificates denote successful completion of the program and, while most are non-academic track classes, some do carry over as credits in MA TESOL programs. So, if you are planning on trying your hand at teaching English, you might want to consider the possibility that you'll like it and want to make it a career. With the rising costs of an education, a few credits already in your pocket can make quite a difference.

Some other considerations when looking at TEFL/TESOL certificate programs are: schedule flexibility and feasibility; customization or tailoring of content to suit particular needs; affordability; a preference for face-to-face, online, or hybrid delivery of instruction; and, if you are coming from abroad, visa support and immigration documentation.

If you still think that all TEFL/TESOL certificate programs are created alike, you need to know that they are not treated alike in different world job markets. For example, many Korean trainees I've spoken with want the certificate to be called a "TESOL certificate," as that's how it is recognized in that country. While the TEFL certificate is essentially the same thing, name recognition is important.

Another issue of recognition and acceptance is the face-to-face vs. online certificate. Some markets are not as open to teachers with online certificates as others, as online learning has not reached a level of acceptance in many parts of Asia and South America. So, be advised that your online certificate, while covering the same topics as a face-to-face class, may not be as attractive to potential employers as the bricks-and-mortar certificate. So, if you know in which country you plan to teach, be sure to ask someone there if the learning environment makes a difference for employability there.

Professional Development

More and more people are studying for TEFL/TESOL certificates. Recent graduates from college, mid-career professionals who've lost their jobs, or retiring workers who are looking for a second career and some travel are all looking for a way to get qualified to teach English abroad. With the proliferation of those seeking to transition into an English language teaching career, the number of TEFL/TESOL training programs has grown to meet demand. The increase in programs has made it difficult for teacher trainees to select among the sheer variety and number of certificate programs out there. After you take into consideration your own personal learning style, your timeline, and the area of the world in which you're interested, you should look for the qualities outlined above. And, if you're anything like me or the young lady who called me for advice, you'll use your English and your TEFL/TESOL certificate as a vehicle for gaining a view of the world from many different perspectives. **X**

Nicholas Ferdinandt is the associate director and teacher training coordinator at the University of Arizona. He has taught English abroad in Brazil for five years and has been training teachers and administrating in schools for the last 10 years in various educational contexts. He holds an MA in Slavic from The Ohio State University and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota.



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