

## Chapter 1

# Discovering the Wonderful World of TEFL

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Realising the need for English teachers
  - ▶ Finding out where you can teach
  - ▶ Travelling to foreign lands
  - ▶ Considering how far TEFL can take you
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**S**o you want to teach English as a foreign language. In this chapter you get an overview of the industry and an idea of what the lifestyle of a person in this rewarding career is really like.

## *Understanding Why English*

Many factors contribute to the market for Teaching English as a Foreign Language. The historical factor offers the legacy of the old British Empire that took the language around the world. The political factor gives the current dominance of the USA. Science and technology have developed with English at the forefront. In addition, there's a need for a global language to make international communications smoother, and tools such as the worldwide web truly accessible around the planet.

These days English is viewed as a language which gives you access to the world. Some want to study at prestigious English-speaking universities; some want a high flying career with international connections. Others just want a better chance in life and move to wherever the money seems to be, and then again, some just love Hollywood, international rock stars or their English girlfriend. Even the free-spirited backpackers need English to get by in far-flung lands.

## Looking at the TEFL Marketplace

For most would-be TEFL teachers, the draw of the job is the ability to travel and work. Even if your responsibilities don't allow you to leave your own shores, at least working in TEFL brings other travellers to you.

### *Considering countries – both home and abroad*

Before entering TEFL, give some consideration to where you want to teach and who your ideal students would be. Subtle differences exist between the criteria for teachers in English speaking countries and elsewhere. The training you need for particular student groups also varies. In addition, unlike a career change at home, teaching abroad presents challenges you may not have considered.

#### *Staying in the home market*

Finding work in TEFL in an English-speaking country can be more difficult than doing so abroad. The problem is that, unlike being a foreigner overseas, you have no novelty value when you're at home. As many English-speaking nations are economic powerhouses, they tend to have various regulatory bodies governing the employment of teachers and trying to ensure high standards in education. In other words you need to jump through more hoops to get a decent job.



Very often TEFL jobs are advertised as *ESOL* (*English for Speakers of Other Languages*) or *ESL* (*English as a Second Language*). Teaching English as a Foreign Language, English as a Second Language and English for Speakers of Other Languages are all the same kind of work depending on which country you're in and who your students are. There's a slight difference between learning a language to survive in the English-speaking country you now live in and learning English while you're in a non-English speaking country.

ESOL students may be refugees or economic migrants who need help with day-to-day situations such as seeing the doctor or understanding letters from their child's school.

Many students are entitled to attend government funded courses or free classes run by charitable organisations. In addition, private language schools offer courses from two weeks up to two years. In the latter case, students pay for their lessons and often have other activities to make the experience more fun, including a social programme that teachers generally get involved with too.

Although the basic skills of the job are the same in each sector, you may not be eligible to apply for all of these jobs. The first thing you need is to be able to speak English well (whether you're a native speaker or not). Most employers require teachers to have a first degree and a TEFL qualification (certificate, diploma or Master of Arts) although in the public sector you usually need a qualification specifically for teaching adults in further education. Non-graduates can often get onto a training course but fewer job opportunities are available to them.

Amongst countries in the European Union things have been changing. Citizens of the EU have rights in the UK, including the right to enrol on courses offered by the state. This means that instead of learning English in their home country and then moving to the UK to look for work or higher education opportunities, it's quite feasible to move over and then learn the language through the state system and full immersion. There have been quite a few changes in the number of jobs offered in countries like Poland for these reasons. Unfortunately the British economy is not what it was, and as the world struggles with the recent banking crises, people are thinking twice about their prospects abroad anyway.

### *Working abroad*

You can find far more opportunities for TEFL abroad than on home soil. The world is a big place, after all! However, despite the thrill of setting off on a new adventure overseas, you need to approach a TEFL work with a balanced outlook that considers both the advantages and the disadvantages.

The advantages are that:

- ✔ You get to experience another culture and broaden your horizons.
- ✔ You're involved in a rewarding occupation through which you can help others to change their lives.
- ✔ You get paid as you slowly travel around the world.
- ✔ If you already live abroad, you can find a job before you have mastered the local language.
- ✔ You work with a skill you already have, speaking English.

But the disadvantages are that:

- ✔ It's difficult to know what kind of employer you're getting involved with until you arrive in the country.
- ✔ Once you've given up your home and job it isn't quite as easy to turn back.

- ✔ You may feel thrown in at the deep end. Even if you get extensive training first, when you actually have your own class, most of the time it's just them and you.
- ✔ You're unlikely to get rich. The best most EFL teachers abroad can hope for is a decent standard of living by local standards (which may be different from what you're used to) and enough money saved to get back home again.
- ✔ You're out of the loop as far as your home country is concerned, both socially and professionally (if you already have another line of work).

So many TEFL operators in the world – almost anyone who speaks the language well can find work somewhere but, as with jobs on home soil, the best opportunities go to graduates with a recognised TEFL qualification.



Ask a school abroad if you can contact one of the current foreign teachers to get some insight into local living. Even if the school declines, you can still put out some feelers among friends and Internet forums such as on [www.esl-cafe.com](http://www.esl-cafe.com). You can ask just about anything and you'll find someone out there who can help you find the answer.

## *Changing with the seasons*

More often than not, TEFL jobs abroad follow the academic calendar. So in most countries jobs start in September or October and run for nine months to a year. Start looking for a good contract in the summer if you want to fly off in the autumn. Some positions begin in January, so December isn't a bad time to look for a position either.

### **Considering China**

These days many TEFL teachers are heading to China. It has become one of the biggest economies in the world and is a huge market for the TEFL industry. It's estimated that less than 1 per cent of Chinese people in China currently speak English and with a population of over a billion, the potential is huge.

That being said, there isn't as much regulation of language schools as you find in other countries, so you need to be very cautious about visas, work permits and contracts and make sure that they're genuine.

With such a large country, you should also give some thought to where you want to teach. Some like to be around other Westerners so they don't feel lonely, whereas others want to immerse themselves entirely in the new culture. Apparently the weather varies greatly too, inside and outside the classroom, so check that you're going to be working in a climate you can manage and that the school has appropriate facilities – like air-conditioning.

When the academic year finishes, students visit English speaking countries so they can practise their language skills. That's why TEFL job opportunities in the UK and other similar places mushroom for the summer. You can often find short contracts from two to twelve weeks long at summer schools. Advertisements for these jobs start appearing in spring, typically in March and April.

So if you want to work all year round, check whether your school closes for long periods and if so, make sure that you can save enough to tide you over or find a temporary position for the 'holidays'.

## *Teaching trends*

English language teaching has become more tailored to the varying needs of students. ESP (English for Specific Purposes) is big news, so instead of studying general English for years, more students are opting for business English, EAP (English for Academic Purposes) or similar courses that address their needs more directly.

Another trend is towards online learning and training for students and teachers. Many resources are available on the Internet so students feel less inclined to ask a teacher for help in person these days. And with fewer students around, employers are looking for a higher standard from their teachers.

## *Getting Out There*

There's a lot to think about when you shut up shop and re-establish yourself in a new location. You need to prepare your mind in advance, not just your suitcase.

## *Preparing to leave town*

If you already know where in the world you want to teach, find out as much as you can about what you're likely to meet in terms of bureaucracy and daily life.

Find the answers to these questions:

- ✓ Do I need a working visa?
- ✓ Do I need any jabs?
- ✓ Will I be eligible for medical treatment and if not what kind of insurance covers me in case of emergencies?
- ✓ Which home comforts may I need to take with me?

- ✓ What are the implications for my tax and pension contributions back home?
- ✓ Have I set up a forwarding address for my post?
- ✓ What do I know about the currency and economy? How much money do I need to take and in what form?



Don't close your home bank account if you can help it. It's really tricky to start all over again when you return because you often have to provide proof of address and accounts for three months just to rent a flat. Have your paperwork sent abroad or to a safe place back home.

## *Setting up elsewhere*

Arriving in another country is a very exciting and frightening experience. When everything is new, you can find yourself feeling a bit isolated and homesick at first, especially if you don't speak the language, but if you're open minded things usually get better.



Use these tips to help start feeling at home:

- ✓ Learn the language to a reasonable extent.
- ✓ Be curious. Find out all you can about your new environment.
- ✓ Listen to advice. Local people try to advise you about all kinds of things. You don't have to follow it all but if you pay attention you'll probably avoid some pitfalls.
- ✓ Accept invitations. If your students are going for a drink, go along from time to time (as long as your employer approves).

The lifestyle of an EFL teacher is usually a pleasant one. Jobs are most often three to five hours a day plus the time you spend preparing. So you can usually find time to explore your surroundings. Take some of your lesson planning out and about with you as you try out local cafés and beauty spots. You may find that if you look different from local people, they start conversations with you out of curiosity or on the other hand they may just stare. Either way, be friendly. When people get used to seeing you around, they're more likely to accept you being there.

A small piece of advice is to judge accommodation by local standards. If you must complain, save it for your friends back home. It does annoy people when they hear 'In my country . . .' too often.



Use the Internet to keep in touch with your friends and family. Even though you may be too excited to keep in touch when you first arrive, you'll miss your mates a bit when things settle down, so don't lose touch.

## *Thinking About a Stint or a Life in TEFL*

Some spend a few months in TEFL, others a couple of years and still others a lifetime. Believe it or not, TEFL work can meet all of those needs if you're brave enough to set your reservations aside and go for it.

Taking someone from the basics of the language to independence is continually rewarding. There's something very special about hearing or seeing the penny drop in a lesson.

### *Filling gap years and career breaks*

TEFL is the perfect antidote to a life chained to a desk. You may be one of those professionals who find that you just can't bear the rat race unless you take some time out. Sales targets can really lose their appeal when you can't see what's really being accomplished by your work. For students, gap years in TEFL can give you the kind of life skills and experience that lectures just can't match.

Real benefits can be gained from taking a year out; they include:

- ✓ **Refocusing:** You may have thought you had it all worked out but suddenly you wonder whether your chosen path is really what you want. Giving yourself time to think and look at other possibilities should set you straight.
- ✓ **Recharging your batteries:** Perhaps you've made the right career choices but you're a little burnt out. A short diversion into TEFL can energise you again.
- ✓ **Appreciating what you have:** Seeing how others live can really help you see the good in your own lifestyle when you return home.
- ✓ **Giving something back:** You can use TEFL to help people who don't have the same advantages as you.

✔ **Broadening your skill base:** You can gain by:

- Finding out how to be independent
- Leading a team
- Taking responsibility for yourself and others too
- Building rapport and communicating with others
- Solving problems
- Improving your planning and organisation skills

## *Planning a new life*

On a personal level, TEFL can take you around the world, which is a goal in itself for many people. But even if you don't cover the whole globe, it's fascinating finding out new things about yourself or rediscovering them. Being in a new environment helps you to sort out the things you want to do from the things you previously just went along with and being exposed to other cultures truly inspires the imagination.

If you do happen to take to the job like a duck to water, you can work up the career ladder too. Once you've been teaching for a couple of years and you have a TEFL certificate (representing at least 100 hours of tuition) you can then become a senior teacher, which introduces you to teacher training roles and added responsibilities such as controlling learning resources. There may be extra money in that but by this time you'll be ready to take your skills outside the classroom sometimes anyway. The next steps are ADoS (assistant director of studies) and DoS (director of studies), which are positions offering a higher salary but which generally require additional qualifications – namely a diploma or master's degree. The problem with managerial roles though, is that they tend to take you away from teaching and into the office. So you may want to embark on more of a sideways move:

- ✔ As an official examiner for the exams students of English as a Foreign Language sit.
- ✔ As a teacher trainer.
- ✔ As a materials writer.
- ✔ As a home-stay course provider, who accommodates and teaches students in their own home.
- ✔ As a marker for distance learning courses.
- ✔ As an agent connecting students with schools and colleges in different countries.



## *Addressing some qualms*

Do you still need a final push to get out there? When you speak to people who have taught EFL, you usually find that there's no need to hold back if this is what you want.

Some common fears include:

- ✔ **Money:** You don't need to have huge amounts of money put by. Save enough to pay for some TEFL training, a return flight, and enough to set you up in the local currency (which may be comparatively little).
- ✔ **Commitments at home:** Although you have commitments, if you think positively you may be able to get nine months abroad without changing your whole life. Have you asked your boss about taking an unpaid sabbatical? You never know, he may be keen on the idea. You can also speak to an estate agent about letting your home for a year and even your loved ones may be happy for you to take a break (in my experience, they love to have a place to visit for a free holiday).
- ✔ **Age:** Don't start thinking that only youngsters get TEFL jobs. Students love to see a mature face in the classroom. Most employers expect older teachers to be more dedicated and have a better work ethic, so there's no need to write yourself off.

You may just have the time of your life working in TEFL, so go ahead and take the plunge.

