



Online TEFL certificates: Are they enough?

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Abstract

This study addresses the lack of research conducted on the design of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) certification courses. It focuses primarily on how graduates of online TEFL courses perceived the design of the course and whether they felt prepared for the complexities of teaching abroad. The study highlights the TEFL graduates' perceptions of the overall design of the online TEFL course while describing their perceived confidence to teach abroad upon completion of the online TEFL course. Findings were based on a qualitative inquiry that facilitated the study of the participants' lived experiences which allowed the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of their opinions and perspectives. The results of this study propose that the participant's held both negative and positive opinions of their TEFL courses. The content of the TEFL courses was perceived as being simple to access, well-sequenced, and with a good pace. Communication during the course was also shown in a very positive light. Participants felt that online the TEFL staff replied quickly, and that course deadlines were flexible and accommodating. The participants also appreciated the support that they received from their peers. They did, however, feel that the feedback could have been more tailored to their specific needs and that more support should be available upon completion of the online TEFL course. A major finding is that the participants did not generally feel prepared for the complexities of teaching abroad. Their suggestions include improvement in the following areas; classroom management, specific content according to age, and the curriculum and culture they were to teach.

Keywords: Design; Preparedness; Language Teaching; TEFL; Online

Introduction

Due to the increase in demand for English teachers in Asia, more people will look to Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) training for qualifications before moving abroad and becoming teachers. These TEFL graduates do not need any prior experience or other teaching qualifications. Seeing that the TEFL certificate is usually the only form of training standing between course attendees and a classroom, it is pertinent to research how graduates of online TEFL courses perceive the design of the online courses, and whether they feel prepared for the complexities of teaching abroad having completed the online course.

After graduating from pre-service training programs, teachers are expected to be ready for the classroom, however, research demonstrates that they feel unprepared for teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students (Mayer, et al., 2017). Unfortunately, there is limited literature available that specifically targets pre-service teachers' experiences of online training related to TEFL. Online teacher training holds a lot of potential as it increases accessibility for many students that previously might not have been able to attend the course due to health, distance or economic reasons. One also needs to consider further challenges faced by these students such as lack of support, and technological difficulties, to name a few (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2018). The aim of a TEFL certificate should be to provide pre-service teachers with "discipline-specific knowledge, pedagogy and assessment methods" (Setty, Iyengar, Witenstein, Byker & Kidwai, 2019, p.37). Providing TEFL graduates with these skills is not enough, as Bahr and Mellor (2016) explain that pre-service teachers will have to have congregated this knowledge and skills needed for the classroom and show positive attributes associated with an effective teacher such as compassion, humour, open-mindedness, to name but a few.

Preparing teachers to be effective in any situation is a massive task especially considering the complex nature of teaching and learning. Mayer, et al., (2017) claim that it is beneficial to consider both the role of the pre-service teachers' education, as well as their employment, as contributors in their readiness for the classroom. This notion is supported by the notion that teacher preparedness may not be a static

factor and may change over time. In other words, teachers may acquire skills through their pre-service education and then develop further through hands-on experience in the classroom (Mayer, et al., 2017). Pravita and Kuswandono (2021, p.10) explain that “teacher identity formation requires not only personal aspect but also social aspect; it is on-going and ever evolving which allow teachers to keep transforming their identity, as the novice teachers have authentically demonstrated” they go on to explain that it is critical to assist novice teachers to understand the school culture in order to help them to enter and appropriately adapt themselves with the new social context” (Pravita & Kuswandono, 2021, p.11)

Another overarching problem is described as the ‘theory-practice divide’ or ‘transition shock.’ These occur as a teacher moves from learning about teaching theories, to applying them in the classroom. Because the classroom is a complex environment influenced by many contextual factors it proves difficult to prepare the new teacher to effectively navigate these environments in pre-service education (Monroe, Blackwell & Pepper, 2010). Although some courses offer links to the real-world context, student feedback often suggests that students feel a divide between theory and practice (Gillett-Swan, 2017). Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2007) explain that it is easy for a new teacher to underestimate the impact of the students’ home and community contexts on teaching and learning. Punthumasen (2007) explains that many foreigners are hired out of field meaning that they did not initially study to be a teacher or study at all. Thus, many TEFL teachers are unprepared for the classroom and may even be unable to speak English at an adequate level (Salahuddin, Khan & Rahman, 2013). Many foreign teachers only take on a teaching post in order to travel and need to be continuously replaced which is detrimental to staff cohesion (Punthumasen, 2007).

There are very few studies that specifically address TEFL certificates as teaching qualifications and even less that explore the students’ feedback on said courses. At present, the majority of information related to TEFL courses is presented in the form of blogs, not empirical research. These blogs are usually disguised advertisements for specific TEFL courses and are, therefore, subjective.

The research question guiding this study can be stated as: *How do TEFL graduates perceive the design of their TEFL course, and do they feel prepared for the complexities of teaching abroad?* The study aimed to show the participants’ perspectives on the design of the TEFL course, highlight their perspectives on the application of knowledge and skills learned in the course, and to determine whether participants felt prepared for teaching abroad.

Method

A qualitative approach was used to determine the perspectives of the TEFL graduates regarding their TEFL course and their experiences of teaching abroad. The

participants in this study were teachers from diverse backgrounds who teach abroad after having already completed their TEFL qualifications. These participants did not have any other teaching qualifications when they started teaching abroad. Semi-structured interviews were used to facilitate wholesome coverage of the topic whilst allowing digression to explore unintended answers or topics. This study comprised of a once-off, semi-structured interview with nine participants who had a TEFL certificate, and have taught English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Some participants were interviewed face-to-face and others were interviewed online using WeChat. Videos were recorded and transcribed and data was then analyzed using a thematic approach by organizing the data into codes and categories (Saldana, 2015).

Results

The categories that emerged from the analysis of the data include: preparedness for teaching abroad, design of content and layout of the online TEFL, design: feedback and support, perspectives on the application of knowledge and skills and recommendation of practical classes.

Preparedness for Teaching Abroad

From the data, it was revealed that the participants did not feel prepared for teaching abroad. Some participants explained that they felt completely unprepared after graduating from the TEFL course:

“I got thrown in the deep end on day one... I wasn't really prepared for anything on day one”
and “I was fresh and new and really had no clue what I was doing”.

Despite this, some felt theoretically prepared but felt that there were few opportunities to apply this theory:

“I was prepared in theory... but it's difficult to apply stuff you've written into a computer to a real-life environment”.

Most of the data showed that the participants felt unprepared to manage the realities of their classrooms.

"I've never been a teacher. Done nothing like it. It was impossible to visualize how the classroom could be, how you could fix the discipline problems" "it is important to deal with classroom management a bit more [In online TEFL courses] and how to deal with some actual nitty-gritty".

Design of Content and Layout of the Online TEFL

Although the design of any course is made up of many aspects, the content and layout of the content TEFL course were accentuated by the participants during the interviews. The theoretical knowledge delivered by their TEFL course was mostly perceived as:

"pretty thorough. All of the modules were really well explained". "good theoretical knowledge" "was a lot of theory" "[the theories were] put in sort of like a simple way... for you to understand without going too deep into it".

Participants explained that "there was a lot of grammar". These sections on grammatical theories seemed to resonate with two participants as they explained that being the taught grammar rules of their native language caused them to confront gaps in their knowledge that they were previously unaware of. They said that the TEFL course:

"made me a bit more nervous to realize how little I know about my own language that I speak... when I'm speaking, I just know from experience that word goes in that order in that sentence. So, as a native English speaker we don't actually think a lot about structure of sentences and structure of words" "it taught me a lot about my own language that I didn't realize".

Subsequently, it emerged from the analysis that the content of the course was found to be well-sequenced and laid out in a user-friendly manner.

"was simple and easy to use" "very well thought through... concise... well laid-out" "the actual modules were useful and well set out" "starts slowly and it's easy to get into"

However, the participants explained that the TEFL course lacked specified content; some described the TEFL course as a

"very basic course... they don't really go too in-depth" "could be more detailed" "needs to be more thorough".

Three main aspects related to content were perceived as lacking in the online TEFL course. These include: curriculum specific content, culture specific content and content appropriate for the age of the participants' future students. With relation to lack of cultural specific content the data revealed:

"[I] couldn't even figure out where Korea was on the map when we got the job" "aware of cultural sensitivities but it didn't really delve into what they are, how to approach them and how-to kind of deflect questioning about it" "being in China ... some resources like YouTube and this are blocked"

This participant therefore had trouble accessing the resources provided to them as they were not accessible in China thus reinforcing the idea that it is vital that content and resources are tailored to specific cultures and countries.

The data emphasized that the predominant perception of the content provided in the online TEFL course was largely irrelevant to the participants because they weren't specified for teaching certain age groups. One participant explained that their first few months of teaching in China had been:

“very different and difficult” “very different to what I'd experienced in TEFL because the kids are a lot younger”

Another participant suggested that the online TEFL would have been more beneficial if there were:

“age-specific courses so if I am going to teach kindergarten maybe something in terms of kindergarten”.

Design: Feedback and support

There were both negative and positive findings related to feedback and support. Positive aspects include: peer support, which was stressed in several interviews as important factors of success during the TEFL course and once the participant entered the classroom. The data indicated that the participants felt that the communication between the online TEFL staff and the participants was positive.

“they replied quickly and it was very straight to the point” “the response that I received when I submitted my final essay and my final lesson plan was quite quick and the response was quite concise and nicely laid out”

The data emphasized that the participants regarded the online TEFL course to be flexible. The course was said to be:

“set up for people who were working they might have a little time or a lot of time”
“adjudicators were really useful because we were on a really tight time-frame to complete

the course. So, they allowed us fast track [their course] and do the two assessments at the same time rather than one after the other. They were helpful”

It was also apparent from the analysis that the participants felt that peer collaboration was an important part of the support provided by the TEFL course. The participants that completed the TEFL course with an offline constituent or fully in class expressed the importance of the collaboration with their peers.

“[W]e did a lot of teaching in groups and got a lot of ideas from each other and a lot of support... some of the people we're still in contact with” .

Another participant that completed their TEFL course completely online was in contact with friends already teaching overseas and they perceived their peer collaboration as an important support mechanism for learning to teach abroad:

“your friends that can help you. People that have actually taught, people who are actually teachers, who know this stuff. Working through the actual issues in the classroom. If that in any way can be incorporated within a TEFL, then it'll be the best qualification” “[their friend’s] help is almost as valuable as a TEFL”.

Then, negative aspects were shown from a participant who felt that the course did not provide sufficient support:

“There is no help, there's no support system after your TEFL” “don't tell you how to get better, how to improve... when you are a TEFL teacher in China, there is always that limit, it doesn't matter where you are it's all around the same pay”.

They also discussed an issue regarding the perceived lack of support when they recommended that the TEFL course make:

“notarization and legalization areas very clear on [the TEFL course’s] website. Or make it so that it can be notarized anywhere or in China or in the country they're in”.

Data analysis revealed that participants recommended that support and feedback available through the online TEFL course could be more efficiently tailored to specific countries and teaching English as a foreign language. One participant explained that they thought these adjustments would help to increase the quality of support an online TEFL student could receive:

“an instructor who has taught ESL in the past [would be beneficial]” “people coming back from various countries. People who might give you real insights into what countries... will offer different experiences. Someone in Asia or someone in the Middle East, someone in Europe. You know, these kids will be different, they'll treat you differently, they'll have

different expectations of you as a teacher”.

Perspectives on the Application of Knowledge And Skills

The data revealed that the participants felt that there was no application of the theory and skills taught in the online TEFL course.

“semi-useful to have a little bit of knowledge there wasn't really any practical application”
“need exposure to a classroom whether it's kids or adults. And that that classroom also needs to be Non-English speaking, so that you can understand firstly what you're getting yourself into that it's not just fun and games” “It's all well and good reading a book but if you have to get up in front of someone and try and sort of implement what you've learned. I think that's the hardest thing, actually being confident enough to do that”

In order to be better prepared to implement theories and skills learned in their online TEFL course participants recommended practical classes.

Recommendation of Practical Classes

It emerged from the analysis that most participants felt that the course needed to provide opportunities to deal with classroom realities and implement theories taught:

“if you are going to say that TEFL [certificate] is the only thing that you need to teach. I think there's a lot of room for improvement... a practical class has to be mandatory for you to get your TEFL [certificate]... the preparation that you need to do in terms of for a real class is much different that you do for a scenario that you would be given in your TEFL exam” “you can read a thousand books but it it's not applied in the classroom setting it's not going to work” “[learning] how to teach... comes with experience”.

One participant suggested that the TEFL courses should:

“condense the theoretical portion down only to the vital and relevant information and rather demonstrate how this information is needed, through a practical way. [Provide] a

practical means on how to implement this information. And allow participants the opportunity to teach in a real class. Have them have mock lessons and provide critical feedback on that, rather than have them read a passage and answer questions. So, apply the knowledge” “you don't really learn your own style until you get into the classroom and do it yourself”.

Participants provided ideas on how to implement a practical class within the online course:

“running the courses over summer so that you can use English summer schools as a practice ground for teaching or you have them do a placement in summer school so that they can watch how teachers do it” or “a virtual classroom... where all of these issues are simultaneously running where you would have to like scramble and deal with them” or “online jobs if there is some kind of partnership”

Discussion

Perceptions Related to Feelings of Preparedness for Teaching Abroad.

The participants explained that they didn't feel prepared for teaching abroad upon completion of their online TEFL courses. This relates to Gillett-Swan's (2017) explanation that pre-service teachers often feel a theory practice divide. Some participants explained that they felt completely unprepared for teaching abroad whilst others explained that they felt theoretically prepared, but they struggled to apply what they had learned in the classroom. Oktafiyani, Saefullah and Abbas (2021, p.394) suggest that “pre-service teachers should learn more about the short lesson plan by the help of the lecturers before they implement it during the pre-service teacher training program.” In the case of TEFL certificate, teachers should also cover lesson planning in depth to aid in the transition of pre-service teacher to in the classroom and bridge the theory practice divide.

Classroom management was perceived as a stumbling block for the participants. They felt unprepared to manage their classrooms and to face the realities of teaching. This brings to mind that although pre-service training programmes provide theory of classroom management, without practical application this remains an underdeveloped skill for many novice teachers. Serliana, Utami and Kamil (2021, p. 78) explain that “pre-service teachers should learn more about how to manage a class, both offline and online, with the help of lecturers and cooperative teachers before or during teaching practice activities.” Seeing that the participants were all non-teachers to begin with, they were even worse off. Without practical experience, they had no way to predict discipline problems and manage them accordingly. Classroom realities were also emphasized as an area in which the participants felt

unprepared for when entering the classroom for the first time.

Participants' Perceptions of the Design of the Online TEFL Course

The participants had positive comments about their TEFL's course content. According to Chen (2016) if an online course is not properly designed students usually become overwhelmed and lost. These feelings are exacerbated if the student isn't accustomed to using technology and the internet. A well-designed course stimulates and cultivates active and engaged learning they felt that the course provided a lot of theory that was well explained. The course content revealed gaps in the participants content knowledge on topics such as grammar and phonics. The participants, therefore, felt that English content knowledge was sufficiently covered in their TEFL courses. The TEFL course seemed to be successful in providing the participants with English content knowledge needed to teach abroad.

Participants also found the content to be user-friendly and well sequenced. The course was said to start easily and get progressively more difficult, the layout of the content was also simple and easy to use. These are commendable as a well-designed course ensures that the student doesn't feel overwhelmed and can be completed in the allocated time frame. However, the participants felt that the content was very shallow and needed to be better tailored to their needs. They felt that the course could have provided more specific knowledge especially when it came to age, curriculum and the culture they were to teach abroad. Moreover, negative feelings toward support stated that it was very generic and was not tailored to the participants' specific needs. This can be linked to understanding expectations of students, to ensure they understand what the course entails and to check their levels of satisfaction after the completion of the course. Floor (2019, para. 4) explains that the designer must get to know and understand the people that they are designing the course for by "getting in touch with your target audience through interviews, observations" Non-specific training forced novice teachers to enter the classroom without an accurate job expectation leaving them feeling unprepared and they miscalculated the influence of their students' culture on their teaching and learning. Opinions related to feedback and support also emerged. Positive opinions revolved

around feedback and support provided by instructors and peers . Communication channels available during the participants' online TEFL course were positively regarded as the staff replied quickly and the responses were straight to the point. The online TEFL course was said to be very supportive as they were accommodating with regard to deadlines and course work. This openness and flexibility are challenges for course designers so it is commendable that participants did not seem to struggle with communication during their online TEFL course. The participants that had a 20-hour offline constituent said that the peer collaboration during this time provided them with support. This collaboration and support are important because as Lim and Vighnarajah (2018) highlight students tend to feel three types of isolation during online classes: academic, social and physiological. Although the cause of this issue may vary and materialize despite the best intentions of the course designer it is important to implement monitoring protocols to identify students at risk. Incorporating platforms that facilitate communication amongst peers and instructors help to curb this problem (Mayende, Prinz & Isabwe, 2017).

Perceptions Related to the Application of Knowledge and Skills.

The data revealed that no practical application of knowledge and skills occurred during the participants' online TEFL. Participants suggested that their online TEFL course should have an in-class training aspect to help better prepare graduates for the realities of teaching abroad. This in-class training aligns with the notion of apprenticeship learning where novice teachers are provided with a practical means to apply taught theories and skills and to learn from experienced teachers. Service practicals are the most beneficial phase of pre-service teacher training (White & Forgasz 2016). There also seems to be a call to reduce the amounts of theory given in favor of practical teaching strategies (Mayer, et al., 2017).

The findings showed that the participants felt theoretically prepared and whilst content knowledge is important for a teacher, pedagogical content knowledge should be the aim of any teacher. Thus, TEFL graduates may have been presented with theories of English but without the bridge to apply these theories practically into a specific classroom. They are, as one participant put it, "*almost pointless*" Jordan, Kurilof, Sutherland, Ponnock and Hoffman (2018, p.4) explains that the "majority of new teachers graduate from schools of education feeling underprepared to meet the challenge of motivating and engaging students." Pre-service teachers need to also be able to apply knowledge and skills to a variety of schools and students (Rowan, Mayer, Kline, Kostogriz, & Walker-Gibbs, 2015) which comes with guidance and experience.

Conclusion

Limitations of the study

All participants were native English speakers. Second language English

speakers could have had a different view on the TEFL course's design and the degree to which they felt prepared for the classroom. Participants in this study only taught in China and Korea after graduating. Teaching in other countries may have yielded different opinions from the participants. Some of the participants had completed the TEFL certificate many years ago and had been teaching in China for at least six months at the time of the interviews. Some of their opinions have likely changed over the years. Some participants state that they cannot clearly remember some of their experiences regarding their TEFL courses due to this time lapse. Participants who have just started teaching after a recent graduation may provide different perspectives. Another possible limitation is that accrediting bodies of the participants' TEFL courses were not considered and no link or connections could be drawn from courses that are accredited by internationally recognized accrediting bodies or not. This has been added to the recommendations for future research.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was exploratory in nature as very little information and research has been done on any aspects of TEFL courses. Therefore, future research is needed in all aspects of TEFL courses.

- Characteristics of people that choose to move abroad and become TEFL teachers and the effect this has on the students, schools and education.
- The extent to which third-party assistance allows new teachers to adapt faster to novel situations.
- Quality assurance of TEFL teachers and TEFL courses/certificates
- Connections between perceived quality of TEFL courses and approval by accrediting bodies
- Differences between online and in-person TEFL courses.
- Professional development of TEFL teachers.
- Creating a country and an age specific TEFL course.
- The benefits and disadvantages of native speakers becoming teachers.
- The effect of cultural differences in the classroom and language acquisition.

Final Comments

Online TEFL courses are used by many countries to certify that teachers are ready to teach abroad. The perspectives and opinions gathered from the graduates of these TEFL courses and other educational stakeholders are vital to ensure quality in the teaching and learning environment. Teachers need to graduate from this online course feeling prepared to enter a foreign language classroom in order to teach students more efficiently. At the moment the TEFL courses need to provide more tailored content and feedback, as well as provide a practical arena for TEFL students to apply appropriate theories and skills.

If online TEFL courses were to incorporate a design in which the needs of the participants were considered at every stage of development, then TEFL graduates might be better prepared to enter a foreign classroom. The participant that did their TEFL course in China, where they went on to teach, expressed that they were better prepared for their foreign language classroom.

There is a great demand for TEFL teachers all over the world. Often the only requirement to teach English in the foreign classroom is a 120-hour TEFL course. This course needs to provide not only content knowledge to novice teachers but also provide them with the pedagogical tools needed to teach their foreign language students. Without the practical application of the taught theories, they will still be walking into their classrooms unprepared for the complexities for teaching abroad. The perceptions of the TEFL graduates are vital to understanding the shortcomings of the TEFL courses and provide the motivation for a more wholesome preparation of TEFL teachers in general.

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