



Cactus Staff Interview – Weekend TEFL Course

Our mission to share our knowledge of all things TEFL with you, in order to help you to make an informed decision about your course, resulted in the recording of a discussion between Laura Harrison, Cactus TEFL Course Advisor at Cactus, and Carole Gengler from the Cactus Language Training department. Laura has a Cambridge CELTA qualification and extensive work experience both within the UK and abroad, and she wanted to find out more about the weekend TEFL course that Carole recently completed...

Laura: 'So how was your weekend TEFL course, Carole?'

Carole: 'Yes good thanks. Very intense but good. Courses start on a Saturday and finish on a Sunday. It's quite a long weekend actually as you start at 9 on the Saturday and finish at 8 in the evening with just over an hour lunch during which you do preparation work and lesson planning as well. The Sunday starts at 6 and finishes at 9.'

Laura: 'Did you have to do any pre-course tasks before going on the course?'

Carole: 'Not really, no. In hindsight it would have been useful just to do at least some preparation but basically they assume that you have a solid knowledge about grammar and English language in general. Some people didn't have this but as the course is so short there is also not time to go through basic grammar so you are then in a class with trainees with different levels of grammar knowledge. It would have been useful to get some advice on how to prepare just so that no one falls behind. I assume there is a task prior to a CELTA then?'

Laura: 'Yes, I was given some tasks to complete before I started my course, along with the names of a couple of books to read and use for reference. I think it took me pretty much a whole weekend to complete all the tasks. They weren't actually compulsory but doing them definitely benefited me on the course.'

Carole: 'That sounds good. I must admit it is quite demanding cramming everything into one weekend. The aim of the course is to enable you to teach English through teaching practice and exercises, including various modules on teaching techniques like pronunciation, reading and writing. You start with some basic exercises or 'ice-breakers' and then you quickly move onto a Teaching Practice session. Your first session is on Saturday, it's only 5 minutes. There were about 12 of us in a group and we were then split into two different groups to teach each other. When the first group do the teaching the second group observes and gives feedback on the sessions. On Sunday they also do a foreign language lesson, where you get to learn a foreign language. This gives you an idea of how it feels to learn a different language and how it feels to be a student again. Quite an interesting experience really; after a while we were all talking away in Japanese.'

Laura: 'We had that same session on the Cambridge CELTA course. This was a 2 hour session where we got to learn Thai.'

Carole: 'What else gets covered on a CELTA course?'

Laura: 'A CELTA course takes 4 weeks to complete and you have daily lessons from 9am to 5pm sometimes even 6 or 7 in the evening.'

Carole: 'Do you have lessons over the weekend as well?'

Laura: 'No, the course is from Monday to Friday. There are 18 people on the course, and these get split into 3 micro-groups of 6 people per group. You do the more theoretical side of the course and the lectures with the whole group, and your teaching practice in smaller groups. On the first day you observe an experienced teacher, usually your assigned tutor and then on the second or third day you have your first Teaching Practice Session, which takes an hour but is shared between the trainees so you each have a 20 minute session. You gradually build up in longer teaching slots to the total 6 hours.'

Carole: 'Is that 6 hours a week for the whole group?'

Laura: 'No, it's a total of 6 hours of teaching practice per trainee over the whole course. It's quite a lot but it is really good. When you first start everyone is really nervous and scared, in my group the majority hadn't taught before, but by the end you feel quite confident. How did you feel, was it the same on your course?'

Carole: 'Yes well we didn't do as much as you as it's just a weekend course but I must admit I went through similar emotions. It's so scary when you first stand up in front of a group of total strangers. It was a lot harder than I thought. The 5 minutes is just enough to teach them how to say 'hello', 'my name is' and 'how are you' but it is actually quite difficult to structure a class without any guidance and I felt a bit out of my depth doing it. The second lesson on Sunday was 15 minutes and went quite a lot better because we'd had instructions throughout the day and monitored and observed other people as well. Also we had learnt about Teacher Talking Time and Student Talking Time'

Laura: 'TTT and STT'

Carole: 'Exactly, and everything makes a lot more sense after you've been introduced to those concepts. I must say the whole situation is a bit unrealistic as you pretend not to understand English when you are taught by a trainee in your group. It makes a massive difference from a confidence point of view though. I felt I gained enough confidence to go out and do it.'

Laura: 'I felt like that after completing the CELTA. But then when you get your first teaching job it's still like a baptism of fire.'

Carole: 'Is it that bad?'

Laura: 'I had a gap of 3 months between finishing my course and taking up my first teaching job in a summer school. Believe me, there is a big difference between teaching some well-behaved guinea pig students on the CELTA and the leery teenagers you get to teach on summer camp. The timetable can be quite strenuous as well; you'll spend the mornings or afternoons teaching English but the rest of the time is made up supervising activities so you feel really tired by the end of the day. But I felt it was a really good introduction to the job. I moved on to teaching in Italy and without that experience I probably would have struggled. I actually did learn a lot more from actual teaching and planning my lessons using different textbooks.'

Carole: 'That's probably the best way to do it, to learn from experience'

Laura: 'Yes it is. I found it very challenging to teach in Italy as well because the majority of students were studying for a Ph.D. or a Masters and were paying good money to brush up their levels of English therefore they expected a high standard of teaching.'

Carole: 'I don't think the weekend course prepares you for that kind of teaching. There is a component on the end of the Sunday dealing with getting jobs and there is also a question and

answer session. But that is quite late in the day and a bit rushed. A lot of people seemed to want to know more. The information you are given does give you a realistic idea of what you can and cannot do with a weekend course and how you can use the certificate with your plans and ambitions. It also gives you the option of extending the module by doing an online or a grammar component. There are a lot of opportunities out there; you just have to make it happen.'

Laura: 'Do you feel like you could teach anywhere now?'

Carole: 'Not anywhere, no. The weekend course is very much aimed towards people who want to travel and teach in places like Asia and South America. And I think that to teach groups out there you don't always need to have all that extensive grammar knowledge. You'll be teaching to improve your student's general communication skills most of the time and there is less need for the students to know every single tense.'

Laura: 'I suppose not. But there is quite a lot of guidance on the job side of things on a CELTA as well. Most time is spent on Teaching Methodology, Teaching Practice and Observation and Grammar and Language Teaching but there is a fair bit on TEFL jobs and opportunities as well. The trainers used to print out pages from recruitment sites and vacancies posted by large EFL organisations would be pinned up in the study area. Also, representatives came in to talk about the ESOL market in the UK, teaching refugees and asylum seekers and how that differs from teaching paying students. At the end of the course representatives from an international recruitment agency came to talk to us about recruitment options. It was a really useful part of the course'

Carole: 'Did you find all parts of the course relevant?'

Laura: 'Well the course practically covers every single aspect of EFL teaching in a short period of time. It was all relevant but the course is extremely intensive. You can spend the whole evening planning a 20 minute lesson for the next day and go straight onto a 5 hour session of grammar and pronunciation after your lesson. Then you take a deep breath and you have to start planning your lesson for the next day. It's really relentless. Sometimes you feel the only thing that keeps you going is the end of the course is always in sight.'

Carole: 'You must have been so tired. I was exhausted after those two days so I can only imagine what 4 weeks of that must be like...and then you realise you have such a lot to learn.'

Laura: 'A lot to learn, but a lot to gain also. I did actually feel it was a really good experience!'

We hope you have found this interview useful. For more information and advice on our weekend and longer TEFL courses, please visit www.cactustefl.com or call us on 0845 130 4775.