

# The quick guide to TEFL

by Richard Bradford

## What is TEFL?

If you've ever popped the word TEFL into an internet search engine, you'll know that it is confusingly portrayed as many things - a job, a career, an industry, a course and a certificate. At Cactus, we understand TEFL to be the industry of Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

*Suzanne's pronunciation guide:*  
TEFL - like "teffle"  
TESOL - like "teasol"  
CELTA - like "selta"

Whether you're interested in teaching English for a few months or for the rest of your life, as a break between jobs or a career in its own right, the entry point into TEFL will usually be via a 'TEFL' course. Again, the internet offers a confusion of courses, from those giving you a widely accepted ticket to ride, to others which tie you down to one individual school or scheme.

Cactus Teachers and the TEFL Admissions Service was created in 2001 to provide better access to those quality courses which lead to an internationally recognised qualification, and which give you the professional start you need for both short- and longer term English Language Teaching projects.

Once you're qualified, you still have to secure yourself a job - although some gap-year teaching schemes exist (see later). Compared with backpacking around the world, the TEFL

route is a structured way of breaking free approved of by parents and corporate entities alike. It will also take you on an amazing journey of new languages, cultures and civilisations.

## Can you do it?

Being an English Language Teacher is essentially about working with fellow human beings and you need to be interested in people from other cultures. Learning a language can be tough too - so an amount of empathy with language learners is useful. You don't need a degree to take the course (A-levels or equivalent are OK), but you might find that certain countries prefer teachers to be graduates. If you're not a native English speaker, you need a good advanced level of English and this may be tested before you're accepted. Age is no real issue. 20 is the working minimum to get on a course with no upper limit. Exceptions can be made to some of these conditions, so it's worth asking if you're unsure. Whether you're extrovert or introvert, a recent graduates or weighed down with life experience, you'll have a unique contribution to give to the course and the job beyond.

The course and the job require motivation, energy, and the ability to absorb new information and adapt quickly to new circumstances. Teaching English is a real job where people will have expectations about your performance - so you need to want to do TEFL as much as you want to leave whatever it is you're doing at the moment.

## Mind the Gap

TEFL is increasingly seen as a great gap year option, whether you're just out of uni or you're having a career break. We think this is a brilliant option and what better way to get to know a country from the inside, and earn some money on the way? It can all happen very quickly too - around 6 weeks from now, you could be qualified, and literally anywhere in the world ready to start your first job!

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There are a number of pre-packaged 'TEFL experience' schemes out there consisting of a short intro course and the guarantee of voluntary or paid humanitarian-flavoured work abroad. These offer a quick route to an eye-opening experience. Too good to be true? The flip-side is that if you get to your location and all goes pear-shaped, you can't jump ship to another school as the course you did won't be recognised. You may also find that, in the eyes of your "underprivileged" students, you're just another under-qualified teacher who only stays for a couple of months before whizzing back home never to be seen again.

By following a structured, approved and internationally recognised certificate course you can still head for your dream location - but you'll also have the skills and knowledge to give genuine help. You'll also feel proud of what you can contribute. And if you should arrive at the 'school from hell', you'll have the flexibility to move elsewhere.

## Learn to drive

Two qualifications are truly internationally recognised as official, entry-level "TEFL" certificates:

The **Cambridge CELTA** (Certificate of English Language Teaching to Adults) is one. The other is the **Trinity CertESOL** (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Both can be found as full-time, 4-week intensive courses or their part-time equivalents. Both follow a set syllabus designed to cover all aspects of ELT and are externally moderated and assessed.

These qualifications (equivalent to a BTEC) involve a lot of hard work, but you'll be amazed at the feeling of achievement afterwards. Frequently we hear that completing the course was more intensive than A-levels or finals! Much like passing your driving test, you're still something of a beginner when it's over. But the experience will flood in with your first job.

## On course

Courses last 110 to 140 hours and take you from speaking English to teaching English. All input is directed to improving your performance in the classroom. Lively input sessions and discussions, observation and activities will cram your head with the theories and juicy practical bits you'll need for your 6 to 8 hours of teaching practice.

You'll cover elements such as language awareness (grammar), linguistics, phonetics, foreign language acquisition, materials, classroom management and lesson planning. The global aim is to apply all these new-found techniques to your Teaching Practice (TP) which is observed by your trainer, your course colleagues and occasionally, an external assessor. Your TP starts with a 5-minute lesson as early as Day 2 of the course, and increases steadily to conclude in week 4 with around an hour of teaching. TP is with real live wriggling language students brought in specially for your lessons.

Outside the typical 9-5 day, you can expect to spend 3 or 4 hours in the evenings and time at weekends immersed in reading up, planning and preparing lessons.

## Go away!

Before you know it, the course will all be over. Yesterday you were sitting up till 4 am practising your lessons on the cat. Today you'll be slightly dazed and probably in need a couple of days to refocus before going in search of your first job. This is generally considered to be easier than getting through the course!

You can do a groovy gap year in Guatemala, or a summer school in Southampton. You can pay to become a volunteer, or answer the abundant job ads to earn a regular salary. Totally up to you.

The course will give you ideas and suggestions on how and where to find work and the Cactus Teachers site has good links too. A lot of contracts begin in the autumn - ideal if you're

qualifying in the summer. In the UK and other English speaking countries, you have better chances just before the start of the summer season. In more competitive countries like Spain and Italy, it can be useful to get an extra qualification in teaching Younger Learners or Business English. It is also worth considering taking the course in the country where you'd like to teach, possibly staying on to do a couple of weeks' tuition in the local language (this gets you a few more weeks of accommodation), giving you free time to look for work. Many organisations also interview in the UK for positions abroad. Feel free to ask us what sort of questions you should put to a potential employer.

## Apply yourself

So you've decided you want to take the Cambridge CELTA or the Trinity CertTESOL and enter the world of TEFL. The next step is to complete and submit an application form. On our site you can choose a location in the UK or overseas, read all about each school & course, speak to past students and download the all-important application form.

We check your completed form and forward it to the school you've chosen. They contact you for an interview, face-to-face or over the phone. At the end you'll be told if you're suitable, and they'll offer you a place (all being well). You have a few days to decide and last of all, you pay your money and start working on your pre-course materials. You may have a couple of books to buy, but many can be borrowed or consulted during the course.

Allow about 4-5 weeks for the whole process outside the busy summer months, or 6-8 weeks for June, July & August courses.

If you can't find what you're looking for online, give us a call and we'll do our best to locate a course for you which might not appear on the site.

## Why Cactus?

At Cactus Teachers, we're passionate about language learning and teaching, travelling and mixing with new cultures and civilisations. When you phone or write, we will be supportive and positive about your plans and aspirations. We'll be enthusiastic about what you want to do, and try to make it happen for you. We spend a lot of every day helping people to plan an escape route, be it for a couple of months, or for a lifetime.

Cactus Teachers is independent. Our admissions service is free, confidential, and impartial. We do have our favourite schools though - we'll tell you about them when you call.

Cactus Teachers is the only central admissions service for Cambridge CELTA and Trinity CertTESOL. We could offer every type of TEFL qualification available, but we've chosen the two internationally recognised TEFL qualifications we believe you need before you meet your paying public.

We hope this has helped you get a better picture of TEFL, and what it's all about. If you feel a sense of excitement at the idea of going abroad to teach English, it could just be you've got that passion too. Give us a call before it subsides. It could be the best thing you ever do.

Good luck!!

### Please note

Cactus Teachers is a private organisation, working independently to help raise the profile of the TEFL industry, with the objective of promoting high quality courses which are professionally delivered, and provide the participant with a solid grounding prior to embarking on a teaching career. Cactus Teachers acts as an admissions service for selected Cambridge CELTA & Trinity TESOL providers only, but is happy to provide course information on all existing Cambridge & Trinity courses. Differences may exist in entrance requirements, application procedures and course content and duration from school to school. Course prices quoted on the Cactus Teachers website are always identical to those offered by each provider.