

Tefl courses - a guide to what's available

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If you've ever typed "Tefl courses" into a search engine, you'll know that the results display a confusing range of options to gain qualifications as an English teacher. The main differences seem to boil down to four factors: course format, level of international recognition, course duration and price.

The big divide in courses is between face-to-face and distance or online courses. The former tend to be very hands-on, involved, and require varying amounts of teaching practice and observation.

For most of the longer courses (100 hours and above), the teaching practice is the central focus of the course, and most of the other input sessions during the course are aimed at increasing your ability to 'perform' well in class. This means that you leave the course with the experience of having taught real language learners, at different levels and possibly teaching different styles of lesson.

Distance or online courses either omit teaching practice completely, or for some of the longer courses, require you to be observed at the end of the course by a member of staff in a designated school. These types of courses tend to be less practical and more theoretical. The better-structured courses do include CD-ROMs with excerpts of classroom teaching in action but you'll probably be itching to apply your knowledge by the end of the course. Having not been able to observe professionals in action or soak up the atmosphere of a language school, there can be more of a culture shock when you get into your Tefl job.

The most widely-accepted "industry standard" entry-level qualifications are the Cambridge Celta and Trinity CertTesol. These are recognised by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and correspond to the minimum qualifications accepted by the British Council in the UK. Overseas these two have the widest possible appeal, and will be mentioned the most in job ads as something like "Celta, Trinity or equivalent".

There are many other course providers who have adapted their syllabus to meet local requirements, alternative methodologies, such as an increase in the amount of teaching practice, but who have chosen to do this without the rubber stamp and external assessment or moderation of Cambridge or Trinity and therefore fall into the category of "equivalent qualification".

The most 'significant other' is the course recognised by the Irish Ministry of Education, the Mei Relsa CertTefl, but a host of other quality alternatives exist as privately run courses requiring in the region of 100 to 160 hours' study compared to 120 and 130 hours for Cambridge and Trinity respectively.

Beyond these substantial qualifications come a plethora of shorter, lighter courses that suffice to introduce the subject of Tefl, though they may masquerade as "certificates in Tefl". These can be anything from a weekend to one or two weeks, or if online from around 40 hours of study time.

Short courses do have a number of advantages. These are appealing as they tend to skim off the juicy bits from the four-week courses, giving you a good insight into what it might be like to teach if you are still unsure. They are also generally impossible to fail. What's more, in some situations, they might be a sufficient Tefl certificate for you to find work abroad, and some schools guarantee paid or volunteer work on completion of a short course.

The main drawbacks are that it will be the lower quality schools that take on under-qualified teachers, they often pay less and offer less support, and you may not have enough of the basic techniques to make a good job of teaching and really get to enjoy it. And if you get to your school and find it's not at all how you imagined, you may have more problems jumping ship to another school.

The short online and weekend Tefl courses start at around £200, but pro-rata are actually more expensive than the 120 to 130-hour courses, which average at about £800, although can be available for much less. There isn't any real comparison between a brief insight and a thorough, four-week intensive course, nor in the level of recognition these courses offer and the ability each one gives you to actually do the job in hand.