

TEACHER TRAINING

# Getting the Right TEFL Thoroughbred is Key

**I** know you require a TEFL Certificate, and I've called a lot of schools, but I've decided I just can't afford them. Aren't there any programs that offer a scholarship or a loan?"

I put my head in my hands. It's 5p.m. on a Friday, time to pick up the kid from daycare, and I really don't want to get started. Yes, there's a quick answer to the question ("I don't know of any programs in a position to offer scholarships or loans"). I could also tell my caller she could doubtless recoup the \$2000 or so within about 6 months of teaching. But more important is that the selection issues are much larger than she suspects.

If I could, I'd tell her it's like trying to bargain for a racehorse you're buying sight unseen. If you know you're getting a thoroughbred, price should not be the issue. But if the horse is an old gray mare, any money spent will be a loss. The animal won't get you to town, much less get you a blue ribbon; in the same way, a certificate from a poor program is useless if you can't get and retain a job after graduation.

I get a lot of similar calls. Because I recruit teachers for schools affiliated with my employer, ELS Language Centers; and because college counselors don't have a lot of information on how to get started in TEFL, I often find myself giving job advice. The good news is that more and more college graduates realize that being a native speaker is not enough to ensure success in EFL. Those who want to grow, personally and professionally, are turning to TEFL Certificate Programs throughout the coun-



try and overseas. But the bad news is that many get a nag when they could be getting a Derby winner - by asking the wrong questions.

What, then, to ask to both be sure of qualifying for a job and be trained well? Some suggestions follow and target private (proprietary) programs.

Reputable programs will be patient as you walk them through these points, and may even have answers already indicated in their literature.

What are the qualifications of your trainers?

An MATESOL for all or most trainers is a

good sign. If those who will be your role models only have a TEFL Cert. themselves, look deeper into the curriculum offered and ask about their years of experience.

While a Master's is not a guarantee of good training, it does suggest deeper understanding about the theory behind the methods and a clear commitment to the field.

Have any complaints ever been filed against your program?

Many proprietary programs (private, not associated with universities) are required by their State licensing agencies to report any complaints, justified or not.

The nature of the complaint will tell you what the program may not publically advertise.

Are you affiliated with RSA/CELTA? How well is your cert. recognized?

Many good programs do not have this affiliation; some employers, mainly in Europe, recognize this qualification because of its long-

standing reputation.

What about duration, total hours in your program and practicum?

Ask about both classroom time and practicum hours. Intensive programs can run 120 to 150 hours.

The more practicum hours, closely supervised, the better. It is very difficult for a teacher to learn from his or her mistakes if given only three or four opportunities to teach.

The ideal program will allow you chances to work with beginning, intermediate, and advanced speakers of English. Note: part-time programs lack the immediacy of feed-

back seen in intensive, full-time programs. **What is your hire/placement track record?** Proprietary programs are required to keep close records on how many graduates receive jobs. The vast majority, over 80%, should be getting jobs within two months of hire, given the intense market for EFL teachers. **Tell me about your job lead network.** At minimum, a school should have an extensive list of employers throughout the world and access to Internet postings. Some programs also offer job counseling, resume advice, and a means of providing feedback from graduates who are now teaching overseas. This career-focused aspect is one of the chief advantages that proprietary programs offer over university-based programs. **Are you licensed by any state agency?** Licensure for proprietary schools does not mean that you will qualify for a public school job, but rather that the school meets stringent state standards. In California, these include

standards for qualifications of trainers and administrators, strict record keeping, and a refund procedure.

**How are trainees evaluated?** If you do poorly at written tests, you won't perform well in a TEFL program that requires passing a test for graduation. All programs should have highly specific criteria for evaluating you, particularly in the area of practicum teaching. These should be in written form, to help prevent any bias on the part of an observer. And if you do find there is a chance of failing, you'll want to know it early on, while there is still a chance to get a refund or improve your performance.

**What kind of coursework and topics do you have?**

A comprehensive program will at least introduce you to the basics of classroom manage-

ment, lesson planning, student evaluation, and techniques for teaching grammar, reading, writing, listening, speaking, and pronunciation.

**What is your trainee/trainer ratio?**

The program should allow for easy exchanges in class work and for closer counseling as needed. Classes of more than 15 trainees may inhibit curious questions. Your practicum classes should be observed by more than one trainer, as opinions on your strengths and weaknesses will vary.

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**How do you get your EFL/ESL students for the practicum?**

The ideal is students who really do not know the material you will be teaching, so that their responses will be genuine. Immigrants who have been in the community for extensive periods of time might not meet this criteria. Make sure you will have a guaranteed number of students for your practicum in order to do pair and group work.

**How are refunds handled?**

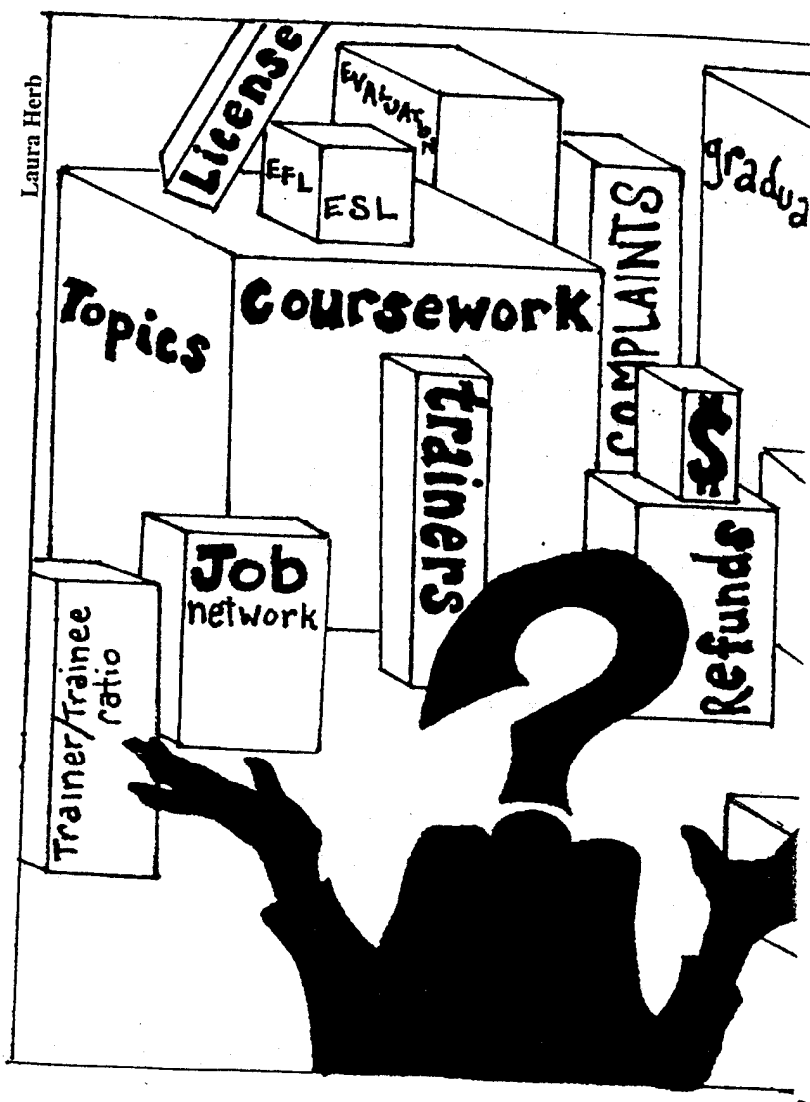
Many unanticipated events may force a drop-out - family crisis, illness, or a mismatch of trainee and program goals. The best programs allow you to leave within the first few days with few, if any, financial penalty. Others will prorate the amount coming back to you depending on the time spent in the program.

**What will I receive on graduation?**

TEFL program graduates disperse quickly after the program ends. An efficient program will make sure that on graduation day, they receive a certificate, a letter of recommendation, and, perhaps, a transcript of courses taken and the results.

**How much will it all cost?**

Of course you will want to know about course tuition, extras such as books and day trips, and housing. Figure a basic budget, then add 10% for emergencies. Then beg, borrow or work to make it happen! The bottom line: go for it! The best program ensures that you'll be sitting in the winner's circle with others who love the profession and have come to embrace it.



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