

English spoken here

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A language-teaching certificate is a passport to a job anywhere in the world, says Alexandra Buxton

For an articulate graduate with several years of real life under her belt, it might sound like a doddle: a four-week course in teaching English as a foreign language. But Sophie Behagg knows it's not.



Teaching aid: Sophie Behagg and her students at Bell International in Cambridge

She is in her last week of a Cambridge CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) course at Bell International, a language school in Cambridge.

"I started trawling through the recommended grammar books last summer, getting to grips with tenses like the past perfect and past perfect continuous," she says. "Since I began the course, I've slept only five or six hours a night."

Sophie, who has a degree in fine art, has spent the past three years living in a converted bus in a lemon grove near Marbella. Partly in defiance of ex-pat inertia, she taught herself to speak fluent Spanish, which helped her get a job with an interior design company. Along the way, she became fascinated by the process of language acquisition.

Like her fellow students at Bell, Sophie sees a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) certificate as a passport to limitless travel possibilities – but there the similarity ends. The 15 participants on the course range in age from 22 to early 50s. Some have recently graduated while others have worked in fields as diverse as nursing, performance arts and wine retailing.

Danica, who is in her late 30s and runs her own internet business, is taking the course as much for mental stimulus as for career reasons. "I work from home and really needed a change," she says. "It's a treat to be working alongside other people. Essentially, it's an intensive course in learning how to teach."

With a good command of English increasingly a must abroad for a career in business and academia, dozens of TEFL courses have sprung up to meet demand for teachers. Courses leading to internationally recognised qualifications are now offered by centres all over the world, so it's just as possible to learn to teach English in Bogotá or Barcelona as it is in Brighton or Bournemouth.

The key considerations for those wanting to teach English overseas are the quality of the course and the industry-wide value of the qualification. The courses that rate highest on both scores are the Cambridge CELTA, which is validated by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, and the Trinity Certificate in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), which is moderated by Trinity College, London.

"If you have an English language teaching certificate, it will never be hard to find a job overseas," says Robin Bell, a tutor of English language teaching at Keele University, which offers a part-time Trinity course. A quick scroll through the jobs section of the sector's dominant websites (tefl.co.uk, tefl.net and eslcafe.com) reveals positions in countries as far-flung as Italy and China, Mexico and Mongolia.

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It is possible, however, to teach English overseas with no previous experience or specialist qualifications. Every year thousands of "gappers" spend time working, often unpaid, as classroom assistants or givers of English conversation classes. For Sam Jackson, another CELTA student, it was just such a taste of teaching that prompted him to consider TEFL.

"I spent almost a year in Vienna with the European Voluntary Service scheme, working for an after-school project that encourages children to learn English through playing games," says Sam, who has a degree in psychology. "It was through

helping German-speaking children as young as 11 with their English homework that I got interested in teaching. They had a better grasp of the grammar of my own language than I did."

Priced in the region of £750 to £1,000-plus (without accommodation), CELTA and Trinity TESOL courses are expensive. However, anyone tempted by cost and convenience to sign up for weekend or online TEFL courses should be aware that most language schools, especially in Europe, prefer to see evidence of supervised teaching practice.

In the past month, Sophie Behagg and her fellow CELTA students have each clocked up six hours of teaching to small groups of volunteer students from all over the world. They have learnt how to plan lessons, how to evaluate learning, and observed each other's attempts to quell the natural exuberance of Mediterranean students and coax those from Tokyo and Beijing to differentiate the sounds "l" and "r".

Sophie has thrived on the TEFL course and on her return to Marbella she hopes to find a job teaching English with the eventual plan of setting up her own enterprise combining art and language. "I picture myself somewhere near Seville giving classes in an open-air studio surrounded by ancient olive trees," she says.

- Bell International: 01223 212333; <http://education.telegraph.co.uk/education/exit.jhtml?exit=http://www.bell-centres.com>. For a list of all schools running Cambridge CELTA courses: 01223 553997; <http://education.telegraph.co.uk/education/exit.jhtml?exit=http://www.cambridgeesol.org/teaching/centres/uk.html>. For centres offering Trinity TESOL courses: 020 7820 6100; <http://education.telegraph.co.uk/education/exit.jhtml?exit=http://www.trinitycollege.co.uk>.

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