

# From Working Holiday to Serious Professional Career: Why TEFL Has to Change

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# **FROM WORKING HOLIDAY TO SERIOUS PROFESSIONAL CAREER: WHY TEFL HAS TO CHANGE**

Alun E.M. Roger

## **Abstract**

TEFL is a profession struggling to survive in the world of the 21st century.

Citing evidence such as the jailing of a TEFL teacher in Sudan and the fraudulent activity and bankruptcy of one of Japan's largest private language schools, this essay uncovers evidence of an EFL industry that is fundamentally lacking in professional standards.

The paper argues that the TEFL profession and the EFL industry are being seriously harmed by the recruitment of teachers who have no clear vocation in mind; by the limited scope of their training; and by the lack of ethical and professional accountability apparent in some of the largest private language schools.

Calling on the industry's stakeholders (including TEFL teachers, public and private language schools, government policymakers, the awarding and accrediting bodies worldwide), the author appeals for the establishment of a global organisation that would establish and maintain exacting professional standards for TEFL schools and individual teachers alike, defeat the amateurism that is currently crippling the industry and ensure that all aspects of the industry are properly accountable.

## **Introduction**

What does the 2007 imprisonment of an English teacher in Sudan for blasphemy have in common with the bankruptcy and collapse of one of Japan's largest private English language schools?

To the casual observer, very little. But dig a little deeper and you will discover that all is not well in the TEFL industry. In fact, both incidents are symptoms of a malaise that has been quietly eating away at the very heart of this profession. To continue this medical analogy: the malaise is so acute that it threatens the very survival of the patient. And, to make matters worse, the patient currently shows little willingness to make the radical changes necessary to ensure survival.

Therefore, the objectives of this paper are to: -

- 1) Identify the serious shortcomings and inadequacies of the TEFL industry, and their impact on learners and teachers alike.
- 2) Argue for a radical overhaul so TEFL remains a viable global industry in the 21st century.
- 3) Make recommendations aimed at helping the profession to recover from its current malaise and to develop and prosper.

## **Professional Image**

The first key concern is over the deliberate dumbing-down of our profession's image and the consequences this has for the future. Next time you are on the internet, google "TEFL" and sit back in astonishment at the number of private companies sporting hook lines such as: "earn while you travel", "fund your travels" and "learn

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to teach by the beach”. Can we seriously conceive advertisements of this kind being used for other professions, such as law, medicine or engineering? Certainly not. So why focus on the idea that fun, frolics and cocktail-fuelled nights by the sea are the rewards of TEFL? A cynic may argue that the only reason is to attract people with no real idea of their vocation: a truly gloomy prospect for TEFL professionalism. Even the UK government (Directgov website, see references for URL) is not guilt-free, with its disgraceful - if not entirely willful - put-down of TEFL as “a tried and tested way for people to see the world while earning a living” – putting it on a par with that of a flight attendant.

Are we sending out the right kinds of messages about the characteristics of people who are best suited to become qualified TEFL teachers? Little attention seems to have been paid either by government policymakers, or the awarding and accrediting bodies, to the professional development of TEFL teachers to cope with the new demands of the 21st century. Kirkpatrick (2006) recognises the fundamental importance of this issue by calling for greater numbers of trained and qualified teachers in the EFL field. Kirkpatrick rightly infers that EFL is the world’s only profession where a lack of vocational training can land you a job.

This essay calls on the existing bodies that represent TEFL teachers (such as IATEFL) to develop a more strategic approach to establishing TEFL as a proper profession on the same level as for example, doctors and lawyers. To be truly effective, one overarching body would be established to act globally across all countries where EFL teachers can be found. This body would work closely with government policymakers, teacher trainers and the bodies that award and accredit TEFL qualifications, to address the need for much greater professionalism in the industry.

## **Teacher Training**

The second concern is over the way that many TEFL teachers are trained. It should be apparent from the 2007 debacle involving British teacher Gillian Gibbons' imprisonment in Sudan, if not from our own experiences, that we can find ourselves, however unwittingly, imposing our own western learning expectations and values onto the people we teach, without recognising that our students may neither share nor appreciate those expectations or values. This fundamental weakness in the EFL training of teachers is indicative of a mindset deeply rooted in imperialism. TEFL training courses must begin to offer meaningful cultural training to teachers and how these cultural differences manifest in the classroom.

Inevitably, teachers who work without specific cultural training and who attempt – unwittingly - to impose a foreign and unfamiliar set of educational principles and values upon their students are likely to only succeed in inhibiting learning, demotivating their students or - at the very worst - causing serious cultural misunderstandings. Failure in this regard will only result in more Gillian Gibbons, perhaps with more tragic consequences.

TEFL training courses often push Communicative Language Teaching (a methodology popular in the west and the mainstay of TEFL courses, accredited or otherwise) as the way to teach, and that failure to do so implies that teachers are not modern (and by implication, effective). But it is clear that other methodologies do work. EFL circles are slowly coming around to the idea that CLT is not the Holy Grail it is sometimes perceived to be. Professional TEFL teachers will therefore seek to understand their students' needs and take account of their students' cultural environments and learning predispositions when selecting relevant teaching

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methodologies, activities and materials. Again, an effective, professional TEFL Association with a global remit has a fundamental role to play in improving the content of TEFL teacher training in these regards.

### **Industry Regulation**

The third major concern is with the dubious business practices of certain large and influential private language schools and their lack of accountability to, or monitoring by, the TEFL community. Japan's largest private language school, NOVA, is a well known case. Nova's widespread deceit of potential students for the products offered and its refusal to provide refunds, caused many of its teachers to go unpaid for months on end, followed by the loss of their jobs and the ultimate demise of the company (Miyazaki, 2008)(Lewis, 2007)(Robertson, 2007). What is perhaps less well-known is that NOVA and certain other leading private schools in Japan have been under investigation for failing to enroll their teachers onto the national Employee Health and Pension scheme, denying them access to state medical cover to which employers as well as employees are required to contribute financially (Brophy 2005). Can it be that the TEFL community has buried its collective head in the sand when confronted with questionable business practice? Without a global, professional body to act as a watchdog, private schools need not uphold rigorous ethical standards in the way they provide their services.

The unethical practice of some schools doesn't end there however. Once again Kirkpatrick (2006) rightly identifies a further failing of our thoroughly unprofessional and unregulated industry. Certain EFL schools, it seems, are advertising high quality courses run by trained and/or experienced teachers, yet an accredited TEFL qualification is not required and many teachers are employed solely

on their being native speakers. Consequently, it can be argued that many of them may be misleading their customers in their advertising.

In the medical, legal and school-teaching professions, this highly unethical and unprofessional behaviour would be regarded as gross misconduct. Yet in the TEFL industry, it seems to be quietly brushed under the carpet or, worse, allowed to become accepted business practice.

In-house training of TEFL teachers should, as in other areas of the teaching profession, provide ongoing high quality tailored support to enable the individual teacher to deliver high quality learning. Sadly, in some private language schools, it simply doesn't. Not only is the training woefully inadequate, it is often primarily focused on indoctrination into company values and on performing sales pitches for company learning materials. A brief visit to a well known teacher's internet resource (Dave's ESL Café) shows that concerns over inadequate training are rife across the industry; this is a major challenge that must be addressed in raising the professional image of the TEFL teacher.

## **Amateurism**

Like a virus in the bloodstream, amateurism seems to run through every aspect of the TEFL industry. Visit the AEON Japan recruitment webpage and look up their education theory and vision. Some TEFL professionals may see this as little more than a poorly explained, unsound and confused understanding of theories on language learning and acquisition, possibly spun to appear as a marketing advantage over other companies. Where was the regulation of this advertising by an independent professional body to ensure that the content is accurate and not

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misleading? Who ensured that new graduates considering the TEFL industry as a potential profession weren't misled by this information? While there are many websites offering advice and guidance to would-be TEFL teachers where is the authority, impartiality or reliability of their content?

Such amateurism is crippling our profession in two ways. Firstly, students are quick to discover that promises of quality teaching are remote from the reality. Many of these companies are trapped in a perpetual cycle of having to replace students who quit before their courses have completed. Not surprisingly, those students feel disillusioned with English language learning and the TEFL industry. This not only reduces the immediate customer base but is also a short-sighted business practice as it decimates much of the potential long term custom as well. Further, by failing to invest in a proper professional workforce they are ensuring that the above cycle is prolonged, as wave after wave of inexperienced, inadequately trained 'teachers' contributes to the disillusionment of learners.

To compound these fundamental problems, existing and potential teachers also become disillusioned with the lack of professionalism in the industry and move on to other areas. In these circumstances, it is conceivable that, at a point in the not too distant future, the ratio of EFL teachers joining/leaving will be so influential that the influx of new trainee teachers will drop off significantly due to the masses of poor publicity and realisation that the TEFL industry is sub-standard and lacking a robust professional development or career path. These companies then face a serious problem of replacing their staff losses. The consequent disruption will lead to further dissatisfaction of students and so the downward spiral will continue.

## **The Road to Recovery**

As stated at the outset, the condition of the EFL patient is critical and unlikely to improve without radical intervention and willingness from within. Private language schools will not or cannot change their practices from within, for fear of losing profit and their jealously-guarded market share to rivals. It is the nature of the beast, and that is why the EFL teaching community must recognise that change can only be incentivised from without rather than within these businesses. An international, authoritative, professional EFL watchdog is required to:

- provide EFL schools with comprehensive advice and guidance on achieving high EFL standards
- encourage those schools to adhere to challenging standards of EFL and business probity;
- monitor and reinforce those standards
- establish and maintain a “whitelist” – a record freely available in the public domain that identifies those schools that meet the minimum criteria.

It should be clear from the arguments advanced above that TEFL is simply failing in its key objective which must be to offer high quality, professional language learning that will enable the students to communicate effectively in their target language. The following first principles may help those who want to see TEFL move on and prosper from its current malaise and achieve this objective:

- There must be a single global, high quality, independent voluntary organisation to represent the interest of the TEFL profession.
- Recruitment and training campaigns by government and private companies must shift away from the notion of TEFL as an “earn while you travel”

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experience and toward a more focused emphasis on TEFL as a high quality career that ranks equally alongside other professions

- The establishment of a proper career path for TEFL teachers supported by a rigorous Professional Development System. TEFL must be a serious and viable career option and training programs will need to be lengthened to reflect this.
- All EFL teachers must go through the same types of extended training in learner psychology, conflict resolution and classroom management. This should help ensure that all teachers are professional and competent.
- The extended TEFL training must include cultural/educational context awareness units. Trainee teachers would be able to specialise in specific cultures or educational contexts.
- TEFL teachers must be trained to appreciate that teaching approaches and methodologies are tools that can be brought in to use as the need arises and as cultural environment dictates
- An EFL watchdog must be established to help private language schools achieve acceptable standards of probity in teacher and student recruitment and support.

The challenges that lie ahead are truly enormous and the road to EFL's recovery has to be grounded in the patient's determination to improve. Perhaps the next step

following this essay is the establishment of a think tank that can pull together the key players and set out proposals for a strategy to ensure EFL has a future in the 21st century.

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