

Training to be an English Language Teacher Certificate in English Language Teaching

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The primary remit of Galway Adult Basic Education Service is literacy provision for adults who have difficulties with reading and writing and basic mathematics. Since the late 1990s, the literacy services of the VECs have also been entrusted with teaching English to immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers. Such provision is known as Teaching English for Speakers of Other languages (TESOL).

The difference between Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and TESOL is that the former is directed at academics, professionals and programme students who are taught in their own country in language academies, or who visit an English-speaking country for special courses which may last from one week to one year. TESOL, on the other hand, is offered to immigrants who plan to stay and work in the country. As far as pedagogy is concerned, TEFL is more language-oriented, with most students taking exams such as Cambridge Proficiency; TESOL is more message or communication-oriented. Apart from the focus on language, students learn about the cultural norms of their new country and learn to communicate in specific everyday situations. Trainee teachers then learn broader skills in the TESOL context and can aspire not only to work in TEFL commercial language schools in Ireland and countries such as Spain, Italy, South Korean, Japan and Thailand, but can also aspire to teaching on TESOL programmes in the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand as part of public-service teaching programmes.

Taking advantage of the experience and expertise of the staff in English Language Training and applied linguistics we began to offer the Certificate in English Language Teaching in 2009 as a response to the unemployment situation in Galway. Since we offered our first CELT in September, 2009, we have adjusted the course in line with feedback from the Advisory Councils for English Language Schools (ACELS), feedback from the students and teachers, recourse to on-going research in applied linguistics and fidelity to our own view of language and literacy as social practice and our quest for expertise in the area of language.

The Course

The six modules that we focus on (as per ACELS guidelines) are:

1. Exploring the Teaching of the four skills
2. Approaches and methods in English Language Teaching
3. Language Analysis
4. Materials
5. Developing learner profiles
6. Learning strategies

Module 1 covers the teaching of the four language skills and the related subskills. The four language skills are reading, writing, speaking and listening and subskills include skimming, scanning, prediction, negotiation of meaning, etc. The trainees attend input sessions on theory, and then individual sessions on the teaching of each skill. While we cover a proliferation of subskills and strategies, it should not be forgotten that subskills such as skimming and scanning and predictive strategies already exist in the minds of the literate students. It may be simply a matter of transferring those skills from their own language. What the student really needs then is background or schematic knowledge (just like he or she does in the first language), knowledge of the writer and, most important of all, vocabulary. So, rather than putting the cart before the horse, a teacher should facilitate skimming, scanning and prediction by pre-teaching vocabulary and making sure that text is suitable. New teaching methodology, new methods, and new theories tend to lead to a lot of over-cooking, so the message for trainees is not to get burned!

In Module 2 we look at Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Learning (TBL), Computer Assisted Language Learning, the Genre Approach to Teaching Writing and Corpus Linguistics. CLT developed as a reaction to the audio-lingual method and the more formal methods of grammar teaching and rote learning. It is theoretically linked to Dell Hymes' theory (1972) of communicative competence, later developed for language teaching by Canale and Swain (1980) and the European Council. The approach focusses on appropriateness (knowing when to say what to whom when and where), communicative interaction and functional, formulaic language, using pedagogical methods such as pair work and role play simulations. Unfortunately, CLT has become associated with the misconception that grammar has a less important role to play, and this has damaged the status of English Language Teaching as a profession, leading to the mistaken belief that any native speaker can teach a language if they come armed with communicative methods.

While methods such as pair-work and role play simulations provide practice and get the student talking, they can only prepare people for a limited number of situations. For example, you can do a simulation such that A is a tourist and B a local resident and A says to B, 'Hello, excuse me, could you tell me the way to the library?' and B, thankfully says, 'Take your first right, and then it's the grey building straight ahead.' Very few people are so obliging as far as clarity and conciseness are concerned, unfortunately, and the real tourist might be subjected to a stream-of-consciousness type answer of which he or she understands not a word. Why? Principally, the tourist does not have enough vocabulary and has not studied the authentic phonological sounds, such as the 19 vowel sounds in English and the schwa (the irritable vowel!), in any detail. Similarly, A the car-owner can say to B the mechanic, 'Could you check the tyre pressure, please?' and B says, 'Of course, sir.' However, no number of simulations will prepare students for when they need to say, 'The car makes a weird clicking sound every time I go round a left-hand bend.' There is no substitute then for vocabulary, grammar and phonology teaching.

In Module 3 we take a closer look at grammar and phonology. Obviously, we cannot teach everything in 120-140 hours, so the sessions focus on raising the awareness of what grammar isn't ("proper" grammar, school grammar, thought) and rather what it is: a finite and meaningful number of rules which enable the learner to generate an infinite number of meaningful utterances.

We look at how English expresses present, past and future time by recourse to a set number of verbal forms, at subject verb object (SVO) syntax of English sentence and the order of adjectives. We look at basic segmental phonology - the 45 phonemes/discrete sounds - 19 vowels (short, long and diphthongs) and the 26 voiced and unvoiced consonants. Most EFL teachers have a deeply-ingrained fear of phonology, although it is one of the “mechanical” areas of the language in which they should be expert. Lack of knowledge in this area leads to teachers “winging” it in the classroom, but more importantly it leads to students, such as Romanians, making embarrassing mistakes such as “it feets me” for “it fits me”, or Manolo from Barcelona saying, ‘Will I serve the soap now, Mr Fawlt?’ Such mis-pronunciation fossilizes if it is not addressed in the classroom.

Knowledge of phonology will also help the teacher explain phenomena, such as why and when the past simple tense is pronounced in three different ways (/t/; /d/ and /id/). It is not good enough as a native speaker to say, ‘It just sounds right to me’. Speakers of other languages do not have the same “sound” intuition for English as native speakers do.

We also teach our trainees basic phonetic transcription as this is a requirement in the best language schools in Europe.

Module 4 looks at the evaluation of materials used in the English language classroom. It is important for teachers to be critically reflective when choosing or using a textbook. Those which have been produced in the UK and the USA tend to promote their own ethnocentric “western” cultures, which of course may not be suitable in certain contexts. It is always better to use local context. As far as language is concerned, teachers may notice that listenings from books such as *Headway* present idealized language - without the discourse markers, backchannels and hesitations common to everyday speech. The teacher can provide the necessary balance by recording local radio programmes for use in the classroom, dependent upon the level of the students, of course. Also noticeable in these textbooks may be the particular pedagogical philosophy of the publishers or writers. *Headway*, for example, uses a communicative language teaching approach and the lessons seem to be structured around the PPP (see below) framework. *Cutting Edge*, on the other hand, seems to approach language learning/teaching from a task-based approach with a strong emphasis on vocabulary.

Modules 5 and 6 focus on the learner. Trainees learn the importance of broad needs analyses which focus not only on language but also on students’ goals with regard to education, work, and integration. Specific focus is given to interference from the students’ own language (we look at Spanish, Russian, Japanese and Nativised English as examples), to learner styles (visual, auditory and kinaesthetic), learning strategies and learner autonomy –self-directed learning, key to the progress of the student.

Teaching Practice (TP)

Trainees will teach 6 classes on the course to our ESOL students. These classes will be prepared in six teaching practice workshops with experienced teachers and trainees will be given a lesson-plan framework. While the trainers provide more input for the first TP on vocabulary, the trainees will be

expected to design their own lesson from then on. At the early stages of the course, trainees receive instruction with regard to the basics of good teaching practice, such as eliciting, concept-checking, nomination, position, the necessity to project one's voice, gaining rapport, using a whiteboard and interactive smartboard, and managing the classroom, both with regard to monitoring activities and classroom dynamics.

A Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) framework is adopted to facilitate a structured class, usually divided into periods of twenty minutes. Students are encouraged to cut down on Teacher Talk-Time (TTT) and facilitate Student-Talk Time (STT). Percentages of 70% (students) and 30% (teacher) or even 20:80 may be advised. PPP is a common communicative language teaching framework, but it actually corresponds to the way that most lay people would go about explaining a subject. Students are usually encouraged to use gap-fills at the practice stage and pair-work or role-playing at the production stage.

Trainees are reminded that no one methodology is the best methodology and no one method is the best method. An eclectic approach is the wisest choice. The CELT in the City of Galway VEC course provides a PPP framework for the benefit of trainees because it is good to have a structure that is clearly defined. However, most teachers stray from PPP once they have experience, realising that there are many other formats that are valid. Diversity and creativity is what trainee teachers should espouse.

Similar to the word of caution expressed above in relation to the subskills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, the trainee should critically reflect on all the methods presented on this course, none more so than communicative language teaching whose disadvantages (misconceptions and all) outweigh its very good focus on interaction. For example, prescriptive percentages with regard to PPP and student and teacher talk time make no sense once the training period is over. Such percentages don't correspond to everyday language experience and can also reduce the amount of time spent on reading and writing in the classroom. Eliciting has also been over-cooked by communicative language teaching. First of all, eliciting can be unnatural. Who ever heard anyone ask (except of a toddler perhaps), "And what I am I doing now?" which is a common cry of an over-eliciting teacher introducing the present continuous (I am reading, you are reading, etc.). The use of quizzes and games such as scrambles and hangman to elicit a word that (supposedly) the student doesn't know is another heart sinker. It wastes too much time and misses the point. Vocabulary should be taught orally first, as any preliminary contact with the written word will produce interference from the student's knowledge of his or her own written language. It makes no sense either to confuse the process with the enunciation of the names of letters and reading or writing the word. Much of these communicative language teaching methods originated with the perceived need for students to be aware of and take part in learning and interactive *processes*. However, such interaction should not be artificially constructed and aided and abetted by artificial and at time pointless "communicative" exchanges.

It is unreasonable for any teacher training centre or school to claim that trainees are totally ready to go into a classroom once they have achieved the Certificate in English Language Training. It's a start. There remains a lot of work to be done. The new teacher should strive to become an expert in his or her subject, which is the English language. That means that grammar and phonology need to be

mastered. The teacher should also, having studied the basics of different methodologies, begin to mould a personal eclectic style. And like any other professional, teachers should not remain anchored to the past and to their original TEFL Certificate. They should be open to new development is second language acquisition and new teaching methods such as the genre approach to writing, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics and, now in the age when a printer can digitalize a spare part for the body, be open to the advances in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), which include apps for mobile technology. As we know, language changes from day to day, and its speakers change with it, so should its teachers.

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