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## Opinion and Perspective

# A Question of Qualifications: Making a Case for TESOL Diplomas

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As teachers of English working in Japanese colleges and universities, we are all familiar with the format of job advertisements for recruiting lecturers and instructors, each one generally containing a section on the qualifications required of prospective employees. For the majority of jobs, in addition to having experience teaching English at the tertiary level, the candidates are expected to hold either a master's (MA) degree or even a doctoral degree in TESOL or applied linguistics. In some cases, candidates may have academic degrees in fields unrelated to the teaching of English.

What the majority of these job advertisements have in common is a focus on academic credentials, and conspicuous by their absence is the mention of professional qualifications. In particular, these job adverts almost universally disregard professional TESOL diplomas as a requirement for teaching in higher education. In this article I will be attempting to make the case that universities and colleges should consider professional TESOL diplomas as being equally valuable to academic degrees when considering candidates for English teaching positions. It should be noted that I will be discussing positions which primarily involve the instruction of English, and that the argument made here will not extend to, for example, professors of literature who teach a small amount of English discussion classes, nor will it apply to professors of English education or researchers into second language acquisition (SLA) and TESOL. The argument will be made with relevance purely to those positions which require, as the primary responsibility, the teaching of English.

In making this argument, it will first be important to define what is meant by a “TESOL diploma,” and to underline the distinction between *professional* and *academic* qualifications.

## **TESOL Diplomas: A Brief Overview**

While they are widely recognized in European countries, TESOL diplomas are far less well known in Asia, and as a consequence of this there may be some misconceptions surrounding them that need to be tackled. This discussion will be framed in terms of the UK National Qualifications Framework (NQF), as it is in the UK where the two most well-known and respected diplomas are based. However, I will make some comparisons with academic degrees in order to give some sense of equivalency.

It should first be understood that a TESOL diploma is not the same as a TESOL certificate. Well-recognized TESOL certificates (the Cambridge CELTA or Trinity College London CertTESOL, for example) are accredited at level 5 of the NQF, putting them at the same level as the first or second year of undergraduate degree studies or professional certificates. TESOL diplomas, on the other hand, are advanced qualifications that can only be taken after a minimum of two years post-certificate teaching experience, and are accredited at level 7 of the NQF, as are Master’s degrees (OFQUAL, 2010).

The two most well regarded diplomas are the Cambridge Delta and the Trinity College London DipTESOL, both of which contain a similar number of hours of study and are assessed through similar procedures (Collins, 2005). Each qualification is assessed through a written exam of around three hours (testing candidates on grammar, knowledge of methodology, and so on), a written portfolio of around 10,000 words (usually consisting of action research, though this may vary), and a teaching practicum (a number of lessons which are assessed both internally by the training center and externally by an independent body, such as a university or exam board) (Hawkey & Milanovic, 2013; see also internal link to “DipTESOL syllabus and assessment procedures” at <http://www.trinitycollege.co.uk/site/?id=694>).

Although there are slight differences between the assessment components

of the Cambridge and Trinity courses, they follow the same basic pattern, and are considered to be entirely equivalent qualifications. In the wider English language teaching (ELT) world, diplomas are generally a prerequisite for jobs in ELT management, teacher training, and materials development, and are highly regarded by large international organizations such as International House and the British Council.

The next section will address my reasons for arguing that TESOL diplomas should also be considered as suitable qualifications for college and university teachers in Japan.

## **The Suitability of TESOL Diplomas for University Educators**

Thornbury (2008) argues that “teaching is a highly skilled activity, but it is not, alas, rocket science. In fact, it is probably not a science at all” (p. 6). Traditionally, it has been important for language teachers at Japanese universities to obtain high-level academic qualifications, which demonstrate sophisticated knowledge of theory and the ability to carry out research. In other words, candidates for these jobs have been recruited on the same basis as candidates for other academic positions, despite what would appear to be quite different responsibilities and duties between the two roles.

It is certainly valuable for a teacher to have a thorough knowledge of ELT theory and methodology, but what often seems to be overlooked is the professional gap between the teaching done by English instructors and that carried out by lecturers and professors in other subjects; that is, the gap between the teaching of a subject and the teaching of a skill. English language teaching is essentially skill teaching. The job of English teachers is not to teach students about ELT methodology and theories of second language acquisition, but rather it is to teach them English while employing those methodologies, and while using that knowledge of second language acquisition.

One very significant way in which TESOL diplomas differ from most (though not all) MA courses is that they have a heavy focus on assessed teaching practice. While requiring theoretical understanding, they are chiefly concerned

with providing teachers with practical teaching skills rather than an exhaustive knowledge of methodology and SLA theory. In other words, teaching is a skilled activity, and while knowledge of the academic side of ELT is essential for teachers to marry their teaching practice to the findings of SLA research, TESOL diplomas provide the teaching skills required for good classroom practice. In fact, it is nearly impossible to complete a TESOL diploma without demonstrating a high level of classroom competence and teaching skill.

It could well be argued that experience in the classroom can provide adequate training for teachers in the practical skills required for language teaching, and also that a number of MA courses include practical teaching components. Both of these points are absolutely true, and I am not intending in this article to make a negative case against other, more academically focused qualifications, but rather to make a positive case in favour of TESOL diplomas. The job of a university English instructor is chiefly to teach the skills of English, and TESOL diplomas are designed to ensure that teachers who gain these qualifications are highly skilled classroom practitioners.

There may continue to be some doubts in the minds of readers about the suitability of TESOL diplomas for teachers at the tertiary level, and I will now examine some of the possible objections that could be raised against this notion.

### *1. Universities are academic institutions, and therefore all educators should hold academic qualifications.*

This is a powerful objection, but one which strikes me as somewhat arbitrary. I have argued above that in many cases the jobs done by university English teachers are qualitatively different from those done by lecturers and professors in other subjects. While professors of oceanography may be expected to hold an MSc or PhD in their fields, scuba diving instructors would more reasonably be expected to hold professional qualifications guaranteeing that they had been tested and found to be competent in the requisite skills for their job. If the suitability of a qualification is judged entirely on the basis of the institution in which it is employed, we risk losing qualified and skilled practitioners through an arbitrary conflation of a *kind* of institution with a *kind* of qualification. It is hard to see

why a master's degree "in any field" should be a more desirable precondition for employment than a professional diploma in the specific field of the position advertised. As such, while this appears to be a reasonable objection, it does not seem adequate to dismiss the case outlined in favour of TESOL diplomas.

*2. TESOL diplomas may be accredited at the same level as master's degrees, but they are not fully equivalent.*

It is true that an equivalent NQF level does not make two qualifications truly equivalent. It is also true that holders of diplomas are granted a varying number of credits towards an MA, implying that diplomas are lower-level qualifications. This is another strong objection but once again seems arbitrary. As argued above, diplomas equip teachers with practical skills that many MA courses do not, and as such to argue that one qualification is better because it is "higher" than another is to ignore the relevant applications of the skills gained from the study of each. Once again, this is not to diminish the value of master's or doctoral degrees, but only to argue that comparisons over the level of the qualifications do not make a strong argument against TESOL diplomas.

*3. Job advertisements often include the open-ended "or equivalent", which may allow for legitimate TESOL diplomas to be considered.*

This is certainly true, and I have previously been offered positions on the basis of my TESOL diploma. However, there are two problems with this objection. Firstly, it places the candidate at a disadvantage, requiring them to explain and justify their qualification. This is something not required of holders of academic qualifications, which have more universal currency. Secondly, diplomas are often not accepted as a relevant qualification for teaching jobs, and I am personally aware of a number of highly experienced, diploma-qualified teachers who have been rejected from jobs on the basis that they were considered underqualified.

*4. Students expect their instructors to be academically, rather than professionally qualified. It reflects badly on institutions to employ people who do not have higher academic qualifications.*

This is an important objection, and one that is perhaps more persuasive

as it focuses on practicalities rather than on merit. Certainly, students may be disappointed to find that their instructor does not have an academic qualification in their field and may respect that instructor less as a result. However, this seems less an objection to diplomas in themselves and more a concern about the prestige of the qualification. This appears to beg the question, in that universities are unlikely to employ people with diplomas because students don't know what they are, and students don't know what they are because diplomas are not usually recognized as legitimate qualifications by universities. While this may be a practical concern, it could easily be overcome by awareness raising amongst students.

*5. If people without academic qualifications are allowed to work as university-level English instructors, the job will be devalued in the eyes of our colleagues, and English instructors will be accorded less respect.*

This is another important, practical concern for teachers at universities. It should be remembered at this point that, as stated in the introduction, I am concerned here with jobs that feature primarily the teaching of English, rather than other jobs in which teaching is a feature but is not the primary responsibility. Once again, these jobs are qualitatively different from the jobs done by the majority of university educators. English instructors typically teach more classes per week than other university lecturers, and the teaching is of a different nature, focusing on skills rather than subject matter. Teachers who hold a less well known, but equally valuable qualification directly related to their profession should not for any clear reason be accorded less respect than those doing the same job with a more academically focused qualification. If respect is lost for English instructors on this basis, it is indicative of the same arbitrary preference for academic qualifications discussed above.

*6. It will be difficult for universities to differentiate between "legitimate" TESOL diplomas and "illegitimate" ones.*

It is an unfortunate fact that the world of TESOL is awash with charlatantry, and fake or unaccredited qualifications. This can be a difficult landscape for

institutions and teachers to navigate and is a cause for concern when considering accepting teachers with professional qualifications. Naturally, universities can take the same steps as they take when evaluating any other kind of qualifications, such as checking course accreditation and the reputation of the organization in question. However, more to the point, there are only two internationally well-known and recognized diploma-level qualifications - the Cambridge Delta, and the Trinity College London DipTESOL - and as such it should be rather easy for universities to identify whether these qualifications are legitimate or not. There is a further concern related to this, however.

*7. Diploma courses are not run by the organizations themselves, but rather are licensed to schools and other teaching centers. This may indicate a varying quality among the courses.*

This may be a valid criticism of poorly-moderated courses, but both the Cambridge and Trinity courses are standardized and regularly inspected, as well as providing external evaluations for each candidate and a centralized system for the grading of examinations. This ensures the quality of all courses will be as uniform as possible and should not be a concern in hiring diploma-qualified instructors.

The seven points above are some of the central objections that may be raised against the acceptance of professional diplomas by universities. It is almost certain that other objections could be raised, and I would welcome further scrutiny of the ideas discussed here. However, I have outlined what I believe to be a strong case in favour of the notion that professional TESOL diplomas should be considered alongside academic qualifications by universities when hiring English instructors.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have argued that professional diplomas in TESOL should be considered as valid qualifications by universities when hiring English instructors. I provided an outline of what is meant by a “TESOL diploma” and presented and critically examined a number of possible objections to my argument. As English instructors we are required to teach a skill, and the type of teaching required for this is different from the type required of lecturers and professors. As such, I have

argued here that qualifications with a focus on the practical elements of foreign language teaching ought to be considered alongside academic qualifications on the spectrum of suitable teaching credentials for university-level English instructors. I'm not sure I agree with Thornbury when he states that teaching is "probably not a science," but as important as the science may be, we should be careful not to neglect the skill.

## References

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