

A Student's Guide to the MA TESOL

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Preface

I never planned to be a teacher. In fact, the idea never even crossed my mind giving me the opportunity to dismiss it. Always an avid reader, I came to college as an undergraduate assuming that I would study English literature, but I fell into linguistics after reading some course descriptions in the university catalog. Although it did not turn out to involve four years of anagrams and other word games as I had somehow envisioned, each step of the way I was fascinated. When we studied morphology, I wanted to be a morphologist. While taking sociolinguistics, I wanted to be a sociolinguist. During my syntax course, I wanted to . . . well, that one didn't follow the usual pattern. Still, had my final coursework been in phonology, I might instead be writing right now about sound patterns in the west African language Mafa. Instead, as it turned out, the last classes I took were in second language acquisition and second language teaching methods.

On the advice of my undergraduate mentor, I applied to work with the US Peace Corps, with little understanding of what that meant. They kept sending me paperwork, I kept filling it out, and eventually they sent me a plane ticket – so I went. After two years of teaching English in Cameroon, I returned to the US and happened upon a private language school, which allowed me to continue to work as an ESL instructor, despite having only a BA degree. Although a friend laughed hysterically when one of my students described me as 'so patient,' I had discovered, to my own surprise, that I loved teaching. Obtaining an MA in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) was a natural next step to bolster my knowledge and credentials for job security and advancement.

That, too, is a story of blind faith and dumb luck, and given my naiveté, I feel lucky to be teaching today. The upshot of all this, however, is that, despite my initial blundering, thanks to numerous friends, colleagues, and professors who were kind, generous, and patient about sharing advice, I learned a great deal along the way. I hope to pass on some of the wisdom I gleaned from others, as well as from my own mistakes, in hopes of smoothing your path through graduate school.

I know from experience that students beginning a graduate program often do so with a great deal of trepidation, and if they do not feel this before the first day of class, they often do after meeting classmates who seem well informed and articulate, or after receiving a detailed syllabus outlining hundreds of pages of reading and writing to be completed during the semester. Although students normally go to graduate school in order to expand their knowledge, the amount of learning to be done can be daunting. Students who have some background in ESL theory or methods, or who have experience teaching, may suddenly feel like they know very little.

In addition, an MA program assumes specialization in some area, and with this comes specialized ways of speaking and writing. TESOL is no different, but despite our focus on language learning, professors' expectations regarding these skills are not often expressed overtly for new students, who must learn implicitly through participating in class and through trial and error.

The goal of this book is to discuss clearly and openly many of the assumptions and controversies in the field of TESOL in order to help new MA TESOL students begin their graduate programs with confidence and finish successfully. The aim is not to provide complete summaries of, or definitive answers to, questions about such topics as teaching methodology and second language acquisition, as there are numerous texts that provide excellent overviews: many of these are cited in this book, and I have tried to err on the side of more recent, rather than classic citations, as you will find classic work cited in these newer publications as well. Rather, it is my hope that this book can help guide your expectations for an MA TESOL program and serve as a resource for success within that program.

The text is organized in two parts. Part I introduces the field of TESOL, providing an overview of important concepts and controversies within the discipline. As you read, you will consider what teaching and learning mean, what the role of theory is for TESOL instructors, and what issues you may face when deciding which variety of English to teach. In addition, a discussion of current views of how to teach will hopefully dispel any expectations that your program will provide you with an arsenal of sure-fire techniques or recipes that you can follow to ensure that your students learn English successfully. Chapter 1 introduces the field and provides some historical background, while Chapter 2 discusses theories related to three

important components of TESOL: language, teaching, and learning. The final chapter in Part I introduces a number of concepts in TESOL that are important influences on second language teaching and learning, and of current interest in the field. This first part may not *answer* your questions, but it should guide you toward an understanding of the kinds of questions you should expect to consider, in your graduate program and in your own future classroom.

Part II provides some relief for those who picked up this text seeking practical, down-to-earth advice. Chapter 4 discusses the experience of learning to 'do' graduate school; that is, it explores the process of socialization into the TESOL community during graduate school. Here you will learn more about activities and expectations you are likely to encounter during your MA program. Chapter 5 addresses ways to find and understand research in order to become a better-informed ESL teacher and to write stronger course papers. Finally, although it may seem too early to be thinking about returning to the world of work, preparation for the job market during graduate school can make it much easier to obtain a first job, therefore the final chapter contains suggestions for strengthening your professional qualifications now.

The main audience for this book is new MA TESOL students and it can be used in a variety of ways. It might be read prior to starting a program as a way of preparing students for the concepts they will encounter, or it could be used as a text in the first course students take in their new program. Professors who opt to use this as an introductory text will certainly want to supplement it with their favorite readings in each area, or assign the suggested readings that accompany each chapter in order to examine specific topics in greater detail. For example, the three main sections of Chapter 2, language, learning, and teaching, might be spread over several different classes with supplementary readings assigned for each section. In addition, it is likely that professors will want to present the information in different order. For instance, Chapter 5, which discusses research, may be presented fairly early in a course as a way of helping students begin work on assigned projects.

Finally, note that as with any new group that you become involved in, applied linguists and second language instructors have specialized language that must be learned. Words in bold can be found in the glossary at the end of this text. Acronyms also abound, and before

you begin reading, you may want to take note of some of the more common one. A fuller list can be found in Appendix A, but these are a few to get you started:

ELT	English language teaching
ESL	English as a second* language
L1	first, or native language
L2	second* language
NS, NNS	native speaker, non-native speaker
SLA	second* language acquisition

* Note that 'second' here does not refer merely to the order in which a language was learned, but is generally used in the sense of 'additional,' to include all languages learned after the mother tongue.

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