

Tips for Choosing a TESOL Master's Program

Whether you are just breaking into the TESOL field or have already been in the profession for some time, a great way to increase your knowledge and expand your career opportunities is by pursuing a Masters of Arts degree in TESOL. There are so many programs and options that just figuring out what to do can feel overwhelming at times. Based on research of ten well-known TESOL programs in the United States, and several in Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, there are some key factors to consider when choosing a graduate school. The most important thing is finding a program that is the best fit for you.

TESOL International Association's position is that the master's degree in TESOL (or a related area) can be considered the terminal degree for teaching positions in English as a second, foreign, or additional language. In other words, someone with an master of arts in TESOL is widely regarded by employers and peers as being well prepared: a properly trained professional in the field. In addition, having a master's in TESOL will greatly expand your career options, including possible opportunities to teach at a university in an EFL context or in an intensive English program or at a community college in the United States. (See [Position on Terminal Degree for Teaching English as a Second, Foreign, or Additional Language.](#))

Which Master's Degree Is Right for You?

MEd or MA or MAT?

An MA or master of arts degree requires a bachelor's degree as a prerequisite. Having an MA means that you are highly educated in a particular subject.

An MEd degree is a master's degree in education. This indicates that you are not only highly qualified in a certain subject but that you are also able to teach it to others.

An MAT is a master of arts in teaching. It is similar to the master's degree in education because it indicates that the graduate is both highly knowledgeable in a subject and has been given the tools and methodology to teach the subject to others.

How Many Classes Are in a Typical Master's Program?

The number of classes varies from one school to the next. Most require 30–41 college units to complete the entire degree. One graduate credit is usually given for each hour the class meets

each week, so a 3-unit graduate class would generally meet for three hours a week for the entire term. This time does not include homework, reading, and projects that would be required for the course also. A full time course load in graduate school is usually about 8 units per term. Working professionals often choose to enroll part time because of the time commitment involved in undertaking a graduate program.

TESOL or Applied Linguistics?

There are so many different types of TESOL-related master's degrees that figuring out which one is best for you may be a challenge. Most of the degrees can fall into one of two categories:

- *MA in TESOL*. This degree focuses on pedagogy. If you are hoping to teach English as a second language to non-English-speaking students in an ESL context, or if you would like to teach in an EFL context, then this degree will give you the proper training and experience to do so. You should be able to teach students English without knowing the language of the students that you are teaching, but when teaching ESL or EFL it is also beneficial if you know something about the language(s) and culture(s) of your students.

Many colleges that offer an MA in TESOL will also offer state certification to teach ESL in K–12 public schools. This route will require more units to satisfy the requirements that lead to certification and usually involves a semester of student teaching. This would not be necessary for prospective students that already have a teaching credential, are attending the school online, do not live in the same state or country as the school, or have already decided that they would like to teach adults.

- *MA in applied linguistics*. This degree will usually focus more on theory and language research. The MA in applied linguistics is designed as a first step in a research career in applied linguistics. It provides both breadth of knowledge in several areas of applied linguistics and the specialized knowledge and skills needed to plan and conduct research in the areas of specialization within a program, such as language acquisition or discourse analysis.

What Kind of Classes Does the Program Offer?

While each school is unique in which courses that they require to complete a master of arts in TESOL, most reputable schools will require the following courses in the degree program.

- *Foundations in ESOL*: This introductory course gives students a general idea of what is involved in teaching ESOL. It may focus on the community resources that are available

for the ESL population in the area or it could have students observe or interview an ESL teacher, class, or student.

- *Methods and/or learning theory*: This course focuses on different learning theories and methods of instruction. Graduate students will be able to give a critical review of the benefits and drawbacks of each theory.
- *Second language acquisition*: An MA in TESOL program may require more than one course in second language acquisition. These classes focus on how students learn language, the phases in how one acquires language, and perhaps instructional strategies to help in the language acquisition process.
- *Structure of English or English grammar*: Some schools may not offer this course independently because it may be part of a second language acquisition class. It is important for future ESOL teachers to explain certain parts of the English language while teaching it. Inevitably, English language learners (ELLs) will ask grammar-related questions in class. Since native English speakers are so immersed in the language it may be difficult for some of them to explain rules without explicitly learning them.
- *Assessment*: This course will show graduate students various methods of assessment in an ESL/EFL curriculum. It will also explain how to ensure that tests are valid, reliable, and practical to use in the classroom.
- *Language and culture*: This class may come in a variety of forms. Future ESL teachers will be able to learn how to address a class that has a mixture of cultures from around the world. Included in the course may be political or educational philosophies from different regions in the world. It may also address how students have been taught in their home country and how it may be very different from the school where you are teaching. Whether it is explicitly taught in the program or not, a high level of intercultural understanding and awareness is an essential attribute for anyone working with English language learners.
- *Curriculum and materials design*: In this class graduate students will focus on the age and fluency levels they intend to teach once they have graduated. The students will be able to develop their own curriculum, educational objectives, short term goals, benchmarks, and related resources, quizzes, or tests to assess mastery.
- *Research methods*: Most universities encourage their students to research the field of TESOL. This course will explain qualitative and/or quantitative research methods, show limitations of research, what to do with the data, and how to publish or use the research results for further study.

Each master's program will also have a culminating project that the students will have to complete. This may include one or more of the following:

- *Internship or practicum*: A graduate student will be asked to teach an ESL class for a pre-arranged amount of time. They will be responsible for writing and delivering lessons, grading assignments, and conferencing with a mentor teacher to address challenges or discuss successes they had teaching the class.
- *Capstone project/portfolio*: Throughout the duration of the program the students will make a portfolio that might include lesson plans, their teaching philosophy, assessments that they designed, and an action research project that they worked on during their classes. This allows the new graduate to have a toolkit of items that they can use as soon as they begin teaching.
- *Thesis*: A thesis is an extended research study on a topic that the graduate student is interested in learning more about. This would include investigation into a specific area of TESOL, often including a literature review and a research project delving into the topic as well. For graduate students who want to pursue further studies or work at a university this may be a beneficial option.

What Kind of Program: Bricks and Mortar, Online, or a Hybrid of Both?

Bricks and Mortar Programs

For some people it is important to have a traditional college experience by going in-person to the school or university for each class. This is a great way to meet other people in your community that are focused on ELLs. Attending classes at the institution has advantages because you are able to use school facilities like the library and computer labs. Many feel that traditional classes are also easier to focus on and that the face-to-face interaction with classmates and professors is invaluable. Many universities offer graduate classes in the late afternoon or evening to accommodate working professionals.

Online Programs

More and more colleges and universities are offering their graduate classes online for students who are unable to physically attend their classes due to work schedules or geographic location. This provides a great opportunity for students to connect with other graduate students around the world. The backgrounds and diversity that each of the students bring to an online class can enrich the experience and broaden the collective experience of the class. One student may be a

practicing EFL teacher in Korea, while another student may be new to ESL and living in Los Angeles.

- **Synchronous or asynchronous?**

Online classes can be delivered in two formats:

- **Synchronous classes** require all of the students that are enrolled in the class to meet at the computer via web cams on specific class times and days. The professor takes attendance and presents lessons on a computer platform which enables PowerPoint; videos can even have students discuss topics in small breakout rooms.
- **Asynchronous classes** do not require students to meet at a certain time and day. These classes are delivered by having students read assignments and write papers on their own schedule and submit assignments by a specified due date. The students in the class may be required to write comments on an online class bulletin board or discussion board or respond to other students' comments or ideas.

Hybrid Programs

Some colleges and universities are offering a mixture of classes that are both online or in a traditional classroom setting. There are also programs that may provide the majority of the classes online but require a short (several weeks) residency on the campus several times a year. Many graduate students appreciate the flexibility of a hybrid program because they are given an opportunity to interact with the professors and classmates face-to-face and the flexibility of taking classes online when their schedules will not accommodate class time on the campus.

What Are the Key Factors to Consider When Evaluating Programs?

Here are some key factors to consider when evaluating an MA TESOL program:

- Does the faculty represent a balance of expertise and experience in teaching in both ESL and EFL environments?
- Does the institution have a solid reputation within the TESOL field?
- Does the university have a good overall reputation (name brand)?
- Ask questions. Schedule an interview to speak to a department member or current student. Most university professors will be happy to discuss their programs with potential applicants. This will give you a feel for what the program will be like for you.

- What kind of professional network does the school have? Some programs have a very diverse student population and active alumni groups that will provide you valuable peer-to-peer networking and learning opportunities for years to come.

Long term, think about what it means to become a professional in the field of TESOL. Key elements of ongoing professionalism involve the following:

- Professional networking, both in-person and online
- Seeking out mentors and mentoring others
- Ongoing learning and professional development
- Action research and sharing information on new knowledge and effective practice with colleagues in your community and internationally
- Joining professional associations like TESOL (and/or IATEFL) and your local affiliate if you have one
- Speaking at or attending conferences to further your professional development in the field and/or submitting articles or resources for print or online publication

Preparing for an Exciting Career in TESOL

Pursuing a Masters in TESOL is a big step that will require dedication, persistence, and hard work, but the benefits can be very rewarding. One of the most important first steps is to try to decide what you would like to do eventually in your career. If you want to work with children, then getting an ESL public school teaching endorsement to teach in your state/province or learning about how to teach young learners in an EFL context may be your best option. If you plan to a doctorate in TESOL, whether to do teacher training or research in the field for a university, then it may be better for you to enroll in a program that includes a very strong component of research and theory. If you are unsure of what you see yourself doing long term, then you may want to diversify by learning about different areas that you are interested in and seeing where that will lead you in your career.

It is critical that you do a strong self-assessment. For example, if you strongly prefer to learn in an experiential format, than look into that type of degree program. However, if you have a lot of practical teaching experience but feel that you are very weak in your knowledge of language, including how to teach grammar, then make sure to find a program or teacher who can most effectively help you achieve what you need. On a similar note, the work and preparation you do before starting an MA program is important. If you know nothing about sociolinguistics or

pragmatics, for example, then consider finding an excellent book or two on the topic and make them summer reading before you start your program. The more time and effort you put in preparing for your program, the more you will get out of it. Or, if you have never studied a foreign language yourself, try to immerse yourself in one before you begin your degree program. Perhaps nothing is as important for a TESOL instructor as being able to put yourself in the shoes of your students.

The key components of any successful career involve finding something that you have a *passion* for, that is also a *natural area of strength* for you (not everyone is cut out to be a great teacher). If, in addition, you really develop both your *areas of expertise*, and also gain *knowledge, skills, competencies*, and *awareness* in areas where you are not as strong, you will position yourself well for success. You want to be aware of your own skill sets and experience as a teacher and build on those natural areas of expertise, while filling in the gaps. For example, if you know nothing at all about teaching reading or writing, one way or another you will have to make the effort to learn more. Think ahead to where you want to be in the future. In the best-selling book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell points out that it takes tens of thousands of hours of practice and experience to become a true expert in something. Want to be a great writing teacher for ELLs? If so, you will have to really put in the time and effort to learn that specific craft.

Another factor in any successful career is keeping an eye out for changes in the job market. First of all, you should consider where you would like to be in 5 to 10 years. If, for example, you would eventually like to teach at a university in an EFL context, then make sure to learn about that type of work environment and gain practical experience in that area. Some MA programs include opportunities to do your student teaching abroad. Also, in any profession, diversifying your portfolio can be very helpful. For example, if you are planning to teach K–12 ESL, having a teaching endorsement in TESOL as well as in math or science would be very valuable given current trends and realities in public schools. If you hope to teach in the private sector, gaining knowledge and experience in English for specific purposes would be important.

Whatever direction you choose to go in with your TESOL career, it will probably change your life. Teaching ESL makes it possible to travel the world without ever leaving your classroom. Many ESL classes even celebrate on the last day by having students bring authentic food from their home countries. You will be able to try new foods and learn about different countries and cultures from the people who know about them best. Students usually enjoy sharing information about where they are from, which can be enlightening for other students as well as teachers. Ask questions, and encourage students to dialogue with others. It not only helps with their communication skills but it can also dispel preconceived ideas that others sometimes have about certain parts of the world.

The rewards of English language teaching are great. Students are generally very motivated to learn English—and even if they are not, you can help provide the inspiration they need to want to learn more about new linguistic and cultural worlds. If you are an effective teacher, you and your students will be able to see measureable progress in a relatively short time. There is an intrinsic satisfaction in teaching English and fostering a common language between groups of people who would otherwise have no way to communicate. It is an incredibly diverse and rewarding profession for those who pursue a career in this field.

About the Author

Michelle Bagwell has an MA in TESOL from The University of Southern California. She has taught in California, Hawaii, Arizona, Texas, and Maryland at the K–12 and community college levels. She wrote this article as part of a professional internship at TESOL International Association.