

Who are TESOL professionals? A white paper

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Abstract

This white paper seeks to provide the profession with focused direction and guidance for researching answers to the overarching question: Who are TESOL professionals? The paper offers 1) a review of literature researching characteristics of memberships in professions internationally; 2) a flexible tool to help researchers and practitioners generate research questions about the profession; and 3) possible ways to prioritize and answer those research questions. The need for this paper stems from the need to know who TESOL professionals are specifically in terms of, but not limited to, context, training, needs, and identities.

Keywords: TESOL professionals, taxonomy, generative framework.

Who are TESOL Professionals?

Introduction

The TESOL¹ profession serves preschool through tertiary education as well as community and professional education settings in physical and virtual locations around the world. As the voice of such a diverse profession, TESOL International Association needs to know who its constituents are: their numbers, identities, education and qualifications, career paths, and current work environments. It also needs ways of representing the beliefs, practices, and concerns of identifiable groups within the profession. Such knowledge supports advocacy on behalf of the profession as well as the provision of services to advance the work of members and professional language educators worldwide. Currently however, accessible data about the profession is very hard to find. Even models for how to collect such data and reliably characterize the TESOL profession are almost non-existent.

This white paper is intended as an initial step to remedy this situation. It supports learning about who TESOL professionals are in multiple ways. First, it examines efforts by other professions to collect and report data about the identity of their constituents as well as represent in systematic ways the collective voice of those constituents. Based on this survey of other professions, a baseline taxonomy of variables for characterizing the TESOL profession and its concerns is proposed. The intent of the taxonomy is to inform a generative framework for

¹ We use the label teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) and TESOL profession to refer to professionals in the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages who include but are not limited to English as a second language (ESL) teachers, English as a foreign language teachers (EFL) teaching in K-12, higher education and non-profit, teacher educators for ESL and/or EFL teachers, curriculum specialists, textbook authors, and program administrators.

research questions about the profession. Finally, the paper concludes with suggestions for potential data sources and research approaches that could be used.

We recognize this white paper comes at a very challenging time for education and the larger society in general in the midst of a global pandemic which, like a disclosing tablet used by dentists to show children where they did not brush well (Shapon-Sevin, 2009), has showed the deep inequities and injustices in society that affect large portions of the population in a variety of ways. Additionally, in the context where we are, in the US, the number of students enrolled in teacher preparation degrees and programs is decreasing (Partelow, 2019) and there is a nationwide shortage of teachers specialized in teaching English learners (Muñiz, 2020). Therefore, we believe knowing who TESOL professionals are and the impact of the current stresses on the field is even more pressing (Muñiz, 2020) in the US and internationally.

Review of Efforts by Other Professions

As suggested by documents such as the TESOL Research Agenda (2014), research within the TESOL field tends to focus more on the object of what we do (language teaching) than on who we are as a profession. There is of course extensive research related to teacher education and development, but again the focus is more on processes that relate to human development than on the demographics of the individuals who enter and sustain the field. With respect to advocating for the concerns of the field, TESOL International Association as well as many regional teacher associations regularly weigh in on policy issues and lobby for support of educational initiatives that support language learning. Rarely do these statements, however, include quantified data about the constituencies behind the statements or the process for arriving at the concern, in other words support for the statement's representativeness.

Given the lack of exemplars within the TESOL field, we searched internationally for efforts by other professions and professional associations that might guide our field. We looked for examples from the legal, medical, engineering, and education professions in North America, Latin America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. Appendix 1 lists identified reports, which were produced by professional associations, governments, and international organizations. By searching across a range of professions, regions, and stakeholders, we hoped for a diverse sample, but we do not claim that it is either exhaustive or even necessarily representative.

We searched both the internet and research data bases available through our universities in the summer of 2020 using the following key terms: numbers, profession, doctors, engineers, law, teachers of English. We also reached out to personal contacts to identify sources the online search might have missed as well as consulting previous research we had individually conducted looking at TESOL professionals around the world. These multiple methods of identifying possible reports allowed us to include a wider variety of sources.

The reports draw on data collected through a range of methodologies: large US Department of Education data sets, member surveys conducted by professional associations, as well as national surveys conducted by independent organizations. We made every effort to find reports from outside the US, but our searches were limited to reports in English. We stopped the search when we reached “saturation” (Charmaz, 2014) and ceased finding reports that added to our taxonomy.

Each report was coded for information categories (i.e., independent variables) used to characterize data. A grounded coding scheme was used, with the final scheme represented in the taxonomy presented in Figure 2 below. Codes for the information categories were drawn from the reports as they were read and then revised as subsequent reports were read and coded. Each

report was coded for the presence or absence of each category using a spreadsheet. Thus, the current taxonomy is a result of the cumulative characteristics included in the reports we analyzed. Once the full list of categories had been generated and the researchers felt that a saturation stage had been reached, the category codes were then analyzed for potential groupings.

While the taxonomy focuses on what can be considered independent variables in the reports surveyed, we recognized an etic-emic distinction² among the categories that aligned with whether the dependent variable represented a count of individuals within a category (etic) or a frequency of beliefs or practices associated with particular groups (emic). The first perspective provides insights into the makeup of the profession as well as identifying surpluses and shortages. The second perspective supports claims about what segments of the profession believe and do.

In order to help make the list of codes for independent variables a more generative source for future research, we then grouped the list according to TESOL International Association's four core values: respect, lifelong learning, professionalism, and integrity (TESOL International Association, nd). The rationale for this second-tier coding holds that what is important to report and assess about a profession should reflect in a sense what the profession values. Figure 1 explains how the TESOL values can be mapped onto different approaches for describing the makeup of the profession as well as its beliefs and practices. *Respect* for diversity and inclusion and enabling of *lifelong learning* both take notice of who individuals are and the lives they lead.

² An etic-emic distinction stems from research in anthropology and refers to the distinction between characteristics of a group of individuals as can be seen from outside the group (etic) versus the view of those inside the group (emic).

They align therefore with the etic perspective of the profession. *Professionalism* and *integrity*, on the other hand, both refer to aspirations held by the profession, corresponding to a more emic perspective.

Figure 1. TESOL Values and Application to Research about the Profession

<i>TESOL Value</i>	<i>Explanation of Value³</i>	<i>Application to Research about the Profession</i>
Respect	Committed to equity, diversity, inclusion, multilingualism, multiculturalism, and individuals' language rights	Many reports address issues of representation and diversity within a profession. These include common demographic categories (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity) but also professional qualifications such as university degrees or state/country issued qualifications. They also frequently examine the intersection of such categories (e.g., ethnicity of different degree holders).
Lifelong Learning	Committed to quality English language teaching and learning opportunities throughout the life of students and teachers	A central question for other reports is the supply and demand of individuals with specific credentials (i.e., people who can be considered "professionals" by virtue of training or experience) in distinct segments of the field (e.g., location, type of career or job) and/or levels of the field (i.e., pre-professional, professional).
Professionalism	Committed to excellence in standards, research, and practice that enhance English language teaching and learning	Other reports attempt to capture characteristics of segments of the profession or the profession as a whole (e.g., beliefs about practice, licensing requirements, professional standards) or its internal structure (e.g., number and size of professional associations).
Integrity	Committed to ethical and transparent action	Reports may focus on the ethical concerns of the profession: their views on policies, what they consider to be best (or least effective) practices, and challenges facing the field.

³ These explanations are shared by TESOL International Association on their website under the heading of "[Mission and Values](#)."

Taxonomy of Categories and a Generative Framework

The full taxonomy of categories based on the reports we analyzed is presented in Figure 2 below. The organization of the categories in Figure 2 follows the emic-etic distinction (column 1) and the TESOL Values (column 2) as previously detailed in Figure 1. As noted above the taxonomy is a result of the cumulative characteristics included in the reports we analyzed but it is neither exhaustive nor necessarily representative.

Figure 2. Taxonomy of Categories

Perspective	Value	Categories
Etic Perspectives: Makeup of and Advocacy for the Profession	<i>Respect</i>	Identity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Race • Ethnicity • Age • LGBTQ+ status • Gender identity • Views of external stakeholders • Nationality • Country of residency • State/Region of residency • Disability status • Marital status or dependency • Parental education • Languages proficiencies and literacy levels) <hr/> Qualifications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Type of university degrees (e.g. Bachelor's, Master's) • University location • Number of university degree applicants • Number of university degree enrollees • Government/state issued qualifications/credentials Certification/licensure/endorsement (exams) passing rate
	<i>Lifelong Learning</i>	Pre-professional stage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment during studies • Attendance during studies • Type of university degree enrolled in (e.g. Bachelor's, Master's)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Type of courses • Student teaching/apprenticeship for position/post-doc <hr/> <p>Professional careers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shortages and surpluses for job categories • Employment after graduation • School debt • Career goals • Having mentors • Access/barriers to professional development • Type of professional development • Cost of professional development • Wages/income • Type of career and role • Part time/ full time job • Employment setting • Instructional setting (face-to face, virtual or a combination) • Tools and resources provided to do the job • Skills and knowledge used • Years in the profession • Volunteer hours • Hours worked (by activity and/or in general) • Job search • Wellbeing • Disciplinary actions • Work outside current work • Performance and/or performance evaluations • Number of individuals served/supported as part of the job • Career satisfaction • Collaboration amongst colleagues • Communication at work • Workplace climate
<p>Emic Perspectives: Beliefs and Practices, Advocacy by the Profession</p>	<p><i>Professionalism</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members of a professional association • Legal definition • Ethical codes • Professional standards • Types of professional certifications • Job practices based on research • Advocacy for learners, programs, etc.

	<i>Integrity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • Online research/research to learn more • Social media presence • • View of (the future of) the profession • Perceptions of the value of the profession • Level of knowledge, preparedness, and readiness • Beliefs and professional practices • English language proficiency levels • Availability outside regular school hours • Juggling priorities • Keeping up to date with technology
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Figure 3 provides a generative framework for formulating research questions using the taxonomy of categories. Whereas the taxonomy frames information about the profession in terms of concerns about its internal makeup and external face, the generative framework exemplifies ways to approach the nature of a concern.

Figure 3. Generative framework for formulating research questions

	Descriptions Who are /are not . . . ? What are / are not. . . ?	Causes What factors? What correlates with? Why?	Effectiveness of actions How could . . . ? What happened? What should happen? What is the impact of?
Respect	What language(s) do TESOL professionals in an educational system speak? What cultural knowledge and cross-cultural skills/training do TESOL professionals have?	What factors (local or national; socio-cultural and political; economical, etc.) impact, if at all, the number of university degree applicants can be identified?	How effective are in-service professional development programs at leading to career promotions?
Lifelong Learning	What type of employment do TESOL professionals have after graduation?	What factors (local or national; socio-cultural and political; economical, etc.), if at	What is the impact of mentors on the careers of TESOL professionals?

		all, impact and/or inform the type of professional development TESOL professionals participate in	
Professionalism	What professional associations are TESOL professionals members of?	What impact does implementation of TESOL teacher standards on TESOL professionals' sense of self-efficacy?	What are the effects of ethical codes, if any, on the evaluation practices of TESOL professionals'?
Integrity	What type of technology issues, if at all, do TESOL professionals encounter?	What factors (local or national; socio-cultural and political; economical, etc.), if at all, impact TESOL professionals' presence or absence on social media platforms?	How effective are professional development programs at supporting TESOL professionals in keeping up to date with technology for teaching?

Conclusion

We hope this white paper is useful to researchers and to the TESOL International Association, informing future scholarly endeavors for the benefit of TESOL professionals around the globe. In preparing this report we recognize the need both for an infrastructure that supports and enables research on the profession as well as a culture that values and disseminates this research. The typology and generative framework developed here (Figures 2 and 3) are intended to contribute to the infrastructure, to provide researchers with ideas and directions for specific projects.

There are concrete steps that could be taken by TESOL International Association and other professional organizations to develop this infrastructure more fully. These might include hosting a location where researchers could share information about existing databases or other sources of information, extending the small list in Appendix 2 to become a more comprehensive

resource. TESOL International Association might also initiate the creation of an award for best research about the profession, possibly approaching other organizations and stakeholders like American Federation of Teachers (AFT) for support. Identifying and partnering with multiple professional organizations to support research projects would also allow multiple stakeholders, resources, and audiences to be involved in this scholarly endeavor. Possible organizations might include, but not be limited to: American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL), or American Educational Research Association (AERA).

Due to possible limited resources and time, TESOL International Association could encourage the Affiliate Network Professional Council to identify high priority areas for comparative research internationally and thus start with those. Similarly, TESOL International Association could reach out to all its professional councils to establish a process for regularly surveying TESOL professionals (not just members) to generate annual or biannual “State of the Profession” reports to be shared and disseminated widely.

Building an infrastructure for research, however, is not enough. There is also a need to build a culture that values and uses information generated by and about the profession. These scholarly endeavors can be initiated and sustained over time by close collaborations between TESOL International Association, local and international affiliated TESOL organizations, and individual researchers and/or universities. Detailed information about who TESOL professionals are in time and over time can inform programming and product development needs, policy and advocacy needs, and member recruitment in a concrete way. Data from such scholarly endeavors can become staples of all reports and benchmarks for the profession. For example, if we learnt

that TESOL professionals are mostly female and white in the US and worldwide, that can inform future initiatives to recruit and support diverse TESOL professionals in their classrooms.

Enlisting the possible support of journal editors, especially the journals associated with TESOL International Association, such as *TESOL Quarterly* and *TESOL Journal*, about special issues and special issues featuring articles and research studies on the profession would be another avenue for both building the infrastructure and a culture of research about the profession. Using the current infrastructure of the TESOL International Association Annual Convention or the Advocacy Summit to prepare and share an annual mini-brief about the profession might be a good place to start.

We know TESOL professionals at times can be marginalized due to different reasons such as “non-nativeness” and that their role in the classroom is de-professionalized (see Valdés et al., 2014, TESOL). In this context, the need for detailed data about the profession is critical to inform local, national, and international decisions related to policies, programs and initiatives, budgets, and advocacy. Without knowing who we are as a profession, we are standing on shifting sands and uncharted territory and we do not have the standing to fight and request change.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Reports Consulted

Source	Report Link	Report name	Type of organization	Description of Data
Administrative Profession				
International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP)	https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.iaap-hq.org/resource/resmgr/files/state_of_the_profession_benc.pdf	State of the Administrative Profession (2018)	Professional association	Survey of administrative professionals sent by the professional association to members.
Education				
American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE)	https://aacte.org/colleges-of-education-a-national-portrait/	Colleges of Education: A National Portrait (2019)	Professional association	Data collected by the US Department of education through National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: 2015-16 (NPSAS).
British Council	https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/D120%20Survey%20of%20Teachers%20to%20Y18_FINAL_Med_res_online.pdf	British Council Survey of Policy and Practice in Primary English Language Teaching Worldwide (2013)	International educational and cultural organization	Survey sent to 64 countries and their representative.
Eurostat	https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20191004-1	Teachers in the European Union (EU) (2019)	EU agency	Quantitative data from EU countries collected regularly.
Institute of Education Sciences; National Center for Education Statistics	https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/question1718.asp	National Teacher and Principal Survey (2018)	US Government agency	Quantitative data collected through a questionnaire on a regular basis.

(IES; NCES)				
Institute of Education Sciences; National Center for Education Statistics (IES; NCES)	https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=28	Teacher Characteristics and Trends (2019)	US Government agency	Quantitative data collected through a questionnaire on a regular basis.
US Department of Education (USDOE)	https://tsa.ed.gov/#/home/	Teacher Shortage Areas (2017)	US Government	Quantitative data collected through a questionnaire on a regular basis.
Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS)	https://www.oecd.org/education/talis/TALIS2018_insights_and_interpretations.pdf	Teaching and Learning International Survey TALIS2018 Insights and Interpretations (2018)	International organization	International survey sent on a regular basis to teachers and school leaders from countries.
Engineering				
American Society for Mechanical Engineers (ASME)	https://www.asme.org/wwwasmeorg/media/resourcefiles/campaigns/marketing/2012/the-state-of-mechanical-engineering-survey.pdf	The State of Mechanical Engineering: Today and Beyond. An ASME Research Study (2011)	Professional association	Data collected through a survey of engineers sent by the professional association.
Eurostat	https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20190830-1	Number of scientists and engineers up 4% in 2018 (2019)	EU agency	Quantitative data from EU countries collected regularly.
Japan Society of Civil Engineers (JSCE)	http://www.jsce-int.org/system/files/Code_of_ethics.pdf	The Civil Engineer's Code of Ethics (2014)	Professional association	Description of the code of ethics.
National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE)	https://www.nspe.org/sites/default/files/resources/pdfs/admin/publicatio	Defining the Practice of Engineering (2018)	Professional association	A list of all state legal definition of the "practice of engineering".

	ns/NSPE-PE-Definitions.pdf			
Legal				
American Bar Association (ABA)	https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/image_s/news/2019/08/ProfileOfProfession-total-hi.pdf	ABA Profile of the Legal Profession (2019)	Professional association	Already collected data from other data sources and data collected through a survey of legal professionals sent by the professional association on a regular basis.
Medical				
American Dental Association (ADA)	https://www.ada.org/~media/ADA/Member%20Center/Ethics/Code_of_Ethics_Book_With_Advisory_Opinions_Revised_to_November_2018.pdf?la=en	Principles & Code of Ethics of Professional Conduct (2018)	Professional association	Description of the code of ethics.
American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)	https://www.aap.org/en-us/professional-resources/Research/pediatrician-surveys/Pages/Personal-and-Practice-Characteristics-of-Pediatricians-US-only.aspx	Pediatricians' Practice and Personal Characteristics: US only, 2018-2019	Professional association	Qualitative data collected through AAP annual survey.
American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)	x https://www.aap.org/en-us/professional-resources/Research/pediatrician-	Annual Survey of Graduating Residents (2020)	Professional association	Qualitative data collected through AAP annual survey.

	surveys/Pages/Graduating-Resident-Survey-Trend-Data.aspx			
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Translators

International Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters (IAPTI)	https://www.iapti.org/files/surveys/2/IAPTI_non-native_report.pdf	Translation into a non-native language IAPTI's Ethics Committee, (2015)	Professional association	Survey of translators sent by the professional association.
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Appendix 2: Data sources that could be used

Resource (alpha order)	Link	Short Description
Teacher Shortage Area	https://tsa.ed.gov/#/reports	Longitudinal data of the teacher certifications that are in shortage in the US.
The Condition of Education	https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/	Longitudinal data of schools, teachers and students in the US
Surveys and Programs from National Center for Education Statistics	https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/SurveyGroups.asp?Group=1	A variety of national surveys education-related in the US.
Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)	https://data.oecd.org	A variety of data sources for countries around the world on a diversity of topics including education.