

# **The Role of an MA TESOL Programme in an Overseas EMI Context**

## **Wider Implications of Changing Student Demographics**

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# Presentation Overview

- ❖ An MA TESOL in an Overseas EMI Context
- ❖ Changing Student Demographics and their Wider Implications
- ❖ Qualifications and what it Means to be 'Qualified'
- ❖ Strengths & Weaknesses of TESOL Masters programmes
- ❖ So what should an MA TESOL in an Overseas EMI Context do?

# An MA TESOL in an Overseas EMI Context

## ❖ The MA TESOL at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC)

- *Offered in full-time mode only, 1 academic year September - September*
- *Currently 70+ students*
- *180 credits*
  - *3 x 20 credit core modules in Semester 1*
  - *3 x 20 credit elective modules in Semester 2*
  - *1 x 60 credit dissertation in Semester 2/the summer*
- *Electives focussing on ESP/EAP; Testing & Assessment; Young Learners; Language Learning & the Language Learner; Teaching Observation & Practicum; English in the Global Society*
- *Usually a handful of international students but the main target audience are mainland Chinese*

# Changing Student Demographics & their Wider Implications

- ❖ In the early years of the programme (2017-2019), most of the participants were experienced teachers doing an MA after 3-5 years of teaching.
- ❖ This student demographic then gradually morphed into a 50-50 split, with half of the cohort as experienced teachers and the other half as new graduates in Applied Linguistics or ELT.
- ❖ The current (2025~) student demographic is now moving more towards a 60-40 or even 70-30 breakdown with the *majority* of the participants enrolling on the Masters directly after their undergraduate studies.

# Changing Student Demographics & their Wider Implications

*When students join a Masters programme directly after their undergraduate studies:*

- ❖ How able/well-prepared are they to contextualize the theoretical input they are exposed to?
- ❖ What role should teaching practice play? How can students be encouraged to make relevant links between theory and practice?
- ❖ If a Masters is now becoming a pre-experience, entry-level qualification rather than a post-experience, higher-level qualification, then what wider implications does this have for the TESOL industry moving forward?

# Changing Student Demographics & their Wider Implications

*When students join a Masters programme directly after their undergraduate studies in an **EMI** context:*

- ❖ How well-prepared are they to cope with the linguistic demands?
- ❖ How well-prepared are they to cope with the cognitive, academic literacy and cross-cultural demands of western-style postgraduate-level study?
- ❖ How well-prepared are they to cope with the realities of the workforce in their own cultural context after graduation?

# Qualifications and what it means to be 'Qualified'

## ❖ 'Credentialed' Vs 'Prepared/Equipped'

"The notion of a 'qualified' English language teacher is somewhat nebulous; it means different things to different people in different contexts" (Stanley & Murray, 2013, p102)

## ❖ Declarative Knowledge Vs Procedural Knowledge (‘knowing that’ Vs ‘knowing how’)

"... what teachers need to know and what they need to be able to do in order to be considered 'qualified' to do the job." (Stanley & Murray, 2013, p102)

## ❖ Teaching Capital: (Language capital; Methodological capital; Intercultural capital)

"We believe that a 'qualified' English language teacher needs to have, or be supported in their development of, all three of the above types of capital both as procedural and declarative knowledge" (Stanley & Murray, 2013, p105)

# Strengths & Weaknesses of TESOL Masters Programmes

❖ Forms of content knowledge typically taught on MA TESOL ...

- Theories about the Nature of Language

e.g., Language is based on imitating behaviour; Language is innate; Language is social...etc

- Theories about Second Language Acquisition

e.g., Monitor Hypothesis and i+1; Natural Order Hypothesis; Affective Filter Hypothesis...etc

- Theories about Learning

e.g., Top Down/Bottom Up Processing; Zone of Proximal Development...etc

- Theories about Teaching

e.g., Methods, approaches and techniques... etc



# Strengths & Weaknesses of TESOL Masters Programmes

- ❖ But the highly theoretical dimension of many MA TESOL programmes often comes in for criticism...

“In describing the least useful features of their TESOL programs, participants wrote extensively about theory instruction, ranging from theories of second language acquisition to theoretical linguistics. Some theory is useful but we need to have more tools to use when teaching,” and “the different theories were interesting, but not very helpful in the real classroom.”

(Faez & Valeo, 2012)

# Strengths & Weaknesses of TESOL Masters Programmes

❖ Practice is a core component of developing proficiency...

“[Teachers need to learn] to operate with some **personal conceptualization of how their teaching leads to desired learning-** with a notion of **causation that has a measure of credibility for them**”

(Prabhu, 1999, p172)

“Teachers.... do not just take a theory or research off the shelf.... Rather **they are selective consumers**, buying from what is on offer in accordance with their particular needs and purposes. Teachers **filter what they are told about language learning through the schemata they have developed from their own experience of classrooms** as learners and as teachers. The idea that research can in some way tell teachers what to do is in fact naïve and hopelessly mistaken. All it can ever do is to offer.... ‘provisional specifications’ which **teachers may choose to act on or not in accordance with their own theories of learning**”

(Ellis, 1998, p12)

# Strengths & Weaknesses of TESOL Masters Programmes

❖ But not all MA TESOL programmes include a practicum...

“The respondents seemed to be most concerned when the **application of theoretical discussions was not the focus of their lessons**. Some commented that “the [TESOL] course needs to be edited for content to include more of the practical aspects of working in teaching,” “I found that **the courses were heavy on theory but too light on concrete teaching of skills**.”

(Faez & Valeo, 2012)

# Strengths & Weaknesses of TESOL Masters Programmes

❖ Critical reflection is needed to further develop proficiency...

“amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, **the organic connection between education and personal experience**” (Dewey, 1933, p25)

“Learning is the process whereby **knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.**” (Kolb, 1984, p38)

“[the] testing of **intuitive understanding** of experienced phenomena often **takes the form of a reflective conversation with the situation**” (Schön, 1983, p241)

“...reflective thinking and examination either during or after the fact **can lead to greater awareness on classroom teachers’ part** in relation to their knowledge-in-action, or the theories, ideas, metaphors, and images they use as **criteria for decision making in their teaching practice.**” (Stanley, 2012, p585)

# Strengths & Weaknesses of TESOL Masters Programmes

- ❖ But any critical reflection needs to be genuine and appropriately scaffolded. When reflection on MA TESOL programmes is assessed, there can be a danger of students writing what they think their teachers want to hear...

“...by making reflection a course requirement that is assessed by tutors, there is a danger that the depth and quality of reflection will be reduced, as **candidates will be inclined to write or say what they think the tutors and the assessor expect to read or hear**. As a consequence, some have questioned whether reflection should be assessed at all” (Mackenzie, 2019, p12)

“When I ask my MA TESOL students to read about a particular theory, I ask them to **reflect on how it may or may not be relevant to their own L2 learning and teaching experiences** and to consider **the extent to which the theory is consistent with their beliefs about how L2s are learned and should be taught**” (Johnson, 1996, p779)

# Strengths & Weaknesses of TESOL Masters Programmes

In summary, the general consensus from the literature to date appears to be that MA TESOL programmes:

- ❖ Score highly on developing declarative knowledge in their participants, but this is not always successfully converted into procedural knowledge
- ❖ Do not always make the links between theory and practice explicit enough
- ❖ Often fail to include a practicum component
- ❖ Try to promote critical reflection but this may sometimes become artificial
- ❖ Still serve as the terminal degree for most people working in the profession

# So what should an MA TESOL in an Overseas EMI Context do?

- ❖ Ensure that there is adequate support and scaffolding in place to help students transition in terms of the language, academic literacy and cross-cultural adjustment elements.
- ❖ Ensure that the content is made relevant to the participants' own context.
- ❖ Ensure that the links between theory and practice are made as strong as possible.
- ❖ Ensure that there is a strong 'hands-on' component throughout.
- ❖ Ensure that there are adequate opportunities for genuine critical reflection.

## A Summary and Some Concluding Thoughts...

- ❖ The traditional student demographic for MA TESOL programmes is steadily changing.
- ❖ In some contexts, MA TESOL has now become a pre-experience entry-level qualification rather than a post-experience higher-level qualification.
- ❖ Given the above, it is becoming more important than ever for MA TESOLs to include practical as well as theoretical dimensions.
- ❖ MA TESOL programmes delivered in overseas EMI contexts need to be *particularly* sensitive to the needs of local contexts.



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# ***Thanks for Listening...***

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