

## Factors Contributing to TESOL Employment: A Graduate Perspective

Ziwei Vera Wu  
*Thompson Rivers University*

### Abstract

The profession of teaching English to speakers of other language (TESOL) has experienced significant changes in the past decades, and career development in the contemporary era is becoming increasingly complex and unpredictable. This study aimed at finding the patterns and attractors that contribute to successful careers in TESOL from the perspectives of graduates. Data were collected through a comprehensive survey of international and Canadian TESOL certificate graduates at a mid-size university in British Columbia and through interviews with several of the graduates. The results were analysed through the lens of the forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and chaos (Bright & Pryor, 2005) theories. The results indicated a significant diversity of TESOL employment and the varied effectiveness of factors in career development amongst participants. Graduates experienced challenges in terms of their TESOL skills and their job search skills, with both being impacted by the forms of capital they held in the TESOL profession. While TESOL students and early career TESOL professionals need to be more prepared for the complexity and unpredictability of TESOL careers by continuously improving their forms of capital, TESOL teacher educators, TESOL program administrators, and TESOL professional organizations should take the diverse needs of students with different backgrounds into consideration and provide long-term career support to build a robust TESOL community.

### Introduction

How can recent graduates of a teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) program find a job after they graduate? The job search after graduation has become a significant challenge for many graduates due to rapid changes in the labour market in general. Some recent research has been concerned with the challenges of an enduring career in TESOL (Feaz & Valeo, 2012; Priddis et al., 2013); teacher attrition in the TESOL profession (Valeo & Feaz, 2013), and seeking best practices of TESOL education for teacher preparation (Farrel, 2012; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2011). Farrel (2012) suggested that improvements in employment stability and support in the TESOL industry could be slow with limited guarantees, and it requires graduates to be adaptive and confront their career challenges in the meantime.

The TESOL profession has experienced enormous changes in the past ten years, and the existing research is insufficient to provide a clear idea about how to better support TESOL professionals to have an enduring career in the profession. Thus, research is essential for TESOL programs to identify areas of possible mismatch between the current demand in the workplace and the preparation offered in these TESOL programs. Research is also needed to inform current TESOL students and novice TESOL professionals, so that they will be more prepared to adapt to this competitive and sometimes unstable profession (Faez & Valeo, 2012).

Employment in TESOL varies in different educational settings. To understand the TESOL labour market and the employment level of graduates, as well as respond to my curiosity

about patterns of career success in TESOL, this study explored the following research question: What factors contribute to TESOL graduates finding TESOL-related positions?

## Literature Review

### Readiness of Graduates

TESOL professionals, and novice teachers in particular, have expressed various concerns in their teaching practice due to a possible lack of readiness in diverse work settings. For example, although TESOL programs mostly focus on teaching adult learners, some TESOL professionals teach youth and children as both English as an additional language (EAL) teachers and general school teachers. According to Baecher (2012), those who were working in elementary schools were in need of collaborative learning models which were mainstream in the general school system but not prevalent in TESOL education programs, while EAL teachers working in high schools did not feel ready to meet the literacy needs of students with low English proficiency and personal issues such as poverty or undocumented immigration status. As reported by the teachers, it was a common practice to place English language learners (ELLs) in special education classes, but teachers in special education classrooms clearly stated their incapability in meeting the needs of ELLs (Baecher, 2012). Teachers also reported frustrations due to unpreparedness for jobs related to testing, assessment, and student placement (Baecher, 2012). For teachers who specifically taught EAL, major challenges were working in isolation, not having stable employment, and even not finding opportunities to start their careers in TESOL (Valeo & Faez, 2013). Other challenges also included the selection and evaluation of materials, and the lack of in-depth knowledge related to TESOL (Kiely & Askham, 2012), which may contribute to a longer learning curve at work and during the transition to employment.

Another major reason for the low level of readiness is that most graduates seemed to lack an understanding of the TESOL labour market and employment situations before they graduated from their TESOL education programs (Farrell, 2012; Priddis et al., 2013; Valeo & Faez, 2013). They were not prepared for the challenges of the diversity of experiences and potential instability in TESOL employment situations.

### Theoretical Frameworks

**Chaos Theory of Careers.** Bright and Pryor (2005) have theorized that modern careers are not linear paths anymore due to the rapid change of labour markets; instead, a career is more complex with multiple transitions influenced by both subjective and objective factors, as well as the interactions of these factors. For Bright and Pryor, attractors are the influential factors that impact career trajectories. Traditional theories of career trajectories follow a linear cause-effect model that describes ideal situations, but Bright and Pryor have stated that career development in the modern era is impacted by unpredictable attractors and trends which result in the emergence of patterns during phase shifts in careers, with no “ideal” situations. Given the complexity and changing dynamics of contemporary career development, Bright and Pryor’s chaos theory of careers provides a conceptual framework to understand and incorporate the nonlinearity and excursiveness of career development instead of focusing on the traditional cause and effects.

It can be put forward that the career paths of TESOL graduates do not have predictable linear results from certain causes. Instead, they are trajectories influenced by the complex interactions of individual features, such as Bright and Pryor's (2005) attractors. As unpredictable events do influence career paths, the emphasis should be on understanding "the process and the patterns in careers rather than on defining or predicting stable variables as outcomes" (Bright & Pryor, 2005, p. 296). Thus, this theory provides a conceptual lens to view the data in the current study more comprehensively than focusing on or expecting the "average" or "ideal" experience. However, it is necessary to be aware that, instead of looking into all aspects of graduates' lives as chaos theory would recommend, this study only focuses on the particular period of time from the graduation from the TESOL certificate program to the data collection, due to the limits of time and resources.

**Bourdieu and Human Capital.** Bourdieu (1986) categorized the different forms of capital that a person can hold into economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital. While economic capital includes the ownership of a property and social capital focuses on the effectiveness of interpersonal connections, cultural capital emphasizes the value of what a person owns from the perspectives of personal, societal, and institutional culture. For Bourdieu, the three guises of capital function differently for each person, and require different costs to transform from one to another. Cultural capital consists of three states including the objectified state (such as owning a bowl with particular cultural symbols on it or owning a car that shows the social class it represents), institutionalized state (such as earning a master's degree), and the embodied state (such as establishing an identity as a TESOL professional, or recognizing the importance of writing).

It is also noteworthy that there are potential connections between the different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986), and these connections correspond to aspects of chaos theory. For example, based on Bourdieu's (1986) understanding of capital, a cultural object can only be a kind of economic capital if the object does not have any links with the embodied culture of a person. Similarly, an institutionalized state of cultural capital is very likely to connect with an embodied state of cultural capital if the institutional recognition is based on the growth of a person in terms of professional experience and knowledge. The institutionalized state of cultural capital can also link to social capital when it directly improves the value of social connections, and to economic capital when it directly contributes to an income or an increase of income. While the connections of transformation are not necessarily direct from one to another, each transfer of capital happens with particular reasons and patterns. Figure 1 illustrates Bourdieu's possible connections between the forms of capital and the states of cultural capital.

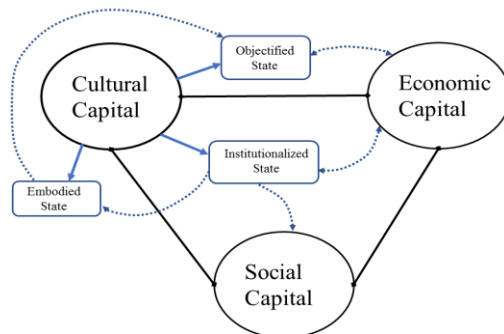


Figure 1. Potential connections between different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Understanding the complex connections between these concepts is meaningful to the analysis of data related to career paths. The interconnections or potential connections reflect the complexity of career development. The theory related to cultural capital helps unpack the complexity by providing insights into the possible links between the key concepts with a framework that clarifies and categorizes the information. By using the frameworks of human capital and chaos theory to unpack the experiences of TESOL graduates in their TESOL careers, the experiences can be broken down into various layers that contribute differently to their career paths. While two vastly different experiences might bring about similar effects due to a key aspect they share, similar experiences might impact careers variously depending on the role the experiences play in the contexts. The credential of the TESOL certificate graduates received is an institutionalized level of cultural capital; however, it is interesting to see the different impacts the same credential can have on the experiences of different individuals holding various types and levels of capital.

### Methods

The data collection for this study included two parts: a survey and interviews, as outlined in Figure 2. The survey provided descriptive data including both quantitative statistics and qualitative information. Quantitative analysis included calculating averages for the survey responses and presenting the results graphically. The range of the responses was also taken into account. Where applicable, a paired *t*-test was carried out to compare two sets of responses, and a Pearson correlation was calculated to investigate the relationship between different sets of responses. The interviews provided more qualitative details to support insights into particular cases, with salient representative quotes identified in the data to illustrate key findings. In general, elements of case study methods were applied to collect and analyse the data (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009).

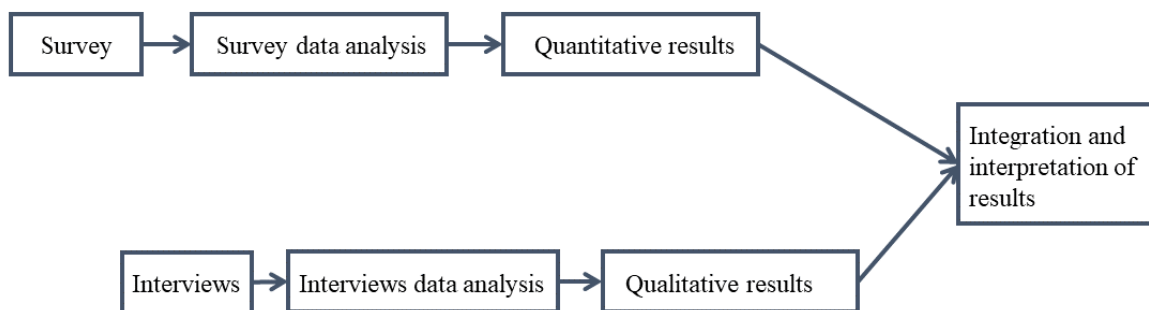


Figure 2. Research design.

A convergence model of triangulation design and concurrent mixed analysis (Creswell & Clark, 2017) was applied to this research. The survey and interviews were conducted separately, and the data from both sources were analysed independently. Afterwards, data from both sources were analysed and integrated in the discussion.

## TESOL Program Context

The research was conducted with graduates of a TESOL program at a medium size university in British Columbia. This program is a 15-credit post-baccalaureate program with five courses that include both theoretical knowledge and practical experience. The program has been running for more than ten years. Students need a completed university degree in any discipline to be eligible for applying to the program. Non-native English-speaking applicants also need to prove their English competency by achieving a score in a TOEFL or IELTS exam, equivalent to CLB level 7/8. Graduates of the program are prepared to teach both in Canada and internationally, working with learners of different ages.

## Participants

The participants for this study consisted of 40 graduates who have completed the TESOL program. Twenty-one participants completed the entire survey, and 19 participants completed the survey partially with valid responses that informed the results for some sections. The ages of survey participants ranged from 22 to 65, with 13 males, 26 females, and one person self-identified as LGBTQ+. There were three interview participants, including one male (Mr. Dream), aged 31, and two females, aged 24 (Scarlett) and 51 (Robynn), respectively. The names are pseudonyms. The participants graduated with their TESOL certificates between 2005 and 2017, including both domestic graduates and international graduates. Graduates might be working or have worked in their home countries, in Canada, or other countries.

## Survey

The survey explored participants' background information, employment history, involvement in the TESOL profession, career goals, career-enhancing academic and non-academic factors, and program factors that may contribute to employment. All of the Likert scales were consistent, with five representing extremely positive and one representing totally negative. As the survey was conducted electronically through Fluid Survey, the TESOL alumni located in different parts of the world were able to participate through the link sent out by email and their responses were received online through the electronic database.

## Interviews

The three interview participants also represent the three main categories of TESOL students: a) Canadian students who have just graduated with their bachelor degrees; b) international students who are doing or have done their degree programs; and c) mature students who are looking to transition their career into TESOL; however, their experiences were not intended to represent that of all the graduates in the identified groups.

## Results

Graduates reported their ideal jobs and their status in terms of professional involvement and rated the effectiveness of different factors for facilitating their TESOL careers according to their individual career experiences. The findings demonstrated a wide diversity of experiences in

TESOL careers and an inconsistency between career goals and career experiences. The factors included in the survey were reflected in and fairly comprehensive according to the literature and experience of TESOL faculty, as participants responded to the Likert scales without suggesting any additional factors in the comment space or open response and most of the factors received a relatively wide range of rates.

### Professional Involvement

Among the six types of professional activities (see Figure 3), 59% of the participants had teaching experience during or before the TESOL certificate program, and 77.3% of the participants had attended professional conferences. Yet only 41% of the participants were members of a TESOL professional organization, and less than 23% of the graduates had been active in giving academic presentations, carrying out research, and writing publications.

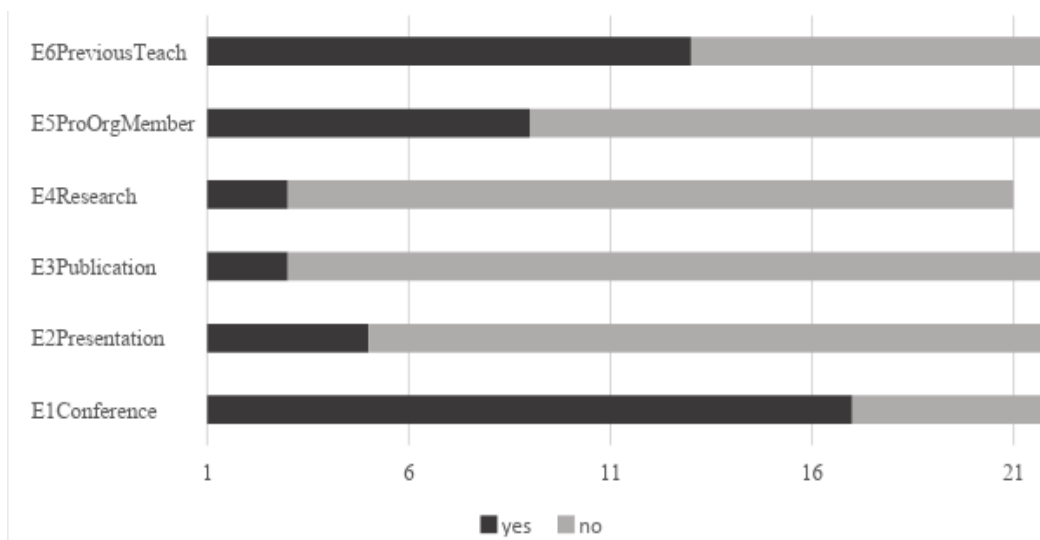


Figure 3. Professional involvement.

Among those who had teaching experience prior to or during the TESOL program, they rated 3.46 out of 5 in terms of how helpful the previous teaching experience was to obtaining employment, with a range from 2, not very helpful, to 5, which means extremely helpful. According to the comments under this question, although any teaching experience may aid graduates with the teaching activities in their jobs, it may not aid them in finding employment. In other words, having previous teaching experience was cultural capital for the job of teaching, but it lacked value as capital during the job search process.

Regarding ideal TESOL jobs, while some young Canadian graduates in the study looked to teach overseas, international graduates may have been seeking employment in Canada and some mature graduates were aiming at a career transition into TESOL at the same time as working around other professional or life commitments, with specific expectations of whether to look for work overseas or locally. Interestingly, an inconsistency was found between the ideal TESOL jobs of graduates and their professional involvement. For example, many graduates reported their interest in being a university instructor, yet they were not highly involved in professional activities. Some were interested in teaching in the K-12 system, yet they had not



obtained a teacher certification for that educational setting. Some reported having an inadequate resume or English proficiency as reasons for not being employed. The vast majority of participants reported their lack of qualifications for their ideal jobs.

Meanwhile, participants reported that, overall, they were not highly involved in the TESOL profession other than for fulfilling their employment duties and attending conferences, which were more passive activities in terms of career development. On the other hand, activities such as making an academic presentation or carrying out research could be seen as more active forms of professional involvement; however, only a small proportion of the participants were involved in these activities.

### Academic Activities

Figure 4 presents the average perceptions of graduates regarding how helpful the listed academic activities were to their careers in TESOL. Owning academic credentials, including a TESOL certificate, undergraduate degree, and graduate degree, ranked at the top among all the activities.

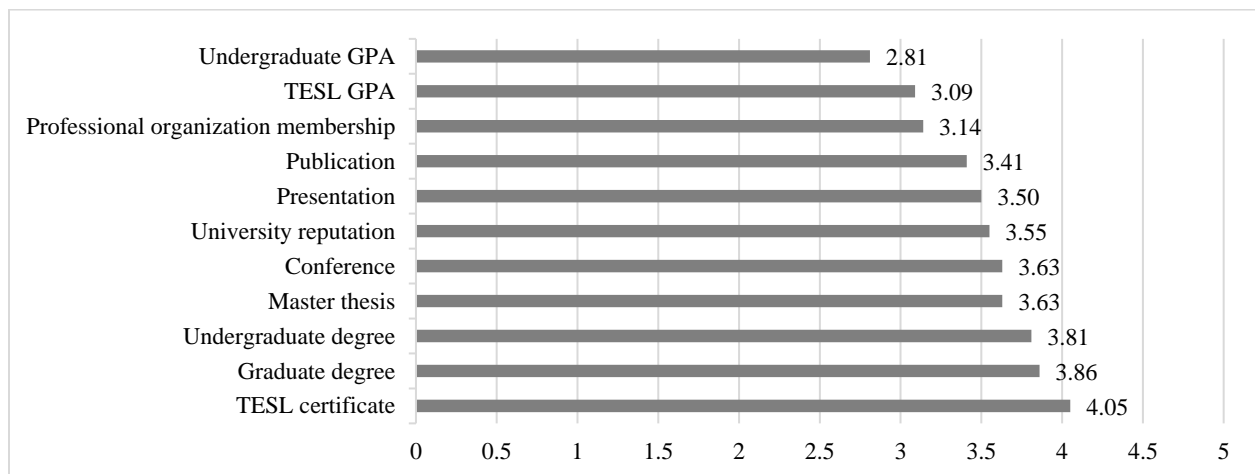


Figure 4. Impacts of academic activities.

The next group of valuable academic factors were academic involvement, including research (such as for a master thesis), publications, and presentations at conferences. While most participants lacked an active involvement in professional development according to the last section, they recognized the effectiveness of active professional involvement. The least effective factors were GPA and membership in a professional organization. Participants acknowledged the importance of professional involvement, yet membership in professional organizations was not considered to be valuable to their career development. The reputation of the university appeared to be more influential than GPA and some active professional involvement in terms of perceived impact on career progression.

Despite reporting the averages, it is also noteworthy that participants demonstrated a wide range of variety in their responses. All the factors, except for GPA and university reputation, had a range of responses from 2 to 5, while the three factors formerly mentioned had a range from 1 to 5 in the same item. In other words, a factor might have been valuable in the career of one graduate while having little impact in the career of another. As the factors were

rated by participants according to their own TESOL career experiences, the range of rates demonstrated the complexity and the various uniqueness of individuals and their career experiences.

### Teaching Experience and Skills

According to the responses, teaching experience and skills, on average, had a higher effect on the career success of TESOL graduates than academic activities and other factors (see Figure 5). Among all types of teaching experiences, TESOL-related teaching experience was significantly more effective than non-TESOL teaching experience in facilitating career development. In addition, only basic computer skills were reported to be significant in a TESOL career.

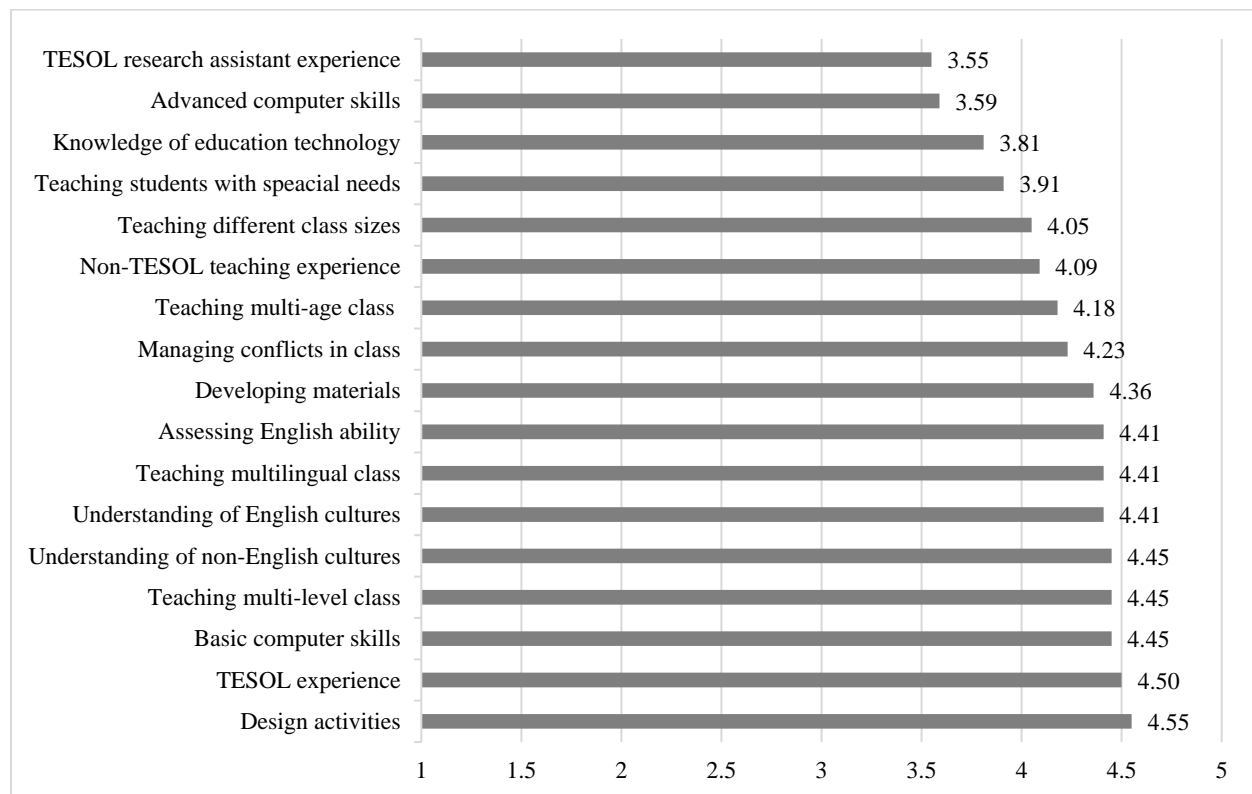


Figure 5. Impacts of teaching experience and skills.

Compared with whether a participant had teaching experience, transferable skills, including understanding non-English cultures and English cultures, and the ability to assess English ability of students, designing appropriate activities for a class, teaching multilevel or multilingual classes, and developing student-oriented instructional materials, were essential to careers in TESOL. Other important skills also included managing conflicts in the classroom, adapting to different class sizes, and teaching students of different ages (such as children and youth). Although teaching students with special needs, knowledge of existing language-teaching software and online resources, advanced computer skills, and experience as research assistants in TESOL were not reported to be essential, these items still had average rates above 3.50 out of 5. The rates of essential skills in TESOL teaching had the least variety among all the factors.



## Other Factors

Factors other than the categories abovementioned were also included in the survey. English skills were indicated to be a key factor for both Canadian and international participants. Openness to different opportunities, persistence in the job search, and having a network of staff through the TESOL program seemed to be valuable in the careers of the participants. In addition, the other factors as shown in Figure 6 were also still influential on career development, with an average rating over 3.60.

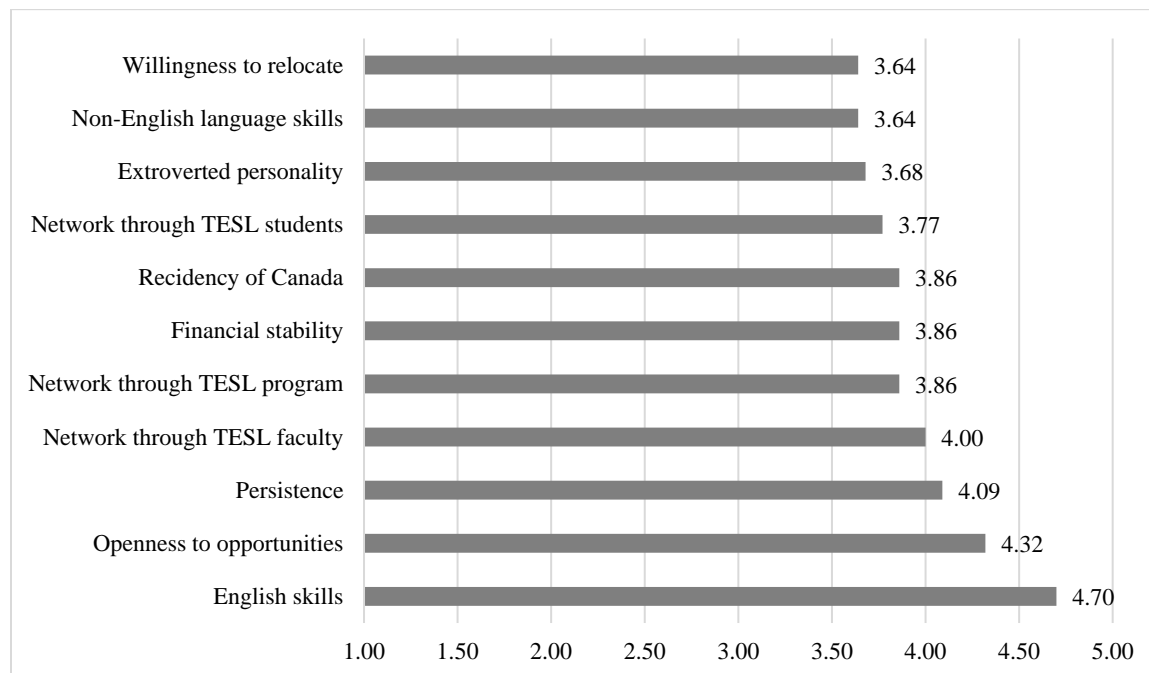


Figure 6. Impacts of other factors.

The three main themes appearing in the interviews in terms of factors impacting career transitions were personal factors, the job search process, and adaptations in the workplace. Mature students were affected more by personal factors and less by job search skills than new graduates who experienced fewer limitations in the types of jobs they could choose but limited experience to rely on to obtain those jobs. All three types of students made important adaptations to their workplace after graduation from the program.

**Personal factors.** Career transition involved many personal decisions in terms of life goals and career goals that were impacted by personality, previous experience and background, and preferences for work and travel destinations.

Mature students had more specific goals that motivated the decision to take a TESOL program. In the case of Robynn, who had experience in teaching adults and curriculum development, she had a source for job information before taking the TESOL certificate, and she had a plan for teaching. She did not express any struggle with her job search and described a relatively smooth transition into a teaching job specifically as she expected. As mature graduates were experienced in the transitional process with their transferable skills acquired from their

previous careers, they were more prepared even before entering the TESOL program, so their post-graduation plans were more likely to work out with less unexpected incidents.

While the survey results indicated an uncertain attitude towards the importance of personal factors, the interview results show that personal factors were actually influential factors, especially during career transitions. Scarlett described the struggles trying to find her personal preferences of employment in terms of job duties, geographic locations, and cultures, and stated “I don’t know what I want to do exactly.” She also expressed her unwillingness to work in entry-level jobs with a minimum wage, such as retail or serving, and her limited financial situation. She said, “[I] wasn’t in a position where I can wait you know a month or two to find a job, I needed to be doing something right now.” Robynn chose the TESOL program also partly because she “was moving to [the city where the program was located]” and “noticed that there were a lot of employment opportunities to teach English as a second language.” Mr. Dream had partly decided his personal preferences for employment when he came to study in Canada: “as an international myself, as a person who is driven to get a degree in Canada, my main goal in the end was to get my immigration document, my permanent residency in the country,” and he considered the TESOL program because of his mother’s suggestion. Moreover, some international graduates from non-native English speaking (NNES) backgrounds also reported in the survey that their English skills had limited their career opportunities in TESOL. Although, these personal factors seemed to be a small part of a TESOL career; they were an influential part of the complexity of career decisions and unpredictability of career trajectories in TESOL.

**Job search.** Searching for work in TESOL was generally reported in both the survey and interviews as a significant challenge for new graduates with not enough previous experience to rely on.

Sources of information played an essential role in the job search process. Mature students took much less time in searching for a job due to their ability and experience in the job search than younger Canadian graduates and international graduates. Robynn had very reliable sources of information about career and job postings in TESOL where she planned to stay and teach, which led to her decision to take the TESOL program to meet the hiring requirements. Her level of preparedness in adapting to a career in TESOL also facilitated her job search after graduation. She received her first job offer right after she graduated. “It happened so fast that I didn’t really have a chance to think about it,” said Robynn. Meanwhile, Scarlett found it challenging to find reliable sources of job information and properly interpret the job postings. Mr. Dream directly stated, “I have to be honest with you that my transition to the ESL workplace has not been an easy one” because he was unfamiliar with the job market culture in Canada. Graduates also expressed such needs overwhelmingly in the survey responses to recommendation to the TESOL program, which will be discussed in the next section.

**Adaptations to the workplace.** The adaptations were usually reflected in job skills such as curriculum design or teaching methods. Robynn “had to put in some pretty long hours to develop some material” to meet the needs of her students because “the curriculum provided..has a lot of gaps”. She also sought advice from the TESOL instructors to adapt to teaching multilevel classes. Scarlett, on the other hand, had to adapt to a different teaching method than what she was used to:

I think one of the biggest transitions is...my school uses the direct method...and...there's nothing wrong...ok. Of course in our program we definitely learned more communicative than anything else...and when I came here, I had to learn to teach in a direct method. ...we come from a program that was a very communicative base and I'm in a direct method school. I definitely have some issues sometimes.

Apart from the teaching method, she also had to adjust to a teaching schedule that changed weekly, and her teaching was usually not during regular work hours because her students could be working full-time.

### Impacts of the TESOL Certificate Program

Participants provided positive feedback about the effectiveness of the TESOL Certificate program. All the courses were rated over 4.10, among which the TESOL practicum ranked at the top of the list, followed by TESOL curriculum and instruction. Participants rated TESOL pedagogical grammar and TESOL techniques at a similar level in terms of effectiveness in their career, which was slightly higher than the TESOL intercultural communication studies course. These results are outlined in Figure 7.

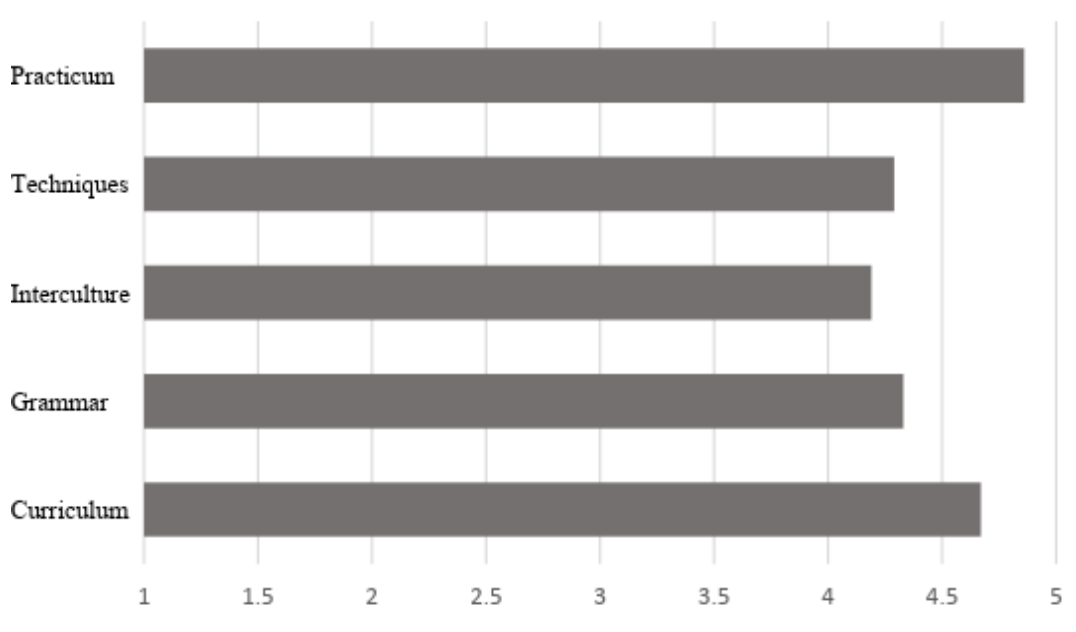


Figure 7. Impacts of courses in TESOL program.

Participants also rated how helpful the TESOL program was as to the factors related to career development in TESOL (see Figure 8). The program was efficient in supporting students with career networking and building a supportive community for graduates, yet there was a gap identified in improving the skills of graduates, especially the skills of teaching students at different ages and teaching different class sizes. In addition, the participants did not identify that the TESOL program significantly improved their English skills as it might not have been considered as a part of the aim of the program.

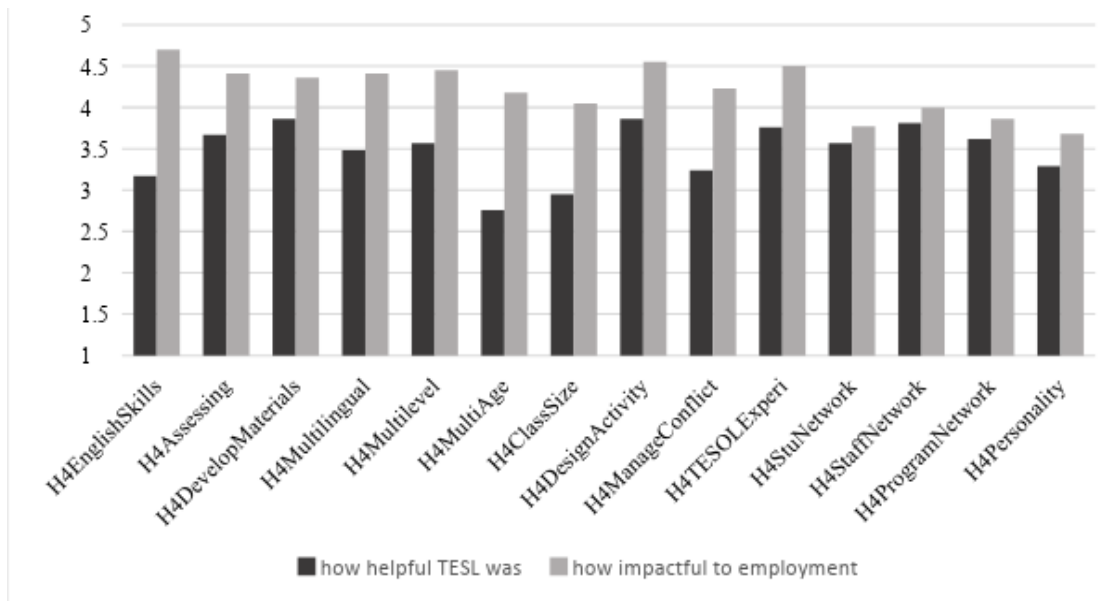


Figure 8. Impacts of TESOL program on career factors vs. effectiveness of factors to career development.

Applying the same Likert scale, the responses also reflected a gap between participants' sense of preparedness for TESOL careers and their satisfaction levels with their TESOL careers (see Figure 9). With the same range of rates (1-5), overall, a higher level of preparedness was reported compared to the level of career satisfaction. This difference demonstrated that while graduates felt the TESOL Certificate program prepared them for their post-graduation careers, they only had a medium level of satisfaction in their subsequent TESOL careers.

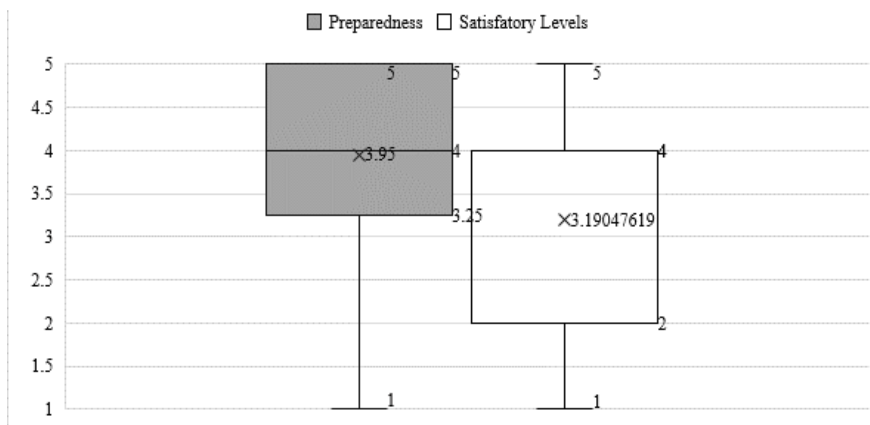


Figure 9. Preparedness vs. satisfaction levels.

Two tests were run to analyse whether there was a significant difference between satisfaction levels and preparedness, and whether these two factors were related. A paired *t*-test showed that the rates of preparedness were higher than that of career satisfaction ( $t(19) = 3.56, p \leq .002$ ). Moreover, a Pearson Correlation analysis found that the levels of preparedness and that of career satisfaction were fairly related ( $r = .67, p = .001$ ). Overall, according to the attribution and correlation analysis, the two items changed relatedly with a gap in between. There was no significant difference for these two items based on gender ( $p \geq .861$ ).

According to the qualitative responses, graduates mainly had challenges during the job seeking process in spite of the fact that they had the certification needed for TESOL-related jobs. As a result, although there was no course suggested to be added into the program, a majority of participants suggested improving support in teaching students with special needs, at different ages, or with different sexual orientations, in doing administrative jobs, and in career development (such as career mentoring). For graduates from NNES backgrounds, the intensiveness of the program was also reported to be challenging as they needed more exposure and practice in teaching in a different teaching culture with various approaches as well as in improving their English skills.

In spite of the various levels of preparedness and satisfaction, more specific information behind these numbers was captured in the open responses and interviews. All three interviewees described very positive experiences overall in the TESOL program. They benefited mainly from the instructors in the TESOL program, the multiple methods of teaching with a focus on students, the practicum in which they gained hands-on teaching experience, and the learning community built into the cohort nature of the program. Participants, especially mature graduates who were seeking a career transition, reported that they developed a sense of purpose in teaching and felt comfortable and confident through studying in the program. A main reconsideration of the learning experience in the TESOL certificate program was the intensity of the program. Depending on their previous experience, acquisition of TESOL related skills prior to the program, and preferred learning styles, graduates experienced different learning curves during their studies in the TESOL program.

**Instructors.** Instructors were reported to have a significant impact on the learning of graduates by modelling teaching with different methods and being student-centred in an EAL classroom, supporting and caring for TESOL students during their learning and practice, and motivating TESOL students with their great passion in the learning and teaching of TESOL and EAL. Instructors were the main support for the graduates both during and after the program. Young Canadian graduates like Scarlett were very appreciative about the fact that the instructors of the program were supportive, caring, and passionate about teaching:

The teacher had such passion for the program and...they really did care about, like you know, what we were doing after teaching and all the stuff. I just felt they were very interested in us as people, and for me that was really good like umm I felt close to them. They would (find the...share of things) they have done, or things that are possible through the program. They were very invested in us finding a job after university...and what not.

Mr. Dream, as an international graduate, also supported the idea that the program was informative and up-to-date because of the instructors:

They teach you a lot of the methodology and the process of what is it like to be an ESL teacher in the field. So they were really up to date with everything.

... The teacher of the class will actually tell you what you need to improve, what you need to...what was good that you taught and everything. So they were very careful in each and every step of the way.

The support of instructors happened not only during the program but also after students had graduated, even for mature graduates like Robynn:

Well, I've gone back to my previous instructors for a few times for advice...I'm not afraid to ask for help. And I have, and they responded like "of course come on in" and had great conversations. Provided me with resources or advice. For sure. And I felt that that was open, when I graduated. ...there's no hesitation about getting in touch with them.

Instructors overall were presented as role models and as a significantly influential factor in the TESOL program in all cases. The connection with instructors facilitated the practices of graduates directly by providing support, resources, and guidance during and after the program.

**Pedagogical focus.** Although not all of the three cases specifically identified preferences for pedagogy in EAL classrooms, the program had a strong focus on student-oriented, communicative methods while providing exposure to other teaching methods in class.

Robynn, teaching in an organization with a similar style preference, found it very helpful to have the communicative approach discussed in detail and demonstrated in almost all of the TESOL classes. It was also consistent with her previous experience as a curriculum developer: "What IS similar [to my previous background] is ... there're a lot of emphasis was put in my Adult Education training on understanding the students and being very student-focus, and that's very similar."

Scarlett appreciated the exposure to different methods; yet, as a young graduate who experienced mostly Canadian education, she encountered a major transition in teaching with the direct method in her workplace overseas. She needed support from her employer to address the challenges of applying a new method that wasn't common in her training.

**Practicum.** Another very influential part of the TESOL program was the practicum, which was consistent with the survey data shown in Figure 7. In spite of whether they took the practicum in a separate semester or not, graduates reported significant learning and improvements in the practicum. Mr. Dream stated that the practicum was significant for an international student teacher like him:

...you don't get just to learn about it on paper but you also get to do it in front of an actual class. ...the teacher of the class will actually tell you what you need to improve, ...what was good that you taught...

Students felt supported in the practicum class in which they applied the learning from other courses and developed their teaching skills that were directly transferable to the workplace.

The practicum was a significant source of exposure to teaching English. Mr. Dream did his practicum in two different settings and experienced the challenge of keeping students focused and interested, which was similar to what he may still experience in a subsequent teaching job. In



addition, Robynn, as a mature professional in adult education, also highly appreciated the practicum:

...there's so many observations that was built into the practicum, it doesn't feel like all of a sudden you're standing in front of a classroom and you're overwhelmed by "well I haven't really finished the course work yet and I don't know really know what I'm doing"

Mature students were also provided a safe space to integrate their previous experience into a TESOL setting before going into the workplace. Nevertheless, a component missing in the data was the professional connections. Participants did not mention this benefit of the practicum in either the survey responses or the interviews.

**Supportive community.** An efficient supportive community that facilitated learning and practice in TESOL was built through a cohort base during the time when students were in the TESOL program. This community consisted of students, instructors, sponsor teachers of student teachers in their practicum, and sometimes even TESOL alumni who were involved in TESOL classes as guests or on campus as staff members. It is a continuous community supporting graduates both practically and emotionally when they encountered challenges or stress in the workplace or life in general. As Robynn stated:

I've gone back to my previous instructors for a few times for advice ... and I felt that that was open when I graduated. I never felt...like there's no hesitation about getting in touch with them.

Scarlett also enjoyed the learning community as she appreciated its impact on her learning experience in the TESOL program:

I really enjoyed it ... We were a lot closer than I had been in any other class because of course we spent all our classes together ... I guess kinda of sense of community.

The community played an important role in the career of TESOL graduates especially during the transition from being a student teacher to working as a TESOL professional in the field.

## Discussions & Recommendations

### Reconsideration of Readiness

At the macro level, career development in the modern era is chaotic. Meanwhile, at the micro level, the capital a graduate holds can be a chaotic system in itself as the interaction of factors in professional and personal life can be complex and unpredictable, and this complexity makes defining readiness even more difficult. Having reconsidered the meaning of career success, I also believe that the concept of readiness is worth reconsideration. Traditionally, readiness is about how ready a graduate is to perform the job they are trained for. However, according to the results of this study, in TESOL, not only is there no one specific job (teaching) that graduates are entering into, but the graduates also have to cope with diverse employment conditions in a

changing labour market and the need to increase their own capital to facilitate their careers. In the contemporary era with chaotic career development, the readiness of TESOL graduates includes not only the skills for teaching the English language, but also career development skills, maturity, and characters that adapt to uncertainty in order to successfully and actively facilitate their career progression. In other words, graduates need to be ready for the possible variety of TESOL jobs where they might be employed in and out of the TESOL profession, and also for the uncertainty in their career development.

### Career Development in TESOL

The needs of students in TESOL programs can be very different. While the intent is not to generalize, the three types of graduates profiled in the interviews were consistent with the survey data in this study. The survey responses and the three interviews showed different focuses and challenges in terms of learning in TESOL and career transitions. In an attempt to demonstrate the emerging patterns from the diverse career paths of participants, Figure 10 proposes a possible framework for considering the intersectionality of the three demographic groups.

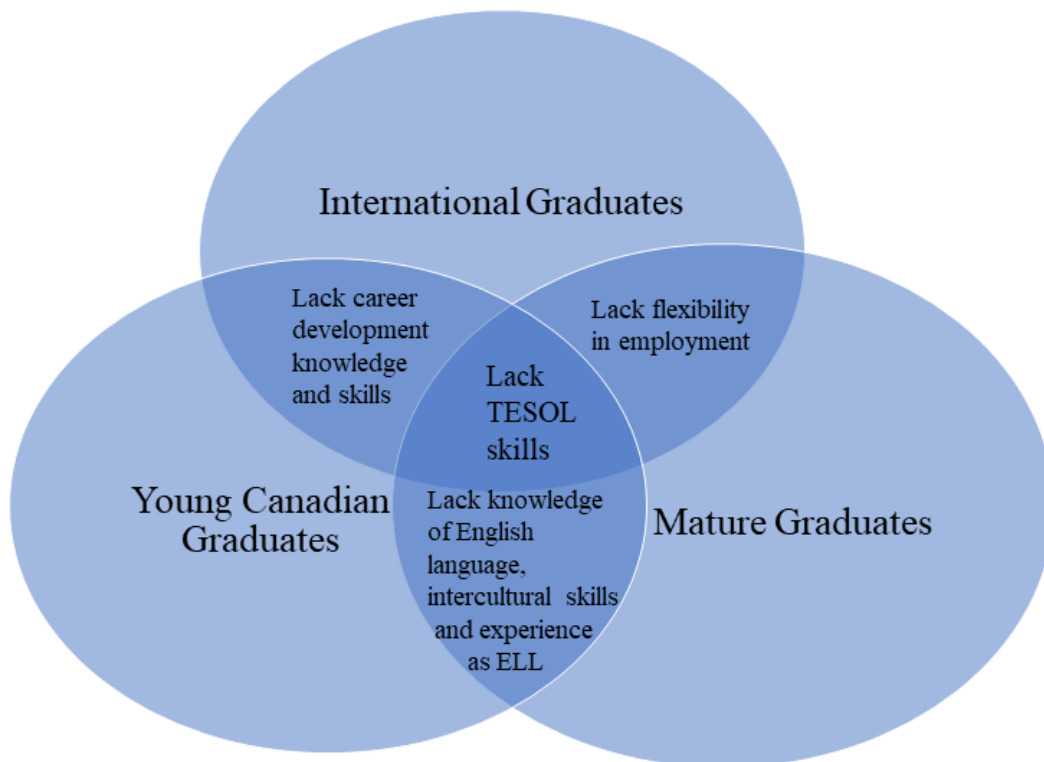


Figure 10. Challenges experienced by TESOL graduates.

In the current study, young Canadian graduates had more interest in seeking employment overseas, and international graduates and mature graduates were more likely to favour jobs in Canada. Mature graduates focused more on pedagogy during their studies and work, but younger graduates, both international and Canadian, had more concerns about the job search and career development. These different goals led to diverse learning needs in a TESOL classroom.

Along with diverse needs found in this study, graduates also held different types and levels of capital. Mature graduates demonstrated the capital related to the job search and career development skills, oftentimes with previous related work experience which facilitated their career progression. Novice graduates in the study usually lacked these skills and experience but were more open to different opportunities, especially to overseas teaching positions, and they could adapt to less stable circumstances because of fewer other commitments and responsibilities, such as family and children. International graduates, especially NNES, may have had better knowledge and experience about EAL learners, but their NNES status might have had an impact on their employment (Moussu & Llurda, 2008). Based on the findings in this study, TESOL programs should recognize the diversity of student needs and take them into consideration during program design and promotion.

Considering the different levels and kinds of capital and needs of graduates in the current study, the skills to cope and navigate the chaos seemed to be required cultural capital for TESOL career development. According to the data from the survey and the interviews, participants identified career development skills in addition to job search skills, such as finding reliable information sources, resume and cover letter writing, professional networking, and interview skills. Personality characteristics (such as perseverance) and career planning skills such as time management, goal setting, taking action, and active involvement in the profession were also important. It appears that TESOL graduates need to develop these skills and thus increase their capital along with their TESOL studies in order to be ready for TESOL employment as well as the chaotic nature of the TESOL profession.

## **Recommendations**

TESOL education is more than delivering the courses of a TESOL program; it also includes preparing graduates for future careers in TESOL and supporting them in their career development. For TESOL Program Students, A proactive attitude in the TESOL profession will benefit both the individuals and the profession. Graduates should have the perseverance and courage to increase their human capital through every opportunity they encounter. Graduates need not only TESOL skills but also job searching and general employment skills to obtain TESOL employment. Additionally, each active involvement in professional development can add a stepping stone for career development and increase the capital that facilitates career success.

From the administrative perspective, in order to support the diverse learning needs in TESOL programs effectively, having small class sizes is a way to ensure the quality of learning and teaching (Glass & Smith, 1979). Furthermore, TESOL programs need to be reviewed and updated constantly in response to changes in the TESOL profession and labour market, and ensure that graduates have enough exposure to different teaching settings and experience before graduation. TESOL programs should also consider the possibility of post-graduation support for graduates who experience career challenges and a regular process for students and graduates to provide meaningful feedback.

Instructors have a significant impact on the career development of graduates. During the teaching of TESOL courses, instructors should consider the diversity of learning needs of their

students and try to accommodate differences in learning needs through curriculum design and lesson planning and delivery. It is also possible to incorporate and model the accommodation of student needs as part of the content of the TESOL program, such as introducing more diverse teaching methods, as graduates may encounter similar levels of diversity in their future TESOL careers. Lastly, maintaining connections with students after graduation was identified in the current study as an effective way for TESOL instructors to offer career advice and support graduates to continuously improve their TESOL skills.

With a high level of diversity in TESOL employment, TESOL employers should review hiring protocols. While it is still a common practice to have “native English speaker” as a job requirement, despite the local TESOL professional organization’s opposition to discrimination on the basis of linguistic background (BC TEAL, 2014), this does not reflect the diversity in TESOL graduates. In addition, employers should take on the responsibility of supporting TESOL professionals to adapt into different work settings by providing a budget for additional training, professional development, and benefits in addition to an adequate salary. This is applicable regarding not only novice professionals but also mature professionals because a new workplace may include some aspects that one has never experienced before.

TESOL professional organizations, such as BC TEAL and TESOL International, have been key providers of professional development opportunities, with organizations such as these building TESOL communities to promote stronger professionalism. These types of organizations are raising awareness for the public about TESOL issues by establishing professional standards and generating and facilitating conversations. Professional organizations should work to address the challenges of TESOL employment and expand the professional community, such as by providing membership discounts for new professionals, mentorship opportunities in career development and research, and more opportunities of involvement for in-training professionals.

### **Limitations & Research Recommendations**

This study has a number of limitations. First, the impacts of various changes might not be reflected in the research. Specifically, the information collected may not include changes in the labour market or changes in the societal environment of the TESOL profession, such as the increasing popularity of global study and work abroad opportunities, the more open discussion of diversity and inclusion, and an improved awareness of TESOL qualifications. The environment and demands in work TESOL graduates face may have changed as the world is increasingly globalized. Changes in the TESOL program, which may influence what the graduates have gained from the program, are also not considered in the current research.

The number of the sample is smaller than expected as a result of the length of the survey and limited access to the survey. The data were collected in a four-week period before the survey was closed. Due to the small sample size, most of the correlative analyses were not applicable.

The research design might have been limited by my previous mindset of looking for what graduates should specifically do to improve their careers. However, each participant in this study narrated a unique career story. For research on the career paths of TESOL graduates, qualitative methods, such as narrative inquiry or case studies, seem to be a more comprehensive method for

capturing details that can support the analysis of career development, and using narrative inquiry or case study methods is a possible road for future studies.

For further research, the complexity and dynamics of changes should be taken into consideration from the beginning and integrated into the research design. An example would be to use case study or narrative inquiry methodology to explore the career paths of graduates through the lenses of chaos theory and capital with an understanding of the new meaning of readiness. Further quantitative research with larger sample sizes and a balance among genders, nationalities, native languages, and specific demographic groups would also make it possible for more correlative analysis to be conducted. It may also be interesting to delve into whether the motivation for taking a TESOL program is an impactful factor of an enduring TESOL career, and how the transferable skills acquired in a TESOL program impact graduates' careers and employment.

### Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the support of Dr. Karen Densky, Dr. Patrick Walton, Dr. Kyra Garson, Dr. Sandra Kouritzin, Alexandra Church, Susan Forseille, and Kathy Gaynor.

### References

- BC TEAL. (2014). BC TEAL position statement against discrimination on the grounds of nationality, ethnicity, or linguistic heritage. Retrieved from <https://www.bcteal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/AGM-TEAL-StatementAgainstDiscrimination-passed.pdf>
- BC TEAL. (2018). BC TEAL facts and benefits [Webpage]. Retrieved from [https://www.bcteal.org/membership/#bc\\_teal\\_facts\\_and\\_benefits](https://www.bcteal.org/membership/#bc_teal_facts_and_benefits)
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of Capital. In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. In J. Richardson (Ed.). New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Breshears, S. (2017, Winter). Understanding the employment conditions of EAL instructors of adults in British Columbia. *TEAL News*, 19–21. Retrieved from <https://www.bcteal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/TEAL-News-Winter-2017.pdf>
- Bright, J.E., & Pryor, R.G. (2005). The chaos theory of careers: A user's guide. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 53(4), 291–305. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2005.tb00660.x>
- Creswell, J.W. (2013). *Research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J.W., & Clark, V.L.P. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Faez, F., & Valeo, A. (2012). TESOL teacher education: Novice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness and efficacy in the classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 46(3), 450–471. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.37>
- Farrell, T.S. (2012). Novice-service language teacher development: Bridging the gap between preservice and in-Service Education and Development. *Tesol Quarterly*, 46(3), 435–449. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.36>

- Glass, G.V., & Smith, M.L. (1979). Meta-analysis of research on class size and achievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 1(1), 2–16.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737001001002>
- Kiely, R., & Askham, J. (2012). Furnished imagination: The impact of preservice teacher training on early career work in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 46(3), 496–518.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.39>
- Moussu, L., & Llorca, E. (2008). Non-native English-speaking English language teachers: History and research. *Language Teaching*, 41(03), 315–348.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0261444808005028>
- Priddis, E., Tanner, M.E., Henrichsen, L.E., Warner, B. Anderson, N.J. & Dewey, D.P. (2013). Career path trends of alumni from a U.S. TESOL graduate program. *The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language*, 17(3). Retrieved from:  
<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1017859.pdf>
- Sandoval-Lucero, E., Shanklin, N.L., Sobel, D.M., Townsend, S.S., Davis, A., & Kalisher, S. (2011). Voices of beginning teachers: Do paths to preparation make a difference? *Education*, 132(2), 336–351.
- Valeo, A., & Faez, F. (2013). Career development and professional attrition of novice ESL teachers of adults. *TESL Canada Journal*, 31(1), 1–19.  
<https://doi.org/10.18806/tesl.v31i1.1164>
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.



The *BC TEAL Journal* is licensed under a  
[Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).  
Copyright rests with the authors.