

THE TEFL JOB ADVANTAGE

Gain professional skills and cross-cultural experience. By Samantha Leal

Teaching English abroad, a popular post-grad option, is often seen as a way for recent graduates to put off entering the “real world” for just a little while longer. But according to career services experts, going abroad for a year or more to teach English can actually help young professionals gain important skills and find a job when they return home.

“I think that it’s extremely beneficial to have some sort of international experience in today’s global economy,” says Leslie Bell, associate director of the Maurice Horowitch Career Center at Hamilton College. According to Bell and advisors at several career centers, the experience of teaching abroad opens up career paths not only in education but in all fields. Teaching abroad can help recent graduates increase their cultural consciousness and become more sensitive to others, which can aid them in almost any professional environment. It also teaches a student flexibility, communication skills, and self-confidence—all important qualities for any successful job candidate.

“In the global economy that we live in, it is imperative for individuals to be cross-culturally competent and to have teaching and leadership skills at the same time,” says Greg Laccarino, senior career adviser of the Letters and Science Career Services at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Employers are looking for individuals who are well-rounded, able to adapt, and display leadership skills. All of this can be acquired and demonstrated from leading and teaching a class abroad. According to Laccarino, the ability to work and live in another culture is highly regarded. He says that if one is engaged in the customs, etiquette, traditions, and rituals of the culture in which her or she taught, it shows respect and cultural sensitivity. Oftentimes, it may also involve mastery of a foreign language, which is a true asset in the global market.

Laccarino notes that many of the individuals he works with often see teaching English abroad as the first step toward working abroad in their careers. It immerses them in a culture and can serve as a transition into the careers they want to pursue internationally. And, according to Laccarino, working abroad can cut down the time employees generally must work at a domestic branch of a company before being assigned to work abroad.

Working for a year after graduation makes sense for those who want to build their resumes, but it is also one of the most feasible and practical times to teach abroad. Recent graduates are most able to afford a bit of risk and have few of the attachments or commitments that tend to come later in life.

“It’s a life experience, and if it fits in with what students are thinking about for themselves than I think they should go for it. [These individuals] are kind of unattached; they’re more free to jump on a plane and go somewhere in the world they’ve never been and stretch themselves and grow as a result,” says Bell.

From a career services perspective, the benefits of teaching English abroad are enriched through students’ own efforts at each step of the process. The first step is finding the best teaching program for the individual’s needs. “I would say most importantly to research credible teaching programs. Students should see if their college or university has working partnerships with established programs that teach English abroad. Talk with other students who have taught abroad to get their insights on their experiences, both pro and con,” advises Laccarino.

Before leaving home, students should research and understand the culture and country that they will be living and working in. Laccarino advises students to become involved with their college’s international student organization, going to cultural events, becoming a conversation partner, or studying abroad. If studying

abroad is part of one’s plan, Laccarino says that it’s important to maximize the opportunity by talking to local people and learning the host country’s language as much as possible.

For those looking to teach beyond their year abroad, a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) certificate program is another helpful preparatory step. Bell encourages individuals (teaching majors or minors, especially) to research programs that offer TEFL training or look into getting a certificate beforehand. “I think that you’re much more likely after that to be confident and successful than if you jump into it blind,” says Bell.

ESL teachers who want to impress prospective employers with their ability to thrive in a foreign country should avoid becoming overly dependent on the program and should show initiative in their travels and individual pursuits. “To make the most of it, reach out to the local community. If you’re seeking true cultural exchange than get out in the community and get involved to the extent that you can beyond your job,” says Bell.

According to most career service personnel, the positives of teaching English abroad greatly outweigh any negative misperceptions. Participants come back more in tune with the outside world and better equipped to handle any situation, job-related or not, because of the skills they developed to manage a classroom and navigate a new culture.

“I think [individuals] come back more self-confident as a result of the work environment. They learn how to deal with people who have different perspectives and are able to look at situations from different cultural perspectives,” says Bell. “They see different ways to do things and different ways to think about things.”

For more information about teaching English abroad, go to: www.tesol.org//www.eslcafe.com // www.transitionsabroad.com/listings/work/esl/index.shtml.