

AccessTEFL

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“No.”

It was what I originally said when offered to do a TEFL course.

“No, see, I’m not really a teacher.”

I did say the ‘no’ in a more strategic manner. First I said ‘ah’ for a while, then I made some other contemplative noises pretending I had more to contemplate.

Then I said it wasn’t what I really wanted to do with my life, or how teaching wasn’t part of my character and it would be against such character to do a teaching course, or something along these lines.

I didn’t say any of this convincingly. I knew what I was waffling on about was partly true, but I also knew something else to be true. Being offered to do a TEFL course was a fairly golden opportunity.

I was then actually told, rightly so, “This is a really great opportunity.”

Now, I have come to learn that in life everyone tells everyone everything is a great opportunity, and there isn’t a more common phrase, or more accurately, more common persuasive pale of words.

I imagine many things in human history have been ushered on, good and bad, through the use of such a phrase.

However, I trusted the person who said it was a great opportunity, and now, I am telling everyone else, after taking the TEFL course, it was a great opportunity.

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SKOLA is a summer school in London running for 2 and a half months. It provides the opportunity, if you have the aptitude, to teach everyday and thus complete your TEFL training in one go.

The course consists of four parts requiring a combination of observations of other teachers, observations of your teaching, your own research style questions, and your personal reflections. There is also a requirement of at least 80 hours of teaching which needs to be signed off on.

Normally it takes applicants several months of back and forth. But SKOLA encouraged the intensive approach of its trainees because they believe the only way to learn to teach is to just start teaching.

So I started teaching and learnt quickly, mostly things I didn't realise I was learning because I was so engaged with what I was doing. Only after I took a second to think back did I realise what I picked up along the way.

But you would not get much from hearing what I learnt through my course. You can get sounder and more qualified advice from anyone who has taught for longer, which is most every other teacher in the world.

What I will give you is something I learnt in a conversation with one of my mentors during the first two weeks of teaching.

It was a very simple statement but it shaped the coming weeks of teaching and made things both easier and far more conducive to learning and completing the course.

"It's the super passionate teachers who often struggle."

When I heard this, I thought it was pure depression, a classic nihilistic defeatist perspective from the bitter and down trodden, a degradation of *Dead Poet's Society* values, a transgression of life's fundamental zest and meaning and doing what you love and all that good motivational stuff we watch on YouTube.

After talking further however, I realised I was naive, and my instinctual responses and reactions were not only ill-informed, but could really stunt my learning.

The truth is teaching, like any job, requires professionalism. And what is professionalism in this context? It is the ability to disconnect emotions, feelings, prejudices, your own biases, ego and blind spots, all in the service of the job you are being paid to do.

As we get older and more experienced with life, the more chips on ourselves we gather. We build ourselves up and become who we are, who we want to be, who we can confidently say, "I'm Jay, this is me, this is what I am about."

It's a great thing, but it also means the idea of starting something new and being a complete fool gets harder. We become set because we know ourselves more, old dogs we are, and learning new tricks seems like a regression of everything we have done in the past, like we are going backwards somehow.

This is especially put to task in teaching because it is a very revealing profession. When you teach, you are constantly portraying yourself to young impressionable learners.

Your teaching persona can sometimes conflate with who you are because it's how you act for most of the day, for most of your life if you're full time.

But it doesn't have to be like this. And this is what my mentor meant when they said the passionate can struggle. It was not a comment on loving what you do or caring about your job. It was the opposite. It was about respecting what you do.

As I learnt from other experienced teachers, teaching is a skill, a trade you can apply like a plumber or electrician. Syllabuses, curriculums, and teaching techniques put into place have all been developed by teachers who have been working for 40 years.

They have seen most of what is to be seen. They have been hurt, taken things to heart, been burnt out, low energy, low zest, given up, felt the futility and also, felt the elation, the joy, the deep connection with students - they have felt all of it. Every situation you could encounter doing your TEFL course, your elders have undoubtedly experienced.

It's a good idea to listen to them and be a sponge and take yourself out of it if you can help it. Bring your personality and new ideas, but don't use them to trump everything already established because you feel you're completely special and don't need no beaten path to walk down.

So no, you don't have to be a teacher to teach. You don't have to be a teacher to do a TEFL course. Don't put pressure on yourself to be good. It's not all on you. There are good days and bad days of work for everyone.

The question of a TEFL course isn't about becoming a teacher then being sentenced to the 'teacher' description the rest of your life. It's about learning the skills of being a teacher, learning a trade, then applying it to help whoever you encounter.

Even though the thought of teaching does not excite me, I am excited to apply my trade of teaching around the world. I am not a teacher, but I think I might be able to teach.