



*The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language*

## **Career Path Trends of Alumni from a U.S. TESOL Graduate Program**

**November 2013 - Volume 17, Number 3**

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## **Abstract**

As English expands across the world, quality English teachers are increasingly needed. However, reports that even degree-holding TESOL professionals have a hard time obtaining stable employment are prevalent. This study sought to provide empirical evidence about career paths in TESOL based on survey responses from 250 alumni of a well-established U.S. university TESOL graduate program who had successfully completed their course of study and had worked during a 35-year period since the program's inception.

The results indicate that TESOL graduates spend about half of their career time in TESOL-related employment. Most are involved in teaching, but jobs in administration, materials development, or testing are more likely to be full-time and offer benefits. Graduates spend little time in EFL positions, but these jobs are the most likely to be full-time and offer benefits. The majority of graduates report salary satisfaction, indicating that perhaps the field attracts those who are not looking for stable, full-time employment. These findings can guide students planning their own careers in TESOL.

and assist faculty who advise TESOL students and design teacher-preparation programs. In addition, the results contribute significantly to the small body of literature focused on TESOL employment.

**Keywords:** TESOL, employment, graduates, survey, career path, alumni, career

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### ***Introduction***

English is the world's lingua franca, and because millions of non-native speakers study it (Crystal, 1995, p. 109), the demand for English teachers worldwide is great. Finding stable employment teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) [1], however, is often a struggle. Studies conducted in the United States indicate that many English language teachers work in several part-time jobs without benefits (Pennington, 1995), or that they experience difficulty finding stable employment unless they have advanced degrees or find employment outside the United States (Tanner, 2003).

In spite of these difficulties, the number of TESOL teacher-preparation programs is robust. In the United States and Canada alone, over 450 university programs offer bachelor's and master's degrees, and certificates in TESOL (TESOL, 2010). This situation raises the following kinds of questions: Where do graduates of these programs work? What kinds of jobs do they obtain? How long do they hold these jobs and stay in the field?

Up to this point, relatively little empirical research has been conducted investigating employment-related issues in the TESOL field and much of it (Day, 1984; Johnston, 1997; Pennington, 1995) is more than a decade old. In particular, little research has been done to help teacher educators and individuals enrolled in TESOL teacher-preparation courses become aware of graduates' career paths after graduation. "Career path" in the present study refers to "the sequence of occupations, jobs, and positions in the life of an individual," as opposed to a job or occupation, which has been defined as "the specific activity with a market value that an individual continually pursues for the purpose of obtaining a steady flow of income" (Jepsen & Choudhuri, 2001, p. 3). Though recent research about professional career paths has been done in other fields such as business (Reitman & Schneer, 2003) and medicine (Nooney, Unruh, & Yore, 2010), only three studies have been carried out to date that attempt to review different job positions held by TESOL graduates in the U.S. over some defined time period. In all but one case that time period has been relatively short. While these studies provide helpful insights to individuals pursuing careers in TESOL, what they do not provide is a long-term analysis of TESOL graduates' career paths. For that reason, the research reported here surveyed graduates of a well-established TESOL program to explore patterns in TESOL graduates' long-term career paths.

## ***Literature Review***

The few published studies that have focused on TESOL employment issues have concentrated on three areas: 1) working conditions (Florez, 1997; Johnston, 1997; McKnight, 1992), 2) the types of skills and qualities sought by employers in the field (Bailey, Tanner, Henrichsen, & Dewey (in press); Henrichsen, 1983; Tanner, 2003), and 3) the types of jobs that graduates obtain shortly after graduation (Day, 1984; Ochsner, 1980).

### **Working Conditions in TESOL**

In 1992, McKnight reported on a survey conducted to investigate the career paths of TESOL diploma graduates from Victoria College in Melbourne, Australia during the years 1978 to 1989. A total of 116 (53%) graduates responded to his survey. When these graduates were asked what their next career step would be, three percent talked about promotion, but 44% spoke of making “some form of change in their professional lives” (p. 26), like changing jobs or going back to school. McKnight concluded from his data that ESL teachers suffer from low status and thus there are high rates of attrition from the field (p. 30).

In 1994, Johnston (1997) interviewed 17 EFL teachers in Poland, 5 native and 12 non-native speakers of English, in an effort to gather empirical data about EFL teachers’ life stories. His goal was to see if teachers spoke about their English teaching lives in terms of careers. Johnston reported that the teachers did not talk about their involvement with teaching English in the discourse of a career, and that “socioeconomic conditions make it impossible for them to make a long-term commitment to EFL teaching” (p. 706).

### **Skills and Qualities Sought By TESOL Employers**

A second group of employment-related studies has focused on the skills and preparation needed by TESOL professionals in the marketplace. Henrichson (1983) conducted an international survey to help determine which of the various topics covered in common TESOL teacher-preparation programs were perceived to be most important by teachers and employers in the field. The survey was sent to teachers and employers in the United States and about thirty other countries. The majority of the 153 respondents indicated that of four major areas (education, literature, linguistics, and TESOL methods and materials), TESL methods and materials, especially training in specific skill areas like speaking or reading, was the most important, and literature was the least important.

In 2003, Tanner conducted a review of 250 full-time TESOL job advertisements gathered from four prominent websites to determine the qualifications that TESOL employers were seeking. His findings indicated that the amount of education required for full-time ESL and EFL jobs is dramatically different. Nearly 85% of the full-time positions advertised in the U.S. and Canada required a master’s degree or doctorate. For EFL positions, the “minimum level of advanced educational preparation [appeared] to be a certificate” (Tanner, 2003, p. 42).

More recently, Bailey (2011) conducted a study reviewing 169 full-time job advertisements from three prominent online TESOL employment websites to see what

qualifications employers were seeking in applicants for TESOL positions in the United States. She analyzed the ads according to the experience, skills, personal characteristics, and demographic information that employers identified. Sixty-five percent of the positions in Bailey's data required a master's degree, and 22% required a doctorate. Almost all of the employers requested some teaching experience. They also wanted new hires with computer, communication, and interpersonal skills, who could work well with others (pp. 25-36).

### **Jobs Obtained After Graduation and TESOL Career Paths**

A third area of TESOL employment research has investigated the types of jobs that TESOL program graduates obtained shortly after graduation, as well as their longer career paths. As noted above, most studies of TESOL graduates' employment have looked only at a relatively short period of time. Nevertheless, to be most informative, career paths research should cover a span of many years and investigate the various jobs that graduates have held during that time period.

McKnight's study (1992), mentioned above, focused on secondary and primary school teachers who took courses to receive credentials to teach ESL. McKnight found that, following graduation, those who were previously primary school teachers spent 58% of their time teaching ESL, and previous secondary school teachers spent about 90% of their time in ESL.

Ochsner (1980) initiated a study of the career paths of TESOL MA graduates from 14 institutions around the U.S.A. who completed their degrees between 1976 and 1978. A total of 150 (43%) graduates returned the questionnaire. He found that, following graduation, approximately 75% of the graduates had obtained a job directly related to their MA TESOL degree. The majority of the positions included teaching responsibilities. Only about half of the respondents had full-time, permanent positions, and about 20% had two or more jobs. The salaries of almost all of the graduates were less than \$15,000 annually. Surprisingly, in spite of these low salaries (which may have been low not only because they reflect the lower cost of living 30 years ago but also because survey respondents were relatively recent graduates), most of the graduates indicated that they were satisfied with their jobs. Given that the study investigated only a three-year career path of very recent graduates, little is known about whether the graduates continued to work in TESOL and find fulfillment in the profession over an extended period of time.

Although it is now dated, the best previous study of graduate career paths was performed in 1984 by Day. In this study, questionnaires were mailed to the graduates of the University of Hawaii's TESOL MA program who received their degrees between 1967 and 1979. The survey asked about the respondents' first jobs after graduation as well as their current positions, inquiring about salary, job responsibilities, full- or part-time status, etc. Day found that 81% of respondents were employed in the TESOL field during their initial job positions after graduation, and about 67% of those were employed full-time. Most respondents included teaching as part of their job descriptions, and about 90% of the respondents were earning \$15,000 or less each year. About 50% of the respondents were working in the United States, and the other half

were overseas, with a majority of those individuals working in Asia, which seems natural given that they attended the University of Hawaii. At the time of the survey, 5-17 years after graduation, 79% of Day's respondents were still involved in the TESOL field, with 72% employed full-time. The earlier graduates reported job duties other than teaching more often, and their salaries were substantially higher than those earned right after graduation. About 58% of graduates were living in the United States. Day also found that there was a positive correlation ( $r = 0.32565$ ;  $p = 0.0006$ ) between current employment status and gender, with men being employed full-time much more often than women. There was no provision in the study to determine if women were working part-time by choice or obligation.

While these studies are informative, they are also over twenty years old. Also, most of them looked only at graduates' first or current positions. Even Day (1984), whose study was the longest, recommended that future research investigate longer career paths.

### **Research Questions**

The current study was designed to follow up on these previous studies and explore longer career paths and related employment issues through a survey administered to alumni of a TESOL graduate program that had been in operation for more than 35 years and had hundreds of graduates. The research questions covered three general topics:

1. Career Time: What percent of overall career time did graduates spend in TESOL? Did this time vary according to the variables of gender or native speaker [2] status?
2. Remuneration: What percentage of TESOL or other jobs acquired by graduates were full-time, what percentage had benefits, and did graduates report that their salaries were adequate? [3]
3. Variation in Remuneration by TESOL Job Type: What types of TESOL jobs did graduates obtain? How were the variables of full-time status, benefits, and salary distributed across different types of TESOL jobs?

### **Delimitations**

Although hundreds of universities in the United States and other English-speaking countries offer TESOL degrees, the results shared in this study, though longitudinal (covering over 35 years of graduates), come from only one university. The advantages of focusing on one institution are 1) a pool of respondents with comparable TESOL preparation and 2) the possibility of locating a large number of respondents with longer career paths. One drawback to focusing on graduates of only one institution, such as in Day's (1984) study and this study, is the more limited generalizability of the results. What is true for graduates of this TESOL program may not necessarily apply to those of other universities, particularly outside of the U.S.A.

## ***Research Design***

### **Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of those who graduated from the TESOL program between 1973 and 2008, minus the graduates who could not be located. The potential respondent pool consisted of 555 individuals. Of those 555, 275 eventually completed some portion of the survey, for a response rate of 49.5%. This response rate was comparable to the response rates obtained in the employment studies by Ochsner (1980) and Day (1984).

Although a total of 275 graduates responded to some part of the survey, only 250 of them included employment information that could be used in this analysis. Some respondents skipped the employment section or provided incomplete data, and though attempts were made to contact them by telephone and email, the final count of respondents with completed employment information was 250. Of those 250 respondents, 155 (62%) had received a master's degree, whereas 95 (38%) had completed only the one-year graduate certificate program. Incidentally, 11 (4%) also reported going on to complete a doctorate degree, and 33 (13%) completed a second master's. Seventy-two (29%) participants were male, and 178 (71%) were female, which reflected the traditional gender imbalance in the program. Finally, 196 (78%) were native English speakers, 50 (20%) were non-native English speakers, and four (2%) provided no information about their native language background. This linguistic imbalance also reflected the traditional demographics of the program.

### **Survey Instrument**

The alumni survey was created by the TESOL faculty in the Linguistics and English Language Department for two purposes. First, the faculty wanted to gather data to assist in the redesign of the MA TESOL program's curriculum. Second, the faculty wanted to capture data regarding graduates' employment history. The actual survey was electronic in order to easily capture data from participants living all over the world and to allow the data to be compiled in an electronic database.

The survey design was somewhat similar to the surveys conducted by Ochsner (1980) and Day (1984). However, besides being electronic, the biggest difference was that, as recommended by Day (1984), respondents were asked to submit information about their entire career paths.

### **Analysis**

The collected data were compiled in a Structured Query Language (SQL) database, then downloaded to a Microsoft Excel® file so they could be adjusted and prepared for uploading to a statistical program, Stata®. Preparation included making sure that all of the data were complete and that they were coded into systems that could be read by Stata®.

***Coding the data.*** The main coding task was to assign each of the reported jobs a career code. Potential career code categories were determined using Grounded Theory (Titscher, Meyer, Wodack, and Vetter, 2000). Specifically, to determine the types of

career codes that were possible, 25% of the data were analyzed by looking for patterns, and creating categories on the basis of patterns that emerged. For units of analysis that did not fit into these categories, new categories were created. This process continued until all of the data were sorted into appropriate categories. In this way, the following career code categories were identified: *ESL-related*, *EFL-related*, *Language-related*, *Education-related*, *Non-TESOL-related*, and *Unemployed by Choice*.

In the survey, when providing job information, respondents provided the names of their positions, their employers, and the locations of their employment. They also were able to indicate if their jobs were related to ESL, EFL, or neither, sometimes providing written details about what each job entailed. Using this information, and, when needed, other details that might have been provided in other parts of the survey, each job was coded into one of the aforementioned categories. The category of *Unemployed by Choice* was inferred from time periods where there was a gap in the job information and the qualitative comments in the survey indicated that the person was not working because of family commitments, schooling, or retirement.

After each job was assigned a career code, the accuracy of the categorization was verified through inter-rater reliability tests on a sample of every tenth job. There was a high percentage of agreement among three raters. Out of 78 samples, the overall agreement was 89.7%. Research experts usually recommend at least 75% agreement (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 244). Most of the disagreement that did exist involved the *Language-related* and *Education-related* codes. According to the coding system that was developed, when a job involved language and education (i.e., a French teacher) the job was coded Language-related.

After the coding was complete, some preliminary calculations had to be performed before transferring the data to the statistical program. In order to do the calculations, a few additional issues had to be resolved. One issue was that in some cases, respondents reported gaps of time in their employment dates. Because the total number of days in each career code was being calculated, any time a gap existed, the gap time was counted as well as the career time. Gaps were divided into three categories: *pre-job gap*, *in-between-job gap*, and *post-job gap*. Each gap was investigated to see if it was intentional, constituting time in the category Unemployed by Choice, by reviewing respondents' comments about reasons for leaving jobs and other survey notes.

A second issue involved 32 cases where individuals reported simultaneously working at more than one job. This situation was handled in one of two ways. In the case where the two concurrent jobs belonged to different job codes, the time spent in each job was counted separately. If the two concurrent jobs belonged to the same career code, the timing for only one of the jobs was counted. It is noted that while the total percent of time spent in each career code for the former case added up to more than 100%, the ratio of time the people spent working in each job is accurately represented.

Once these coding issues were resolved, the total percentage of time each person spent in each career code was calculated. This was done by using the graduation dates for each person and a uniform survey date to determine the respondent's number of potential

workdays since graduation. Then the total amount of time each person spent in each job and then in each career category was calculated. The total number of days each person spent in each gap code was also calculated, just as for each of the career code categories. Finally, the amount of time spent in each career code was divided into the total number of days since graduation to determine the percent of overall career time that each person spent in each career code. On obtaining these numbers, the data were finally prepared to be transferred to Stata® to find an average percent across all of the respondents and to run other statistics.

**Data analysis.** The data set was uploaded to Stata®, which allows users to write statistical commands to execute on the data. Statistical commands for the first research question, including table functions and linear regressions, were created and executed. The analysis for the second research question was executed in a similar manner. However, rather than comparing the career paths of each person, the analysis investigated all recorded jobs grouped according to career categories only. Who held each job, when, or in what order was not considered. The analysis for the third research question was like that for the second, except that this question focused only on jobs that were coded as TESOL jobs.

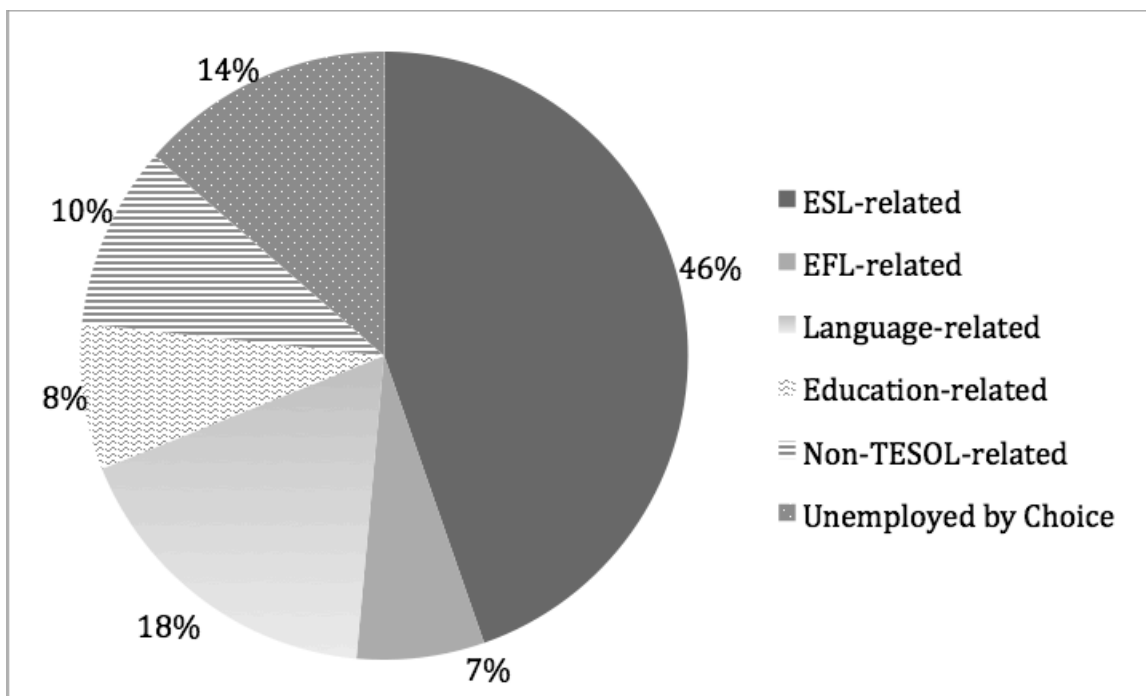
## **Results**

The results of the data analysis are reported in connection with the three research questions: 1) what percent of overall career time did graduates spend in TESOL? Did this time vary according to the variables of gender or native speaker status? 2) What percentage of TESOL or other jobs acquired by graduates were full-time, what percentage had benefits, and did graduates report that their salaries were adequate? 3) What types of TESOL jobs did graduates obtain? How were the variables of full-time status, benefits, and salary satisfaction distributed across the types of TESOL jobs?

### **Question 1—Time Spent in Each Job Classification**

The first research question investigated the average percent of overall career time each graduate spent in each of the following career categories: *ESL-related*, *EFL-related*, *Language-related*, *Education-related*, *Non-TESOL-related*, *Unemployed by Choice*, or *Gap*. Gap time accounted for nearly 20% of overall career time, but drawing conclusions about gap time had to be done with caution. The time reported as gap time may have been true gap time, when a respondent was unemployed before, after, or between jobs, or it might have been that the respondent could not remember the exact dates of employment well, did not completely fill out the survey, or was unemployed by choice but did not indicate this in the survey. Thus, although gap-time results may have been of some interest and perhaps some concern, these gaps were taken out of the equation, and the other percentages were recalculated using only the time when the respondents reported being actually involved in gainful employment or being unemployed by choice. According to that analysis, graduates spent about 53%, slightly more than half, of their actual employment time, in the TESOL field, including both ESL and EFL. The results are displayed in Figure 1.





**Figure 1. Average Percent of Career Time Minus Gap (250 people)**

The results for average percentage of overall career time in each job category were further divided according to the variables of gender and native speaker status to see if any of these variables influenced the amount of time spent in TESOL or the other fields. Gap time was again intentionally omitted.

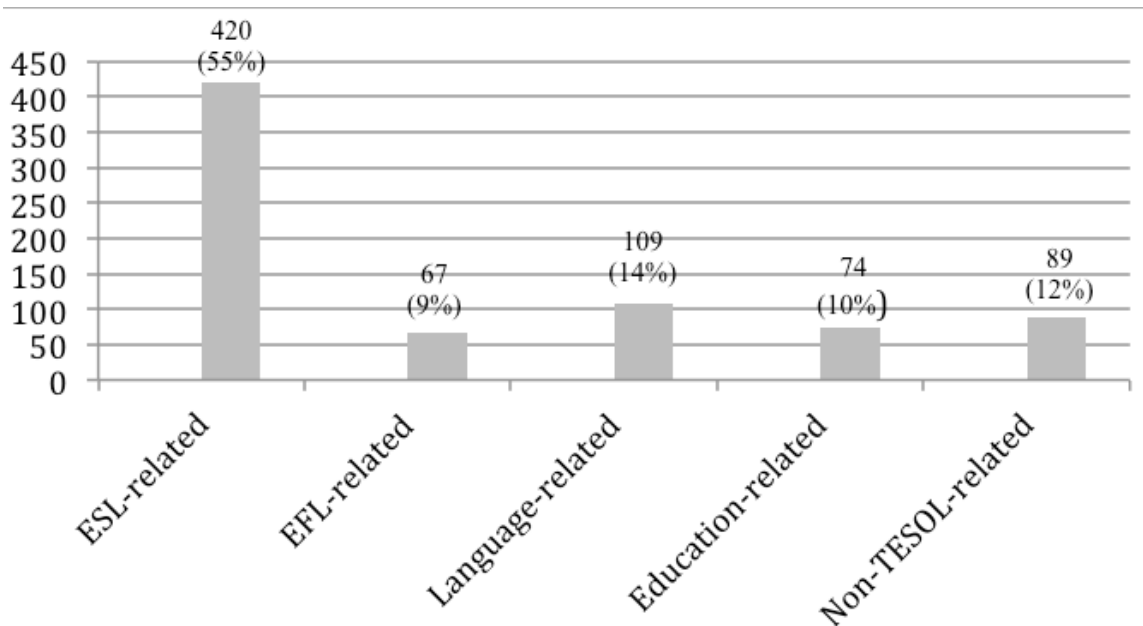
The results of statistical linear regression analyses showed statistically significant differences based on gender. The results indicated that males spent a significantly higher average percent of time in EFL ( $p = 0.037$ ) and Non-TESOL-related ( $p = 0.006$ ) positions. Females spent a significantly higher average percent of time in ESL ( $p = 0.016$ ) positions and unemployed by choice ( $p = 0.003$ ). Particularly interesting was the difference in percentage of time that men and women spent unemployed by choice.

The variable of native English speaker versus non-native English speaker also proved to have a significant effect on the average percent of time graduates spent in different career types. Native English speakers spent a significantly higher average percent of career time in ESL ( $p = 0.013$ ) or unemployed by choice ( $p = 0.038$ ). Non-native English speakers spent a significantly higher percentage of time in EFL ( $p = 0.004$ ), other Language-related jobs ( $p = 0.012$ ), or other Education-related jobs ( $p = 0.009$ ).

### **Question 2—Job Status and Remuneration**

The second research question explored job status (full-time versus part-time), employee benefits (including things like retirement, health insurance, paid vacation, housing, travel, etc., but not including flexible hours), and the perceived adequacy of program graduates' salaries. To answer this question, all of the jobs were analyzed, irrespective

of who held them, for how long, or how they fit into each person’s overall career path. The total numbers of jobs coded according to each career category are displayed in Figure 2. More than half of all of the jobs were ESL-related, and there are nearly four times as many ESL-related jobs as there are jobs in any other one category.



**Figure 2. Number of Jobs Obtained in Each Career Code (Total Number of Jobs = 759)**

Table 1 indicates how many of the jobs in each career category were full-time. Less than half of the ESL-related jobs were full-time, comprising the lowest percentage for any career category. The second lowest category was Language-related jobs. As for EFL-related jobs, on the other hand, 79% of the jobs were identified as full-time. The Non-TESOL-related jobs had the second highest percentage. Nearly twice as many Non-TESOL-related or EFL-related jobs were full-time as compared to the totals for ESL-related jobs.

As for benefits, the results, also displayed in Table 1, are similar to the results for full-time positions. ESL-related jobs are the least likely job area to include benefits, and Language-related jobs are next to last in this category. The percent of ESL-related jobs with benefits is less than 50. Every other category maintains at least 50%. However, the highest percentage, Non-TESOL-related jobs, is only 67%, so no category is far higher than all the others. EFL-related, Education-related, and Non-TESOL-related jobs are all very close, with about 65% of jobs in each category providing benefits.

**Table 1. Number of Full-time Jobs and Jobs with Benefits in Each Career Code**

<b>Career Code</b>	<b>Total Number of Jobs</b>	<b>Number of Full-time Jobs</b>	<b>Percent of Full-time Jobs</b>	<b>Number of Jobs with Benefits</b>	<b>Percent of Jobs with Benefits</b>
<b>ESL-related</b>	420	180	43%	192	46%
<b>EFL-related</b>	67	53	79%	43	64%
<b>Language-related</b>	109	59	54%	55	50%
<b>Education-related</b>	74	47	64%	48	65%
<b>Non- TESOL-related</b>	89	68	76%	60	67%
<b>Total</b>	759	407	54%	398	52%

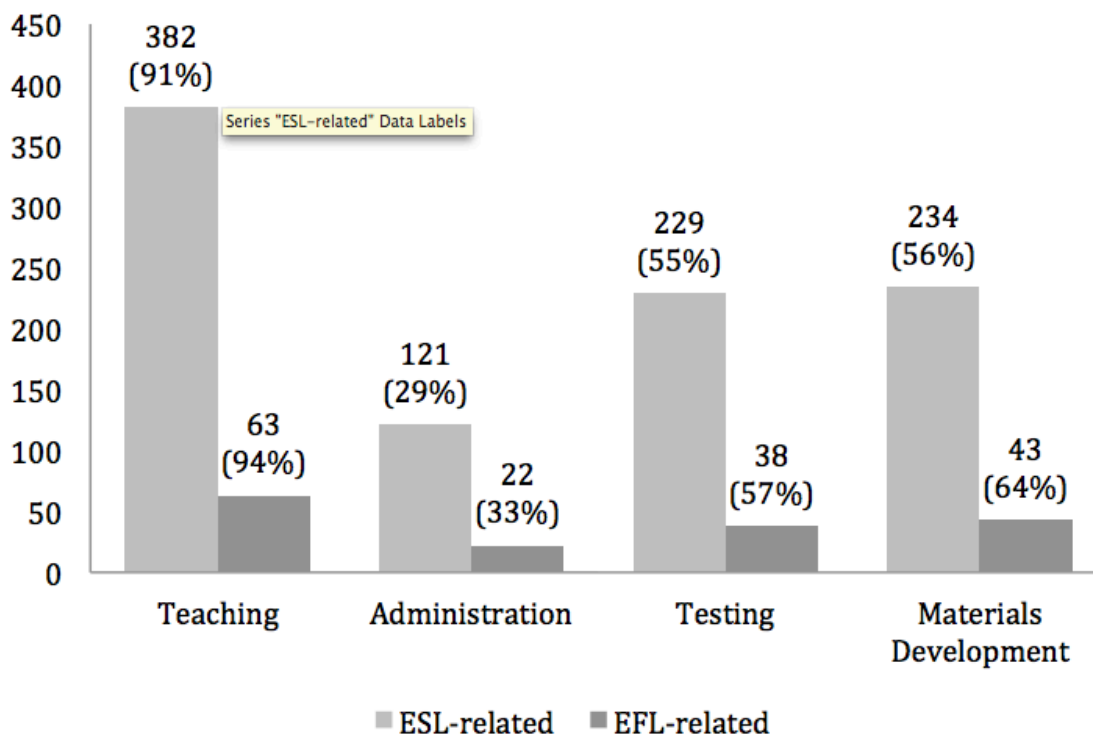
Graduates' perceptions of the adequacy of salaries for jobs of different career types are slightly different. For 64% of the ESL-related jobs, respondents identified these positions as having an adequate or more than adequate salary, in spite of the fact that the percentage of jobs that were full-time and the percentage that provided benefits were both substantially lower than that, and also lower than in any other career category. The percent of ESL-related jobs with perceived salary adequacy was only second lowest this time, and at 59%, Language-related jobs ranked last. Once again EFL-related jobs were rated highest, with 81% of the jobs identified as having adequate salaries. The percentage of Education-related jobs with adequate salaries was higher than the percentage of Non-TESOL-related jobs, at 72% and 66% respectively. Conversely, 36% of those respondents with Language-related jobs reported inadequate salaries, comprising the highest percentage. Some people chose not to respond to this section of the survey, though, and several jobs had no indication about the adequacy of the salary. The number of non-respondents also varied by career category. Overall, 66% of all jobs were reported to have adequate or more than adequate salaries.

An analysis of differences between genders in terms of salary satisfaction (i.e., adequacy) and benefits showed no statistically significant differences between males and females overall or in any specific career category. Similarly, differences between native and non-native speakers were also not significant overall or for any specific category.

### Question 3—ESL/EFL Employment by Duty Type

The third research question focused only on the TESOL (ESL-related and EFL-related) jobs that graduates obtained. We explored respondents' specific job responsibilities and how their different job responsibilities affected remuneration. Survey respondents were asked to indicate whether their TESOL-related jobs involved teaching, administration, testing, or materials development. The numbers of responses for each type of job are displayed in Figure 3. Nearly all of the ESL and EFL jobs involved teaching, at 91% and 94% respectively. More than half of the jobs involved testing or materials development. One in three jobs involved administrative duties. The respondents were able to choose as many categories as applied, so the totals add up to more than 100%.

The remuneration aspects of the different job responsibilities were also explored, using the same pattern employed for answering the second research question. The percentage of TESOL jobs of each type that were full-time, the percentage that had benefits, and the percentage with adequate salaries were all calculated.

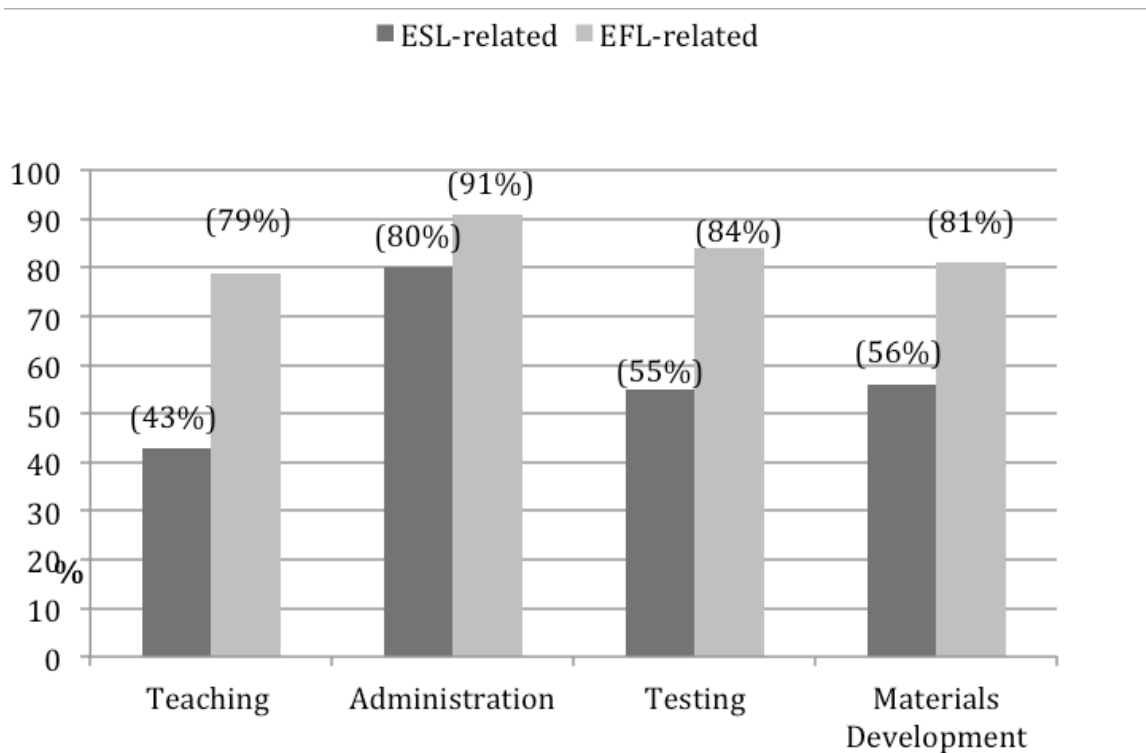


**Figure 3. Types of ESL-related and EFL-related Jobs (Total Number of ESL-related Jobs = 420; Total Number of EFL-related Jobs = 67).**

As seen in the prior research question, EFL-related jobs were more likely to be full-time than ESL-related jobs. Figure 4 shows that the highest percentage of full-time jobs among ESL-related job types (80%) is only one point higher than the lowest percentage

in EFL-related jobs (79%). When comparing types of jobs, it should be noted that in both ESL-related and EFL-related jobs, Administrative jobs are most likely to be full-time, and Teaching jobs are least likely to be full-time. Testing and Materials Development jobs fall somewhere in between, having very close percentages.

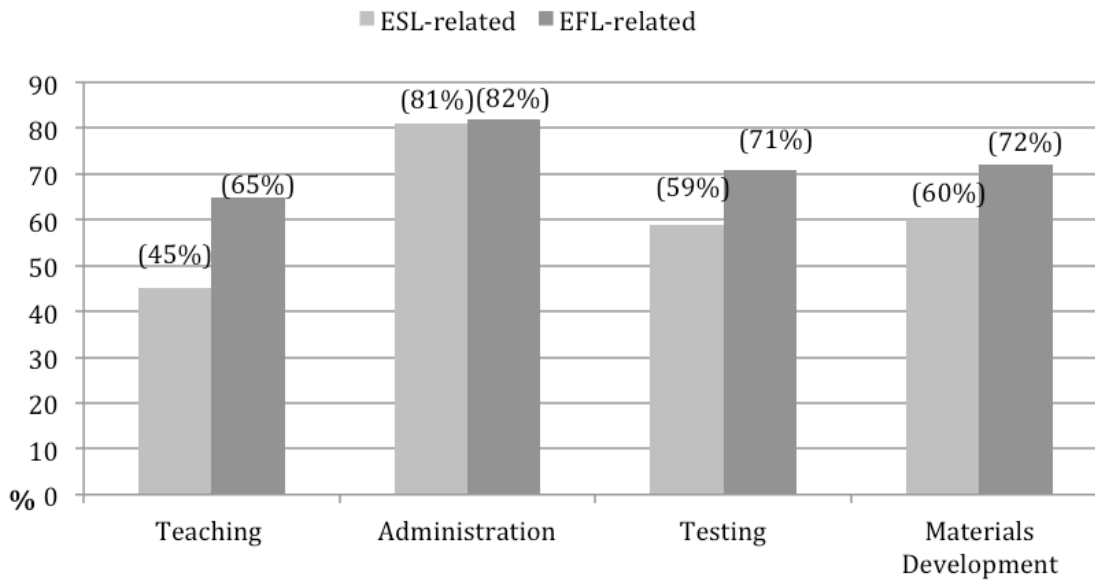
Regarding benefits (See Figure 5), the data revealed that Administrative jobs are most likely to offer them, and Teaching jobs are least likely to offer them—in both ESL and EFL-related jobs. Testing and Materials Development jobs once again fall in the middle, with very close percentages. All EFL-related jobs (in Teaching, Administration, Testing, or Materials Development) are more likely to have benefits than ESL-related jobs.



**Figure 4. Percent of Full-time ESL-related and EFL-related Jobs According to Job Type (Total Number of ESL-related jobs = 420; Total Number of EFL-related jobs = 67).**

Even though many of the teaching jobs were part-time and came without benefits, respondents reported that the salaries for 68% of ESL-related teaching jobs, and 79% of EFL-related teaching jobs were adequate or better than adequate. Salary satisfaction levels for ESL-related testing and materials development jobs were 66% and 67% respectively, nearly the same as for teaching jobs. For EFL-related testing and materials development jobs, satisfaction levels were 82% and 88% respectively, slightly higher than for teaching jobs. The percent of administrative jobs with adequate or better than adequate salaries was highest in the ESL-related category, at 80%. Interestingly,

administrative jobs had the lowest level of salary satisfaction in the EFL-related category, with only 73% of jobs reported to have adequate or more than adequate salaries. Overall, EFL-related jobs, especially in materials development or testing, had the highest level of salary satisfaction. Administrative ESL positions came next. However, the percent of more than adequate salaries was highest in administrative jobs in both ESL and EFL. Overall, the level of salary satisfaction was fairly high in all categories.



**Figure 5. Percent of ESL-related and EFL-related Jobs with Benefits According to Job Type (Total Number of ESL-related jobs = 420; Total Number of EFL-related jobs = 67).**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this research was to investigate the career paths of TESOL graduates. Interesting data emerged from this study, some of which appear to contrast with data found in Day (1984) and Ochsner (1980), both of whom reported a strong majority of graduates employed in TESOL after graduation. According to Ochsner, who looked only at employment within three years of graduation, 75% of graduates stayed in the field, and Day, who compared first and last jobs within a twelve-year period, reported about 80% retention. In our study, which looked at entire career paths up to 35 years long, graduates were found to have spent only 53% of their overall career time in TESOL-related employment. This finding suggests that, over longer periods of time, there may in fact be a lower retention rate of TESOL program graduates employed in TESOL-related work than previous research has indicated. This finding agrees with much of the relevant literature (Johnston, 1997; McKnight, 1992). This situation could be due to the difficult working conditions that have been reported for some TESOL jobs, or another

possibility is that many participants in TESOL teacher-preparation programs are not seeking stable, long-term careers, but rather flexible, short-term jobs. Further research would need to be done to clarify this finding. The data does appear to reinforce Johnston's (1997) assertion that TESOL is a flexible profession, and that people enter or leave it with relative ease.

The fact that graduates in this study reported spending a very small amount (7%) of their career time in EFL positions contrasts with Day's (1984) finding that 50% of the graduates of the University of Hawaii TESOL program were working overseas for their first position after graduation and 58% were overseas at the time of his survey. This discrepancy may be due to BYU's location on the U.S. mainland rather than in the middle of the Pacific. However, even the non-native speaker graduates of BYU's program spent an average of only 15% of their overall career time in EFL positions. Yet, it could be, as the numbers in this study seem to indicate, that most graduates spend a very small amount of time overseas, or it could also actually be that a small number of graduates, like some non-native speakers, spend a large majority of time overseas, while most others spend no time overseas. Further research with graduates of other university TESOL teacher preparation programs would help clarify this point. Nevertheless, the data did show that EFL-related jobs were most likely to be full-time and most likely to offer benefits [4], and that graduates reported higher salary satisfaction in this field than in any other career category.

These results lead us to question why graduates do not spend more time in EFL-related jobs, especially when data show that there are many more teaching positions available abroad with less stringent degree requirements (Tanner, 2003). One possibility could be the gender divide that appears to occur in our TESOL data. As evidenced in BYU's TESOL program and TESOL programs in general, the field does tend to attract a high percentage of women. Further research could probe why more women appear to pursue ESL rather than EFL positions and why more men are drawn to teach in EFL-related jobs. Could this difference be because ESL positions tend to be part-time and therefore provide more flexibility where a family is concerned? Are there issues or concerns for either group with working and living abroad? For men who may be put in the traditional societal role of provider, do they gravitate toward EFL positions because these positions have been shown to offer more full-time work, benefits, and higher salaries? Further research into gender preferences is needed to help clarify these and other questions. For TESOL graduates in general though, the results of this study suggest that EFL employment may be an untapped area for TESOL practitioners seeking stable, higher-paying employment.

Another puzzling finding in this data connected to gender was the amount of time graduates spent unemployed by choice. The analysis did show a positive correlation between being female and spending time unemployed by choice, and as mentioned, the great majority of program graduates were female. Therefore, the fact that many of BYU's TESOL graduates come from a religious culture that highly values child rearing may account for the high percentage of time graduates spent unemployed by choice. However, it would be interesting to know if the same unemployed-by-choice pattern found in these data occurs with graduates of other TESOL programs. It would also be

interesting to know if the pattern occurs in other fields as well, or if a higher percentage of TESOL practitioners spend time unemployed by choice, especially since TESOL programs in general tend to have a higher percentage of their students who are female.

The results of this study do support the findings of McKnight (1992), Johnston (1997), Ochsner (1980), and Day (1984) that TESOL jobs often lack stability according to normal indicators established by the United States Department of Labor (*Employee Benefits*, 2011; *Household Data*, 2011). Nearly half of the jobs graduates obtained were part-time. TESOL jobs were less likely than jobs in other career categories to offer benefits. Yet, in spite of the fact that half of the ESL-related jobs were part-time and only about half had benefits, the respondents reported that the salaries for the majority of the jobs obtained were adequate or more than adequate. Ochsner (1980) and Day (1984) found similar results. These results may indicate that many of those who enroll in TESOL programs are not seeking highly remunerated, full-time, stable positions. It may be that many graduates obtain only part-time employment because they only want part-time, flexible employment. Again, given that 79% of the respondents in this study were female, further research needs to be done to ascertain how gender impacts the issue of salary adequacy and nature of the job.

From the data, unfortunately, it is impossible to differentiate whether the salaries were reported as adequate because they are substantial or because the respondents have low demands. Though our survey asked graduates to report their actual salaries in addition to their perceived adequacy, in several cases (22%) respondents gave no salary figures, likely due to a desire to maintain a sense of personal privacy.

An important implication of this and other related studies is that TESOL faculty who have responsibility for teacher-preparation program design may want to inform their students about the types of employment and benefits offered in TESOL that go beyond classroom teaching. Our data indicate that administrative jobs are most likely to be full-time, most likely to have benefits, and in ESL, produce the highest reported degree of salary satisfaction. Unfortunately though, many graduates from TESOL programs report that they are inadequately prepared for administrative work (Ochsner, 1980). In addition, while this and other studies (Day, 1984; Ochsner, 1980) show that the majority of TESOL positions involve teaching, EFL positions in materials development and testing are also more likely to be full-time and pay higher salaries.

The findings from this study also have important implications for TESOL educators advising those commencing TESOL studies. TESOL educators can advise such students that if they are seeking ESL teaching positions, these jobs will largely be part-time, providing flexibility but no benefits. For those seeking full-time TESOL employment with better remuneration, a better career path would be to go overseas and teach EFL. Teacher educators can further advise their students seeking full-time jobs with benefits to diversify their skill set and include an emphasis in administration, materials/curriculum development, testing, or other specializations like research or technology. While these skills may be taught in some programs, they are often overlooked and/or not prioritized in others.



## ***Conclusion***

This study investigated the long-term career paths of graduates of a university-level TESOL program. The amount of time spent in the TESOL field, variation by job responsibility, and remuneration aspects of particular jobs were explored.

The results indicate that graduates spent slightly more than half of their time in TESOL-related employment, with the other time spent in a variety of other occupations. While TESOL jobs did tend to lack stability, those seeking full-time employment were most likely to find it in EFL positions or in non-teaching TESOL-related positions. This information should help future TESOL practitioners to know how best to prepare in order to succeed at finding stable jobs in TESOL.

## **Limitations**

Though the survey results proved interesting, there were some limitations. One negative effect of asking respondents to provide information about their entire career paths is the potential fatigue factor. While most respondents reported on each of their jobs, some did not want to take the time to complete the entire survey. Some had difficulty remembering information about former jobs many years before and did not enter sufficient information or entered it incorrectly. In addition, the open-answer format that was necessary to allow information to be entered about entire career paths subsequently allowed so much freedom in completing responses that it was sometimes difficult to know which answers were actually complete.

Another limitation was that some of the older respondents were less familiar with computer technology and indicated that it was difficult for them to complete an online survey. Later, an option was offered to complete the survey by telephone, but the initial request to complete the survey online may have led some older candidates not to participate.

Finally, these data were collected from graduates of a single program in the U.S.A. Additional data from more programs within and outside of the U.S.A. are necessary before any broad conclusions can be drawn.

## **Suggestions for Future Research**

While the findings of this study reflect the career paths of hundreds of TESOL graduates, the respondents still came from only one institution. In order to ascertain whether these results are representative of TESOL program graduates generally, more research of this type needs to be done at other institutions to determine the extent to which these results are generalizable.

In future studies, special care should be taken to insure that respondents give complete and accurate information about each job held. This could be accomplished by using more sophisticated computer programming to allow for entering a flexible number of job descriptions, but then having a very rigid template for which information must be entered for each job before moving on with the survey.

As mentioned earlier, the gender divide in TESOL appears to be an area that needs further study. Empirical data is needed to help track why a higher percentage of women are drawn to the field of TESOL and why women tend to teach more in ESL settings. Similar questions can be asked of men and why more men tend to teach in EFL positions. Finally, researchers could explore the types of job offers male and female students receive and whether the development of career paths differs between men and women.

This study explored differences between native and non-native TESOL professionals, but many questions remain unanswered regarding similarities and differences in their career development. For example, one could investigate differences in salaries and benefits and whether these differ in EFL or ESL settings.

One of the noteworthy findings of this study was that a large percentage of TESOL program graduates spent a substantial amount of their time unemployed by choice. Though participants' responses did largely identify if they chose to be unemployed, there were no provisions in the survey to determine if they chose to work part-time. A future study should have more explicit response categories to indicate when graduates are unemployed by choice and when graduates who are working part-time are working part-time by choice.

This study sought to provide insights regarding the career paths of graduates from a program that has been in operation for over 35 years. Continuing to gather career data over subsequent years would provide greater insight into longitudinal changes in employment and allow more recent graduates to be tracked to see if they follow different career paths.

While this research provided many interesting insights about TESOL employment trends, continued research into this topic is important. It will help increase understanding about the career paths of TESOL graduates and illuminate ways that our teacher-preparation programs, as well as the profession as a whole, can adjust in order to meet the needs of graduates who are seeking fulfilling TESOL employment.

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## Notes

[1] The authors recognize that the TESOL label can, as Nayer (1997) notes, imply the dominance of a monolingual society, where acquiring an additional language in adulthood is the norm. Nayer suggests that the term is very Anglocentric, not taking into account situations like former British colonies, where English is acquired at a young age, often at the same time as a "first language," blurring the line between first and second languages. The regular functional use of English in such locations can make it a primary language. Nayer also points out that the use of Other in TESOL produces a dichotomy that divides us from them, creating implicit differences in status.

[2] The authors acknowledge that the dichotomy between native and non-native speakers is a problematic one, which can infer a privileged status for those who are native speakers. Addressing the problematic nature of this dichotomy, Nayer (2002) states, "English is being established as the language of the empowered elite, and speaking it indigenously is taken to be the hallmark of the 'chosen ones'," and "the colonial 'natives' have become non-natives." Nayer asserts that the use of the native-non-native dichotomy contributes to this elitism.

[3] Asking salaries in dollar amounts and making comparisons would have been problematic, since dollar amounts translate into varying lifestyles, depending on one's location throughout the world. Economists and psychologists regularly measure well-being by satisfaction rather than income in dollars and there is ample evidence that satisfaction can depend on factors such as age, marital status, personality, culture, and level of education (see Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999 and Helliwell, 2003 for overviews of these factors). The authors have therefore opted to inquire regarding the adequacy of salary (i.e., satisfaction) rather than dollar amounts.

[4] It should be noted that outside the U.S.A., benefits as described in this study may not consist of items added to a position to attract interested applicants. These benefits may

instead simply be part of legal residence in the country (i.e., provided or mandated by the government) and not a job benefit per se. This issue warrants additional study.

*Editor's note: This version was amended from the original on December 5, 2013.*

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