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A Short Term TEFL Training Course in the Czech Republic

By Charles Hall, University of Memphis, cehall@memphis.edu; Gabriela Kleckova, University of Memphis, gabriela_kleckova@yahoo.com; Janet Rees, University of West Bohemia, janetrees701@hotmail.com

Immediately after the 1989 "Velvet Revolution" in former Czechoslovakia, many untrained North Americans were being hired to teach EFL at universities and secondary schools. With initial support from the Fulbright Commission, Professors Eva Valentova and Charles Hall began an intensive three-week TEFL course to provide basic ELT skills for at least some of these future teachers. The course was created as a component of a larger international summer language school organized by the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, the Czech Republic. Over the years the needs of the participants have changed, and the days of the completely untrained teaching in the Czech Republic are long gone. Now, we clearly offer the program as just a first step in teacher training. The current structure of the course that we present here reflects twelve years of modification and evaluation.

We understand that short-term TEFL training courses are often controversial and viewed by many as demeaning or even detrimental to the profession. Nonetheless, these certificate courses are quite common and serve as a first step in EFL teacher training. Keeping that in mind, we must constantly reassess which materials and topics we wish to include or remove since there are finite limits to what can be learnt in a course of three to five weeks. From the beginning, rather than designing a syllabus that imposes a fixed EFL teaching model, we have worked to introduce the participants to the skills, strategies, and teacher resources that will enable them to continue to grow as teachers.

The course, offered only once a year in July, recruits native speakers of English and advanced non-natives from many countries. There are no formal requirements for admission and participants have ranged from beginning college students to those with advanced degrees. The central parts of the program are

- 1) basic training in current TEFL methods,
- 2) structured teaching in an EFL environment,
- 3) intense social interaction with EFL students, and
- 4) an authentic second language learning experience.

1. TEFL TRAINING

Five days a week participants (known locally as the "TEFLers") have two TEFL classes. The first class, taught by an American ELT trainer, is a 90-minute applied theory class that deals mainly with methodologies, SLA, grammar, introduction to phonetics, and the role of culture. The second, led by a Czech ELT trainer, is a 90-minute methods class that handles self-evaluation and analysis, lesson planning, and classroom management. While the theory class provides a general background to the EFL/ESL field, the focal point of the methods class is the actual teaching that the participants do in a 45-minute, structured teaching experience with genuine EFL students.

2. TEACHING EXPERIENCE

The participants daily teach a 45-minute class for an ability-based group of 15-18 English learners, who also have four additional hours of formal English instruction daily by experienced teachers from Canada, Britain, Ireland, the United States, and the Czech Republic.

The preparation for each day's teaching is done in the methods class where the TEFLers learn new techniques or create appropriate activities after analyzing what went well and not so well in the previous day's lesson. Through the sharing of successes and failures, participants develop self-confidence and introspective skills.

We use both direct and indirect methods to monitor the TEFLers' teaching. To make the training international, a senior British faculty member who does not otherwise work with the participants conducts a formal observation of each of the participants. The observer then reviews the evaluation with each participant and then with us. In addition, we also receive informal feedback on the TEFLer's progress from the EFL students and from the experienced teachers who teach these classes the rest of the day. If the feedback gives us concern about a participant's ability, we work more intensely with that person to address the students' concerns. Using this system, we have had only one TEFLer who failed to meet the challenges of teaching and could not be entrusted with a class.

3. SOCIAL INTERACTION

Since both the EFL students and the TEFLers are taking part in an intensive three-week course, the TEFLers usually spend many hours outside the formal classroom socializing with their students and other participants in the school who act as cultural guides. The students, who come from up to 20 different countries, informally help the TEFLers with the transition from student to teacher and through the culture shock they inevitably experience. These social encounters (usually in the famous Czech pubs) often provide rich material to be discussed in the two TEFL classes in which the importance of the role of culture in ELT

training has dramatically increased over the twelve years we have been doing these courses.

4. SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

The fourth part of the program places the participants in experientially based "Czech as a Second Language" [CSL] course taught by teachers who speak little if any English. Having a teacher who does not speak their language allows the TEFLers to experience how their future ESOL students will perceive them. Moreover, the experiential nature of the course involves authentic tasks, such as buying tram tickets or ordering a meal, and takes the TEFLers outside the sheltered classroom environment where they themselves must face the real-life demands of coping in an unfamiliar language and culture.

Additionally, the CLS course permits the TEFLers to discuss their own feelings on what works and does not work for them as they learn Czech and then apply their experience to their own teaching.

Although the program is relatively short, the complexity of the issues and the richness of involvement mark the participants. By the end of program, they have a better idea of whether or not they are capable of committing themselves to a teaching position in a non-English speaking country. Most importantly, through their roles in this program, in which they are trainees, independent teachers, and language learners, the participants learn and practice the rudiments of TEFL methods while knowing that they have just begun their professional development.