

Cactus Interview – Susan Griffith



Were you ever a TEFL teacher?

When I was at school (in anglocentric London, Ontario, Canada), a small group of students arrived from Hong Kong with very little English. There was no ESL infrastructure in my school so I was asked to volunteer to give some after-hours conversation lessons. At the time I was quite flattered to be entrusted with this job, although I now realise that these poor new arrivals got a raw deal when they got me. With no guidance, I improvised little speaking and writing tasks, mainly based on Canada-specific topics (like how to cope in snow) and quickly began to understand that teaching a language required far more than knowing the vocabulary and grammar yourself. After moving to England after university (in order to do an M.Phil. in English literature at Oxford), I was attracted to the idea of qualifying as a TEFL teacher and applied to do the RSA Certificate as it was then at the Oxford College of Further Education. But a job in publishing in Oxford came through first, so that is the direction I followed. The book *Teaching English Abroad* (first edition 1991) arose out of my career as a travel editor/writer and my growing expertise in the field of working abroad.

What made you write the first edition of *Teaching English Abroad*?

While researching my first book in 1982 (*Work Your Way Around the World*) and subsequent editions, I soon saw what a key role TEFL played and could play for adventurous graduates and others who wanted to spend time abroad. Throughout the 1980s, I made contact with hundreds of TEFL teachers, partly through research for other Vacation-Work Publications titles and partly through my extensive travels in Eastern and Western Europe and beyond (Albania, Tunisia, Nepal, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, etc). It was obvious that the demand for English outstripped supply and that many native speakers were interested in finding out how to go about finding a job abroad. My publisher (Charles James of Vacation Work) and I felt that there was a need for a how-to book that would also incorporate lively real-life accounts from TEFL teachers.

What was the first reaction from the general public?

As I recall, the book was very favorably received by most of the TEFL establishment and by bookshops and libraries. It has always been aimed at the novice teacher rather than the career professional, so it was not greeted with wild enthusiasm in all ELT quarters. Yet British Council offices around the world stocked it in their libraries so that they could refer to anyone enquiring about working in ELT.

This was before the internet and it was difficult for job-seekers to obtain contact details of training centres and language institutes that might hire them, so the painstakingly researched Directories of Language Centres with actual vacancy listings have always been greatly valued by readers. The early editions were also written in an era that predates the universality of email, so I had a bulging mailbag from readers who were eager to tell their stories to supplement the ones included in the first edition.

What changes have you noticed in ELT through the years?

That is a very broad question. Obviously a huge amount of TEFL information and teacher recruitment has moved to the internet (just look at the Tuesday *Guardian*!)

One fundamental change has been the huge explosion of TEFL training centres around the world in all shapes and sizes. This has resulted in a much higher percentage of “teacher-travellers” gaining a certificate which gives them at least some theoretical grounding and

experience of teaching before being set loose on learners, which is a good thing (as I know from my own long-ago experience).

Of course shifts in world politics have changed the most popular TEFL destinations, e.g. the first edition of my book had a section on the “USSR”. The amazing enthusiasm with which native English speakers were embraced by the people of Eastern and Central Europe desperate to learn English just after the “revolutions” of 1990/1991 has been replaced by a more mature approach by established language schools with professional standards. As the European Union has grown up and expanded, the demand for English shows no signs of abating (favouring British and Irish teachers over North Americans for visa reasons). Countries like Vietnam and Cambodia that were virtually off-limits except to volunteers with aid agencies or backpackers roped into giving informal conversation lessons now have flourishing ELT industries. And of course the expansion of the EFL market at all levels in China over the past few years has been phenomenal.

What is your opinion of the professional status of the TEFL teacher?

From the kind of book I have written, it is obvious that I am not a hardliner who insists that only professionally trained EL teachers should be allowed to teach. In the real world there are innumerable children in Taiwan, university students in Buenos Aires, businessmen in Korea and company employees in Spain who can benefit from classroom contact with a native speaker, whatever his or her training. When confronted with a class of mischievous Greek teenagers, painfully shy Japanese students or unwilling Mexican employees, many people with minimal training soon realise the value of proper lesson preparation and training, and indeed many novices go on to obtain an advanced qualification. By the nature of the job, not all people who teach English abroad for a couple of years can make a career of it.

How is the research done for the updates of the book ?

New information comes in from teachers, aspiring teachers, directors of studies and so on over the two-year life of each edition, all of which is filed away to be re-checked at the time of revision. Over a period of 4-6 months, my research assistant and I contact all the approximately 2,000 language centres and other companies and organisations included in the book by email and phone to update the teacher specifications in the Directory entries. Meanwhile, we send questionnaires to hundreds of other potential employers. Inclusion in the book is free for the schools, so the information is as comprehensive as we can make it. If we can't confirm the details, the entry is removed (something which many other books claiming to be “thoroughly revised” do not do). That is the hard slog. The fun part is talking to and corresponding with current or recently returned teachers about their experiences. The book comes alive because it includes so many fresh first-hand accounts, like the recent arrival in Mexico who emerged from a metro stop to figure out a plan, spotted a language school across the road, introduced himself and within an hour was told when to start his training. I also solicit reports from DOS's who are often happy to write a report about the TEFL scene in Lithuania, Cyprus, Vietnam or wherever they work.

How was the original research done for the first one?

I followed every lead I could to make contact with TEFL teachers. Friends of friends and their friends were all forthcoming with stories. Since I was then based at my publisher's office in Oxford, we placed small ads in the student broadsheet *Daily Information* asking if anyone who had taught English abroad (and of course many people in Oxford have) would like to tell their stories over an all-expenses-paid pint at the Nag's Head. Through previous travels and book projects, I already had a file of potential contacts and wrote to them all (this was the era of the postage stamp) asking for feedback. Some of those early contributors were a joy to correspond with since they wrote witty and informative accounts of their experiences, whether trying to restrain the ebullience of Turkish teenagers or renew a visa in Venezuela.

Do readers write to you? What comments do they make?

It is always a pleasure to hear from readers. Most write with great enthusiasm about their experiences and about the book which has often helped them to achieve those experiences.

They may offer corrections to the information (especially about work permit processes) but often they just want an outlet for telling their stories. Sometimes they want to have a moan about dodgy accommodation, broken contracts, money-mad employers, the horrors of conducting sing songs with young children and so on, but this has all helped the book to present current readers with a realistic rather than an over-rosy picture of what might be in store for them.

If you could do it all again what would you change?

If I had written the book just a little bit earlier, it would have coincided with my pre-maternal life when I was free to do a lot more unfettered travelling and research abroad than I have been able to do since my twin sons were born.

Sadly, the publisher who first hired me as an editorial assistant in 1978 has recently retired and the Oxford office will close in March. But that's the kind of thing you can't change.

Would you recommend any other EFL books?

Since I am not an EFL practitioner myself, I am sure there are far better qualified people to recommend other books.

What advice would you give a new TEFL teacher these days?

Success comes with practice and experience so do not expect too much at the beginning. Try to be as creative as you can; a teacher who is willing to be a performer, even to make a fool of him or herself, will keep the students' attention far better. If the pupils are falling asleep, change tack, make them move around. A good teacher builds a rapport with the class, and is enthusiastic, patient, imaginative and genuinely interested in the welfare of the pupils.

Do you speak any languages, what kind of language learner are you?

I am ashamed to say I am not much of a linguist. Like all Canadians, I learned French in school. From the beginning my proficiency in reading and writing far outstripped my confidence in speaking, which has never caught up.

Native or non-native teacher, which is best in your opinion?

It depends on the objective. I guess it could be argued that the ideal is a team arrangement (like in the JET programme) where a local English teacher who is au fait with prevailing cultural norms and the learners' backgrounds can work in partnership with a native speaker. Of course a well trained native speaking teacher who is aware of the grammatical and pronunciation stumbling blocks faced by the students and who is sensitive to the learning methods that work with specific groups is probably the best kind of teacher.

Many Thanks to Susan for agreeing to be interviewed!

The Cactus TEFL Team

'Teaching English Abroad' is available from all good bookshops. Details are as follows:

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