

TEFL in Ireland – Reflecting a Profession?

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In response to issues raised in Gronia deVerdon Cooney’s article on TEFL qualifications in a recent FELT Newsletter (see De Verdon Cooney, 2000, p.8), I wish to reflect on the notion of TEFL as a profession in Ireland. Gronia de Verdon Cooney questioned the validity of the ubiquitous ‘TEFL Cert.’, and she raised many salient issues about TEFL teacher training as a whole. Her article comes closes without redemption:

Let’s face it, how many of you want to be TEFL teachers when you’re 30? 40? You’re really only doing this until you can get a proper job... TEFL isn’t a profession – it’s a long term holiday! ... Qualification? Who the hell cares! De Verdon Cooney, (2000, p.8)

The author hits on fundamental conundrums here: can one be over 30 and hold a ‘proper job’ in TEFL in Ireland? Can one work in the area of TEFL and claim to be a professional?

This question of ‘TEFL as a profession’ is not just confined to Ireland, in another issue of FELT newsletter, Martin Eayrs ponders on the same topic in the context of Argentina (Eayrs 2000). There is also universality to the notion of TEFL as a holiday from real life and real work. How many times have you heard a graduate say *‘I think I’ll take a year out, travel, do TEFL’?*

The professional status of teaching in general has also been open to question, indeed recent state-employed secondary school teacher strikes in Ireland have led many to point to the ‘grand life’ teachers have compared to real hard working professionals, who work longer days and have substantially shorter holidays. To place TEFL within the scheme of things, Doble (1997, p.62) offers the following quotation from *Dirty Tricks* :

‘ Teachers are … at the bottom of the professional heap…and I wasn’t even a real teacher. The only remarkable thing about me was the fact that I was still doing a holiday job at the age of forty. I was… another over-educated, under-motivated loser who had missed his chance and drifted into the Sargasso Sea of EFL work.’

Dibden, M. *Dirty Tricks*, cited in Doble (1997, p.62)

The parallel between the latter and the sentiments in De Verdon Cooney (2000, p.8) is striking.

For those of us who have, for better or worse, sought to make TEFL our ‘proper job’ and ‘profession’, it is important to reflect on what merits such nomenclature. Firstly there is a need to explore what constitutes a ‘profession’. A distinction needs to be made between doing something in a professional way and being a sociallydefined professional. The latter comes from within and the other is external or socially attributed. A mechanic may be highly professional, yet my dictionary tells me that he or she is a person skilled in maintaining or operating machinery, motors, etc. (Collins Concise Dictionary 1989), while a lawyer is ‘a member of the legal profession’ (*ibid*).

This points to a jobs hierarchy which is socially-defined, a club of doctors, lawyers, accountants and so on, though teachers don’t readily fit the schema. Eayrs (2000, p.11) makes an interesting point about the deconstruction of the old professional order within the knowledge economy. Within Ireland, teaching was traditionally seen as a vocation, with a highly pastoral role, and within the parish view of the world, having a teacher in the family was almost as good as having a nun or a priest.

Farr (2001), drawing on a corpus of teacher training feedback sessions, found evidence of this culturally-rooted notion of teaching running in the family - like red hair or big ears. One of her informants, while defending his poor performance in his teaching practice lesson (which is under review when the recording was made) takes a bemused stance, explaining that teaching was in his blood (Farr refers to it as the ‘*teaching gene*’):

Trainee: ... I had always a feeling about teaching but it it has been in I have two aunts teachers and+

Trainer: Umhum.

Trainee: +my sister and my brother have taught as well so+

Trainer: Umhum.

Trainee: +it's definitely somewhere in the family Farr (2001)

Let us leave aside the socially-defined professions, and turn to professionalism which is a more reflexively-defined attribute of a cohort doing the same type of work and endeavouring collaboratively to do it to the highest standards, something, I would argue, which is achieved and defined from within. Doble (1997) provides some useful criteria to determine professionalism in teaching: (1) *commitment*; (2) *adequate body of knowledge*; (3) *autonomy* and (4) *status and prestige*.

Commitment

Here Doble refers to the level of commitment on the part of a teacher to his/her profession. In the area of TEFL, he notes that the tendency is to '*wander*' into the area. His research, which involved interviewing teachers of EFL, revealed that teachers frequently talked about drifting into teaching English. Having tried other occupations, they were enticed by the possibility of travel. This lack of commitment is in contrast to that normally associated with other established professions. It is probably fair to speculate that in the past most people wandered into TEFL. However, the Irish economy is such that graduates have little need to wander into any job nowadays. In any case, how one enters a career is by no means an indicator of one's subsequent commitment to it. Indeed, it has to be said that within recent years in Ireland, it is not possible to wander into TEFL, since one needs a minimum of a degree plus a 70 hour TEFL qualification, as laid down by the Department of Education and Science.

With a '*wander-in-off-the-street*' bar in place, is there enough to tempt graduates to stay in TEFL, and so become part of a '*profession*' over time? This is where it is difficult to argue

for TEFL as a profession - there are very few fulltime, permanent and pensionable posts in TEFL in Ireland, and that includes the public sector (*e.g.* universities). Pay and conditions are subject, for the most part, to market forces. In the absence of tenure, pensions are obviously not offered.

Indeed, most teachers probably do not hold written contracts, and there is no dedicated teachers' union to mediate in teacher-management disputes and so on. It could be argued that market forces have, in the last few years or so, improved pay and conditions to some degree, but that's all very well when the forces are with you, but it is the '*profession*' that suffers when demand for teachers drops. So herein lies an imperative if TEFL in Ireland wants greater professionalism - greater *commitment*, not from teachers, but from language school owners, universities or whoever the employer may be. Such a commitment would entail making available more permanent posts and more fixed term contracts.

Adequate Body of Knowledge

All professions have a body of knowledge that takes many years to acquire and apply to classroom practice (Doble 1997, p.62). To say that to be a professional one must have a critical body of knowledge is not to threaten teachers of EFL in Ireland. The Advisory Council for English Language Schools (ACELS), as referred to above, has created an entry bar: to teach in Ireland one must have a degree plus a TEFL qualification which is of at least 70 hours. At present, ACELS is leading a large overhaul of standards in teacher qualifications; it is working towards standardising what is meant by '*TEFL Qualification*', in partnership with stakeholders in the area. In this respect, TEFL in Ireland is in a very healthy state.

However, though TEFL is available at both undergraduate or postgraduate level in many Irish universities, one cannot take TEFL as an undergraduate major at any Irish university. This

does point to a certain lack of esteem for TEFL within academia, which might be linked to the ‘*walk-in-off-the-street*’ TEFL teacher myth.

Autonomy Most professionals are autonomous and are able to act independently. However, according to Doble, TEFL ‘*sold its soul to the business ethic*’ (Doble 1997, p.63) a long time ago. He continues that autonomy is only weighted on the basis of whether the teachers’ independent actions affect school profits. Here one could argue that autonomy within most professions is bound by some limitation, for example, institutional ethos, professional ethic and so on. I would also say that most Directors of Study would see *teacher autonomy* as a valuable characteristic.

Status and Prestige

This refers to how teachers are viewed from outside, that is to say, how they are viewed within their society. Doble notes that EFL teachers suffer from bad press in many countries. Archive searches of the *Irish Times*, the ‘*paper of record*’, using the key words such as ‘*teachers + English*’ and ‘*TEFL*’ yielded nothing, while key words ‘*foreign + student*’, ‘*Spanish student*’ and ‘*language school*’ produced a handful of articles, but no story relating to *teachers* of EFL was found.

Let us pursue another route - not looking at ourselves from outside, but from within.

What markers are there of collaborative ‘*action*’ in pursuit of better practice and procedures, that is to say - efforts at ‘*professionalisation*’ of TEFL in Ireland? Earlier I referred to the ongoing ACELS-led project to set up an ELT qualifications register (the ELT Registration and Qualifications Recognition Project - ELTRQRP), this project has to date involved three public meetings, where all stakeholders (that is, teachers, teacher trainers, school owners and so on) were invited to attend, as well as smaller group meetings for core groups and a steering

committees. It has solicited the opinions of EFL teachers in Ireland as to what they see as good practice in relation to teacher training, TEFL qualifications and so on. These data were disseminated in their report *Good Practice Consultation and Review: Report on Phase 1 of the ELT Registration & Qualifications Recognition Project*.

One of the greatest by-products of this process has been a very simple one - they have brought people together from around the country, creating a forum for TEFL teachers in Ireland, but also simply allowing them to meet others in the field and feel a sense of *cohort*.

Another interesting development for TEFL in Ireland has been the *marriage* of the Marketing English in Ireland (MEI) and the Recognised English Language Schools Association (RELSA). The coming together of these organisations in 2000 might not have been seen as offering much to Pat and Mary Soap EFL teachers, however, to its credit, MEI-RELSA has, in a very short time, shown strong commitment to teacher development in Ireland. Most significant is their appointing of an Education and Training Officer whose role is to facilitate teacher development. They have received *Skillnets* funding (an EU/Irish Government funding scheme) for the piloting and eventual mainstreaming of a mentoring system, specifically geared towards novice teachers and also for teachers who find themselves teaching in areas, such as Business English, for which they have no prior training. Other interesting MEI-RELSA projects include an action research competition, and they are also running skills workshops around Ireland (personal communication Gill Nother, May 2000).

In conclusion, I think there is evidence of a growing sense of professionalism in TEFL in Ireland. If this is to be nurtured, much depends on the degree to which teachers in schools are involved and supported, and, even more, on the extent to which they feel they belong to part of a group. Reflexively-defined professionalism is about seeing yourself as a professional and feeling you belong to a group of professionals. I would stress, therefore, the crucial need for

the development of stronger teacher networks. As mentioned, ACELS and MEI-RELSA are playing their part in the '*professionalisation*' of TEFL in Ireland, however, strengthening and enlargement of a teachers' organisation is vital, so that teachers bring *themselves* together in pursuit of professionalism.

The *FELT Newsletter*, for example, offers a forum for EFL teachers and teacher trainers in this country, and the more it can encourage Irish *professionals* to engage with it and to contribute to it, the more it will add to a sense of professional cohort. I look forward to reading more on this topic in the coming issues.

References

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