

Landing Your Ideal TESOL Job: Tips for Success

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Introduction

The authors approached our job searches in different ways, and we have both been successful in landing jobs we wanted. One of us (Sarah) learned about successful job searches by trial and error, by gathering—over a six-year period—bits and pieces of information from colleagues and mentors about how to develop her teaching skills and how to better prepare for the job search process. The other (Luciana) did much more “front loading” in her process—attending job workshops while in graduate school, focusing her course work and professional experience toward the requirements of her ideal job, and developing a professional network that guided her as she identified job leads, wrote cover letters, and prepared job talks. We hope that what we have learned through our own experiences in looking for TESOL jobs will help you through the process of landing your ideal job. Some critical components of a job search include identifying one’s skills and experience, focusing and systematizing the job search, preparing necessary materials, and getting ready for interviews.

Identify Skills and Experience

One of the most important aspects of finding a job is making realistic choices about what types of jobs you want to apply for. Whatever your choices are, you will need to be prepared to discuss what you have to offer when you write or talk to a potential employer. Even before you begin to look for actual job openings, take some time to create a list of skills and experiences so that you can access this information easily as you search for job announcements, prepare application packets, and practice for interviews. Elena Cole, a community college English colleague, suggests that you also develop a set of “skill stories,” that is, concrete examples from your experiences that demonstrate

particular skills and qualities that you can bring to the service of an institution and its students.

Focus the Job Search

Focus is the key to any successful job search. You need to define your career goals in order to determine the types of work and other experiences that will ultimately lead you to your ideal job, but you should also be prepared to consider a wide range of job opportunities. Even if your first few jobs are not your ideal job, you can gain valuable experience that gets you closer to that ideal job.

Once you have a sense of your career goals, you'll need to look for job announcements and opportunities. The process will likely be more efficient and effective if you develop a systematic approach. For example, when Sarah was looking for community college jobs in California, she identified the ten community college districts within driving distance from her home and checked the districts' human resources websites weekly. In your own job search, develop a systematic approach for locating appropriate job openings. A good place to start is the CATESOL website, <www.catesol.org>. There you will find CATESOL's job bank as well as information on how to subscribe to the CATESOL job bank listserv.

As you begin to locate jobs to apply for, it is also important to set realistic objectives and priorities. Remember every goal you achieve in the job search process is important. Landing that ideal job will most likely involve meeting a series of smaller goals over a period of time. For example, during her last year in her Ph.D. program, Luciana developed a schedule to meet her application goals and kept an agenda to be sure she didn't miss any opportunities, deadlines, or appointments.

We have also found it very important to remain optimistic, to persevere, and to be *extremely* patient. The job search process is long. And, for most people seeking TESOL jobs, it will likely involve some rejection and disappointment. However, by trying to use every rejection and disappointment as an opportunity for reflection and learning, you will get closer to your ultimate goal. Stay focused on that goal by continuing to strengthen your resume by acquiring more skills and experience in your field through part-time teaching or volunteer experience. Whether still in graduate school or currently teaching in that less-than-ideal situation, engage yourself in service in the professional community (CATESOL, for example, is always looking for new volunteers!). Being an active professional not only means attending conferences but also participating as conference presenter, volunteer, or leader. This is an important way to get yourself recognized by the community and to begin to develop a professional network of colleagues and mentors that can be invaluable in your job search process.

Prepare Necessary Materials

For most TESOL job applications, you will be asked to compile and create a set of materials that demonstrate your “fit” for a particular job. The following materials are typically requested: post-secondary transcripts, proof of the required degree or credential, a resume or curriculum vitae (CV), a cover letter, recommendation letters, a statement of your teaching philosophy, and other writing samples.

A resume and CV have the same basic components, your education as well as your teaching and other work experiences, but a CV tends to be longer with sections that list publications, presentations, professional affiliations, honors, awards, and grants. Ask colleagues and mentors to share their resumes and CVs with you. TESOL job

workshops, offered at many universities and professional conferences, are another good source of example resumes and CVs. Before sending out your resume or CV, have two or three trusted people give you feedback so that it can represent you in the best possible light.

Unlike a resume or CV, which can be used in the same form for a variety of job applications, cover letters should be specific to job requirements and should highlight how your skills and experience fit the requirements of a particular job. We can't emphasize enough that a strong cover letter will be tailored to the different requirements of different jobs. For community college and university jobs, it is not unusual for cover letters to be two-to-three single-spaced pages. (And it is not unusual, in our experience anyway, to spend many, many hours creating a single cover letter!) As with your resume or CV, we recommend that you have other people read and give you feedback on your cover letters before you send them out.

Recommendation letters should ideally come from colleagues, professors, or administrators who are familiar with and have observed your teaching. Providing your recommenders with your current resume or CV and any relevant job announcements may help them write a stronger, more specific letter about your accomplishments and potential.

Some job applications will require additional supporting materials including those already mentioned at the beginning of this section. We suggest developing a professional portfolio even if it is not required for a specific job since you can cull items from the portfolio or build on its contents as you put together the specific set of materials required for a particular job opening. Briefly, a professional portfolio is a collection of documents

that represent your best and continuing work as a TESOL professional. Professional portfolios typically contain a statement of your teaching philosophy, examples of student work, sample syllabi, materials and lesson plans as well as official documents such as transcripts and evaluations from students and supervisors.

Get Ready for Interviews

Strong application packets will help you land interviews, and there are a number of things you can do to be well prepared for the interview process. First, find out as much as you can about the interview process at particular institutions. For example, interviews for university jobs are typically all day or several day affairs that involve multiple meetings with faculty, administrators, and students as well as teaching demonstrations or job talks. Community college interviews are typically conducted by large panels and include a teaching demonstration and a writing sample or evaluation of a student paper. Knowing what to expect will help you prepare for the interview and may lower your anxiety level during the actual interview.

You should also find out as much as you can about any institution where you have an interview. With the Internet, it's easy to find information about the institution's mission, students, faculty, staff, facilities, programs, and courses offered. If possible, it's also a good idea to visit the campus before the interview to check out the facilities, locate your interview room(s), and peruse the bookstore offerings for courses you might teach. During the interview, the information you discovered through your research can help you ask specific questions about the institution and demonstrate your interest in being a part of it.

Perhaps the most important aspect of preparing for interviews is practice. If you've never interviewed for a TESOL job before, create a list of possible interview questions by brainstorming, reading books about interviewing, and talking to colleagues and mentors who have been through the process. Use your list of possible questions to practice your responses many, many times in the days leading up to the interview. It is a good idea to create written outlines of your responses to these questions in order to reinforce the oral practice you are doing. Some people like to practice their responses by saying them out loud in front of a mirror, while others ask colleagues, friends, family members, and/or mentors to conduct mock interviews. When you're nervous in the actual interview, you'll be able to access some of the discourse chunks you've been practicing even if the questions are slightly different from the ones you practiced.

As you gain interviewing experience, create an interview question bank. Immediately after each interview, write down all the questions you remember and add them to your interview question bank. That way you'll have more questions to add to your practice list and you'll begin to see common question patterns that occur within your particular area of TESOL.

Continuing the Process

Like crafting a fine piece of writing or becoming an expert teacher, seeking your ideal TESOL job will take considerable time, concerted effort, and continuing reflection. We hope that the tips in this article will make your job search process more like Luciana's—her ideal job landed right out of graduate school! But if your process is more like Sarah's—a multi-year process of building both professional and job search skills—we encourage you to stay positive and learn from every opportunity that comes your way.