Teflers teaching law or lawyers teaching EFL?
Matt Salusbury investigates who make the best legal English teachers

D o teachers of English for law need to have a legal qualification to be effective? And, conversely, do qualified lawyers need a Tefl qualification before they can teach loose teaching legal English? We asked a number of centres who offer English for law for their opinions.

Peter Thompson, director of courses at the London School of English (LSE), believes, ‘It's best to have both, as long as the lawyers are also ELT-trained and have EFL experience.’ LSE has two kinds of trainers: qualified ELT professionals who have a wealth of expertise in ESP and have been given time to train up to teach the language of law, and qualified lawyers who have a formal ELT qualification and considerable experience.

LSE’s group courses ‘tend on the whole to be taught by the ELT professionals while the focus is more on language than legal content’, while the ELT-trained lawyers tend to concentrate on one-to-one tutorials and leading discussions. The school’s legal English courses also feature legal experts – current practising lawyers – to deliver workshops and seminars. These lawyers ‘have literally come from their offices to the school’. Charles Reader, of Cambridge Academy of English, told the Gazette, ‘Lawyers are not qualified to teach English for law simply by virtue of being lawyers.’ He believes this ‘because we know that, for example, Cambridge ELEC level there is a major language input of a kind that a lawyer with no EFL training ... would not have the skills set to teach.’

Maurice Cassidy, director of studies at the Executive Centre at International House (IH) London, believes that teachers should ideally ‘have a legal background’. He adds, ‘It is difficult to retain credibility when students with a legal background are taught by well-qualified non-law degree teachers.’ Lawyers teaching on English for law courses ‘absolutely need to have an initial Tefl qualification as well as CELTA, as a minimum’, he believes.

Other factors that Maurice incessantly emphasise are the outcome of an English for law course ‘the level of English of the students ... as can their aims. A course for newly qualified lawyers will generally be easier to manage than, say, a group of experienced enanced corporate lawyers whose field is intellectual property and whose level of English is B2+.’

Joseph Girada, director of the English for Law Training Centre, Malta, feels that ‘English for law is an EFL course. Any English language teacher who has ESP training and who is in possession of an EFL teaching permit issued by the Maltese education department is able to teach English for law.’

Having a legal background helps, particularly by reducing preparation time, adds Girada. His school tends to look for English teachers who have a legal background to teach legal English classes. These teachers would either be law professors, legal students or lawyers who are also EFL teachers. In Malta the Maltese education department is required to have hired instructors with dual degrees,’ says Dr Saltzman. ‘We have hired EFL professionals who work as in-house language experts in law firms abroad. We have hired highly experienced EFL professionals with an interest in law and a willingness to learn. It is the most cost effective, especially when preparing legal English needs.

In Cambridge’s English for law programmes, ‘ELT instructors concentrate on legal lexicography, acronyms, jargon, accuracy and legal terms – and legal experts – professors, lawyers and such professionals as our.’

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Page 16 November 2011

EL prospects

Time to make your training online
Begs’s Mike Hogan on the benefits of new communication technology

A n ongoing challenge for teachers is to find the time and money to invest in their own professional development. Face-to-face workshops and training sessions can be costly and involve time participating and travelling. However, as technology has become cheaper, faster and more accessible in recent years, these challenges can be overcome allowing teachers to participate in online seminars (aka webinars) and workshops, from the comfort of their own homes. Many teaching associations and training providers even offer them for free. So, ‘Where’s the catch?’ I hear you ask. There is none!

The latest Business English Sig (Sig) has been running both webinars and online workshops since 2011. The Sig’s chair is more panel-discussion style followed by a populated QA session. Workshops on the other hand aim to be more like face-to-face workshops, in that they involve more regular participant interaction.

Based on the experience we’ve gained, here are a few tips for those thinking of running their own online workshops for teachers within their school or organisation.

The room. There are various virtual meeting platforms available with a range of features and price points. They are generally quite similar to each other and so our tip is to take part in a couple of events offered on various platforms to get a feel for which might be best suit your needs. Tefl and its Sig uses Adobe Connect Pro with a room capacity of 200, which we have reached our limit before, so get your seats early!

The speaker. You don’t have to be a tech whiz to present online! Having said that, a rehearsal is essential. During such a rehearsal, you can run through the basic functionality of the platform with your speakers, such as how to advance slides, play audio or video, and interact with the audience. It’s also a good time to set up and check your audio and webcam settings. It’s a good idea to use a headset as well as loopbacking feedback when you just pass them the microphone and speakers on your computer. It’s also good to make sure your phone is turned off. It’s better to be connected via cable rather than wirelessly and the rehearsal should be done using the same computer and connection as will be used for the event itself. If you’re presenting to your audience with low bandwidth, turning the sound off can help avoid overloading the connection. This could lead to bad audio quality or even losing the connection.

The topic. Just because these events are online using technology doesn’t mean that their content need be about technology. Actually, we made a conscious decision to have non-tech topics as the subject matter of the webinars and workshops with the aim of making the topics as accessible as possible to all teachers. So far in the workshops we’ve covered topics ranging from networking to storytelling to teaching beginning level. Students, and in our webinars have included debates on ELF/SFL and intercultural issues.

Dynamic sessions. It’s important to be aware that the dynamic of the webinars is quite different to seminars and workshops delivered face to face. You can’t eye-contact with your audience and the dynamics of small group or pair work are quite different from face-to-face workshops. Participants can see and hear you, but you can’t see or hear them. The audience members have the opportunity to interact with you by typing into a chat field or by speaking to you via the microphone. Bearing this in mind, it’s good to offer participants regular interaction by asking for opinions and experiences, or to brainstorm ideas. You can then respond to them by name. It’s also good to vary your input media. So, in addition to slides, you could also use audio or video clips, images, and so on. You should avoid using too many slides as your slides may appear choppy when embedded in the virtual room. A final tip is to allow time for Q&A.

The Besig weekend workshops are generally on the first Sunday of each month and are available to all members. There are two or three webinars per year. See www.besig.org/events for more details and updates. We’re looking forward to seeing you online.

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