

# OCELT ADVANCES ESL TEACHING STANDARDS IN ONTARIO

By Samantha Serles and Arielle Townsend

If you are a TESL Ontario member, you have a new designation to add to your name. The Ontario Certified English Language Teacher (OCELT) designation has been awarded to all TESL Ontario members in good standing. It is intended to be a symbol of professionalism in adult language education. But what exactly does this mean for ESL teachers and their careers?

Professional licensure and any accompanying professional designations have two main purposes: first, those within the profession may be able to use them to extract economic rents (payment in excess of the minimum required to bring provide the service) by limiting the competition and increasing their perceived quality,<sup>1</sup> and second, employers and consumers may be able to reduce search costs and risk.

“Everyone is familiar with OCT, RN, CA, and PEng as professional designations for certified teachers, nurses, chartered accountants and engineers,” says Reza Mazloom-Farzaghy, Accreditation Services Manager for TESL Ontario. “These abbreviations have become common fixtures in everyday language, symbolic of the professions and respected titles for their practitioners.”

Like all designations, OCELT is a marketing tool designed to signal to employers and consumers that TESL Ontario members have specialized knowledge, skills, and experience in teaching English as a second language to adults. Furthermore, as Mazloom-Farzaghy explains, “OCELT distinguishes the holders from non-adult ESL teachers, and adult ESL teachers who do not qualify for TESL Ontario accreditation.” Another possible outcome of the use of a designation is a deeper identification of designation holders with the “brand” of the designation. “This identification with the brand is reflected, for example, in the hours of volunteer work that individuals will do for their association” (Richardson & Jones, 2007, p. 141). And in a field with high levels of attrition (Valeo & Faez, 2013), it may also go some small way to reducing that attrition.

Outside of the organization, a designation will only be as useful as it is familiar. In the case of OCELT, the nature of the English-language teaching field, which is often funded by the government either directly or indirectly, means that potential employers in Ontario will most likely be aware of TESL-Ontario certification and its newly attached designation.

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<sup>1</sup> Note, however, that “low pay contributes to low professional status and that accreditation alone has not sufficed to change this” (Valeo & Faez, 2013, p. 4).

Language learners attending schools or hiring teachers privately, however, are far less likely to be familiar with it and therefore far less likely to seek out teachers holding the designation.

For these reasons, it is useful for the organization to promote it, and consequently, TESL Ontario's *Guide to OCELT: The Professional Designation of TESL Ontario Accredited Members*, encourages members to use the OCELT designation on their business cards, email signature, writing bylines, and whenever they are introduced professionally. As more members adopt this professional title and use it regularly, the guide explains, it will become a common term in the TESL industry, both in Canada and around the world. "When employers see OCELT on a job seeker's application, they immediately know that the applicant has met rigorous standards and is ready to do the job," says Mazloom-Farzaghy.

Beth-Anne Chansavang, a TESL Ontario member since 2010, sees how the designation will have a positive for both ESL teachers and students. "Having the OCELT designation informs the greater public that a member in good standing is accountable, not only to the professional body itself, but also to English language learners," says Chansavang. "I believe that the designation will also promote and ensure consistency in terms of professionalism and competence across the entire OCELT community."

Today, TESL Ontario's Certificate of Accreditation is highly regarded by teachers and learners alike, but the standards of ESL teaching in Ontario have not always been so clear. Some TESL members may not be aware that OCELT is the result over two decades of advocacy for excellence in ESL teaching.

In *A Short History About TESL Ontario Certification*, Executive Director Renate Tilson describes of the process of establishing a certification process. The topic was raised in September 1994, at meeting between TESL Ontario and representatives from the Ministry of Education and Training, Citizenship and Immigration of Canada. At the time, there was a wide variety of ESL training courses in the province but no standardization. "The question of 'What Is a Qualified ESL Instructor' could not be readily answered, and teacher training courses within Ontario at that time ranged from 5 weeks to 2–3 year credit courses, some included a practicum, others did not" (Tilson, 2005).

The Standards and Certification Project was established and an initial survey was conducted to gather data about "the qualifications of instructors teaching non-credit adult ESL courses in Ontario as well as...survey data on teacher training programs issuing ESL teaching certificates throughout the Province" (Tilson, 2005). A second survey looked at "admission requirements, number of hours of instruction, course content, length and nature of teaching practica, and types of certificates issued upon completion of programs including admission requirements, course content, hours of instruction and teaching practicums, and types of certificates issued upon completion of programs" (Tilson, 2005).

This comprehensive survey data was used to inform focus groups that further explored issues in standardization. ESL training programs outside of Ontario and models of

certifications in other professions were also considered. “The findings were then validated through a pilot study, with a sample of ESL instructors identified in the initial survey being selected for participation (Tilson, 2005).

In February, 1998 the first draft of a proposal was circulated to teachers, service providers, stakeholders and the ministries, and discussed at affiliate meetings and conferences. “Based on the feedback received, the Steering Committee met again on two separate occasions to revise the document to include a number of the very constructive suggestions that were sent in. The approved (by TESL Ontario’s Board) text appeared in the 1998 fall issue of *Contact* and on [TESL Ontario’s] website” (Tilson, 2005).

By 2001, over one thousand instructors were certified by TESL Ontario and 13 institutions were recognized as meeting TESL Ontario’s standards. Although the Standards and Certification Project was completed, TESL Ontario continued pushing for more professionalism in the ESL industry, and ways for the professionalism to be recognized, thus providing value for their membership. OCELT is the result of that ongoing work.

“OCELT [is] considered one more step towards getting the adult ESL teaching regulated in Ontario,” explains Mazloom-Farzahgy. “We know that we still have a long way to go and many more steps to take to achieve that goal. OCELT [will] help us go forward more smoothly and efficiently and bring together the adult ESL teachers in Ontario under one umbrella, give them a united voice, and put TESL Ontario in a more solid position in its advocacy efforts.”

## References

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## Author Bios



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