

Applying for a Position in ELT: Behind the Scenes (Part 1)

[*Sigrun Biesenbach-Lucas*](#) & [*Deanna Wormuth*](#)

Part 1: Teaching Portfolios That Get Attention

A position announcement catches your eye: Program X invites applications for the position of English Language Instructor. It's just the kind of job you've been seeking—an opportunity to advance your career. But how can you stand out among other applicants? What can you do to assemble an impressive application packet that substantially increases your chances of being offered the position? Based on our experience with faculty searches—as administrators, search committee members, and applicants—we offer insights into what employers look for when they review application portfolios (Biesenbach-Lucas & Wormuth, 2016), and we provide suggestions for developing application materials that rise above the rest.

For many teaching positions, applicants are required to submit a teaching portfolio. While not all programs prescribe the specific documents to be compiled, some programs may be quite prescriptive about portfolio content. In such cases, it is advisable to adhere to instructions and not deviate from the prescribed list. Portfolios generally contain “documents and materials which collectively suggest the scope and quality of an instructor’s teaching proficiency” and professional activities (Rodriguez-Farrar, 2006, p.3). You should compile the portfolio carefully and thoughtfully, recognizing that preparing a high-quality portfolio is a time-consuming process.

The most successful applicants “provide documented evidence of teaching from a variety of sources ... and provide context for that evidence” (Teaching Portfolios, 2015, para.1). In order to select appropriate materials, you should read the position announcement carefully, research the program thoroughly, determine which materials you have developed that are aligned with the target program’s requirements and philosophy, and decide which materials you need to create. For example, if applying to a university IEP program, you would not effectively address the goals of that program by providing materials designed for adult education or secondary school programs.

Superior portfolios provide a comprehensive portrait of the candidate. They illustrate instructional philosophy methodology, provide evidence of creativity and professional commitment, and demonstrate organizational skills. A good portfolio begins with a table of contents, guiding the search committee to the various parts of the portfolio. For hard-copy portfolios, clearly labeled tab dividers should separate the portfolio sections; for electronic portfolios, sections can either be prepared in separate folders, or one PDF file with consecutive page numbers can aid the search committee in locating the portfolio components. Brief context descriptions at the beginning of some sections are helpful for search committee members to review and evaluate submitted items appropriately. Organizational skills are essential; you need to put yourself in the portfolio readers’ shoes to help the reader navigate through the submitted elements and anticipate what background information he or she will need to place the materials in the portfolio into the context of a course.

Cover Letter

The cover letter should follow standard business letter conventions. It should

- be written specifically for the position,
- reflect the position announcement, and
- generally not exceed one page.

You should state how you learned about the position and emphasize why you would be a good fit in the target program. A cover letter is *not* another version of your CV or résumé; therefore, you should avoid repeating information stated in your CV. Instead, you should address the position requirements explicitly and state how you can meet those requirements. It goes without saying that proofreading the cover letter is critical.

Curriculum Vitae

The curriculum vitae (CV) is your professional biography. It should clearly convey whether or not you meet the minimum requirements for the position. Usually, this means indicating

- degree/s obtained,
- length of prior teaching experience, and
- evidence of professional development.

We have read CVs in which writers listed their prior ESL/EFL teaching positions *without* indicating the skills (reading, writing, etc.) nor the proficiency levels they had taught. Lack of such critical information gives an incomplete picture of the applicant's teaching background. Furthermore, you should indicate whether or not previous positions were full-time or part-time employment. The CV should also provide evidence of service to your department or institution and professional development activities within the profession. For example, the CVs of impressive applicants often list:

- membership in professional organizations,
- presentations delivered,
- works published, and
- involvement in local affiliates.

If you do not update your CV regularly, the task of remembering and listing all relevant responsibilities, activities, and dates may become daunting. It is a good idea to keep a version of your CV current on your desktop and to update it regularly, especially after presentations or new responsibilities are given to you. Also, if you indicate that you have your own website, contribute regularly to blogs, or provide links to online documents, you can be sure that the search committee will check your presence on social media.

References

Applicants are usually asked to supply names of references (usually three) or have their references send recommendation letters. Letters that are either generic or obviously recycled give

a negative impression. Letters should be current or very recent (the past 3 to 5 years), from employers or colleagues who can speak to your teaching skills and engagement in the profession, and from within your teaching program. Be sure that reference letters arrive by the application deadline; therefore, recommenders must be given sufficient time to prepare their letters. We suggest that you ask your recommender no later than 3 to 4 weeks before the deadline.

Philosophy of Teaching Statement

For teaching positions, a standard element included in a portfolio is a philosophy of teaching statement. The philosophy should be “a clear and unique portrait of [the applicant] as a teacher, *avoiding generic or empty philosophical statements about teaching* [emphasis added]” (Teaching Statements, 2015, para.1). A good rule of thumb for an effective teaching philosophy is to select three or four focal areas which you illustrate with specific examples from your teaching, and which are then illustrated through actual teaching materials included in the portfolio.

Evidence of Teaching

Evidence of your *actual* teaching experience is addressed in three components:

1. course descriptions/syllabi
2. teaching materials
3. assessment instruments

Ideally, all three components should be connected; a course description/syllabus for an intermediate grammar class should be accompanied by teaching materials from that class, as well as tests, quizzes, or other assessments designed for the same class. If this “trifecta” is to impress the search committee, applicants should include a variety of skills and proficiency levels—not course descriptions from one level.

Course Descriptions and Syllabi

The course descriptions (a good number is three to five) should show relevant course information, performance objectives, learning outcomes, class activities, materials, evaluation/grading, and course policies. However, because these items are often prescribed by teaching institutions, detailed syllabi (week-by-week course schedules) that show how you are able to break down course content into appropriate and well sequenced pedagogical chunks should be included. If the course descriptions and/or syllabi are not your original creation, you should make this clear.

Teaching Materials and Assessment Instruments

The teaching materials and assessment instruments that you select for your portfolio should be items that you have created (or sufficiently adapted) for your classes in current or prior teaching assignments. Impressive teaching materials are *complete* activities for a *variety* of skills *relevant in the target program*; therefore, if applying to a university-based IEP, you should select materials clearly based on topics and skills that students need for college. Additionally, lessons

for all skills should be complete units with appropriate handouts and worksheets, and not merely activities for 1-hour class sessions. Materials that show how your teaching philosophy is implemented in the lesson design are especially suitable.

Assessment instruments should show a mix of test types, from multiple-choice items to detailed rubrics. In today's wired world, you should also demonstrate familiarity with technology and show how you can integrate various technological components into your lesson design. Search committees are not impressed with pages copied from textbooks, nor with class lists and attendance sheets! Search committee members will appreciate, however, the applicant who briefly describes the teaching context for each of the submitted materials—skill, level, and the fit of those materials into the overall course sequence.

Teaching Video

A teaching video may also be required of applicants or of finalists invited for an interview. It is a good idea not to leave videotaping a lesson until the last minute. Anything from technological glitches to inattentive, unprepared students during the taped lesson can compromise the video's submission by the deadline; be sure to allow ample time to record another lesson if necessary.

When planning a videotaped lesson, applicants often mistakenly assume that the search committee wants to see them conduct instruction throughout the entire lesson (usually about 50 minutes). This misguided assumption leads to predominantly teacher-centered lessons, which do not provide evidence of instructional abilities related to communicative and task-based learning, common to most programs. Other ill-conceived lessons are those which include lengthy segments of students' reading or writing silently.

Plan a lesson with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Well-designed lessons alternate effectively between teacher-centered moments and learner-centered activities, demonstrating your ability to use effective classroom management and pacing to achieve the lesson's goals. As with teaching materials, you should provide a context for the videotaped lesson in the portfolio, as well as the materials used in the lesson.

Evidence of Professional Development Activities

Classroom instructional competence is but one aspect of a qualified applicant. Administrators prefer faculty who show commitment to the field and who see themselves as lifelong learners. Applicants for ELT jobs must be prepared to show evidence of participation in professional development activities. Such evidence can come in multiple forms, such as

- membership in professional organizations,
- conference attendance,
- committee involvement,
- conference volunteerism, and
- accreditation work

While presentations and publications are listed in the CV, you should include handouts/PowerPoint slides from presentations and workshops you have given, along with copies of selected published work in the portfolio. Conference attendance certificates are less impressive to a search committee than proof of scholarly activity and active engagement in the profession, and the more experience an applicant has, the greater are the search committee's expectations for a clear professional development history and trajectory.

Conclusion

ELT programs vary considerably in their instructional design and faculty expectations. However, all seek faculty applicants who demonstrate their commitment to providing excellent instruction. It is critical that you follow instructions, attend to deadlines, and allow yourself ample time for completion and review of your portfolio. In so doing, you will present a high quality portfolio that illustrates your organizational skills, clarity of expression, teaching philosophy, and creativity in material design and development. Submission of such a portfolio will receive greater attention by a search committee and increase your chances of attaining a position.

References

Biesenbach-Lucas, S., & Wormuth, D. (2016, February). From position announcement to interview: Administrators' and applicants' perspectives. *PAIS Newsletter*. Retrieved from <http://newsmanager.commpartners.com/tesolpais/issues/2016-02-22/2.html>

Rodriguez-Farrar, H. B. (2006). *The teaching portfolio* (3rd ed.). Providence, RI: Brown University Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning.

Teaching portfolios. (2015). Vanderbilt University: Center for Teaching. Retrieved from <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/teaching-portfolios/>

Teaching statements. (2015). Vanderbilt University: Center for Teaching. Retrieved from <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/teaching-statements/>

Sigrun Biesenbach-Lucas received her MAT and PhD degrees in applied linguistics from Georgetown University. She has taught ESL, linguistics, and teacher training courses, and she is currently teaching in the Intensive English Program at Georgetown University; she has also served as a site reviewer for CEA. She regularly presents at TESOL conferences; she has published articles on email communication, and she is the coauthor of *Next Generation Grammar 4*.

Deanna Wormuth is director of the Center for Language Education and Development and English as a Foreign Language at Georgetown University. She has extensive experience as a program administrator and has served as a CEA commissioner and site reviewer. She has also served as advocacy chair and president of University and College Intensive English Programs (UCIEP).