

# Online Language Teacher Education:

## Participants' Experiences and Perspectives

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The International Research Foundation  
for English Language Education

# Executive Summary

This brochure provides a summary of key findings from *Online Language Teacher Education: Participants' Experiences and Perspectives*. To read or download the full version of the paper, please visit: [www.tirfonline.org](http://www.tirfonline.org)

The use of computer technology in education has grown, especially since the advent of Web 2.0 (i.e., the collection of second-generation internet services that were built on the expansion of social media technologies), with its affordances for teaching and learning. Increasingly, technology-enhanced education is being delivered online, rather than in stand-alone computer labs. The online delivery of education ranges from some online support for face-to-face (f2f) classes, to totally online courses including online language teacher education (OLTE). The need for OLTE has increased with the demand for English teaching and for qualified instructors as English use as a global language has increased.

The study reported here built on that of Murray (2013). Murray's study provided an overview of the types of OLTE available and included in-depth snapshots of 18 OLTE courses/programs. The Murray 2013 study laid the groundwork for understanding more about OLTE courses and programs, in other words, what is being offered and by whom. Since the publication of Murray's 2013 study, we have had numerous conversations about OLTE with instructors and students in courses and administrators in and directors of OLTE programs, as well as other researchers. What has become increasingly apparent to us as a result of these discussions is that we need to learn more about the experiences and perceptions of the individuals involved in OLTE. What are the characteristics of OLTE participants? Why do participants choose online, rather than on-campus or f2f courses and programs? What types of technology and course configurations have they experienced and which do they prefer? What are participants' perceptions of online learning and the applications available for learning? Understanding what OLTE participants think, know, and believe about OLTE can be enormously useful in creating more effective online learning environments, designing courses and programs, and assuring the quality of OLTE. Therefore, the focus of the current study reported here is the experiences and the perceptions of both instructors of and students in OLTE courses and programs.

To carry out the study, we developed two online questionnaires, one for instructors of OLTE (i.e., teacher educators) and the other for students in OLTE (i.e., teacher students). The items in the questionnaire were developed based on current literature on online education and our own experiences in OLTE in several different settings and programs. The questionnaires included multiple-choice, rank-order, and short-answer questions, often with an option for write-in responses. The questionnaires sought to discover who is participating in OLTE courses/programs and why; the types of OLTE courses and programs available; the configurations of these courses/programs, including activities and technologies; participants' preferences for OLTE, activities, and technologies; and participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of OLTE courses and the applications for the delivery of the course. We classified OLTE into five configurations: (1) enhanced, (2) blended/hybrid, (3) flipped, (4) totally online with a synchronous component, and (5) totally online with no synchronous component. The term *configuration* is being used specifically to talk about how online technologies are being implemented in the design of courses.

One hundred eighty-five (185) programs/courses were contacted directly via email and invited to participate. They were asked to distribute the call for participation to their teacher educators and teacher students. In addition, the call for participation with the URL link to the questionnaires was posted on several TESOL professional websites and listservs. A total of 137 teacher educator questionnaires were returned and 309 teacher student questionnaires, for a total of 446 responses. The quantitative data were analyzed using Qualtrics, while the qualitative data were searched for themes and then coded to create categories that were related to the main constructs represented in the questions.



# Findings

While there was some agreement between teacher educators and teacher students, their experiences and opinions differ considerably on many key factors.

## Participants

Both native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of English participated in the OLTE surveys. It is important to note that the terms *NS* and *NNS* are used in this report only as useful heuristics. Participants were located in many different contexts around the world, including Asia, Australia, Europe, the Middle East, North America, and South America. Teacher educators were a considerably older cohort (the largest group was in their 50s) than their teacher students (the largest group was in their 20s). Perceptions of workload for OLTE courses varied a great deal between teacher students and teacher educators. Teacher educators indicated that the workload is much heavier in online courses than in f2f courses, while teacher students perceived the workload as being similar to f2f courses.

## Reasons for Choosing OLTE

Data were collected about general reasons for choosing OLTE courses and reasons for choosing OLTE over f2f courses. Teacher students reported that they chose to study OLTE in general and to obtain credentials in English language teaching, whereas the teacher educators' perception was that their teacher students mainly wanted to travel or took courses required by their employers. The reasons for choosing OLTE over f2f for teacher students were related to flexibility; consequently, teacher students did not welcome synchronous lectures or discussion groups. They wanted to take full advantage of the any-time, any-place affordance of online learning. In contrast, teacher educators wanted to encourage interaction and facilitation of group work. To this end, they used a variety of different technologies to promote both synchronous and asynchronous participation. The teacher educators did perceive that their teacher students took online courses for their flexibility, but they included learning activities that made their courses less flexible.

## Configurations of OLTE

Both teacher educators and teacher students had the most experience with asynchronous online OLTE courses, followed by blended/hybrid for teacher students and enhanced for teacher educators. Teacher educators did, however, use a variety of synchronous applications. In terms of preferences, teacher educators ranked a totally online course with no synchronous component the lowest, whereas teacher students ranked it as their highest preference. These preferences reflected the differing beliefs that teacher educators and teacher students had about the value of OLTE: Teacher educators preferred modes and configurations that allowed for interaction, whereas teacher students preferred modes that gave them the greatest flexibility. They both ranked enhanced courses quite high, but flipped courses quite low. The participants also taught in or learned in a range of courses and programs, from short courses measured by hours to multi-year-long degree programs.

## Quality

Neither teacher educators nor teacher students were particularly interested in or often aware of accreditation as a measure of quality. Indirect measures of quality indicated that neither teacher educators nor teacher students believed OLTE was easier than f2f study. Flexibility reflected quality for teacher students, whereas the availability of applications for promoting interaction suggested quality for teacher educators. Teacher educators in this study were experienced as teacher educators and considered themselves qualified to teach OLTE and support their students' learning because most had taught and/or designed OLTE, had undertaken formal technical training, and had obtained experience as teacher educators. Teacher students reported that their teacher educators were experienced and qualified. Most were instructors, only a few being tutors or teaching assistants.

## Technical Support

Teacher educators, even those with considerable experience and/or training with OLTE, did not have high levels of confidence in their technological competence. In contrast, teacher students were confident. Teacher educators did, however, provide some technical support to their



teacher students, and teacher students' perceptions of the technical support provided by teacher educators were more positive than the perceptions that the teacher educators had of themselves. In addition, a number of OLTE programs had technical support staff persons who were available to answer questions about the technology.

## Learning Management Systems (LMSs)

The most commonly used LMSs for teacher educators were Blackboard, followed by Moodle, Canvas, WebCT, and locally designed LMSs. Teacher students most frequently used Moodle, followed by Blackboard, WebCT, locally designed LMSs, and Canvas. Teacher educators preferred WebCT while teacher students preferred locally designed learning LMSs. However, teacher educators ranked “other” LMSs and applications as second in their overall list of preferences and teacher students ranked “other” as first in their list of preferences. Both provided extensive lists of other LMSs and programs. Although the preferences for specific features expressed by the two groups were similar (e.g., flexibility, transparency, messaging system, and synchronous applications), there were some differences. Teacher educators placed a high priority on features that promote interaction, group work, and communication. In contrast, teacher students placed a high priority on features that assist them in doing well in the courses, such as features that allowed them to track their own progress and have access to grades.

## Assessments



Exams still figured quite prominently as a form of assessment. However, teacher educators and teacher students agreed that online quizzes that allowed for multiple attempts and provided immediate feedback, peer assessments, and practice quizzes that included answers and explanations were all useful in promoting learning.

## Implications

These findings produced a rich understanding of the world of OLTE. For OLTE to meet its full potential of providing quality education for those who choose not to attend brick-and-mortar institutions requires institutions

to rethink why they are providing OLTE and what configurations they have chosen to adopt. Institutions and teacher educators embarking on OLTE, therefore, need to consider the following:

- balance the needs and wants of their teacher students with their own pedagogical beliefs and practices;
- determine who should provide technical support for teacher students – teacher educators or technical staff – and make this decision understood by all participants;
- carefully evaluate new technologies to determine their fit-for-purpose for both teacher educators and teacher students;
- provide clear information for prospective teacher students so they can make informed decisions about what programs meet their needs and preferences, including technologies used, pedagogical approaches, and types of assessments;
- evaluate their compensation for teacher educators by examining additional workload in terms of time and in terms of role, such as technical expertise; and
- constantly evaluate the quality of their OLTE programs or courses, using tools such as accreditation or the Online Learning Consortium's scorecard.

Potential teacher students need to carefully examine not only the availability of OLTE, but also the exact configurations used in the program or course, the qualifications and expertise of the teacher educators, the administrative and technical support provided, and the underlying curriculum design. Professional associations in TESOL should consider advocating for quality accreditation principles for OLTE. Other stakeholders, such as software companies, should also examine the findings so that their products more effectively match the needs of OLTE teacher educators and teacher students.

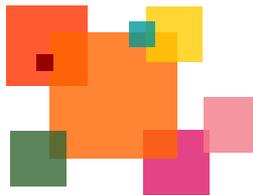
Additional research is needed to fill the gap in our understanding of the impact of OLTE on hiring practices and the perceptions of how well prepared OLTE graduates are for their language teaching work, and examine the compensation for OLTE teacher educators.



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