



The commodification of English language teaching in tourism: A sustainable solution?

Hayley Stainton

Buckinghamshire New University, High Wycombe Campus, Queen Alexandra Road, High Wycombe HP11 2JZ, Buckinghamshire, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

TEFL tourism
Volunteer tourism
Sustainability
Commodification
Package tourism
Commercialisation

ABSTRACT

In a world of surging globalisation and increased pressure on countries to develop their English language learning provision, TEFL tourism is utilised as a medium for meeting demands across the world. In contrast to the ideological foundations of TEFL however, increased commercialisation has seen rise to a profit-orientated form of alternative tourism. Deriving from a triangulated methodology consisting of a qualitative review of agency websites, blog analysis and quantitative survey data, it is concluded that the TEFL package facilitates the consumption of a post-modern tourist experience, where the TEFL experience is packaged and sold as a commodified product. Drawing upon lessons learnt by industries of a similar nature, notably volunteer tourism, this paper raises a number of sustainability concerns.

1. Introduction

Fundamentally, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) is the practice of linguistically educating those for whom English is not their native language (Griffith, 2014). While its roots may lie within the notions of altruism and community development, this paper demonstrates that in many instances this is no longer the case, providing evidence of the rise of commercialisation and the packaging of the TEFL experience into a commodified product, resulting in a progressive movement away from the ideals of community development towards the entrepreneurial fundamentals of capitalist society.

Robinson and Novelli (2007), in their introduction to the niche tourism phenomena, postulate that tourists have developed as consumers, becoming increasingly sophisticated in their needs and preferences as a result of an emergent culture of tourism. This is clearly evidenced within the TEFL tourism industry, where the use of tourists to meet the growing demand for TEFL teachers worldwide, coupled with the growing desire for tourists to undertake 'meaningful' and 'alternative' experiences has seen the rise of TEFL tourism as a solution to meet the demands of both the host community and the tourist (Stainton, 2017a). Inherently, however, it has been demonstrated through a number of tourism means that meeting the collective needs of the community, the tourist and the profit-orientated host organisation is a difficult endeavor (Benson & Wearing, 2012) and, in fact, the very existence of profit-driven motivations place any ideological foundations under significant threat (Mostafanezhad, 2013).

Despite the prominence of TEFL tourism across the globe, it is surprising that the industry has scarcely been addressed outside of

pedagogical literature to date (Stainton, 2017a). This is a particular concern with regards to the sustainable future of the industry. This paper sets out to first demonstrate the commodification of English language teaching within the tourism industry, evidenced both through TEFL opportunities advertised on the Internet and TEFL tourist experiences, and secondly to promote sustainable thinking by TEFL tourism stakeholders by drawing on similar practices and associated implications demonstrated through similar tourism forms, most notably volunteer tourism.

2. The emergence of TEFL tourism

In a world of surging globalisation, English is increasingly becoming the dominant medium in every domain of communication within both local and global contexts, resulting in high demand for English speakers (Khamkhien, 2010; Punthumasan, 2007). As of 2014, the number of English language learners worldwide peaked at 1.5 billion with estimates that this figure will increase to over 2 billion by 2020 (British Council, 2016), thus generating an almost insatiable demand for TEFL teachers. It is estimated that 250,000 native English speakers work as English teachers in more than 40,000 schools and language institutes around the world (Teaching English as a Second Language TESOL International Association, 2014), although this figure may be significantly higher as a result of employment which is unaccounted for, such as private tuition or those working without the correct visas or documentation.

Training and recruiting such a large number of TEFL teachers across the globe is, in itself, a challenging endeavor. Additionally, educators

E-mail address: hayley.stainton@bucks.ac.uk.

also have to plan for the inevitably high staff turnover. The [TESOL International Association \(2014\)](#) state that approximately 50% of TEFL teachers remain in employment in excess of one year, with 15–20% relocating to an alternative school or country after this time, 30–35% returning home and 10% continuing employment for a third year, resulting in the need for global recruitment of over 100,000 TEFL teachers annually.

The lack of qualified English instructors presents one of the largest challenges to educators and citizens across the globe, and as a result, English-speaking tourists are now frequently being called upon to help meet demands. Whilst there is a paucity of literature to date conjoining the concepts of TEFL education and tourism, there is strong evidence that the increasing commercialisation of TEFL presents binding links with the tourism industry ([Stainton, 2017a](#)). A simple Google search for TEFL opportunities overseas demonstrates that, similar to the volunteer tourism industry, the marketplace is in a state of continuous evolution, with new businesses continuously entering the market, ranging from those which claim to be charitable or non-profit organisations ([Brown, 2005](#)), to projects funded by large institutions such as the World Bank ([Wearing & McGehee, 2013a](#)) and traditional tour operators ([Benson & Wearing, 2012](#)).

3. Parallels between TEFL and package tourism

Holiday packages, an integral part of the mass tourism sector, are commonly facilitated through the use of third party agents, often referred to as tour operators, whose function is to purchase and assemble a number of components in the transportation, accommodation and other travel sectors before selling these as a commodified holiday package ([Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert, & Wanhil, 2013](#); [Holloway, 1992](#)). Although this fundamental purpose has remained the same for the past twenty-five years, the nature of packages has evolved in situ with the dynamicity of the tourism industry ([Vainikka, 2014](#)). Often considered a manifestation of mass tourism, package holidays have traditionally been associated with sea, sun and sand motivations and destinations, along with the homogenous and standardised nature of Fordist mass ([Fletcher et al., 2013](#); [Poon, 1993](#)). Despite the progressive move away from this association, however, mass and alternative forms of tourism largely remain dialectically polarised ([Weaver, 2007](#)) and have been described as hierarchical ([Vainikka, 2014](#)), with mass tourism associated with negative connotations and alternative or sustainable tourism forms viewed as ‘good’ or ‘better’.

[Weaver \(2007\)](#) argues that alternative forms of tourism, such as TEFL tourism, have begun to converge with the mass market, but the process is asymmetrical and heavily skewed towards mass tourism. This is demonstrated through the significant increases in the number of commercial operators that have subsequently changed the face of similar industries, such as volunteer tourism ([Wearing & McGehee, 2013b](#)). As a result, ideological foundations become threatened in exchange for profit-driven motivations ([Mostafanezhad, 2013](#)). The monetary exchange for doing good poses several philosophical and ethical questions and it is argued that monetary gain is not appropriate in a world of benevolent intentions ([Tomazos & Cooper, 2012](#)). Some researchers have argued that organisations are tapping into demand and are actively exploiting niches, such as TEFL teaching, with high prices charged ([Keese, 2011](#); [Tomazos & Butler, 2009](#)) and benefits to the hosts questionable ([Benson & Wearing, 2012](#)).

Although there do not yet appear to be any academic studies focusing on the fiscal nature of the TEFL industry, the commercial presence of the industry in the market is indisputable. A 2017 Google Internet search for the term *TEFL teaching in Thailand*, for example, revealed 504,000 results, demonstrating the significance of this sector. Further evidence of the commoditisation of TEFL and its links with the tourism industry is shown through the organisations offering TEFL packages and ‘package’ style tours. An example of this is the purchase in 2007 of the volunteer company i to i by the profit-maximising

organisation First Choice Holidays for approximately £20million ([Benson & Wearing, 2012](#)), who now promote paid TEFL opportunities at a cost.

4. Sustainability considerations

As more regions and countries develop their TEFL tourism industry, it becomes more important to take into consideration the sustainable management of TEFL operations. Defined as “tourism that respects both local people and the traveller, cultural heritage and the environment” ([UNESCO, 2017](#)), it is clear that the ideological foundations of TEFL tourism do provide the opportunity for a valuable and fun holiday that is also of benefit to the people of the host country. It can be suggested, however, that this utopian perspective requires urgent consideration and that the considerable gap in current literature is a significant concern.

There has been an influx of sustainability texts from both academic and industry perspectives produced in recent years that can be used as a mitigation for the lack of literature specific to the TEFL industry in this regard. [Stainton \(2017a\)](#) in her study found that the industry aligned most closely with TEFL tourism is volunteer tourism, and therefore suggests that lessons can be learned from this neighbouring tourism form. Like TEFL tourism, the volunteer tourism industry appears to have resisted critical scrutiny at large, owing to its laudable character and limited research ([Benson & Wearing, 2012](#); [Sin, 2009](#); [Weaver, 2006](#)). Whilst it is far beyond the scope of this paper to provide an exhaustive examination of identified negative impacts of volunteer tourism, it is important to highlight some of the key areas, of which may be indicative of possible negative impacts of the TEFL tourism industry.

From the perspective of the tourist, studies focusing on the volunteer tourism industry have provided evidence of culture shocks ([Mostafanezhad, 2013](#); [Wickens, 2011](#)), volunteers not understanding where their money has been spent ([Coren & Gray, 2012](#)), experiences not matching expectations ([Coren & Gray, 2012](#); [Gray & Campbell, 2007](#); [Guttentag, 2009](#)), misleading marketing material ([Coghlan & Fennell, 2009](#); [Palacios, 2010](#)), a feeling of awkwardness when locals are viewed as inferior to volunteers by the host population ([Palacios, 2010](#)) and lack of amenities/activities ([Gray & Campbell, 2007](#)), all of which may possibly play a role in TEFL tourism. Similarly, studies have also indicated a number of negative impacts of volunteer tourism which affect the host population. Relevant issues include a neglect of local's desires and lack of community support ([Benson & Wearing, 2012](#); [Guttentag, 2009](#); [Matthews, 2008](#)), unsatisfactory work ([Benson & Wearing, 2012](#); [Guttentag, 2009](#)), disruption of local economies ([Guttentag, 2009](#)), reinforcement of conceptualisations of the ‘other’ ([Benson & Wearing, 2012](#); [Coren & Gray, 2012](#); [Guttentag, 2009](#); [Raymond & Hall, 2008](#)), lack of specific skills, knowledge or experience by volunteers ([Brown & Hall, 2008](#); [Butcher & Smith, 2010](#); [Callanan & Thomas, 2005](#); [McGehee & Andereck, 2008](#); [Tomazos & Cooper, 2012](#)), lack of regulation of the sector ([Tomazos & Butler, 2009](#)), lack of quality control and background checks on volunteer tourists ([Tomazos & Butler, 2009](#)) and lack of financial and vocational benefits directed towards host community ([Clifton & Benson, 2006](#); [Wearing, 2001](#)).

Drawing on the aforementioned impacts, it is not difficult to imagine that these can be applied to the TEFL tourism industry. There is every possibility that TEFL tourists may also experience culture shocks or question where the money paid has been spent. It also appears that the TEFL industry does suffer a lack of regulation and quality control ([Sciberras, 2012](#)) and that the skills or experience required by teachers does not necessarily need to be of a prescribed standard (as indicated through examination of TEFL agency illegibility criteria). Whilst these links can be made quickly by the ‘naked eye’, there is very little academic evidence to support such claims. Through highlighting the commodification of the TEFL product within tourism, this paper aims to act as a precursor for further research in this regard.

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