



## Factors Influencing Success of Conditionally Admitted Students in Graduate TESOL Programs

Many graduate TESOL programs grapple with whether to admit applicants who fall short of meeting established admission criteria yet who show promise as future TESOL professionals. This study examined key characteristics affecting the success of candidates admitted conditionally to graduate TESOL programs. Participants were 21 students who had been admitted conditionally to master's-level TESOL programs at 2 faith-based universities. Correlations between several independent variables and success in those programs were studied. Experience abroad and holding a teaching certification had the highest positive correlations with academic success as measured by GPA in the 1st semester of course work. Previous ESL teaching experience had a respectable, yet smaller, correlation. All of these variables had higher correlations than undergraduate GPA. These findings suggest that considering undergraduate GPA in isolation is unlikely to result in informed decisions about conditional admits in graduate TESOL programs as there are many other factors that predict TESOL candidates' success.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that candidates in graduate TESOL programs differ from candidates in undergraduate teacher-education programs in many ways. For one thing, they tend to be older, often applying to TESOL programs after being out of school for some time, discovering or affirming their interests in other cultures and languages, and deciding to make a career of these interests. Sometimes they are already teachers but want to add TESOL to their current teaching area in order to better serve English learners in their classrooms and/or make themselves more marketable. Despite their interest in, if not passion for, TESOL, some of these students were relatively unsuccessful as undergraduates, earning a grade point average (GPA) below the 3.0 that is usually required for admission into a TESOL graduate program. As the first two authors have directed master's degree TESOL programs since 2004 and 2008, respectively, the authors have grappled with whether to admit applicants who fall short of meeting key admission criteria but otherwise show

promise as future TESOL professionals. Students with an undergraduate GPA below 3.0 fall into the conditional admission category; they need to earn a B or higher in their 1st semester to lose their conditional status.

The current study is intended to help TESOL program directors or admission personnel make informed admission decisions by examining what factors, in addition to undergraduate GPA, influence TESOL candidates' academic success. It is important to examine key characteristics of successful TESOL candidates in order to select promising applicants during the initial prescreening stage through admission review. While there are studies of admission policies and practices in other disciplines to predict graduate students' academic success, no such research, to our knowledge, exists in TESOL. This study seeks to address this gap in the literature. With little research on this topic in TESOL, indicators of student success in other master's programs were reviewed to predict factors affecting success in TESOL graduate programs.

Various studies have reported that undergraduate GPA and standardized test scores are strong indicators of success in graduate programs. Several studies of MBA programs found undergraduate GPA and Graduate Management Aptitude Test (GMAT) total score to have the strongest positive correlations with academic success in an MBA program as measured by graduate GPA (Ahmadi, Raiszadeh, & Helms, 1997; Braunstein, 2002; Fish & Wilson, 2007; Ragothaman, Carpenter, & Davies, 2009). Halberstam and Redstone's (2005) correlational study in a graduate speech-language pathology program found graduate GPA to be correlated with students' undergraduate GPA, along with GPA in prerequisite courses, the quality of their personal essay, and their letters of recommendation. Kuncel, Hezlett, and Ones (2001) performed a comprehensive meta-analysis of the predictive validity of the GRE for a wide range of academic disciplines and found "moderate correlations between GRE scores and important criterion measures, including graduate GPA, comprehensive examination scores, and faculty ratings of student competence" (p. 176). A study of an educational-leadership program at the doctoral level (Mountford, Ehlert, Machell, & Cockrell, 2007) showed that undergraduate GPA and GRE-Verbal score were the only factors with predictive value for student performance.

Although graduate schools have traditionally placed considerable weight on applicants' undergraduate GPA and standardized test scores, there is some research (a) challenging them as significant predictors of success in a graduate program and (b) identifying other factors, such as maturity and work experience, as strong indicators of graduate GPA.

Age appears to be a significant predictor of graduate GPA. Arnold and Chakravarty (1996) point out that several studies (e.g., Hecht, Manning, Swinton, & Braun, 1989) indicate that the GMAT total score, plus the verbal and quantitative component scores, decline with a person's age and the time since her or his last academic degree. The drop-off in these scores is greatest for those 34 years and older. Similarly, many MBA admission officers believe that undergraduate GPA decreases in importance as a predictor of graduate performance when the date of the undergraduate degree surpasses 10 years. These officers state that "motivation to succeed" is an important driver of performance in

MBA programs and that motivation changes significantly as an individual matures and her or his career develops. As a result, they conclude that the accuracy of undergraduate performance as an indicator of motivation decreases through time, and undergraduate GPA becomes less significant in the prediction of MBA performance. Ragothaman et al. (2009) found age to be a significant predictor of graduate GPA. "One would expect [that] the higher the age," they explain, "[the] higher the motivation to come back and get a masters degree" (p. 883). Halberstam and Redstone (2005) cite two studies that support maturity as a predictor of success in a graduate clinical program. Murden, Galloway, Reid, and Colwill (1978) examined the relationship between personal/academic characteristics and clinical success in a medical-school program and found that personal characteristics related to maturity correlated highly with clinical success. Similarly, Forrest and Naremore (1998) found the second-best predictor of success for students in a graduate speech-language program to be having an undergraduate major in a field other than speech pathology. They hypothesized that students with degrees in other fields tend to be older, to be more mature, and to have more drive.

Prior records of successful careers have a highly significant correlation with students' academic success. Braunstein's (2002) study of an MBA program found that work experience has a highly significant correlation with academic success as measured by graduate GPA. Fish and Wilson (2007) also conclude that the graduate admissions process should include potential measures of individual motivation or business success. Adams and Hancock (2000) pointed out that students with prior work experience have an easier time relating to ideas presented in class and can share personal experiences to connect class materials to real-life applications.

Several qualitative factors have also been related to success at the graduate level. Halberstam and Redstone (2005) found graduate GPA to be correlated with the quality of students' personal essay and their letters of recommendation, along with their undergraduate GPA. Ahmadi et al. (1997) concluded that undergraduate GPA and GMAT scores are significant variables in predicting success, but because of their low predictive ability, other forms of assessment (writing samples, interviews, work experience, or other nonquantitative measures or assessments) would be useful. Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, and Spiegel (1994) surveyed faculty in doctoral psychology programs about second-order admission criteria and found the following among the most important: research experience, "good match" factors (degree to which applicant skills and interest match those of the program, etc.), and writing skill.

Although extensive research has been done into factors that predict success in graduate programs, (a) most of the research has been conducted on business programs, and (b) many of the studies have emphasized quantitative factors such as undergraduate GPA and GRE score. Furthermore, these studies do not distinguish between students who were admitted unconditionally and those who were admitted with conditions. This is an important distinction for directors of graduate TESOL programs, who grapple with whether to admit applicants who fail to meet the undergraduate GPA criterion but show promise

as future TESOL professionals. If directors reject them because of the low GPA, there is the possibility of excluding otherwise qualified TESOL candidates. At the same time, we have accepted that undergraduate GPA is one of the most significant predictors of academic success for graduate work. The present study was conducted to address the following research questions:

1. How can directors of graduate TESOL programs make informed admission decisions about applicants whose undergraduate GPA falls below 3.0?
2. What factors predict the success—or failure—of TESOL applicants whose undergraduate GPA falls below 3.0?

The present study uses a simple correlation model to examine key characteristics of students' success based on the data collected from two master's-level TESOL programs.

### **Method**

Data were collected from two private, faith-based universities, one in central Ohio (UCO) and one in upstate New York (UNY). Both universities are small, tuition-driven schools that operate in the shadow of large research institutions. Both programs are relatively new: UCO has been offering classes since 2005, UNY since 2008. Almost all of the TESOL candidates in both programs are native English speakers: UNY has trained all native English-speaking American students so far, and less than 5% of the UCO TESOL candidates have been international students. The directors of the two programs looked at candidates who had been accepted conditionally into their programs during 1 academic year, the fall of 2008 through the summer of 2009. There were 21 individuals in this category, eight at UCO and 13 at UNY. These candidates were admitted conditionally because they had failed to attain a cumulative GPA of 3.00 at the undergraduate (UG) level required for admission. All of them were native English speakers.

The directors first identified several characteristics that could be used to describe these candidates. They include: overall undergraduate GPA (typically required for admission; past performance is often a predictor of future success), whether or not they had experience teaching English to speakers of other languages (previous ESL experience hereafter), previous teaching experience, whether or not they held any type of teaching certification, whether or not they had any experience abroad (travel, work, etc.), previous graduate work (and GPA), other master's degree(s) (success in one graduate program might predict success in another graduate program), age (age reflects maturity, and maturity is necessary for success in graduate school), years between undergraduate degree and entering current TESOL program (maturity factor, opportunity to have other life and professional experiences). Basic descriptive statistics were used to paint a demographic picture of these candidates.

The directors then identified several factors that they hypothesized might predict success for these candidates. Five independent variables, then, were se-

lected to correlate with their candidate success. These variables were selected based on best practices in the field, what was found in the literature review, and the experience of the authors of the present study. They include overall undergraduate GPA, TESOL experience, experience abroad, teaching certification held, and candidates' age at the time of their application to the graduate TESOL program. The directors obtained this information by reviewing documents that candidates had submitted for admission (applications, essays, and CV/résumés) or by asking candidates directly (by telephone or e-mail).

These factors were analyzed using basic, analytical statistics to capture which factors were the most predictive of success for candidates who fell into the conditional category. Success for these students was defined as GPA in their 1st semester of course work: They needed to average B or higher in their 1st semester to lose their conditional status. Graduate program GPA, then, was the dependent variable of the present analysis. First, descriptive statistics were gathered in order to describe the characteristics of candidates who were admitted conditionally to graduate TESOL programs at the two faith-based institutions. Then a simple correlation was used, with the GPA in the graduate TESOL program as the dependent variable. The five independent variables are identified above. For undergraduate GPA, the overall figure (on a 4.0 scale) was used. For age, the closest rounded figure was used.

The general idea here is to uncover important characteristics and experiences of these conditional admits that go beyond the minimum undergraduate GPA in order to predict factors affecting TESOL candidates' academic success. The authors of the present study believe that a more robust analysis of candidates and a deeper look at what they bring to the graduate TESOL program can enhance the overall quality of students who are admitted. Considering their undergraduate GPA in isolation is unlikely to produce informed decisions about conditional admits in a graduate TESOL program.

## **Results and Discussion**

This study examined key factors influencing TESOL candidates' success in graduate TESOL programs by examining academic success or failure of 21 conditionally admitted students in two private faith-based universities. Correlations between several independent variables and success in those programs as measured by graduate program GPA were studied. After a brief description of the students, salient TESOL success predictors from the strongest to the weakest are reported.

### ***Profiles of Students Admitted Conditionally***

Students who had an undergraduate GPA below 3.0 were admitted conditionally to both universities. Descriptive statistics were used to characterize these candidates. As shown in Table 1 (Appendix A), 21 students were admitted conditionally to the two schools between the fall of 2008 and the summer of 2009. All of them were native English speakers. The average undergraduate GPA of these candidates was 2.62, with a range from 2.20 to 2.99. Overall, these candidates made very good academic progress: The average graduate GPA for

their initial 3 to 9 hours was 3.58. More female students (14) were admitted than male students (7). The students' ages spanned from 26 to 74, with an average of 41. Eleven out of 21 students had done previous graduate work before they entered the program, and they had an average of 7.5 years between their undergraduate study and graduate work. Most of them (17 out of 21) had experience abroad (travel, work, etc.). About half of them had previous ESL teaching experience (11 out of 21) and held a teaching certification in another subject area (12 out of 21).

### ***TESOL Success Predictor: Experience Abroad***

The data suggest that having experience abroad is one of the strongest indicators of graduate TESOL program success. Experience abroad has the highest positive correlation (that is statistically significant) with academic success (correlation of 0.555 with a “*p*” value of 0.008—Appendix B). The relatively high positive correlation, with the relatively low “*p*” values, suggests that if candidates have experience abroad, they are likely to do well in their 1st semester of graduate work in TESOL. There is little research to confirm or deny these correlations in TESOL, but several studies in other disciplines have addressed the predictive value of experience abroad for success in a graduate program (teachers' higher employment rates after returning from teaching abroad [Black & Scott, 1997]; educational benefits of international experiential learning experiences in an Master of Social Work program [Gilin & Young, 2009]; professional value of temporary study in another country [Ulrich, 2007]). One possible reason that experience abroad correlates so strongly with success in graduate TESOL programs is that the experience results in applicants' increased awareness of, sensitivity to, and skillfulness with other cultures and languages. In this respect, experience abroad is the cause of success in TESOL. Another possibility is that experience abroad indicates applicants' interest in other cultures and languages, which is a desirable, if not required, trait in TESOL. In this respect, experience abroad is the result of a predisposition toward success in TESOL.

### ***TESOL Success Predictor: Teaching Certification***

Having teaching certification is a stronger indicator of success in a graduate TESOL program than undergraduate GPA, the variable that made these students conditional admits. Holding a teaching certificate has a positive correlation with academic success in TESOL (correlation of 0.497 with a “*p*” value of 0.022). There is little research in other fields to confirm or deny these correlations, though Braunstein (2002) found work experience to have a positive correlation with academic success in an MBA program. Teacher certification may be the equivalent of work experience in TESOL education, but no studies, to the authors' knowledge, have addressed the predictive value of teaching certification for success in a graduate TESOL program. Although there has been no research into the relationship between teaching certification and success in graduate TESOL studies, anecdotal evidence suggests several reasons for the correlation. First, having a teaching certificate clearly demonstrates an applicant's commitment to education, and such a commitment is necessary to

succeed in a graduate TESOL program. Second, holding a teaching certificate is a measure of success, and being successful in one type of teacher-education program bodes well for success in another type. Finally, having a teaching certificate suggests that an applicant has classroom experience and such experience provides a sturdy framework for TESOL study. These reasons are really hypotheses and call for further research.

#### ***TESOL Success Predictor: ESOL Teaching Experience***

Previous ESL teaching experience does not show a significant relationship with academic success in the graduate TESOL program (correlation of 0.27 with a “*p*” value of 0.236). There is a positive relationship between teaching experience in ESL and success in graduate TESOL education, but it is substantially less than the one between experience abroad or teaching certification and graduate TESOL education. The finding is unexpected in that work experience in the field is generally a strong indicator of success in any field (Adams & Hancock, 2000; Braunstein, 2002). The question arises as to why prior ESL teaching experiences correlated less with academic success in TESOL graduate programs than experience abroad and holding a teaching certification did. Further research is suggested.

#### ***TESOL Success Predictor: Age***

Age does not show a statistically significant relationship with academic success in the graduate TESOL program. For the 21 students observed in the present study, age has a relatively small, inverse relationship with academic success in the graduate TESOL program (-0.16 with a “*p*” value of 0.478). Moreover, this correlation is not significant at the 0.05 level. This finding is inconsistent with other studies, which supported maturity as a predictor of success in graduate programs (Forrest & Naremore, 1998; Murden et al., 1978; Ragothaman et al., 2009). However, because of the small sample size in the present study, it is suggested that future research gather additional data on this variable over a longer period with a larger data set.

#### ***TESOL Success Predictor: Undergraduate GPA***

The most surprising finding in this study is that undergraduate GPA did not correlate more highly with success in graduate TESOL education than the other variables. In fact, undergraduate GPA exhibited the weakest correlation with academic success as measured by 1st-semester graduate GPA, as shown in Table 2 (Appendix B). This finding is surprising given the extensive support in the literature for undergraduate GPA as a predictor of success in graduate programs (Ahmadi et al., 1997; Braunstein, 2002; Fish & Wilson, 2007; Halberstam & Redstone, 2005; Mountford et al., 2007; Pelech, Stalker, Regehr, & Jacobs, 1999; Ragothaman et al., 2009). There are many possible reasons for this finding, including change in candidate motivation through time. Some studies of the MBA, including Hecht et al. (1989), found that the accuracy of undergraduate performance as an indicator of motivation decreases through time, and undergraduate GPA becomes less significant in the prediction of aca-

ademic program performance. Given the average age of the students in the study ( $M=41$ ), it may not be surprising that undergraduate GPA was no longer the most accurate predictor of success in a graduate program.

In summary, the data in this study suggest that undergraduate GPA had the weakest correlation with academic success in graduate TESOL programs and that students who were admitted (conditionally) for reasons other than undergraduate GPA (experience abroad, teaching certification, etc.) performed well despite their low undergraduate GPA. Therefore, we must consider many factors other than undergraduate GPA in attempting to predict candidates' academic success in graduate TESOL programs.

## **Conclusion**

### ***Recommendations for TESOL Policy and Pedagogy***

The present study has implications for both administration and pedagogy in graduate TESOL programs. The administrative implication is that those who make admissions decisions for such programs must be careful not to base their decisions exclusively on undergraduate GPA as it correlates only weakly with success in those programs. Instead, admissions personnel should place significant weight on experience, both personal and professional, when considering applicants. These personnel should pay more attention to qualitative factors, such as experience abroad, teaching certification, and TESOL experience. Taking a more holistic approach to the admission process could lead to increased admissions and diversity within programs. The admission process for graduate TESOL programs might also take into account other qualitative measures or assessments such as writing samples and interviews. A writing sample would assess candidates' writing ability, a critical factor for academic success at the graduate level, and identify candidates' commitment to the field. An interview might identify candidates' commitment to the field and their dispositions for teaching.

The pedagogical implication is that, because prior work and teaching experiences, especially abroad and with English learners, are highly correlated with success, ESOL teacher educators may want to incorporate more teaching and intercultural competence-building opportunities into their curriculum. Teaching experiences might vary from increased structured observation opportunities to microteaching in class to paid or volunteer ESL teaching. Offering an international internship program during an academic break or for a semester might increase ESL teacher candidates' academic and professional success by giving them first-hand experience with teaching, as well as with diverse cultures and languages. We can offer these elements within the US by giving students extra credit for service-learning activities—for example, serving in community-based ESL programs or participating in/hosting international events.

### ***Limitation of the Current Study***

The present study should be considered preliminary in that it includes

a total of only 21 students in the sample. The data used were extracted from information that students provided at the application stage of the admissions process. The authors suggest that this analysis be redone with a larger sample and over a longer period during students' graduate work. Basing admissions to graduate TESOL programs on undergraduate GPA is insufficient: Other factors should be considered. Finally, success in TESOL must be defined more broadly, and candidates should be considered on the basis of more diverse measures or assessment.

### ***Suggested Future Research***

In terms of future research, this study raises several follow-up questions to explore. Why do experience abroad and holding a teaching certification correlate so highly with success in graduate TESOL programs? What kinds of experience abroad correlate with program success? Is it necessary, for example, to have worked or even lived abroad to be successful at TESOL, or is it just as good to have simply traveled outside the US? While the present study looked at experience abroad, it may be that any cross-cultural and/or -linguistic experience, whether in the US or abroad, might enhance a candidate's TESOL knowledge, skills, and/or personal dispositions. Examples of this experience include working as an ESL tutor, volunteering at international fairs, and hosting international families. Why does teaching certification also correlate with program success? Furthermore, why does TESOL experience correlate with success in graduate TESOL programs, but not to the extent of experience abroad or holding a teaching certification? Further research should also set the parameters for what constitutes success in graduate TESOL programs. More accurate definitions of success could include GPA at graduation, graduating from the program, and/or success in the field. It is widely recognized that candidates with extensive backgrounds in teaching enhance the experience of their TESOL classmates and faculty: This might be another measure of success. More than 30 years ago, Hartnett and Willingham (1980) raised the question of how to define success in graduate studies. The present study echoes that question.

### ***Final Recommendations***

The present study demonstrates that several factors may be related to the success of those admitted conditionally to graduate TESOL programs. The authors recommend viewing the results of the present study as preliminary because of the small sample size and the need for more uniform methods of collecting the data. Undergraduate GPA has traditionally been used as a primary criterion in admissions decisions, but other factors—experience abroad, teaching certification, and TESOL experience—may be significant predictors of academic success. Admission personnel may want to consider these factors at the prescreening stage of the graduate enrollment process, and ESOL teacher educators may want to incorporate these success factors into the TESOL curriculum so that teacher candidates will have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to be successful both academically and professionally.

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## Appendix A

**Table 1**  
**Characteristics of Students Who Were Admitted Conditionally**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
UGGPA	21	2.62	0.25
Graduate GPA	21	3.58	1.28
Age	21	40.81	11.96
Years between UG and master's	21	7.52	4.91

## Appendix B

**Table 2**  
**Correlation Analyses Predicting Academic Success**  
**for Conditionally Admitted Students**

<i>Predictor</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Correlation</i>	<i>p</i>
UGGPA	2.62	0.24	0.14	0.542
TESOL experience	1.52	0.49	0.27	0.236
Experience abroad	1.71	0.45	0.56	0.008
Teaching certification	1.57	0.49	0.50	0.022
Age	40.81	11.67	-0.16	0.478
Graduate GPA	3.24	1.25		

*Note.* The correlations and significance tests presented in Table 2 include 2 students who withdrew from the program during the 1st semester, thereby earning a program GPA of 0.0. The researchers felt the inclusion of these GPAs to be valid and relevant based on the nature of the research question. The students withdrew for a number of reasons.