

Summer madness?

Nicola Prentis
explains why managing
a summer school might
be a sensible move.

After a hard year's teaching, there's no denying the appeal of a month or two off in the summer – especially if you're lucky enough to have a year-round job with paid summer holidays. But, if you want to see what a position in management is like, summer could be the best time to dip your toe in.

If you're wondering about changing path, but hesitant about leaving the classroom behind, summer school offers an intense trial period. If you don't like it, you've only lost a few weeks. Even for someone happy in their year-round job, the experience gained by giving up a month in the summer could open doors to promotion or a pay rise back home. And, of course, the extra money is a huge plus. With accommodation and food provided, there's almost nothing to spend your basic salary on – plus the few days' holiday pay that plump up your last wage packet.

Suitability

In the UK, summer schools, even good ones, struggle to fill DOS and Academic Manager positions with staff who are both qualified *and* suited to the role. Management isn't for everyone, but can you have what it takes if you've never done anything like it before? The answer might well be yes, but many applicants apply for *teaching* positions because they wrongly assume they're not eligible for a senior role.

In year-round schools, this is often true. Management positions come up so rarely that experience is the key factor in securing a job. Summer schools just

can't afford to be that picky because the explosion of jobs in July and August means demand outweighs supply. They have to look for people who they think they can train at induction, which means that skills and character traits can carry as much weight as experience.

As Academic Consultant for one of the top five summer schools in the UK, I helped seek out potential Academic Managers. And, with six years running a centre, I learnt what makes a good manager and what makes for a disaster. So what do you need to do the job?

Requirements

British Council rules require that you have the equivalent of a DELTA, which includes observed teaching. Obviously, you must also have the legal right to work in the UK. There are no ways round the 'right to work' requirement, but, in cases of dire need, if the Centre Director above you has the appropriate qualification and can do your lesson observations for you, you might be hired even if you *don't* meet the qualification requirements.

I get asked a lot if it matters whether an applicant is a native speaker. Absolutely not, but native speaker *proficiency* is essential. In 2014, the school I worked for had a Polish Senior Academic Manager overseeing seven Academic Managers, three of whom were non-native speakers (Spanish, Greek and Polish). Aside from the fact that it's illegal in Europe to advertise jobs only for native speakers, it simply isn't necessary for the job.

Summer madness?

Skills

The other language you need to be proficient in is IT. Managers who fail at the job are usually those who get stressed out by having to do anything more challenging than open an email. You need to have a basic working knowledge of *Word* and *Excel* and the computer sense to check your work emails regularly. Be honest with yourself about your computer capabilities, as this is not something that can be taught at induction.

The next skill you need is the ability to lead and make decisions. Again, this means honestly evaluating yourself. You'll be in charge from the moment you introduce yourself to your staff at induction. You might be managing returning staff with much more knowledge of the school than you, and any sign of weakness, hesitation or lack of confidence on Day 1 can end up in full-scale mutiny by Week 3. I've seen a manager so afraid of the job that she couldn't even say her name in front of 200 people at the general induction without her voice faltering. She didn't last long.

She was English so, again, being a native speaker has no connection with doing the job well. However, there is some evidence that the character people take on in another language can be different from the one they have in their mother tongue. Someone might be brusque or come across as domineering in English. Or the reverse: they might be more hesitant and less sure of themselves. These things won't translate well in the job. Think about how you feel in English and how you see yourself when expressing your 'English self' if you're not a native speaker.

Communication with your staff isn't the only thing to be thinking about. How well each member fits into the whole team is a huge part of the success of the high-pressure environment of summer school. Ask yourself if your personality suits this quite extrovert requirement. A cheerful demeanor is critical. Are you generally a positive person? If so, you'll

do well at summer school and come out of it with a great reference. It almost counts for more than being brilliant at every aspect of the job.

The last skill you need is organisation. There might not be anyone around post-induction to help you assimilate all the information, so it's up to you to put it in a manageable format for yourself. If you're the type who makes lists and schedules, you'll get on well. Typically speaking, the job will involve placement testing and class allocation; assigning teachers to classes and managing the changeover if classes are shared; making sure reports and registers are done on time by the teachers; dealing with parent enquiries and students moving level. In the pressure cooker of summer school, perhaps managing teachers with very little experience post-TEFL-qualification, the only way to stay on top of the workload is to be calm and organised.

When to apply

One more thing to remember is that even applying late might not be a problem. Summer schools open recruitment early on in the year so you might think, if your application isn't in by Easter, that you've either missed out entirely or only lower-quality schools are still hiring. Aside from the incredibly high demand for qualified applicants, you'd be surprised to learn the dropout rate of successful candidates. It's even more shocking how close to the beginning of summer these can occur, leaving positions open and a last-minute scramble for managers. You might find yourself able to negotiate a shorter contract so you can fit it into your annual leave.

Where to look

The key for anyone looking at taking this mini-step is choosing the right school. The usual TEFL recruitment websites are a good place to start to see what's on offer. Then you need to narrow them down to those that will help you gain what you want from your summer. Here are some things to help:

- The British Council inspects summer schools every four years and the results are published on their website: www.britishcouncil.org/education/accrreditation/centres. Look for 'strengths' in the parts of the reports

that refer to Management, Learning Resources and Teaching and Learning. If it's been three years since they were inspected, there's the likelihood of having to deal with an inspection in your first summer, which is a pressure you might not want. On the other hand, it's great for your CV!

- The *EL Gazette* runs regular articles on the quality of schools, and it came to the conclusion that the best summer schools are those that spring from year-round private boarding schools, as they have an infrastructure already in place. These might be better than chains you've heard of, but which open a large number of schools in July that disappear in August.
- Find out how long the induction is. A school that cares enough to give a one-week induction to its managers is going to be much more professional than one that has the managers and teachers turn up and do some ice-breakers one day before the students start arriving.



As a testing ground for your own personal development, professional development or as a doorway to a higher-paid job, I can't think of a better place than summer school. If it's not for you, at least you've found that out in just a few weeks, rather than being stuck in a job you can't leave because of the holes it will create in your CV. **ETp**



Nicola Prentis has taught for over ten years, including six summers as a DOS and Centre Director. She is an Academic Consultant to summer schools and a materials writer, with two graded readers and a self-study speaking skills book published by HarperCollins.

nicolanicol@live.co.uk

Writing for ETp

Would you like to write for ETp? We are always interested in new writers and fresh ideas. For guidelines and advice, write to us or email:

helena.gomm@pavpub.com