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

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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-orienteered 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-orienteered 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; Punthumasen, 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

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 volunteering 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 keys 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.

Table 1
TEFL Opportunities in Thailand.

TEFL organisation	Placement details	Cost to TEFL teacher	Monthly salary in country	Person specification	Programme synopsis
i to i (owned by first choice holidays)	- 5 months teaching - Orientation and full support throughout - 120 h online TEFL training and 2 days classroom training	£1095	£315[a] + accommodation and weekday meals	- Must hold a university degree - Must be a native English speaker - No experience required - Must be aged between 21 and 45 - Must have a passport from the UK, Ireland, USA, Canada, Australia or New Zealand	'…discover the ins and outs of laid-back Thai life, by living as an English teacher in the local community. Explore lively cities, chill out on idyllic white sand beaches, visit serene temples and get to grips with teaching English in a friendly host school. You'll earn a generous monthly allowance and be able to live very comfortably, and you'll receive great support throughout.'
TEFL heaven	- 6 months + teaching - 3-4 weeks face-to-face TEFL training - Guaranteed placement hosted via Media Kids	£1095	£600[a] + accommodation during TEFL training	- Must hold a university degree - Must be a native English speaker - No experience required - Must have a passport from the UK, Ireland, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand or South Africa	'Join a face-to-face TEFL course with around 20 or so like-minded individuals, train in TEFL, with complimentary holiday resort accommodation in a paradise location in Thailand – and receive a guaranteed paid teaching job afterwards for 6 months or more! Get 3 times more than the average local salary and enjoy a country that is known internationally as "The Land of Smiles!"'
International TEFL academy (promoted via Goabroad.com)	- 6-12 months teaching - 180 h TEFL course + 20 h practical training - Lifetime job placement assistance	£935–£1450[a]	£350–£500[a]	- Programme open to worldwide participants - Must possess excellent native-level English - No experience necessary	'Teaching English overseas not just an opportunity to work abroad, it is the chance to truly immerse yourself in a new culture, experience a different way of life, build friendships that will last a lifetime and discover your own potential… you'll have the opportunity to experience a land, its people, and culture firsthand, see the sights and sample the local cuisine, and make friends you'll have for a lifetime… International TEFL Academy can be the gateway to making your travel dreams a reality.'
Teach English ESL	- 5-10 months + teaching - 120 h TEFL course - Lifetime TEFL support	£1660[a]	Salary dependent on qualifications	- Must be able to read, write and speak English fluently (no need to be a native speaker) - No experience necessary - No qualifications necessary	'If the limestone karst formations of Thailand's southern coast have you beaming with delight, our Krabi TEFL Course is just for you. A long-time favorite destination for beach goers and rock climbers alike, with stunning sunsets, island hopping and great nightlife, Krabi has all the charm of a beach city and none of the unwanted fluff. With our three-week, internationally accredited TESOL/TEFL course in Thailand, you can live your dream of teaching English abroad. And the best part of all? It comes with ESL job placement in Thailand!'
SEE TEFL	- 4-5 months teaching - 2 weeks teaching essentials training - SEE TEFL Certification awarded on completion of semester one + 2000 word essay	£900[a]	£500[a] + accommodation during training	- Must hold a university degree - Must be a native English speaker - Must be aged 21-50 - Must have a passport from the UK, Ireland, USA, Canada, Australia or New Zealand - Must possess police clearance from their home country - No experience necessary	'The SEE TEFL Paid Internship is an ideal way for people who wish to experience living and working in Thailand as a paid English language teacher, but who are not ready to commit to a 4-week training course, or a teaching commitment longer than 5 months… with a salary of not less than25,000 Thai Baht (THB) per month…It is possible to save money from this salary during the internship period, and afford at the end of the teaching placement a few months traveling Thailand and Southeast Asia and/or sitting on a beach under a palm tree, or trekking in the jungles… There will be other foreigners in the internship placement town, but these are likely to be other teachers, adventurous travellers or expats.'
Teach away	- 12 months teaching - Online TEFL qualification available separately	Not stated on website	£300–£600[a]	- Must have a university degree - Must have a TEFL certificate - Usually will have previous ESL teaching experience	'For those who are interested in teaching English in Thailand, Teach Away offers a variety of teaching jobs ranging from ESL instructors in private language institutes to English teachers at private international schools. These positions are ideal for teachers looking to advance their professional careers, or for social, active individuals looking

Table 1 (*continued*)

TEFL organisation	Placement details	Cost to TEFL teacher	Monthly salary in country	Person specification	Programme synopsis
					to travel and explore new employment opportunities in a dream location.'
Gap 360	- 6-12 months teaching - 120 h TEFL/TESOL course - 1 week Thai language and culture orientation	£999	Up to £830[a]	- Must be aged 21-35 - Must be a native English speaker - Must have a passport from the UK, Ireland, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand or South Africa - No experience necessary - No qualifications necessary	'This programme is unique as it offers a whole week of exciting cultural immersion, where you can discover all about Thai culture, see the sights, learn a little of the Thai language and have fun trying Thai cooking or visiting temples! Get a paid teaching job in Thailand after training and earn up to USD1200 per month in a teaching placement. Train directly in a Thai school environment, gain practical classroom experience and study at our beach front training centre with views of the sea in beautiful, laid-back Hua Hin! Meet like-minded mates and bond with teaching buddies as you train. Make a real difference to the lives of Thai kids as a school teacher, plus volunteer for 2 days teaching at a kids camp during your TEFL training!'

Based on- i to i (2016), TEFL Heaven (2016), Goabroad (2016), Teach English ESL (2016), SEE TEFL (2016), Teach Away (2016), Gap 360 (2016).

[a] Based on May 2016 exchange rates.

5. Methods

The intention of this paper is to highlight the links between the packaged tourism product and TEFL teaching in order to examine to what extent the TEFL experience resembles a commodified product. This is evidenced through the presentation and analysis of a range of data collected as part of a larger study of TEFL tourism based in Thailand. A mixed method triangulated data approach was utilised to reinforce arguments presented in this paper, making use of a review of current published literature by TEFL organisations on their websites along with qualitative and quantitative data collected via online blogs and web-surveys. Mixed method approaches are particularly valuable when undertaking research in a 'real world' setting due to the complex nature of the phenomena and the range of perspectives that are required to understand them (Robson, 2011). Quantitative research tends to provide an account of structures in social life, whereas qualitative research provides a sense of process (Bryman, 2012). Therefore, adopting a mixed method approach for this study enabled an overall perspective of the TEFL industry to be achieved. Furthermore, a mixed method approach allowed for greater flexibility within the research. Research questions were developed during the qualitative research phase and tested throughout the quantitative phase (Bryman, 2012; Robson, 2011).

To begin, a content analysis of TEFL agency websites advertised on the Internet was undertaken. In order to provide an overview of TEFL opportunities five key areas were examined and organised by hand according to a pre-determined coding system. Sub codes of duration, training, pastoral support, job search assistance, orientation and additional elements were collated to provide an overview of (1) placement details. The remaining codes consisted of (2) cost to the teacher, (3) monthly salary, (4) person specification and (5) programme synopsis. To examine all opportunities available to the consumer was far beyond the reach of this study, therefore a summary of the opportunities presented on the first page of results obtained via a Google Internet search was used in order to provide an overview of the TEFL opportunities in Thailand advertised. Whilst there were limitations of utilising this method, such as sample size and selection bias, with the likes of Google search engine optimisation and algorithms playing an inevitable role, the intention of this section of the research was to be indicative as opposed to explicit.

Primary data was obtained via a two-staged sequential exploratory mixed methods research approach based upon the case-study of Thailand. The first stage was exploratory in nature, employing the use of blog analysis. Travel blogs, within which category TEFL teaching in Thailand often falls, can be data-rich and valuable sources of information (Banyai & Glover, 2012). Content analysis of blogs allowed for qualitative, unstructured data to be systematically reviewed and classified according to themes, characteristics and patterns relevant to the research aims (Crano, Brewer, & Lac, 2015; Stainton, 2017b). Blog analysis helped to understand previously issues within the TEFL industry through the narratives provided (Snee, 2010; Stainton, 2017b). The blogs provided easy access to data and spanned wide geographical areas, reaching data that would otherwise be difficult to obtain (Carson & Schmallegger, 2008; Snee, 2010; Stainton, 2017b).

The second stage was explanatory. Based upon the exploratory data collected during research phase one a survey was design and administered. The online survey consisted of 78 questions, which formed part of a larger study, and took approximately twenty minutes to complete. The majority of the survey consisted of closed-questions, most of which were multiple choice or Likert-style. In order to reduce human error and to enable more complex statistical tests to be completed with ease Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version twenty-three, was utilised for the analysis of research phase two. Once the data was input into SPSS it was cleaned to eradicate or identify any data entry errors (Seale, 2012) before statistical tests were undertaken. Relationships between variables were then determined through the use

Table 2
Elements organised by an agency.

Element organised (multiple response)	Percent of respondents who used an agency
Accommodation	73.5
TEFL qualification	69.5
Collection from the airport	65.8
Pre-departure information	64.7
A guaranteed job	88.0
Flights	14.5

(Valid responses = 1034).

of descriptive statistics and chi square tests.

Data were obtained through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques and blogs were located through the search engine Google and Wordpress blogging platform. Snowballing was facilitated through the use of hyperlinks included with blogs. A total of 36 blogs were collated, after which time the determined saturation point was reached; this meant that no new themes or patterns had been derived from the data during ten consecutive blog analyses. Surveys were administered online using e-mail and social-media links as methods of distribution, also taking convenience and snowball approaches, where existing contacts forwarded the survey to their acquaintances. Internet connectively allowed for the surveys to reach a large sample both demographically and geographically, with almost immediacy. A total of 567 responses were obtained.

6. The TEFL package: evidence on an organisation level

Table 1 presents a summary of the data obtained from the websites of TEFL organisations collated via the Google search. As suggested by Griffith (2014), many programmes appear to offer travel advice and orientation prior to departure, in-country transportation, accommodation and visa assistance. In addition, some programmes offer optional excursions such as orphanage tours. Based on the products advertised by TEFL agencies, it can be argued that these organisations act as post-modern tour operators that have moved beyond the traditional stereotype of the package holiday (Vainikka, 2014), and which provide an commodified TEFL product in accordance with current tourist desires.

Whilst, in essence, packages such as these may replicate many of the essential components of a modern package holiday, it is important to recognise that the nature of TEFL teaching is very different from the typical sea, sun and sand holidays. Despite this fundamental difference, the websites of the organisations included in Table 1 promote a strong theme of tourism, with images and rhetoric of exotic beaches, cultural tourism, camaraderie and parties (as represented through the programme synopsis). This factor provides strong indications of and further justifies the conceptual amalgamation of package tourism and TEFL, giving rise to the question as to why the two research areas have not yet been combined by scholars, despite the strong associations as presented to the consumer.

Griffith (2014) suggests that there are a variety of TEFL organisation types ranging from charitable, governmental or non-profit organisations to commercial ventures. This variety, however, was not apparent when undertaking the online search for TEFL opportunities in Thailand, where commercial organisations dominated the results. The prolific nature of the industry is demonstrated, for example, through the company i to i who offer TEFL placements as part of their provision and, despite their individual branding, are owned by the profit-maximising organisation First Choice Holidays (Benson & Wearing, 2012) who are typically associated with modern package holidays. It is, therefore no surprise that TEFL teaching opportunities provided by such agents have strong associations with the traditional package tourism model.

To date, there is no clear distinction between the types of agents offering TEFL placements and the differences in their services and

values. This is akin to the volunteer tourism industry, where it is argued that the ever-evolving marketplace contributes to an ambiguous industry. With such variations in terms of size, ethos and business there are concerns with regard to the value of projects promoted by these agents (Tomazos & Butler, 2009). Some agents have a broader knowledge and understanding of tourism and development (and by extension TEFL teaching) than others (Wearing & McGehee, 2013b) and the current lack of regulation of the industry leaves the door open for opportunists (Tomazos & Butler, 2009). Whilst studies addressing sustainability considerations such as this within volunteer tourism may not directly apply to the TEFL sector due to the macro, umbrella nature of the industry (Stainton, 2016), the similarities in terms of variations in TEFL facilitating organisations and lack of regulation indicate that the TEFL tourism industry may too be susceptible to ambiguity and opportunistic activities.

7. The TEFL package: evidence from the teacher

The prominence of the use of agencies such as those discussed above was evident through the collection of survey data, where almost half (49%) of respondents stated that they had utilised an agency to organise their TEFL placement. As suggested above, these packages were reflective of a post-modern holiday experience (Vainikka, 2014), as opposed to the traditional package holiday model. Rather than incorporating transportation and accommodation as key components, packages consumed by respondents included a range of different elements, outlined in Table 2.

Despite purchasing a commodified experience, the majority of TEFL teachers in Thailand were paid for their services (80.8%), an approach by organisations not commonly found in the tourism industry. Salaries ranged from £70–£2775 per month (based on March 2016 exchange rates), with an average salary of £681.64. For 18.5% of respondents, expenses were provided by the employer. Of this number, 69.5% were entitled to expenses in addition to their salary and 30.5% were undertaking voluntary placements. The majority of respondents entitled to expenses were provided with free accommodation or a housing allowance (64.8%). Other expenses included food (23.8%), travel reimbursement (30%), visas and work permits (13.3%) and insurance (8.6%). There has been considerable debate about whether a position is voluntary or not when compensation is of a non-financial nature (e.g. Ellis, 2003; Lyons, 2003; Lyons & Wearing, 2012; Tomazos & Butler, 2009), with the blurring of paid and voluntary work becoming commonplace (Lyons, 2003; Lyons & Wearing, 2012). This suggests that although respondents may have classified their experience as voluntary, due to the receipt of alternative means of compensation some scholars may not view this to be the case.

There were a high number of missing values (61.5%) in response to a question relating to how much was paid to a TEFL agency, indicating that the issue of where the TEFL tourist's money ends up is somewhat ambiguous. 24.7% of respondents who booked through an agency stated that they did not pay an initial fee but that the agency took a percentage of their salary each month. The actual amount was largely unknown. A further 11.1% could not remember the amount paid. Derived from the remaining 38.5% of responses, the mean value was £556.88, therefore approximating the average cost of undertaking a TEFL placement through an agency at £550. When comparing this to volunteer tourism, which is similar in nature and frequently incorporates TEFL (albeit on a voluntary basis), this is significantly lower than the average cost of £2000 to undertake a volunteer tourism placement (TRAM, 2008). Upfront costs paid to TEFL agencies ranged from £60 to £995 with a standard deviation of £280.30.

The monthly deduction by the agency experienced by some respondents highlights a significant difference between the payment methods adopted by traditional tour operators and those operating in the TEFL sector. This practice was not indicated in the information provided by TEFL agencies (Table 1), further emphasising a possible

ambiguity amongst TEFL teachers about what costs are involved and where their money may end up. Prospective TEFL teachers may not be aware that they will be required to make regular payments to the agency and there is evidence to suggest that in some instances TEFL teachers may be paying such fees unknowingly. Blogger R explained:

'A friend of mine came to Thailand through this company that did everything for her. I wondered why her salary was so much lower than mine so she investigated only to find out that she was paying a percentage of her salary to the organisation each month. What an absolute RIP off! If it went to the school or to someone in Thailand I could maybe have some empathy, but it didn't- it went straight back to the US based organisation that placed her there!'

A further respondent suggested that there may even be an element of corruption amongst TEFL organisations.

'My agency did not appear to be corrupt as far as I knew, but the agency that some of my co-teachers were with was very corrupt. Additionally, the school English program head administrator was corrupt and routinely withheld portions of teachers' paychecks and deposited them into her personal account.'[sic] (Survey respondent, anonymous).

Whilst it can be argued that it is unethical that TEFL teachers may be paying money to an agency without their knowledge, blogger R's comment about where the money paid ends up raises an important concern. This is an issue that has been highlighted in the literature addressing volunteer tourism (e.g. Benson & Wearing, 2012; Coren & Gray, 2012; Tomazos & Butler, 2009), although to date there appears to be no proposed solution to the problem. Like volunteer tourism (Benson & Wearing, 2012; Brown, 2005; Tomazos & Butler, 2009; Wearing & McGehee, 2013a, 2013b), TEFL organisations are diverse, wide ranging and often ambiguous, making it difficult to understand the motives and intentions of each individual agency. In support of research suggesting that the ideological foundations of volunteer tourism are threatened in exchange for a profit-driven industry (Mostafanezhad, 2013), the above quotes indicate that this may be the case for the TEFL industry also. Whilst a call for more rigorous regulation and monitoring of TEFL organisations may appear to be the appropriate course of action in response to such findings, it can be argued that due to the scale and diversity of the industry this would be extremely difficult to operatationalise.

There is evidence within the volunteer tourism industry that the profit-driven nature of organisations who prioritise capital over the consumer may not only have negative consequences on financial matters as noted above, but may also lead to less favourable conditions (Mostafanezhad, 2013). Compared to respondents who self-sourced their employment as a TEFL teacher, survey data suggested that those who utilised an agency tended to have larger class sizes, earned less money and were commonly dissatisfied with their placement location. This is an issue not only in terms of recruitment and retention of the TEFL teacher employed, but also of the subsequent impacts that this may have on the host community. If the altruistic intentions of community development and educational prospects associated with English language learning are exchanged for projects which yield benefits primarily to the agency involved then this places the risk of reduced quality of teaching, a lower standard of TEFL teachers recruited and limited educational prospects of the students.

The survey data indicated that the commodified, packaged TEFL product was more likely to be purchased by those of a younger age, with a statistically significant correlation between age and the use of an agency. 89.2% of respondents using an agency were aged below 40. It was suggested in the data collected during the exploratory phase that the reason for the popularity of the use of agencies amongst young TEFL teachers was the result of the need for security and from lack of travel experience. Bloggers C and U remarked respectively;

'I booked through [agency name] because I loved the feel of the company. There were so many blogs written by their ex-teachers that filled me with confidence. I had never ventured far from home or done anything remotely similar to this so it was nice to know that everything

Table 3
Duration of TEFL teaching.

Duration	Number	Percent
1–5 weeks	63	11.6
6–11 weeks	24	4.4
3–6 months	80	14.8
7 months- 1 year	85	15.7
1–2 years	119	22.0
3–5 years	78	14.4
6–10 years	51	9.4
10 + years	41	7.6

(Valid responses = 541).

was sorted for me and that there were people to help if I got into any trouble.'

'The world is a big'ol place and I didn't want to go it alone just yet… I liked having the security blanket that the organisation provided me with. I had a new group of friends, a pre-planned itinerary and experts on hand, what more could I ask for?' [sic].

Similar to research focusing on the length of volunteer tourism placements (Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Gecko and Bradt Travel Guides and Lasso Communications, 2009; Keese, 2011), there was a strong variance between the duration of placements when TEFL teaching. In support of figures presented by the TESOL International Association (2014), who found that 50% of TEFL teachers teach for up to one year, this research found that 45.5% of respondents taught for a duration between one week to one year (Table 3) and the majority of TEFL teachers taught for a duration of less than two years (68.6%).

There was also a statistically significant relationship between the use of an agency and the duration of the TEFL placement. For those who secured their employment via an agency, their placement tended to be shorter in duration than those who self-sourced their employment. This further demonstrates the links between TEFL teaching and the concept of tourism, with those choosing to utilise a packaged TEFL product as a means of securing their TEFL experience replicating durations of travel more aligned with tourists, whether this be on a short-term holiday or a gap-year, than expatriates with longer-term relocation ideals.

The impacts of placements which are of short or medium duration is an issue that has been raised in the literature addressing volunteer tourism, where reduced longevity has encouraged the recruitment of volunteers which frequently possess a lack of skills, enhanced cross cultural mis-understanding, inadequate training and the consequences of short-term bonds between the volunteer and the host (e.g. Benson & Wearing, 2012; Butcher & Smith, 2010; Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Palacios, 2010; Raymond & Hall, 2008; Richter & Norman, 2010; Tomazos & Cooper, 2012). With evidence denoting the popularity of short to medium-term TEFL tourism project participation, it is important that stakeholders are aware of the potential downfalls which may result and that attempts are made to mitigate these where possible.

A third cause for concern identified through data collected in this research is the legal working status amongst TEFL teachers, with 45.1% of respondents stating that at some point they did not hold the correct legal documentation (Table 4). 31.3% of these respondents blamed this on the agency or school which recruited them. Teachers without the legal paperwork were commonly on a gap year or backpacking trip (62.5%), were teaching in rural areas (48.8%), were unqualified (63.2%) and were under the age of 40 (78.2%).

There was evidence to suggest that the legal documentation required in order to be a TEFL teacher in Thailand was not clearly understood by all respondents. Fifteen respondents claimed, through the use of the 'other' string option on the survey, that they did not require any documentation, for example;

'I was in Thailand as a volunteer teaching tsunami survivors English. Because I was a volunteer I didn't need any paperwork.'

With little information on visa requirements noted on the websites

Table 4
Reasons for working illegally.

Reason	Percent of respondents working illegally
Paperwork delay	31.6
Probation period	3.1
Process too complicated	14.5
To have more flexibility	0.4
Agency or school never did it	31.3
Forgot to renew	0.8
Changed jobs	3.1
Too expensive	4.3
Didn't meet the requirements	7.4
Missing	3.6

(Valid responses = 256).

of the TEFL agencies examined in Table 1 and confusing rules (Methanonppkakhun & Deocampo, 2016), it is no surprise that some TEFL teachers were unaware of their legal obligations. Although it was identified through the data familiarisation and cleaning process that only 2.6% of respondents appeared to have incorrectly stated that they did not require a visa, it can be argued that this figure may actually be higher since respondents may, based on incorrect knowledge, not have accurately answered the question.

The fact that many TEFL teachers were working, either temporarily or permanently, without the correct documentation is worrisome, particularly if this is the result of the agency failing to organise the relevant paperwork. To begin, it is extremely difficult to holistically examine the TEFL industry and those working within it accurately if there is a proportion of the teaching community that is hidden through illegal employment (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Punthumasen, 2007). Furthering this, there is an abundance of possible sustainability consequences deriving from illegal employment. It can be suggested that one reason for this ambiguity is the lack of regulation of the TEFL industry (Sciberras, 2012). Whilst there appears to be no research addressing this with specific regard to TEFL, in the volunteer tourism context, lack of regulation and control has raised many concerns, suggesting that this opens the door for opportunists (Tomazos & Butler, 2009). Similarly, it appears that the door may also be ajar for TEFL organisations, providing the potential for a perplexity of negative consequences to arise. In terms of not obtaining the correct paperwork to be legally employed this may bring rise to inconsistent teaching standards, failure to collect employment taxes and the auctioning of the TEFL teacher's employment rights. In broader terms, this lack of regulation holds the industry in perpetual abeyance.

8. Conclusion

The introduction of TEFL tourism may appear to be a welcome solution to aid in recruitment shortages of TEFL teachers in many parts of the world, however its implementation may not always yield results equal to those produced outside of the realms of alternative tourism. Whilst research into the TEFL tourism industry is in its infancy, there is very little evidence to provide support either for or against continued commodification of TEFL. However, as discussed throughout this paper, there are neighbouring industries, such as volunteer tourism, from which TEFL stakeholders can learn.

Whilst there are a wide variety of TEFL organisations operating across the globe (Griffith, 2014), ranging from non-profit to commercial, independent to multi-national corporations, each with their own motives and intentions, the links between post-modern package tourism and the commodified TEFL product are undisputable. Whilst commodification in itself may not be a problem, there is an inherent contradiction between benevolent intentions and monetary gain. Based largely on evidence presented within the now-commodified volunteer tourism sector, this paper has highlighted a number of ambiguities and

risks that the TEFL tourism industry is likely to face should it continue along the road of commodification into a world centered no longer around altruism and good intentions, but instead a capitalist society where profit take precedence.

It is the intention of this paper to act as a precursor for future research and consideration from industry practitioners and academics alike. Whilst this research has limitations in that it is relatively small-scale and is based upon a case-study approach, it succeeds in highlighting that there are a numbers of areas worthy of additional consideration. One solution to mitigating some of the possible negative impacts is regulation and it is suggested that further research is undertaken to investigate the feasibility of implementation and operation. Through highlighting some of the possible negative impacts of TEFL tourism, this research paper preaches caution to industry stakeholders who, if they are to implement successful management strategies, are able to ensure the sustainable future of the TEFL tourism industry.

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