Qualifications for English Teaching

The Institute for Cross-Cultural Training

One of the questions we are asked most frequently is, "If you speak English, can you teach it?" This question is not always easy to answer.

## When is being a native speaker of English enough preparation for teaching ESL/EFL?

We realize that the demand for learning English far outstrips the number of qualified teachers. Especially if you are living overseas, you are very likely to be asked to teach someone English, even if being a native speaker is your only qualification. However, we also know that even with some minimal preparation, you can be more effective in classroom teaching and tutoring, and with good preparation you can be much more effective.

While we would like you to be well prepared for your teaching or tutoring assignments, what is reasonable? When should we encourage you to "just jump in and do the best you can" and when should we encourage you to get some professional preparation?

Here are some situations for which teacher training would be helpful, but we believe should not be required:

* You are serving as an unpaid conversation partner, perhaps as part of a structured program (e.g., a church-based program in North America), or apart from any organized class, you offer your time to your friends or others for informal conversation practice.
* You are serving as a volunteer in a class (e.g., in a church- or community-based program) with very limited responsibilities and you work alongside a qualified teacher.
* You may be volunteering to see if this is a field you would like to go into or you may simply be trying to meet an immediate need. Whatever your reason for volunteering, it’s important that the learners know you are a volunteer, not a teacher. Keep in mind that if they think of you as a teacher, they are likely to expect you to be able to explain grammar points and offer other specialized insights and instruction. If you call yourself a teacher and you are unable to provide the quality of instruction the students expect, it’s not only detrimental to their learning, but it may also negatively affect your relationship.
* You are teaching, or assisting a teacher, in a short-term program (e.g., an English camp, or a course of only a week or two) and you have materials provided for your teaching as well as some instruction in how to use them.

In situations like these, you will probably have lots of questions once you begin teaching. Therefore, it’s very helpful if you have a qualified ESL/EFL teacher nearby who can help you as needed.

## When is being a native speaker of English not enough preparation for teaching ESL/EFL?

Even if you are a native speaker of English, when do you need at least some additional professional preparation? If you are going to be teaching in any of the contexts listed below, we urge you get some training. While there are a variety of ways to get the preparation you need, often one of the best options is to take one or more teacher preparation courses.

* You have been given the title of "teacher" or you are considered by others to be an ESL/EFL teacher, not a volunteer. For example, you may be planning to work for a year or two, or even longer, with an organization that provides English teachers for countries in which English instruction is in high demand. Your organization has given you the title of "teacher" and your students view you as a teacher they assume is qualified to provide English instruction.
* You are going to be teaching or tutoring on your own without an experienced teacher on hand to guide you. For example, your organization may have asked you to teach English to new refugee families in North America. Or, if you are living overseas, you may want to start offering English classes to those in your neighborhood.
* You plan to teach for more than a few weeks, or you will be teaching more frequently than only on an occasional basis. Perhaps you have already volunteered in a local program for new immigrants, and now you can see that you will be teaching English on a regular basis.
* You are going to be paid for your teaching. When students know that the teacher is being paid—and especially when the students are the ones paying for their instruction—they expect quality learning experiences that will help them meet their goals. Especially in some areas of the world, such as Eastern Europe, those who call themselves teachers are expected to be well-qualified for the task, and if they are not, the students lose respect for the teacher. Read [Teaching Overseas: Do’s and Don’ts](http://www.joyjobs.com/) to learn more about the expectations your students may have.
* You need to handle responsibilities such as (1) designing a curriculum and selecting textbooks, (2) training other teachers or volunteers, (3) writing materials, or (4) overseeing learner assessment. While we would like to think that these are responsibilities given only to more experienced teachers, that is not always the case. Not infrequently, totally inexperienced teachers are expected to handle tasks such as these. To do this well, you will probably need more specialized preparation than a single course can give you.

In summary, it’s clear that in many circumstances being a native speaker is not sufficient qualification for teaching. The amount and type of preparation you need will depend on a number of factors. For more information about professional preparation for ESL/EFL teachers, see the section Courses and Degree Programs, which addresses the types of available professional preparation programs and suggests programs for you to consider.