

Are you a Christian who wants to have an English-teaching ministry that will provide high-quality English instruction and at the same time will open doors for building relationships? If so, perhaps you are asking questions such as these: What do I need to do to get started in teaching English to speakers of other languages? Can I learn on the job, or do I need some specialized training before I begin teaching? If I need some course work, are there short courses that can provide adequate preparation, or do I need to get a degree in TESOL? What else can I do to prepare myself?

Why do native-English speakers need special preparation to teach ESL/EFL?

Many people believe the maxim, “If you can speak English, you can teach it.” In one sense, this is true. You can serve as a conversation partner for those who already know some English; you can probably correct a host of grammar problems, even if you can’t explain why a particular usage is correct; you may be able to help students work through lessons in ESL/EFL textbooks; you may even have the expertise to teach literature or composition to university students who are at the advanced level of proficiency. Your ability to speak English will allow you to handle a number of specific teaching responsibilities; however, the *range of tasks* you can perform—and especially the *range of tasks that you can perform well*—will be severely limited if you lack professional preparation.

There are other reasons for obtaining appropriate teacher preparation. Once you become an ESL/EFL teacher, your students and others will quickly assign you to the role of ESL/EFL “expert”—the one who knows how to organize a new program and select appropriate teaching materials, the one who excels at teaching a range of skills and components of English to all kinds of learners, the one who is a storehouse of knowledge about the English language. To be the “expert” that you are expected to be requires far more than your good intentions and the ability to speak the language. It requires professional preparation—both course work and practical teaching experience.

If you are planning to be an overseas tentmaker, you’ll find that professional qualifications will enhance your marketability considerably. Those who go overseas with no more than a bachelor’s degree—and often even with a master’s in an unrelated field—may find entry-level positions, but the pay scales tend to be quite low, sometimes not even enough to live on. In addition, benefits such as housing, health coverage, and travel, as well as the preferred teaching assignments, are frequently offered only to those with the higher qualifications.

The Alphabet Soup of English Teaching

In general, courses in ESL (English as a Second Language) offer instruction to non-English speakers in English-speaking countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia; courses in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) provide instruction to non-English speakers in non-English-speaking countries such as France, China, and Argentina. TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) refers to teacher-preparation courses that focus on teaching ESL learners; TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) courses focus on the needs of EFL learners. The acronym TESOL, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, represents the teaching of English to all non-English speakers worldwide. TESOL is also the name of the international professional organization of more than 13,000 ESL/EFL teachers.

Susan Griffith summarizes the need for adequate preparation: “Training in teaching English as a foreign language is not absolutely essential for successful job-hunting; but it makes the task easier by an order of magnitude.”¹ She also states, “As the profile of the English language has risen, so has the profile of the profession which teaches it, and the number of qualified and experienced English teachers has increased along with the rise in demand, even if it hasn’t kept pace with it.... Certainly without a degree, a TEFL qualification or any relevant experience, the scope of opportunities shrinks drastically without dwindling away completely.”²

In many EFL-teaching situations, professionalism is mandatory for acceptance as a qualified teacher. Often desperate to learn English, students who spend their time and their hard-earned money on English instruction expect quality teaching that utilizes appropriate methods and materials. An article in *World Pulse* states, “The central issue in making TESOL a viable and fruitful ministry is professionalism.” It goes on to cite Mark Dyer, former president of International Teams, “if the teaching is good...the teacher is winning a hearing as a Christian.”³

How much preparation do I need?

The answer to this basic question depends on your future teaching situation. What will it be like? Will you be teaching formal classes, or will you be tutoring individual students? Will you be teaching alongside experienced EFL teachers, or will you be working alone? Will you need to decide on course content and choose from among the thousands of available textbooks, or will someone else do this for you? What skills (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, writing) and what content areas (e.g., grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, literature, culture) will you be teaching? What levels (e.g., beginning, intermediate, advanced) will you be responsible for?

If you are planning to teach English overseas for more than a few weeks as a summer volunteer, you may not know what ESL/EFL-teaching demands will be placed upon you. In this case, it would be unwise to go overseas without professional preparation. For some assignments, a TESOL short course and some practical teaching experience are sufficient; for others, a master’s degree is the insurance that you may need to be prepared for any eventuality.

What courses and degree programs are available? What will this preparation equip me to do?

Hundreds of colleges and universities across North America offer TESOL courses. More than 65 U.S. and Canadian institutions offer an academic certificate, approximately 50 have undergraduate minors or majors, more than 200 offer a master’s degree, and at least 35 have programs at the doctoral level.⁴ Among these institutions are a number of Christian colleges and universities with TESOL programs. The discussion below will focus on master’s degrees, certificates, and course work not part of a degree program.

Master’s programs. Master’s degree programs vary from one to three years in length. Some institutions offer a master’s in TESL, TEFL, or TESOL while others offer a master’s in Applied Linguistics, English, Education, or Intercultural Studies with a specialization in TESL, TEFL, or TESOL. Required courses typically include the following areas: introduction to linguistics; principles of second language acquisition; materials selection and development; teaching methods; intercultural communication; language testing; the teaching of grammar, pronunciation, listening, speaking (conversation), reading, and writing; and supervised practice teaching.

A person with a master's degree and a minimum of two or three years of teaching experience should have the basic preparation for designing curricula (i.e., setting up, administering and evaluating an EFL program), training classroom teachers, and writing materials.

Certificate. The term *certificate in TESL, TEFL, or TESOL* is used in at least four different ways:

1. **A U.S. or Canadian academic certificate program.** Requirements for an academic certificate vary considerably. Generally, it represents either (1) about one-half to two-thirds of the course work for a master's degree or (2) the same courses as a master's degree, but no thesis is required. Certificate programs frequently provide a more practical emphasis than the master's degree.

Some programs offer a master's degree in Applied Linguistics, English, Education, or Intercultural Studies, with an accompanying certificate in TESL, TEFL, or TESOL. Generally, students can use their master's elective credits toward the certificate so that at most only a few extra courses are required to obtain the academic certificate in addition to the master's degree.

Most U.S. and Canadian academic certificates provide solid preparation for effective classroom teaching in North America and overseas. In addition, many persons with this qualification should be able to handle the same tasks as those with a master's degree in TESOL.

2. **A certificate in the United Kingdom.** Among the several types, the best known is the Cambridge CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching for Adults), which requires approximately 100 clock hours of intensive instruction. CELTA courses are offered in many countries, including North America.

Teachers with one of these certificates are recognized worldwide as qualified beginning ESL/EFL instructors. In *Teaching English Abroad*, Susan Griffith says that "anyone with [this certificate]...is virtually guaranteed a job in any country where English is widely taught, from Austria to Zimbabwe."⁵ These certificates, however, do not provide sufficient preparation for tasks such as designing curricula, training teachers, and writing materials.

3. **A teaching certificate for ESL public school teaching.** In the U.S., this is also called teacher endorsement, teacher approval, or a teaching license for elementary and/or secondary education. Although requirements vary, all states offering teacher certification in ESL require a number of education courses as well as a minimum amount of practice teaching. A U.S. academic certificate is likely to include some, but not all, of the required course work for teacher certification.

An elementary or secondary ESL teaching certificate plus ESL teaching experience equip individuals particularly well for teaching ESL in MK schools. In addition, these teachers are frequently well prepared to teach EFL to adult learners.

4. **A certificate that may look similar to a diploma.** Some colleges, universities, institutes, and organizations award a certificate to individuals who attend seminars as short as a few hours to as long as a few weeks. While this document is sometimes given to those who complete courses for academic credit, it is often awarded on the basis of attendance rather than achievement.

Many of these programs prepare individuals to teach a particular skill, such as conversational English; some equip teachers to use a single set of materials with a predetermined class of learners. Other programs, however, focus on a variety of practical teaching procedures, giving prospective teachers a basic foundation for teaching a broad range of ESL/EFL classes. These latter "certificate" programs often require two or more weeks of classes and include practice teaching.

Teacher-Preparation Programs: Where Are They?

See the [Christian Educators in TESOL \(CETC\)](#) Web site for a listing of programs in Christian colleges and universities. In addition, the [Directory of Professional Preparation Programs in TESOL in the United States and Canada](#) gives information on over 400 programs in the U.S. and Canada. A large number of certificate, diploma, and master's programs in the United Kingdom (and a more limited number in other countries) are listed in the [ELT Guide](#).

Course work not part of a degree program.

Many colleges and universities offer one or more courses in TESL/TEFL or TESOL. These offerings are usually very practical in emphasis. If you have a choice of courses, the most crucial teacher-preparation areas for a beginning teacher include (1) an overview of TESL/TEFL or TESOL techniques and procedures, including an introduction to teaching content areas such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and the listening-speaking and reading-writing skills; (2) the evaluation, selection, and adaptation of teaching materials; and (3) supervised practice teaching.

What else can I do to get started?

If you are able to take no more than one or two teacher-preparation courses, you can augment this training by learning on your own. Here are some suggestions:

1. Do some introductory reading.

Some useful resources are the following:

- Dalle, Teresa S. & Laurel L. Young. 2003. *Pace Yourself: A Handbook for ESL Tutors*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL. (Easy-to-follow guide for inexperienced or volunteer tutors.)
- Dickerson, Lonna J. 2004. *Getting Started in Teaching ESL/EFL: Resources for Christian Educators*. Wheaton, IL: Institute for Cross-Cultural Training. (CD-ROM available from ICCT.)
- Dickerson, Lonna J. 2004. *Resources for TESOL*. Wheaton, IL: Institute for Cross-Cultural Training. (CD-ROM available from ICCT.)
- Snow, Donald B. 2001. *English Teaching as Christian Mission: An Applied Theology*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press. (A "must-read" for those who wish to examine the relationship between the Christian faith and teaching ESL/EFL.)
- Snow, Don. 1996. *More Than a Native Speaker: An Introduction for Volunteers Teaching Abroad*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL. (This book offers a wealth of highly useful, non-technical advice for new teachers.)
- United States Information Agency. [English Teaching Forum](#). (Journal that deals with practical issues for the EFL teacher outside the U.S. Issues beginning with 1993 are on the Internet.)

Your local public library may also have professional books and journals plus a range of ESL/EFL classroom teaching materials.

2. **Check out the growing number of TESOL sites on the World Wide Web.**

Three useful sites to begin with are the [Amity Foundation Teaching Resources](#), [Dave's ESL Café](#) and the [Internet TESL Journal](#).

3. **Observe ESL classes at a local university, college, community college, or English-teaching institute.**

Try to observe a variety of course levels (e.g., beginning, intermediate, advanced) and a variety of skills or content areas (e.g., reading, conversation, composition). Ask to look at their curriculum guides and course materials.

4. **Volunteer to work as a teacher's aide, tutor, or conversation partner in an ESL class.**

Many churches, adult education programs, and community colleges need volunteers to help with their students.

5. **Attend a local or state TESOL conference.**

At TESOL conferences you will not only learn about effective teaching methods and procedures, but you will also become acquainted with others—professionals and volunteers—in the field. In addition, at many TESOL conferences, major publishers display their textbooks and distribute their catalogs.⁶

Summary

We hope by now that you realize that the saying, “If you speak English, you can teach it,” is mostly a myth. While being a native speaker of English can be very helpful, that alone is not sufficient to make you an effective and confident ESL/EFL educator. To be competent at whatever level you plan to teach, you will need some professional preparation. Fortunately, many useful resources are available to help you get started. These include a large number of degree and certificate programs as well as hundreds of teacher-training courses offered in North America and overseas. Other resources include a wide array of highly useful books and journal articles, TESOL conferences that deal with practical classroom issues, and abundant opportunities not only to observe ESL classes but also to “get your feet wet” in volunteer work with learners of English. Some combination of these resources can give you the knowledge and experience you need as preparation for a satisfying ESL/EFL-teaching ministry.

If you have questions about the type of training you need for your work overseas, you are welcome to write, call, or e-mail me. If you are interested in taking one or more courses that offer a good foundation for getting started in teaching ESL/EFL, we suggest you check out our [ICCT TESOL courses](#).

References

1. Griffith, Susan. 1991. *Teaching English Abroad*. Distributed in the U.S. by Peterson's Guides, Inc., 202 Carnegie Center, Princeton, NJ 08543, p. 18.
2. Griffith, p. 13.
3. *World Pulse*, Volume 26, Number 24, December 27, 1991, p. 2.

4. Garshick, Ellen. 2002. *Directory of Professional Preparation Programs in TESOL in the United States and Canada, 2002-2004*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL.
5. Griffith, p. 20. In addition to specifying teacher training opportunities in the United Kingdom and other essential information for EFL job seekers, this book provides a country-by-country listing of EFL teaching positions.
6. To locate the nearest TESOL affiliate, check the [TESOL Web site](#).