
ICCT TESOLnotes Q & A

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Can non-native-English speakers be good ESL teachers?

If you are not a native-English speaker, can you still be a good ESL teacher? Let's begin by saying that some of the most effective teachers I know are not native speakers of the language they teach. While native speakers do have some advantages, we often tend to forget that those who have learned English as a second or foreign language also have some important advantages.

If you are teaching those who live in, or have immigrated from, your home country, you have the huge advantage of speaking the same language as your students, knowing which aspects of the language will be most challenging, and knowing the culture from an insider's point of view. Even if you are teaching those from language backgrounds and cultures different from yours, you still have the advantage of having been an ESL/EFL learner yourself.

Today, there are about four nonnative-speaking English teachers for every teacher who is a native speaker.

— Don Snow

In my experience, I have found that to be accepted by their students, teachers who are second-language speakers of English sometimes need somewhat higher teaching credentials than their native-English-speaking counterparts. However, the bottom line is that even though native-English speakers are frequently in higher demand for teaching listening and speaking skills, there are other times when non-native speakers of English have the clear advantage. If you are a second-language speaker of English, we encourage you to continue to improve your own language skills and to get appropriate teacher preparation so that you can be a competent and qualified English-teaching professional.

If you are new to teaching ESL, I suggest you read Don Snow's 2007 introductory teacher-training book written especially for ESL teachers who have also learned English as a second language. (Snow, Don. 2007. *From Language Learner to Language Teacher*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL)