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## *The Joys and Challenges of Teaching English*

### THE JOYS OF TEACHING ESL

If you are or will be teaching English as a second language, you are in many ways fortunate. Unlike many teachers, you have a genuine mandate to teach a real academic subject, a language, and to teach it well. Teachers who have a serious academic bent sometimes complain that they feel pressured to teach with the brakes on. You, on the other hand, as an ESL teacher, are expected to help students master a new language, prepare them to study academic subjects in that language, and help them adjust to a new culture. While some foreign language teachers complain that they are neither allowed sufficient time nor given a serious mandate to impart their subject, you will have both.

Your students will be more motivated than most, or at least they can be if you figure out how to reach them. With very few exceptions, your students want to know English. Unlike students of foreign languages who might never have the opportunity to use their new language outside the classroom, your students will likely use their new language every day. For them, English is a living subject that they can put to use on a daily basis. Those who are not interested in knowing English on the first day of class will soon change their minds. After just a few months of living in the United States, the advantages of knowing English and the disadvantages of not being able to communicate in the prevailing local language become obvious.

## 2 Teaching English Language Learners K–12

Very few of my students were actually hostile to knowing English. Only two readily come to mind. One was a student who was sent to live with relatives in Texas after being expelled from middle school in Mexico and was trying to get expelled from our school as well. The other was a teenaged girl who was determined to do nothing that would please her English-speaking stepmother, although her brother was one of my most motivated students.

Some of your students will, of course, be more interested than others. Not all of your students will have sufficient intrinsic motivation to learn as much English as you want them to know. It is, of course, part of your job to bring them a motivating spark. But the fact that your students at least want to know that which you have to teach gives you an advantage that not all teachers enjoy.

### **Travel the World With or Without Leaving Your Classroom**

If your taste runs to the exotic, English teaching offers you opportunities not available to the average teacher. ESL teachers are in demand throughout the world. You will need a bit of luck or maybe the right friends to land one of the plum jobs in a high-paying school for the children of embassy staff or wealthy businesspeople or in a prep school for young people planning to study at a university in an English-speaking country, but it will be easy to find a humbler, lower-paying job that offers the opportunity to live and work in a country that you have always dreamed of visiting.

Even if you never leave your native country, English teaching offers the opportunity to have some interesting experiences. You will get to know some fascinating people, both your students and those of their community, and you will likely get a chance to experience parts of their culture more deeply than do most “outsiders.” Other teachers occasionally receive an apple from a student; we ESL teachers receive mangos, sushi, tamales, kim-chi, saltenos, chapatis, and wojapi, both literally and figuratively.

## **THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ESL**

It has been said that learning a language is like drinking water from a fire hose. Before becoming able to communicate in a second language, learners must learn literally thousands of new words. To attain a level of fluency equivalent to that of educated native speakers, they must learn more than one hundred thousand. They must work with a phonological system that includes sounds that they may not initially even be able to distinguish, much less pronounce. They must not only learn but also assimilate and become able to automatically apply new syntactical rules. In addition to the teaching of the language itself, English teaching in public schools brings a special set of challenges.

Unlike students at private schools that offer intensive language study, your students will probably be expected to make progress in all required academic subjects. Whereas English and content classes can enhance one another, the dual tasks of learning a new language while advancing in math, science, and social studies are demanding indeed. The lot of the English learner is somewhat like that of a student who takes on a full academic load while participating in a dozen extracurricular activities.

There are, alas, those who see ESL as some sort of a remedial class. Quite frankly, some people view those with whom they cannot communicate as feebleminded. Of course, to those who do not understand our language, we seem pretty dim as well. The reality is that, if your students are to succeed, ESL must be one of the most demanding classes offered at your school. Any teacher who treats ESL as “academics light” is doomed to fail. Never forget, nor let your peers forget, that English learners are as able as any students in your school, and that your ESL class is and must be a demanding one. Language learning is not for sissies, and neither is language teaching.

### **It's More Than a Job, It's a Mission**

For your students, language learning is more than important, it is essential. Although there are a few people who manage to make a comfortable living in the United States without ever having mastered English, the odds are against those who do not speak the language of the land. Then there are people who manage to learn English after a decade or so but, as a result of years of not understanding their teachers, missed out on much of their education. Such students drop out of school able to speak English but without the skills required of a high school graduate. On the other hand, opportunities galore exist for bilingual individuals who possess a solid education. Your class is the critical transitional step into the English part of that education.