

Reflections from a Virtual TESOL 2021 Experience

by Rosemary Colón

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The 2021 TESOL International Convention as a virtual event followed the format that we have become accustomed to since lockdowns began at the start of the pandemic in 2020. In late March, TESOL 2021 was a fully virtual convention adapted into a combination of live and pre-recorded sessions over the course of three days which offered current and relevant content to its attendees. While sessions were mostly based on East Coast time, opportunities were available for networking across the globe as attendees had the ability to join in on discussions or groups at varied times throughout. In this sense you could say that TESOL met the attendees where they were, similar to how we as educators attempt to reach students where they are. I am based in Spokane, a member of WAESOL (Washington TESOL, the Washington state affiliate of TESOL International) and I share here some impressions of the course of the convention as one of those ESL educator attendees who logged in on Pacific time.

First, virtual TESOL was not without technical difficulties. Often attendees, including myself, were dropped from live keynotes or had difficulty attending live sessions the first two days. Between email and social media posts addressing the technical difficulties, TESOL provided alternative links. As a result of the tech difficulties, TESOL also made it known that all sessions would be available for 90 days after the convention via the conference portal. What was once a three-day professional development opportunity as the annual TESOL conference became a chance to revisit the conference site for up to three months afterward to learn even more.

Impactful highlights of the conference were the keynote speakers. Keynote speeches ranged from current event topics, like recognizing and talking about race and ensuring equity in lessons and curriculum, to best practices in the classroom. Illustrating such a range of topics were two poignant quotes from two different keynote speakers. First, in the opening keynote, Clint Smith encouraged educators to teach not only classic Western authors but to add to classics by engaging students with diverse contemporary poets and writers. Smith made the point that

“poetry and prose did not die with Shakespeare” or Emily Dickinson, but continues with Amanda Gorman and Sandra Cisneros, for example.

The second keynote speaker, Dr Janet Zadina, explained that “gratitude rewires the brain” by encouraging educators like all those attending TESOL to bring mindfulness into the classroom. Language learning is an everyday fluid process that requires practice, failure, and more practice. She also shared best practices about how to take care when we present our facial expressions and how we react to students who might say “they can’t, or aren’t very good” at a task. These ideas and tips in addition to the “23 practices” Dr Zadina graciously offered as a supplement to her keynote are timely reminders as we adapt to the changing pandemic times to keep student welfare in mind.

Beyond keynotes, as an attendee, I find myself at conferences looking for new ideas. However, I might be pleasantly surprised when I stumble upon a familiar subject and am reminded of best practices. To illustrate this, three such sessions about best practices I attended included an advocacy update, teacher awareness of stress, and presentation of pronunciation activities. The advocacy update discussed how educators can advocate for their English programs (K-12 and Higher Ed) within their administrations and with their local representatives. The session’s presenters encouraged any lift from light to heavy that reminds administrations of the valuable resource and important part of campuses English programs are. That is to say, they encourage you to advocate for your English programs in a manner that is comfortable for you whether that is a conversation with colleagues (a light lift) or visiting local policy makers (a heavier lift).

During the second day, a session called “Teacher Awareness of Stress” presented various scenarios and asked attendees how they might approach them given their current context. One overwhelming answer given by attendees was the opportunity or lack thereof to collaborate with other teachers or administrators. This scenario was a response to the prompt about “opportunities to work with

colleagues in your department.” After a few different exercises and discussions, the presenters reminded attendees that these conversations should be ongoing to recognize and address stress amongst each other.

On the last day of the conference, after spending the previous day focused on teacher awareness and advocacy, an opportunity to listen to more hands-on, classroom practices piqued my interest. One such practical session discussed using an experience most college students everywhere are familiar with: going to a coffee shop and ordering coffee, specifically, at a Starbucks. Using the coffee shop experience as a foundation for a lesson, the presenter shared a variety of ways to incorporate pronunciation into the speaking and listening opportunity. For example, students focus on asking questions with rising intonation or telling the barista their name and spelling it. All of these familiar or new ideas in these sessions provided practical information that can be used in my teaching within higher ed.

Impactful keynotes, refreshing ideas, and technical challenges filled this convention with memorable moments. Throughout TESOL 2021 the commitment to adapt to the time changes and engage in this professional development event by people from all over the globe is a reminder that taking the opportunity to attend when possible is both a privilege and an opportunity to simultaneously connect with and learn from fellow educators. Though TESOL will have some technical issues to work through before attempting another virtual event, overall the convention worked. In fact, it is still working at the time of writing since, as previously mentioned, TESOL has made

available all sessions and keynotes for 90 days after the conference, which means attendees could still be “attending” into June. The learning continues while many of us are still teaching virtually and waiting patiently for when we can return to full classrooms and in-person conferences. Lastly, as many speakers and presenters during the convention noted, it is important in the meantime to connect not only with our students but with each other as educators whether that is at TESOL or in our own learning communities.

For more notes and info from TESOL 2021, see my curated resource page by scanning the Wakelet QR code.



Figure 1: Colón curated Wakelet for TESOL Convention 2021



Rosemary Colón is an ESL educator. Having attended the MA|TESOL program at Gonzaga University, she has been able to build on her experience over the last 3 years teaching in university and community settings in the Spokane area where she currently resides after having spent most of her life in the Bay Area, California. Rosemary has also worked with KSPS PBS as an education consultant developing curriculum and facilitating workshops. She is an advocate not only for ELs but for education by taking an interest in policy and advocacy and learning how educators can build on their support for their students and communities. She continues to add to her experience and learning through conferences such as WAESOL, collaborating with her peers, and being creative with tech resources like Twitter. You can contact Rosemary at colon.rosie@gmail.com.