



## **TESOL Board Connect: A Professional Background in TESOL Is a Passport to the Best Jobs in the World!**

by [Debra Suarez](#)

As a TESOL professional for almost three decades, who has served the TESOL field in a variety of sectors, I find myself more and more called-upon by newer TESOL professionals (and even career-changers) to provide mentoring and career coaching. I embrace these conversations. From these professional exchanges, I share ideas from my past experiences, and I learn challenges expressed by those who are in the earlier stages of their careers. One thing I have learned from these conversations is that often professionals with a degree in TESOL do not envision career opportunities outside of classroom teaching. Completing a 30+ year career as an English language teacher is a wonderful and meaningful career path; at the same time, there are many reasons why TESOL professionals may wish to seek opportunities in addition to the traditional classroom setting. The purpose of this column is to spark your exploration of the enormous career potential of a TESOL background.

Through this column in *TESOL Connections (TC)*, for the past few months, you have been reading about professional development and personal leadership stories shared by TESOL board members. Their stories are fun, exemplary, and enlightening, and I encourage you to read those past columns in the [TC archives](#). My own professional development story is that of a career path from the traditional classroom to a variety of positions in different sectors: university professor and researcher, international consultant, U.S. federal educational leader, and senior advisor to White House initiatives. My volunteer work included service to my local TESOL affiliates and to TESOL committees and now serving on the TESOL Board. When I look back on my career, I am amazed because I had not really planned this trajectory—but it all started with classroom teaching.

The recommendations discussed here are borne from my own career trajectory and my observations of the career trajectories of other “seasoned” TESOLers. When we explore the multiple ways that TESOL professional experiences can be repurposed, we are less likely to limit our professional possibilities. We are more likely to increase our ability to weather economic storms. We can better manage the hills and valleys of reductions in teaching force or a changing work environment. We also are more likely to better define what gives us meaning and joy, and then to better align our careers with our personal sense of values, bliss, and a life well lived. And, we are most definitely inspired to dream, to search, and to strive for some of the best jobs in the world.

Research-based practices in professional mentoring and professional coaching call for coaches to use “questions” and “questioning” to ignite the dialogue and to elicit the “answers” from those being coached. This column follows that best practice by offering some guiding questions to ignite your own reflections and to help you discover what you, already, know to be your own best truth.

## ***What Is Your TESOL Career Journey?—Explore Your Skills and Align With Possibilities***

A background in TESOL offers so many career possibilities because we TESOLers develop so many skills through our TESOL formal education and our TESOL professional experiences. As you think about your TESOL career journey, ask yourself “What skills do I have?”, “How do I define those skills?”, and “What is the terminology for those skills within different career paths?”

For example, as TESOL teachers, some of the things we do every day include

- writing and implementing objectives-based lesson plans;
- researching materials;
- continuing our professional development;
- reflecting upon students’ success and planning how to improve; and
- communicating with students, parents, school leadership, and other stakeholders.

When you think about your everyday activities, how do you define the skill set required to accomplish those tasks? What are the terms other career paths use for those skills? You may call it lesson planning and teaching, but what other terms accurately capture those abilities? Organizational development skills? Project management skills? Communication ability? Cross-cultural expertise? Commitment to diversity and equity? Advocacy? Outreach?

As you explore your skills, start to align those skills with the myriad possible career paths for TESOL professionals, both in the classroom and outside the classroom, and both in the United States and internationally. Possibilities abound! Some possibilities include:

- Teaching
  - Early childhood
  - Elementary and secondary
  - Community college
  - Higher ed
  - Adult education
  - Workforce education
  - Private language schools
  - Refugee-serving organizations
  - Commercial training and education
  - Teacher training

- Administration
  - Administrative staff
  - Director of intensive English language programs
  - Academic advisor for international students
  
- Business Development and Education Careers Within Business Environments
  - Private consulting business
  - Your own small business, using your subject matter expertise
  - Marketing and outreach
  - Advocacy and policy development
  - Cross-cultural awareness training
  - Diversity, equity, and inclusion
  - Talent learning and development
  
- Publishing and Research
  - Curriculum development
  - Developer of English language teaching materials
  - Blogs
  - Online newsletters
  - Researcher in large educational research firms
  
- Country Development and Global Development
  - Local, state, and U.S. federal government
  - International governments
  - Association work
  - Nonprofit work
  - Development agencies and nongovernmental organizations
  
- Volunteer Positions
  - TESOL affiliates (U.S. state affiliates and international country/regional affiliates)
  - TESOL Interest Sections, committees, and Communities of Practice
  - TESOL Board of Directors

Back in 2018, I co-led a panel discussion, “Career Pathways in TESOL,” for the Maryland TESOL affiliate as part of our Professional Development Spring series. The panelists included many TESOLers who held positions like those I’ve listed. The panel discussion demonstrated that TESOL professionals who have successfully moved from the TESOL classroom to other career trajectories more often than not were successful because they found ways to diversify their professional learning opportunities and therefore to develop or intensify a diverse set of skills. Some used their perch as classroom teacher to take part in action research or advocacy activities or volunteer opportunities. And in so doing, they furthered their skill sets. Others on the panel sought an additional certification or degree which also furthered their formal credential. But all recognized that the TESOL credential and experience was foundational.

## *Where Does the World Need You Most?—Revisit Your Values and Joys*

Another observation that I took from our panel presentation years ago was that so many of the most contented and most passionate TESOL professionals actually have held many *different types of positions* in *different kinds of sectors* during the course of their careers. And I believe we can see that same takeaway in many leadership stories shared by the board in recent *TC* columns. The panelists shared that sometimes they moved up (increased their level of professional attainment), but sometimes they moved laterally. In other words, they may have taken a position that was the same level of salary or the same level of professional attainment, but there were many more important differences. Changes in position were due mostly to a desire to affect the profession in new and different ways. And to live their profession in new and different ways. Their new position may have been a new type of position for them (e.g., the move from teacher to program administrator). Or their new position may have been in a different sector (e.g., the move from educational administrator to local government). Or their new position may have given them the ability to have a different kind of impact (e.g., the move from materials writer to serving as translator for refugees). Or their new career leap enabled them realize a personal dream (e.g., moving from classroom teacher to starting a small consulting business).

As we ponder our own career moves, we may wish to consider questions like these:

Even if I stayed at the same salary, what would I like to most be doing?

- At this point in time, what do I value?
- What gives my work life meaning?
- Where does the world most need what I can offer?
- How are my values most aligned with what the world needs?

As we continue to fill our professional toolbox, and as we gather more stamps on our professional passport, we become stronger. More equipped. And better able to affect positive change. And we can become that much more creative and innovative.

What sort of TESOL-related position now desperately needs your strength? Your experience? You may decide to stay in the position where you are already, but do it in a different way. Or you may decide to explore other trajectories entirely. Some of the most contented TESOL professionals I know find joy in what they do because they move to positions that hold meaning for them, positions that enable them to actually live their values in different ways, and to live their best current professional version of themselves.

## *How Do You Show Up Every Day?—The Small Steps Matter Most*

My final observation is that moving through one's career path with meaning and with one's own authenticity intact is more often due to the small steps that we take every day than it is to the large changes. When reflecting upon my own trajectory, I've come to trace my successes back not to the "big moments" or the "big decisions"—but more to minor moments that hardly register for me when they happen—but which become apparent to me much later down the road.

How we “show up” matters the most. Do we attend committee meetings and participate? In my own experience, my participation in committee meetings has singled me out for leadership opportunities.

Do we “show up” authentically and with respect, whether we are in meetings, or on the elevator, or passing others in the hall? In my experience, the ways I have engaged with others has given me the reputation as someone to work with, which, in turn, has opened the door for professional opportunities.

Do we support others, especially women and minorities, as they also find their voice and become their best professional selves? Do we ask questions, listen, seek, explore, problem-solve? How do we show up in the world, every day? What are the traces of little moments—moments that all along, like little pebbles, have actually laid the stone foundation of our career paths?

The small steps, how we behave authentically as ourselves, every moment of every day, matter the most. And it leads us not to the best place in the world—but to the best place in the world, for us.

**Ready to begin the next chapter in your career story? Check out these resources:**

- The [TESOL Career Path Development Professional Learning Network](#) (PLN) is committed to addressing professional development throughout members' careers.
- [TESOL Career Center](#)
- [Chronicle of Higher Ed](#)
- [USA Jobs](#)

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