

4 Ways to Maximize Your Convention Learning

by [Jessica Burchett](#)

I am always excited to attend the TESOL International Convention & English Language Expo each year. It is always great to get new ideas and current research, and to network with other professionals. Two of the biggest challenges in attending any conference, and especially one as large as TESOL, are that you not only have to use your time wisely while you're there, but you also have to make use afterward of all the valuable and interesting knowledge you've acquired.

Now that the convention is over, I'm focusing on Challenge #2, which I do by conducting presentations, organizing contacts, and making specific plans so that I can follow through with ideas learned. Here are some great ways to ensure you make the most of your convention learning.

1. Give a Presentation

One of the best ways to retain and utilize your convention learning is to present it to others. It is important to me to immediately provide a highlight of what I learned during the sessions, because by immediately sharing what I learned with others, I'm forced to organize the information and use it. It keeps me motivated. It motivates others and—even though they were unable to attend—they still receive the knowledge from the sessions.

What to Focus On

Share things that you think your team or program could immediately, change, add, or act on. At our weekly ESL staff meeting postconvention, I focused on sharing things that we could utilize right away. For example, this year one of the writing sessions spoke about having English language goals in the students' binders. The presenters used the Leader in Me program, which teaches the kids to take responsibility for their learning. The students look at their data and make goals for themselves. Our school also uses this program. We have our reading and math goals in the binder, but it had never occurred to me to add the language proficiency assessment and goals to this binder. This was something simple that could be done right away that would benefit our students, parents, and the classroom teachers. I was able to take something learned and immediately use it.

Implementing the Big Ideas

Our school has an established RTI process; however, it is something that I would like to see improved. The sessions I attended that dealt with this topic were very helpful, and I was afraid if I didn't do something with the information, it would stay in a pile on my desk. So, I prepared a day-long workshop to help us improve our response-to-intervention (RTI) process based on what I learned at the convention.

On our school professional development day, my ESL staff and I worked on reviewing the proficiency standards and each proficiency level. Presenting an important idea for a substantial change in your program requires the buy-in and assistance of your entire team, and spreading the

word and the work will help ensure ideas become actions. In my school, we are now developing a flip book to help the classroom teachers to provide the necessary accommodations and modifications for English learners starting in Tier 1. Throughout the next school year, we will continue to add and edit our RTI process for English learners.

2. Set Specific Future Goals

Sometimes you learn new ideas, but you can't apply them right away. This is problematic, because you will often forget to use them if you don't lay out a plan. So, I make a list of future professional development opportunities, further readings I can do on the topic, or other suggestions in my notebook and on my calendar. This keeps the ideas close to me so that I don't forget them on the shelf.

This is true about the session I attended in Seattle on Socratic circles. I love the idea of using this approach to scaffold English learners in academic conversations. The discussions that my students have now are good, but some of the ideas that I learned at convention have made me more motivated to use Socratic circles in my history and language arts discussions. My plan includes a few steps:

1. Read more about this so that I can start next year with a good routine for my high school students.
2. Prepare scaffolding: general discussion phrase/sentence frames and cards or handouts for specific discussions.
3. Prepare a few lessons specifically to teach the process, including using think-alouds.
4. Plan specific lessons within units to use the process.

It is something that will take more time and energy for me to fully implement, but having learned about it during the convention, I am motivated to see it being used in my cotaught history or language arts class.

3. Organize Your Contacts

Networking with others during conferences is wonderful. We are able to connect with people from all over the United States and from other countries. We are able to discuss ideas, programs, and learn about what others are doing in the field. It is a time that you can learn from the people at the top of the field and build relationships with professionals who work with English learners. Because I work in a low-incidence district, it is even more important that I keep these connections throughout the year. There are many wonderful people with a passion to educate English learners and their families. Their motivation and knowledge help me to continue to strive to do my best. It is great to have people that I can contact with questions or for support. I also hope that I am able to help them as much as they help me.

Because of this, I do my best to organize my networking contacts immediately after the convention. A good organizational system will help you to keep your news contacts in one place so that you can truly use them:

- Gather the name cards that you've collected and make sure that you enter them in your email or phone as contacts.
- Write down their expertise or the grade levels that they teach, along with where they teach.
- Try to reach out to people within the first few months. You can just reintroduce yourself, or you can send something that you have learned.

I love my job. I enjoy what I do. It is great to have people that I can contact who are just as motivated and passionate as I am about working with English learners and their families.

4. Get on Social Media

At the convention, it becomes very apparent that social media is a tool that is used to help spread information in our profession. Attendees post about current research and laws, local conferences or professional development opportunities, and sometimes local news or current articles that are important in our field. I was amazed to learn about all the people and organizations who are actively using social media. At the convention, I tried to make a list of all the different sites and people to eventually connect with.

Postconvention, here are a few ways not to get lost in the social media maze:

- Follow the different organizations you've come across and are interested in on your Facebook page.
- Immediately, read posts from others who are sharing about topics you're interested in (politics influencing our students, news articles, suggestions for materials or ideas for teaching students). Repost, retweet, and like anything you find useful—engagement is key.
- Try to continue to improve your social media usage. Whether you're a social media newbie or an expert, try stepping up a level. (This was a personal goal of mine this year.)
- Develop a list of different sites as well as people to follow on Twitter, and consider participating in weekly Twitter chats involving educating English learners (check out #ellchat on Mondays).

In Conclusion

The TESOL convention provides me with an in-depth look at the current research in English language education and great teaching ideas, and it motivates me and fuels my passion as an educator of English learners. The convention is only a few days, but—with a little effort and planning—the knowledge and connections that are made continue to be utilized throughout the year.

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