



TESOL Connections

Keeping English language professionals connected

“Back to School” in Fall 2020: Approaching Uncertain Territory

by [Katherine Lobo](#)

This school year has been like no other, and it looks like next year will be different in ways that are hard to imagine. I am an English as second language (ESL) teacher in a public middle school, Grades 6-8, just outside of Boston, Massachusetts, USA. This year, the 2019–2020 school year, I have served close to 30 students from 14 countries that spanned five of the seven continents. Our last day of face-to-face school was 12 March. Since 13 March—67 school days of distance learning later—the lines between home and school, teacher and parent, work and nonwork, and weekday versus school day have become blurred.

Dealing With Changes as They Come

I went from teaching English learners (ELs) in multiple classes and grades with various levels of support, including “push-in” instruction within core academic classes, to synchronous and asynchronous teaching, where all the ELs I served were put into just two groups based on English proficiency level. In addition to this, I held multiple grade level–based homework help sessions, where I still did core academic class push-in support by attending the students’ class Zoom meetings “with” them, and checking in with all the families at least once a week by phone or text.

Since the transition to online classes, two of my students’ families chose to leave the United States and return to their home countries right away. We had to arrange for food to be delivered or picked up for the students who had free and/or reduced lunch, or for whatever reason needed help with food. We dealt with internet connectivity access and problems. We delivered laptops across the district so that students could continue their learning remotely, online. Within a few short weeks of staying home we had fully transitioned to the distance learning format.

Was it easy? No. Was it perfect? No. Did it work? Yes, in many respects; the spread of the virus was slowed down in Massachusetts after we made the transition.

Preparing to Reopen: Planning for Flexibility

In June, Massachusetts public school districts were asked by the state’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to prepare for three scenarios for going back to school in the fall:

1. **In-person school**, taking into account health and safety accommodations (e.g., physical distancing, classroom configurations, and the use of face covering)
2. **A hybrid model** of in-person and distance learning
3. **Full distance learning**

Add in considerations for food services provided by the school, as well as the transportation to bring the students to and from school, and the task of preparing for all options seems overwhelming. Then add meeting the needs of ELs and of students with special education plans, and this task seems next to impossible! Districts are currently sharing their plans and unions are negotiating, and the outcomes are still unclear. The best laid plans may be scrapped overnight.

Every year as I plan for the new school year, I always think about how I can better maximize the learning for the students I serve. We teachers are committed to our calling and to refining the art of teaching through professional development and lifelong learning. Despite all our experience and knowledge, many of us feel greatly challenged by the circumstances we find ourselves in now. In fact, my teacher friends and I have been surprised to find that we are having back-to-school dreams and nightmares prematurely; in my own dreams, I've dealt with labyrinths of plastic tunnels, being separated from students by layers of plastic, and struggling to interact and hand out materials. My waking anxieties about reopening school are stealing into my dreams.

In my classes, I teach language, content, culture, and interpersonal communication skills. I always need to be mindful of teaching across the four domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Each year, I carefully choose short stories, articles, and novels to read, discuss, analyze, and write about with my students, taking their individual needs into account. Besides teaching my own English classes, I also foster collaborative relationships with the classroom teachers with whom I do push-in instructional support in content area classes.

My plans for Fall 2020 must be especially responsive and flexible because we *may* have a combination of face-to face learning, hybrid, and distance learning. I need to demonstrate nimbleness in both my planning and execution of those plans. And additionally, on top of this, I need to stay healthy and to keep my students safe, too. No small feat.

Activities to Start the School Year Off Right

At the very start of the school year, as always, I will need to be intentional about getting to know my new students as we make a concerted effort to build a learning community. I have decided to start the year off with a couple “getting to know you” activities in response to COVID-19. Consider planning these activities with your students:

Making Masks

Sew masks as a class. Mask sewing teaches a useful life skill, but also teaches students the language of making lists and procedural language. The students will also have a mask for when and if you can meet face-to-face. Teach the students some rules of thumb for sewing and how to

use a pattern. Use language of inquiry and advocacy as you sew: “How do I make a knot in the thread?” and “Show me what ‘right sides together’ looks like.”

I have already made kits that include some modeling in the form of a pinned pattern piece to cut out, one seam sewn by me, and a needle already threaded with the thread knotted for the students to use for their first seam. If we make the masks face-to-face, all the better, or if we are on Zoom, we can talk about what we are doing and then write about it. This will be an authentic learning opportunity and a language experience approach lesson like none other I have done.

Writing Letters

If you are physically at school, write letters together and seal them in an envelope for the last day of school. Ask easy questions like, “What is your favorite color?” and “How tall are you?” as well as prediction questions, like “How many inches or centimeters will you grow this school year?” or “How many snow days will we have this year?”

If you are not face-to-face, send all the students a letter and ask that they return a postcard to you; provide the card, a stamp, and an address. The postcard should have sentence frames or sentence starters for them to fill in and post. I like to send them another letter later in the year with an envelope and stamp enclosed for them to address and send back. This is one way to teach genres like descriptive or persuasive writing in an authentic way. Learning how to compose emails and text messages also provides great opportunities for authentic instruction and assessment.

Choosing Texts to Teach Resiliency

Every year, I try to choose stories and articles that preteach and reteach things my students will encounter in their mainstream classes. Consider the following for your students, depending on their ages and English proficiency levels. Many are stories of struggle, overcoming challenges, resilience, and survival.

- [*Tornado*](#), by Newberry Award winning author Betsey Bayer. This book provides ample opportunity to frontload lots of words and concepts that the students will encounter in their core academic subject classes. (Lower level)
- [*The Gold Cadillac*](#), by Newberry Award winning author Mildred D. Taylor, to introduce issues of American history and race (Lower level)
- [*Ghost Boys*](#), a bestseller by Jewell Parker Rhodes, also related to American history and race (Higher level)
- [*Smile*](#), the Eisner Award winning graphic memoir by Raina Telgemeier (Lower and higher level)

You can read these face-to-face, or if you are not together, you can deliver or post the text and provide worksheet kits for “in-class” work.

Incorporating Math and Science

Each school year, I like to raise and grow things like silkworms or flower bulbs with the students. We learn how to take care of something living, make scientific observations (spoken and written), take mathematical measurements, and make drawings. In Fall 2019, we grew paperwhites and each student kept a science journal in my EL English class (see Figures 1 and 2). The bulb planting lesson lasted for more than 6 weeks and ended with the students taking a blooming bulb home for their Thanksgiving table in November.

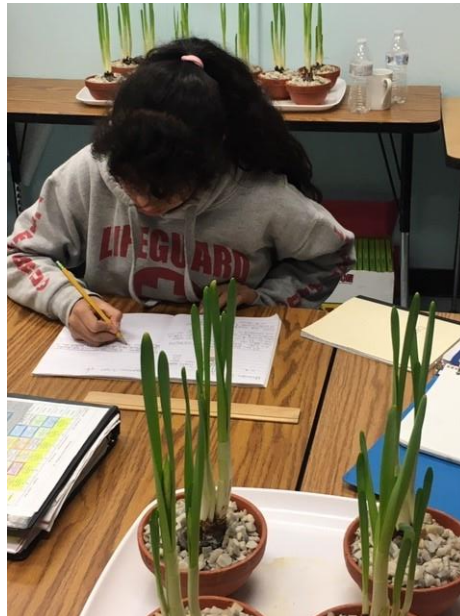


Figure 1. A student makes written observations of her plant and the plants of her classmates.

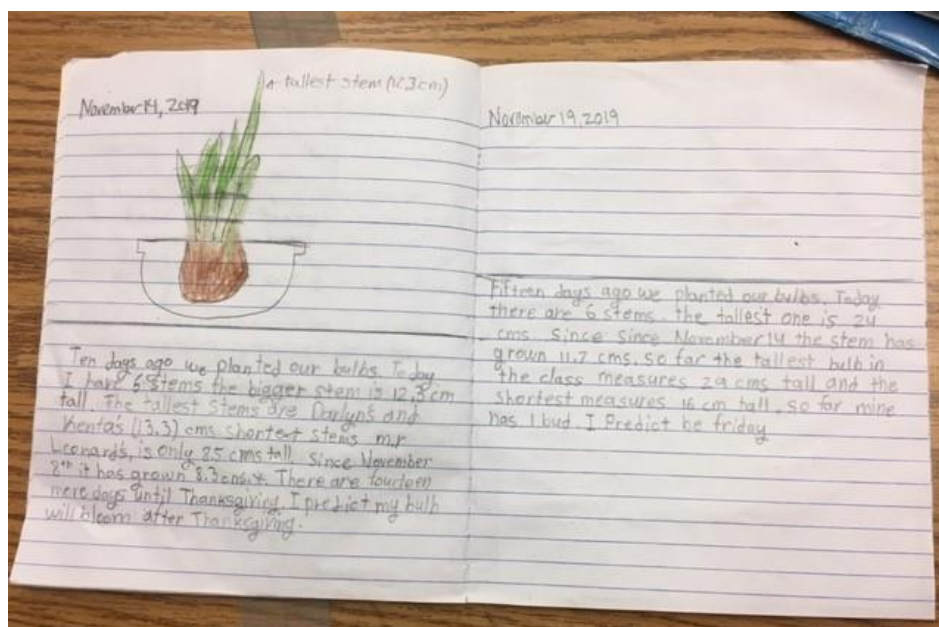


Figure 2. Student journal pages, complete with a sketch of his bulb.

In Fall 2020, consider doing something similar. This type of activity is easily differentiated, adapted to the grade level, level of English proficiency, content the students are or will be learning, and the interests of the students. You can start the project off *at* school if possible and have the students take their plants home in anticipation of hybrid or distance learning. And if you begin the year with remote learning, then you can send the materials to the students' homes in advance. Here are some tips for this project:

- Establish a weekly journal in the form of a Google document for each student. Journals can include weekly sketches, measurements, and predictions. Students can make graphs and calculate the mean, median, mode, and range from your combined data, all while learning/focusing on the language of math as well as science.
- Within the first face-to face hours together, set this up with your students (or set things up remotely).
- Weekly, provide writing prompts so students can write and you can provide feedback.

Fostering Communication

To foster a home/school connection, I plan to begin regular communication with parents and/or guardians early on in the year. This spring, with COVID -19 looming, I began to call families once a week to check in as well as to convey messages from the school. I was able to speak with the children as well, for some additional one-on-one speaking and listening practice. Parents shared that they looked forward to my calls, and some asked that I continue during the summer.

In Fall 2020, each school community will have to establish norms and protocols for communication based on their district and state guidelines. This will more than likely include virtual means (electronic computer-based as well as phone-based correspondence). Digital literacy skills for the entire community will need to be improved upon as well so that we can be ready for full distance learning at any time.

This past spring, while the move from face-to-face learning was challenging for many reasons, I hope you were able to build upon the relationships that had been established face-to-face throughout the year. Hopefully, we can take the lessons learned from Spring 2020 and apply those lessons to Fall 2020.

Final Thoughts

The transition to distance learning, though sudden, wasn't all bad. One unforeseen advantage to remote learning that surprised me was that students engaged in distance learning could be grouped in new ways that better met their needs. Another unforeseen advantage was that several students with whom I work who have special education plans actually were able to do their work better because of the distance learning format. Moving from class to class and changing subject areas every 50 minutes in the school building had made it harder for these students.

Finally, I want to leave you with the reassurance that we are not alone in dealing with these uncertain and blurred times. Soon, my school (and probably yours) will announce the *final* grand

plan for “back-to-school.” We will find a way to rise to the occasion as we grow, learn, and stay safe as a community.

Katherine Lobo comes from a family of educators. She has taught at both private and public schools in the United States as well as in Australia and Japan. Presently, she is a full-time ESL teacher at the F. A. Day Middle School in Newton, Massachusetts and an adjunct professor in the Education Department at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. Finally, Kathy is a member of the TESOL International Association Board of Directors.