



# TESOL Connections

Keeping English language professionals connected

## Meet TESOL's New Executive Director: Amber Crowell Kelleher

Interview by [Tomiko Breland](#)

Meet Amber Crowell Kelleher! Amber is the newly appointed executive director for TESOL International Association; she begins her work with TESOL on 5 January 2022, though she's already preparing for her new role. You can read about Amber's professional background [here](#), but we wanted to take some time to get to know her on a personal level.

Born in Rochester, New York, USA, Amber discovered an early curiosity to see the world beyond the small town in Pennsylvania where she grew up. When I asked her to tell me about herself, her responses made it clear that she loves to travel because it allows her to meet people from all over the world—to learn about their cultures by talking with them and visiting them in their homes.

In fact, Amber met her husband on a study abroad program in Sheffield, England. She counts herself lucky that they have both been fortunate to have international careers that have given them many opportunities to travel together—as well as independently—for more than 30 years; Amber has visited more than 50 countries so far, and she's excited to continue her travels because “there are still so many people to meet and places to experience.”

In her spare time (and when she's not traveling!), Amber is an avid runner (dragging her BRFs—“best running friends”—along with her to various cities for half-marathons) and practitioner of yoga, but she most enjoys spending time with her husband and two teenage boys, who are finishing up high school in the next 2 years. At home during the pandemic, she enjoyed the close quarters with her family, and with her children, especially: “I am cherishing every single minute we have together before they leave home. They make me laugh, and they drive me crazy, but they are my world.”



Amber and her husband in  
Quebec City, Canada

I asked Amber a few questions to learn more about her and about what makes her so eager to begin her new position:

**What in your background makes you excited to lead this organization?**

My parents are probably responsible for planting the seed that started this journey. They are high school sweethearts who have spent six decades together standing up for others and pushing back when things didn't feel right. In the 1970s, they quietly and boldly made their mark in the world by adopting two biracial children, creating a family that didn't look like others. My three siblings and I joke about the improbability of four kids (who are completely and utterly different from each other) ending up in one family.

Witnessing the world through the lenses of inequity and prejudice that my siblings encountered shapes my world view and still influences my major life decisions, like schools for my children, jobs I take, and neighborhoods to live in. I still have much to learn about my own privilege, but I will be forever grateful for the perspective that my family experience gives me. It has been the gift of a lifetime.

Joining the TESOL family—and all the diversity that it represents—felt like a natural next step in my professional journey. I can't wait to get started.

**Can you tell us about a learning experience you've had related to language development?**

As TESOL members know better than I do, learning a language is so much more than acquiring the ability to communicate. It can be thrilling. It is deeply humbling. It can literally change the course of someone's life. I am in awe of the transformative work TESOL professionals do every day.

Though I know everyone learns differently, when I was learning languages (Spanish in high school and a few semesters of German in college), my experience was that the less concerned I was about making mistakes, the faster I progressed. I also realized how much more I grasped when immersed in a setting where I was forced to actually use the language (e.g., my German host family's home). I guess that means I will eventually need to retire to a Spanish-speaking community (Costa Rica? Barcelona?) if I want to become fluent in Spanish—which is on my bucket list.

**Which books are you reading?**

I am usually drawn to stories about people who are transitioning between cultures.

I have read a handful of books over the past 18 months that I'm still thinking about, including: [\*Americanah\*](#) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, [\*Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End\*](#) by Atul Gawande (it sounds kind of depressing, but it was a fascinating book with some fundamental lessons about figuring out what is important in life), and [\*Braiding Sweetgrass\*](#) by Robin Wall Kimmerer (you will look at the world differently after reading this one!).

Two books that are currently on my bedside table are [\*The 6 Principles for Exemplary Teaching of English Learners\*](#) (really!) and [\*Caste: The Origin of Our Discontents\*](#) by Isabel Wilkerson. Those will be my holiday reads.



Amber's "kids"

### **Which podcasts are you listening to?**

Without a work commute, I haven't listened to many podcasts recently. I do admit to shamelessly bingeing on Netflix now and then, especially the baking shows. I was a very picky eater growing up (I survived my childhood eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches) and missed out on so many years of eating good food. Now, one of my favorite things to do is try new dishes, particularly anything that includes cilantro, cumin, ginger, or gochujang!

### **If we went to lunch and agreed not to talk about work, what would we end up talking about?**

Probably...food and places we want to visit.

### **What are you most looking forward to learning about the field and our members?**

I am looking forward to hearing your stories, being transported into your classrooms, seated among your students, and understanding what it is like to do the work you do. I want to hear your challenges. I want to celebrate your successes. Most of all, I want to partner with you to learn how the TESOL staff and I can help you advance excellence in English language teaching.

### **Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?**

I know I have a lot to learn about the profession. There will be good days and challenging days ahead. I will probably make a few mistakes along the way. But I am 100% committed to the long-term success and sustainability of TESOL.

I am thrilled to begin working over the next few weeks with Rosa (Aronson), the board, and the staff to hit the ground running in the new year. We are going to accomplish amazing things together!

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*Tomiko Breland is TESOL Content and Learning editor. She received her BA in English from Stanford University, her MA in writing from the Johns Hopkins University, and her certificate in TESOL from Anaheim University. In her free time, she writes and edits fiction.*