



TESOL Board Connect: This Year, Graduation Ceremonies Are So Much More

by [Shelley K. Taylor](#)

What university holds 28 separate graduation ceremonies in a little over a month, and why would a TESOL board member happily attend three of them? In June, [my university](#) held two convocations a day for 9 days in a row, and then it held two a day for 5 more days in a row in July. I first participated as “orator” for my faculty and announced the names of graduates crossing the stage. Next, I attended one family member’s graduation in June, and another one’s graduation in July. Diplomas had already been sent out, but some students had had to wait 2 years for their graduation ceremony due to the [university closure](#) in mid-March 2020. Therefore, the reason why my university held so many graduations in short order this spring was to catch up on all those missed opportunities to celebrate loved ones’ successes by seeing them proudly walk across the stage. (And, in two of the three ceremonies I attended, service dogs crossed the stage as well!)

We have all faced life, work, and educational challenges since 11 March 2020, when the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic. Many of us can remember where we were when we heard the (surreal) news about upcoming work closures. I was in a meeting of Senate on 13 March 2020 when our university president told us to clear key things out of our offices because we would not be allowed back in them for the foreseeable future—and all teaching was going online. All of the senators’ jaws dropped, including mine.

The instant closure meant that for one course, I had to teach the last 2 weeks of Winter term using an online platform. We had already used that platform occasionally, so it did not involve a learning curve for the students or me. As for my other course, it was designed as an online course, and we had been using VoiceThread to satisfy an oral component anyway. Overall, finishing off the term totally online was not too disruptive.

The closures did wreak havoc with conferences, however. Having rotated off the TESOL Board of Directors the year before, I had jumped into being the local conference chair of the Canadian Association of Applied Linguistics’ (ACLA) 2020 conference with Program Chairs [Dr. Francis Bangou](#) (ACLA President) and [Dr. Guillaume Gentil](#) (ACLA Vice-President); they were from Ottawa and my university was hosting ACLA and [Congress](#), of which ACLA was part. But after that fateful day in March, messages began swirling around email about conference cancellations:

American Educational Research Association, American Association for Applied Linguistics, Congress (and ACLA), and, sadly, the annual TESOL convention.

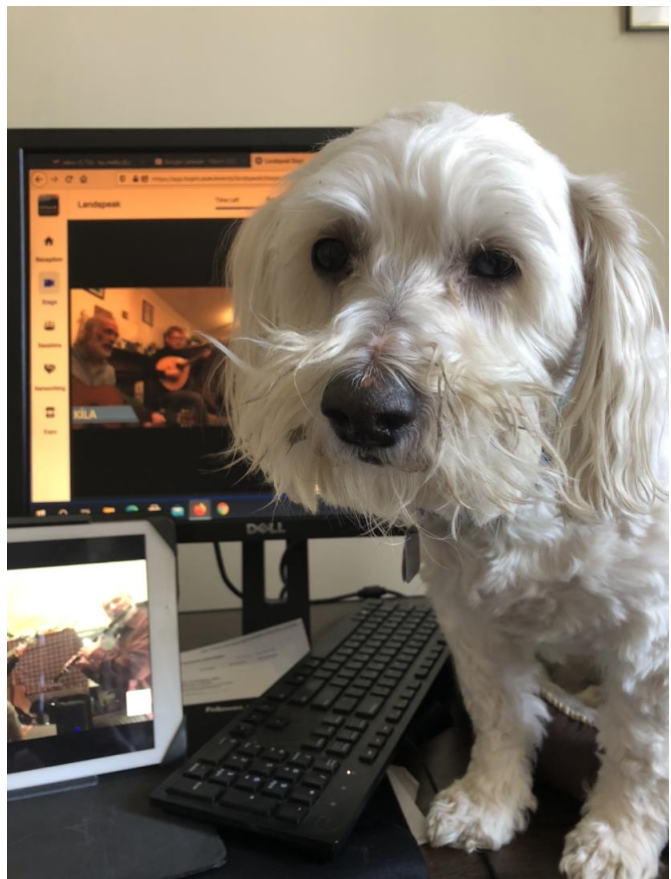
Along with signing up as local conference chair for ACLA, I had also joined in a consortium of universities in my province to hold an on-site symposium so local professors and graduate students could meet and find out about related studies going on not so far away, but that they would never have known about otherwise. [Dr. Enrica Piccardo](#) was spearheading the consortium and, rather than cancel it, we ventured into shifting it to an online event.

Having just seen how the first wave of COVID-19 hit her Italian homeland, Enrica's rallying cry was: "People need hope." Therefore, we decided against cancelling the symposium. Hosting it online turned out to have a steep learning curve (Zoom-bombing, links that wouldn't link, etc.), but at the end of the day it was a success because it provided a sense of community. TESOL also dusted itself off and took a giant leap of faith, offering its first fully online convention a few months later—also providing a much-needed sense of community.

Before everyone caught on to Zoom, I was able to catch up on work. Since I already had pets, there was no need to get a pandemic puppy, and I started learning a new language online, which, as it turned out, was me getting my just reward.

Previously, I had incorporated an online language learning component into a graduate course on language learning. My students endeavored to not only read about language learning, but to dip their toes into doing so themselves (using the online program of their choice). One criterion was that the target language not be in the same language family as any language(s) they already knew. Their assignments involved comparing their personal experiences to the sage advice of their readings. I thought the task would be easier for me because I had an online instructor via Zoom, and classmates that I could see and hear online. (Nobody kept their camera off).

I discovered, however, that learning synchronously and having "live" classmates sometimes placed me at a disadvantage. By learning a Gaelic language, I fulfilled the criterion that it not be related to any languages I had studied before (language families, orthographies, etc.). It had been a while since I had ventured off the deep end and exposed myself to a totally unknown language, but, still, I was not immersed or submersed in it; we just met synchronously on Zoom as a cohort with an instructor for a few



hours a week. I began to fear the false beginners who would go “off script,” and leave we rank beginners in the dust as we clung onto our limited vocabulary and the few phrases we had learned.

I also experienced all the discomfort that metacognition ([second language anxiety](#), [the monitor model](#)—read more about the monitor model [here](#), p. 15) could throw my way; however, my biggest distress came from accidentally turning the camera of my iPad the wrong way and not noticing what was showing up in gallery view until there was no turning back. The horror! The horror! I kept emailing (uninvited) reflections on my learning process to a colleague that spoke the language I was learning, reflections sprinkled with: “It’s so hard!” and “How did you ever learn that language?” When I looked back on these messages later, I thought: “Ohhh, maybe I wasn’t dealing with total lockdown, masks, people dying, and fear as well as I thought I was.”

And yet, I was able to work from home. I did not lose my job, I did not end up in the hospital, and my short-lived discomfort with language learning did not interfere with my grasping the content of central topics. Neither was it crucial to my grade progression nor to my completing a degree. My thoughts turn to [multilingual learners lacking a sufficient number of devices](#) or connectivity at home, to colleagues in my university who had never ventured into online teaching before, and to elementary and secondary teachers who did not have the luxury of shifting their teaching onto familiar platforms or who sought to deliver all teaching on cell phones via WhatsApp. In my province, schools had already been closed for 26 weeks by the end of the 2020–2021 school year (Wadehra, 2021), and more closures followed right up to January 2022.

We are still in a process of catching up: catching up on content learning and teaching, on language and literacy development, and on important life events. Catching up on travelling (hence the bedlam in many airports); socializing; being able to see a doctor in person instead of over the telephone; attending weddings, sports events, and—heck—even standardized testing in person. And yet, even with all this playing of catch-up, now is a time for us in the TESOL community to celebrate our achievements.

Now is the time to listen to each other’s stories and support one another, and to walk across the metaphorical stage and celebrate—with our students, colleagues, friends, families, service pets and pandemic puppies or goldfish, as the case may be. We are nimble, we are here, and we are more international than ever. Yay, us!

Reference

Wadehra, R. (2021). *The impact of school closures on Ontario students*. Centre for Global Social Policy. <https://cgsp-cpsm.ca/ceic/2021/07/05/theimpactofschoolclosures/>

Shelley K. Taylor, professor, teaches in the graduate TESOL/Applied Linguistics and Bachelor of Education program at the University of Western Ontario. She has conducted research on

multilingual language education and language policy in Canada, Denmark, Greenland, and Nepal, and on youth refugees' language and literacy learning. She has also chaired TESOL's Bilingual-Multilingual Education Interest Section, served on the (former) nominating and professional development committees and the board of directors, and served as associate convention program chair for TESOL 2015, as well as contributing to numerous TESOL publications (as editor and author).