



# TESOL Connections

Keeping English language professionals connected

## TESOL Board Connect: Learning Through Service

by [Elisabeth L. Chan](#)

I'm originally from Memphis, Tennessee, USA where my great-grandfather moved after immigrating to North Little Rock, Arkansas. I come from a multigenerational immigrant family. My great grandfathers, grandparents, and father immigrated to the United States over the years. I identify as a fourth/second-generation Chinese American from the U.S. South. Unfortunately for me, it means I grew up somewhat detached from my cultural and linguistic heritages. I didn't understand or recognize the differences of high- and low-context cultures or the differences of collectivist versus individualistic perspectives clashing in my house. I didn't recognize my father as a bilingual, bicultural person and how that shaped the way he communicated with his third-generation Chinese American wife and four very American children who were monolingual English speakers.

These experiences and realizations have shaped the way I approach my teaching, research, and professional service. I can look back and see the lack of culturally responsive or culturally sustaining pedagogy in my own experiences with schooling as a young learner. This is part of the reason I am passionate about examining language education through critical, intersectional, and relational lenses.

The year after I completed my master's degree, I joined TESOL International Association as a young professional. A year later, I volunteered to serve on the Diversity Committee. I learned a lot about the big picture of the association, expanded my network, and benefited from informal peer mentoring. Because of this experience, I always encourage other members to volunteer. You don't have to wait for years before you volunteer.

Becoming more involved in interest sections (IS) was really the best way that I made the most of my membership. I was elected chair of the [Social Responsibility IS](#). I appreciate the flattened hierarchy of leadership in this member community because I had incredible access to historical knowledge and support from other Social Responsibility IS leaders, present and past. Through this experience, I learned more about the big picture of the association from a different perspective. I also strengthened my skills in collaboration by working with several other member communities to facilitate panel presentations.

When the Diversity & Inclusion Committee was sunset, I met with members from across ISs, (then) forums, and committees to create a TESOL Diversity Collaborative. It was an informal

group working for diversity through a critical lens, which eventually applied to become a forum and then the [TESOL Diversity Collaborative Professional Learning Network](#) (PLN). As I started my volunteer work on the Diversity Committee, I remained committed to working on equity issues. Volunteering to work within a PLN has both similarities and differences to working in an IS or committee. Both are great ways to make connections to like-minded professionals. Unlike ISs, PLNs are not part of TESOL's governance structure, but they tend to have more diverse leadership structures than ISs.

One of the task forces that I worked on focused on ISs. We found that the majority of participants in our member survey were not part of an IS and/or didn't know what an IS was. Based on our sample, it turned out that the largest "member group" in the association was members who didn't have an IS. This experience has helped inform the way I think about belonging and engagement within the association at different levels.

I later served as a member of the Nominating Committee (NomCom). I think the NomCom is a little bit of a mystery to some members. This is the committee that is primarily charged with encouraging people to apply for leadership positions and vetting applicants to create the annual ballot for the NomCom, board of directors, and president-elect. Because of this, the NomCom has power to influence making changes at the top leadership levels. Serving on this committee as a member and later as the chair and past chair, I became more familiar with both the opportunities and challenges of leadership at these levels. I especially learned better how the TESOL staff work together with the executive director and the board.

I am still in the midst of my first year on the board of directors and am open to learning and seeing where this journey is going. To conclude, I hope you feel free to reach out to me and share a little of your own journey. I spend a lot of time reflecting as part of my professional practice and welcome your reflections, too. Maybe you have found something in my experiences that stood out to you, made you feel a connection to something, or left you pondering something new. I have a few short acknowledgments and reflections for leadership.

- 1) For past leaders: Thank you for your dedication and contributions to the field and the association. I know it's currently difficult to find recognition of members' past service, but I hope that is something we can work on as an association.
- 2) For current leaders: Actively seek out and invite others to collaborate. Let me also personally thank and acknowledge you and the time, consideration, and professionalism you bring to your volunteerism.
- 3) For future leaders: If you're interested in volunteering, just try it. If you feel nervous about serving, don't worry. You can do it! You'll find new connections and mentors along the way. A thanks in advance to you for your service!

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**Elisabeth L. Chan** has more than 15 years of experience as an English language educator. She currently teaches English as a second language at Northern Virginia Community College. She holds a PhD in multilingual multicultural education and interdisciplinary perspectives and social policy. She has presented, researched, and published on issues of social justice in

*education through a critical lens and challenging anti-Asian hate, where she draws upon her lived experiences as a second/fourth-generation Chinese American from the U.S. South.*