



## Ask a TESOL Leader: “What advice would you give a starting English language teacher?”

by [Mawa Samb](#)

*Question:* “What advice would you give a starting English language teacher?”

I have worked as an instructor, a teacher trainer, and a consultant, in addition to serving as president for the Association of Teachers of English in Senegal and as a board member for TESOL International Association. I have been an English language professional for many years, but I still remember what it was like to be just starting out. I’d like to answer this question by sharing some anecdotes and tips to empower new English language teachers—those with little or no experience.

My first tip is to **prioritize professional development**. In fact, teachers should and must be constant learners, and this is even more important when they are new in the profession. The more a teacher attends conferences, seminars, and workshops, the more they read English language teaching (ELT) magazines and books, then the better they can understand the profession and feel ready to face their students. Teacher learning never does stop, especially in a fast-changing world like the one we live in. The COVID-19 pandemic offers the best example of this: Many teachers took early retirement because they felt unprepared to teach online classes.

Professional learning may actually be done formally or informally through personal readings, research, sharing with colleagues, or experimenting with new techniques. In addition, it’s key to join teachers’ associations to keep updated, become empowered, and seek networking opportunities.

My second tip is to **be empathetic at all times**. Empathy is currently viewed as a new leadership skill. It appeals to human qualities; we are humans before being teachers. There is an anecdote that goes something like this: A student missed a test and told the teacher that she was sick. The teacher said, “If you don’t take the make-up test tomorrow, it’s going to be a zero for you.” In this case, instead of inquiring about the student’s health, the teacher just focused on grades. A more empathetic approach would mean a teacher having a listening ear, knowing their students’ background, and treating each student differently according to their specificities...essentially, showing them that each student matters.

My third tip is in line with empathy, and it also happens to be the first principle of [The 6 Principles for Exemplary Teaching of English Learners®](#), from TESOL: “**Know your learners.**” I once had a student who used to come late to school. Because of her lateness, her grades suffered, and all the teachers used to sanction her. Eventually, it was discovered that

she couldn't afford to pay the bus fare and had to walk 10 kilometers to school each day. Once the teachers and administration knew about her situation, they were able to take the necessary steps to serve the student's needs, and she started coming to school by bus, stopped being late, and improved academically. Knowing the student and her background enabled her teachers to become better educators; if we had taken the time to know her sooner, we could have spared her distress and helped improve her academic outcomes right away.

My fourth tip is to always **approach lesson preparation professionally**, do some background research on your lesson content, and share your plans with more seasoned teachers and colleagues. During your lesson, if you don't know the answer to something a student asks you, be humble. It's okay to say "I don't know" and offer to check and come back with the right solutions.

And finally, I'd like to suggest that you spend time ensuring you **provide equitable assessments**. Your role is to make sure you assess what is taught in a fair and equitable way, ensuring the validity, reliability, transparency, and security of all tests. Be sure not to use retired tests (already used), and be fair with all students, whatever their gender, race, social position, and so on. There are many resources on the web for creating equitable assessments; here are a few to start with:

- [Sounds Like Success: A Framework for Equitable Assessment](#) (from *The Science Teacher*, by Siegel, Wissehr, and Halverson)
- [Equitable Assessments](#) (University of Minnesota)
- [The Role of Equity in the Assessment of English Learners](#) (from *Language Magazine*, by Krastel)
- [Equitable Assessment Practices for English Learners in Connecticut: A Handbook for Educators](#) (Connecticut State Department of Education, RESC Alliance)

In a frame on the wall of my language institute, there is an anonymous saying: "To teach is to touch lives, good teachers touch the lives of many."

Do you have a question for the TESOL leadership? Email your question to [tc@tesol.org](mailto:tc@tesol.org) with the subject line "Ask a TESOL Leader" and it could be featured in this column!

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