



# TESOL Connections

Keeping English language professionals connected

## TESOL Board Connect: My First Year on the TESOL Board

by [Mawa Samb](#)



Sitting in the TESOL central office beneath artwork (African women at work in rural areas) gifted to TESOL by the Association of Teachers of English in Senegal.

I'm writing this article to invite all TESOL members to be fully engaged. I want to encourage all the undecided to go the extra mile: Help the organization grow and better shine by taking up leadership positions, which are open to all TESOL members and inclusive of all races, ethnicities, nationalities, language backgrounds, disabilities, health/medical conditions, ages, religions, genders, gender identities, and sexual orientations.

TESOL wishes to offer many more opportunities to its members and continue to advance the field and increase the association's assets. It's important to understand that by *assets*, I don't mean only *finances*—but rather the association's valuable people, from executive director, staff, board members, and committee members to all its volunteers.

I am the living example of an ordinary member: I come from a very poor country and have nothing special about myself but my love and passion for teaching English, my dedication to the field, and my dreams of a better,

stronger, and more sustainable association. In this column, I would like to focus mainly on my experience as a first-year TESOL board of directors member, including challenges and the perspectives we embraced to fully recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Beginning My Board Journey

My participation on the TESOL board has led me on a wonderful adventure. I never dreamt of joining the TESOL board, even when I volunteered for TESOL many times over the years:

during its international symposium in Dakar, Senegal; for the Franklin Global SpellEvent (coordinator); the 50th TESOL anniversary committee; and also my pivotal role in partnerships with affiliates, such as Washington, D.C., Area TESOL (WATESOL), Maryland TESOL (MDTESOL), and my own affiliate, Association of Teachers of English in Senegal (ATES).

One evening, while dining with a former TESOL president, we were discussing the association. I stated some frustrations I had as an international member and shared some ideas and dreams I had for the organization. After listening to me, my colleague asked, “Why don’t you apply to become a board member?”

My answer was negative at first; to me, it seemed impossible to be elected. At that time, no African had ever joined the TESOL board of directors. However, thanks to his pep talk, I applied. I was shortlisted, but I was not elected in the final round. I didn’t give up—after my second application, I received a call from then Executive Director Rosa Aronson, who announced the good news. I’d been elected!

## Feeling out of Place

Actually, being a board member involves a lot of responsibilities and duties. It’s no doubt one more challenge in my professional career. The biggest shock stems from the amount of information, data, meetings, assignments, and paperwork to be dealt with. Additionally, my first year on the board coincided with a COVID-19 year. The association, like many organizations at the beginning of the pandemic, was going through difficult times. Having just started my term, I acted first as an observer; I attended online meetings without feeling I had the right to intervene.

The atmosphere, the solemnity, and the meeting protocols made me believe at first that I was out of place. The environment felt as foreign to me as if everyone else were from the planets Mars or Jupiter. To complicate matters, I had no idea what the multiple acronyms being used meant!

Another new experience for me was attending the first virtual TESOL convention. In spite of some initial challenges, the convention went smoothly and I will never forget the speech delivered by then TESOL President Deborah Short, which not only summarized the pandemic situation with its challenges and setbacks, but encouraged all TESOLers—specifically the board, staff, volunteers, and members—to be one to overcome COVID-19 challenges and keep the association viable and healthy. She summoned all ELT professionals to deal with this new paradigm and stay innovative and creative in order to keep up with the new trends of Zoom classes, Google classrooms, and other edtech to address the needs of our learners. She emphasized that it was key for us to change our classroom practices or disappear forever. TESOL itself had embraced this idea, having canceled its in-person annual convention and, for the first time ever, hosting a virtual convention.

## Finding My Place

Amidst all the Zoom board meetings, which had taken the place of in-person meetings because of the pandemic, the existing board members welcomed the newcomers so warmly that I told myself that I didn't dare give up my position. Also, there was no way I could disappoint my friends and colleagues, who had offered so much excitement and expectations.

My mentor, Debra Suarez, also played a great role in my regaining confidence. So, I started calming down and telling myself that challenges are ahead for all people, and that no matter what position or experience you have had in life, there are always times and occasions that we need to use our commitment and determination to get through some complex situations.

During subsequent board meetings, when there were acronyms used or concepts discussed that I was unfamiliar with, I started asking lots of questions. As the Russian proverb states, "There is no shame in not knowing; the shame lies in not finding out." In the end, I helped raise awareness about simplifying and decoding concepts that people would take for granted simply because they lived in the United States. In my capacity as a board member from an underprivileged and underrepresented area, I began striving to get TESOL to reach out to more people and places in the world. Today, with its DEIA (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access) initiative, the organization is making greater efforts to have a more diverse association. In fact, the TESOL board had its most diverse membership in its history: It had board members from Nigeria, Senegal, Honduras, Argentina, Denmark, the Czech Republic, France, and the United States.



Photo with my mentor, Debra Suarez.

## Conclusion

My dream today is to inspire millions of people around the world to join TESOL International Association, become active members, and then take up leadership positions. As the saying goes: "We can soar on the wings of an optimistic attitude." Each person can make a difference from all the parts of the world and have a meaningful footprint in the association's management.

TESOL is a big family with great heart and, no matter what, many people will remain faithful to the association. Whenever there is an event, we can see the longstanding members who attend and give their unremitting support. Whenever something is needed, such as when there is a new committee created to solve an issue or address an important topic, or when an interest section needs revitalization, volunteers step up. It is just amazing to see that whenever there is a problem, it can't contend with the dynamism, commitment, and passion of our extraordinary members.





Several members of the TESOL board and staff (October 2021).

Glenda Gallardo, a TESOL reviewer, sums up volunteering for TESOL well. She states on her Facebook page that there are many advantages to volunteering for TESOL, but “most importantly, you feel connected to TESOL.”

The heart of TESOL is its volunteers. I would love to one day have a TESOL Hall of Fame displayed at all our annual conventions to help celebrate TESOL’s most devoted members and recognize the inspiration they provide to entire generations. Such recognition, through a TESOL Hall of Fame, might be the ultimate recognition of the association to its pillars: The long-time volunteers and devoted members who sustain the organization through the introduction, over time, of challenges and new paradigms.

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