

GRANTS & AWARDS: REPORTS

Building a Volunteer Team for your ESL Class

by Cynthia Putnam

I'm an instructor for Literacy Source's English Conversation Class and I rely on a team of volunteers to bring value to our 20+ students. Our class meets twice a week and serves a diverse group of students ranging in levels from beginner (ESOL 2) to intermediate (ESOL 4/5). In this report, I will share the benefits a volunteer team brings to our class, and how we built our team to support the student learning outcomes, either in-person or remote.

Building a volunteer team can seem daunting, especially for an instructor who already has responsibility for managing a full body of students. It takes work, and we talk about that next, but I've found the rewards to be well worth the effort. Have you ever had a class with

students of varying abilities and wished you could tailor your lessons to their levels? With a volunteer team, you can do exactly that. Our team of eight volunteers gives us the capacity to organize students into eight different groups customized to beginner, intermediate, and high level. Each group is led by one volunteer, and we rotate the groups weekly so that students practice listening and speaking with different native speakers over the course of the term.

A second benefit our team brings is expanding the teacher/student ratio. With eight volunteers and one lead instructor (me), we achieve a teacher/student ratio of 1:3, giving each student more individual talk time in the breakout rooms. Our students rate small group discussions as the most valuable part of conversation class.

Last, but not least, is building rapport. Rapport is one of the most effective strategies for motivating students and building trust. Rapport happens when volunteers and students find shared interests. It can be living in the same neighborhood, having children in the same local school, sharing a hobby in music or interest in sports. Two of our volunteers live in the same neighborhood as students and run into each other in the local park and supermarket. Their children go to the same school. Another two volunteers share interests with students in playing music and sharing YouTube videos. A deep and broad volunteer team increases the opportunity for finding common interests and building camaraderie.

Volunteer teams don't come together magically. To be effective, they require good planning, clear roles and assignments, some ability with Zoom skills (if the class is remote), and regular communication, observation, and feedback. Some practices that work for our team:

- team planning meeting at the beginning of the quarter;
- weekly communication with links to the lesson plan and small group assignments;
- observations from volunteers about highlights and/or challenges in their small group discussions;

The screenshot shows a blog post titled "Morning Conversation Class" dated Thursday, April 15, 2021. The post includes a homework assignment about Ramadan due 4/19/2021, with a note that it's for home practice. The main content is "Part 1. Ramadan Reading & Pictures", which includes a picture of a mosque at night with the word "Ramadan" written below it. Text below the picture provides information about Ramadan, such as the date (April 12 to May 11), the number of Muslims in the US (3.5 million), and a common greeting. There is also a picture of people observing Ramadan. On the right side of the blog, there is a profile for Cynthia Putnam, the instructor, and two Zoom links for "MORNING Class Zoom Link" and "EVENING Class Zoom Link". At the bottom right, there is a "TRANSLATE" section with a language selection dropdown and a note "Powered by Google Translate".

Figure 1: The class blog

- involving team members in identifying and solving problems and sharing tips for class management;
- invitations to contribute content to the [class blog](#) (see [Figure 1](#));
- short sessions to practice using Zoom features in breakout rooms (e.g., how to share screens and use the white board).

I hope the experiences and practices I've shared here have piqued your interest in working with volunteers. There are many ways to build an effective volunteer team and what's here is by no means exhaustive. If you work with

volunteers, I would love to hear your suggestions (cynthia@putnamprice.com).

In closing, I would like to thank the members of our volunteer team: Catherine Vallejo, Grace Zou, Julie Fanselow, Julie Howe, Lidiia Gagarina, Linda Pye, Steve Deutsch, and Tom Patterson. And a very special thanks to Literacy Source for their outstanding support with volunteer recruitment and training: Caroline Socha, Volunteer Program Manager, and Cat Howell, Co-Executive Director. You make our work ever meaningful and rewarding.



Cynthia Putnam joined [Literacy Source](#) as a volunteer in 2017 as she was in the process of retiring from her own environmental firm. She began as a class assistant teaching ESOL I students and, following full retirement, became a lead instructor for Literacy Source's Conversation Classes. She works with a team of skilled and dedicated volunteers to deliver a class that is fun, friendly, and provides lots of opportunities for students to practice their English listening and speaking skills. You can contact her at cynthia@putnamprice.com.

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WAESOL Funding Grant Report

by Jackie Otting

At the WAESOL 2020 conference, I was surprised to learn that I had received a WAESOL Funding Grant of \$500 to complete my research study, "How prepared do educators feel to meet the needs of MLs with disabilities?" Due to this generous funding opportunity, I was able to compensate participants for partaking in my research study. This funding allowed me to recruit more participants which led to gaining more insight into educators' perspectives on educating multilingual learners (MLs) with disabilities.

For my study, I sent out an online survey by email to educators of MLs throughout the state of Washington and the Midwest. I was also able to put out a call for participants through professional educator organizations by posting on their websites and discussion boards. The first 100

participants of my study received \$5 digital gift cards to Starbucks or Target depending on their preference. The gift card incentive that was funded by the grant from WAESOL definitely improved participant responses for the survey.

My survey resulted in responses from 261 participants. Participants were administrators, EL/ESL/ENL teachers, world language teachers, bilingual teachers, and dual language teachers. The diversity of educator backgrounds allowed me to compare responses from these groups.

I encourage anyone interested in completing a research project to apply to the WAESOL funding grant. I am so grateful to WAESOL for this funding opportunity.



Jackie Otting is a K-6 ELL teacher and formerly a Chinese Teacher for the Iowa Department of Education. She is a curriculum and research consultant for an English language learning app for elementary students. Her research focuses on teachers' feelings of efficacy and preparedness for teaching DLLs/ELLs with disabilities. She is currently pursuing a masters of education in Learning Sciences and Human Development with a graduate certificate in Disability Studies at the University of Washington in Seattle, WA. You can contact her at jacqueline.otting@gmail.com.