As teachers, we often focus on the task at hand and give it our all to help our students understand and apply new knowledge. We rejoice when we see their progress, and share in their happiness to do something new or open a new door in their life.

Our influence does not stop there. Especially in the case of MIT's ESL for Service Employees Program, we also get to hear how the student's progress helps the community as a whole, whether it is the MIT community or the students' families and neighbors.

We have all heard about the smart MIT custodian who used his newly acquired English skills to make design suggestions for quiet and ergonomic cleaning carts. There are many additional stories of improvements that are a direct consequence of our helping to improve our students' communication skills. From being able to detail cleaning plans for important meetings, to being able to explain disposal best-practices to labs, or being able to clearly report any issues with stock or facilities – these skills allow for building a strong rapport with other MIT community members, not only giving our students the opportunity to rise to the height of their own expectations of offering excellent service, but also allowing for the community to express their needs or convey their gratitude. What a great feeling!

Speaking of great feelings, I’d like to share with you an excerpt from a letter one of our tutors received from one of our student’s children. This letter is for all of you fellow volunteers – it is the gratitude our students’ families and neighbors would express had they had the chance to meet you.

It speaks to our students’ increased involvement in their communities, a direct consequence of their becoming more confident in their English skills. This is how you are helping make the world a better place:

“You have made such a big impact on my mother’s life. As you continue to help her with her English, her confidence grows and she is able to better communicate with the people she loves.”

— Message from a student’s daughter

While space does not allow for sharing the entirety of the letter, I want you to know that your volunteering ripples across many communities, much more than we can even imagine.
When I tell people that my father is from Mexico and my mother is from Japan, I usually get the question, “Oh really? How did they meet?” My response? “In ESL.”

I owe so much to ESL, and I know because I can see the difference English makes within my family. As fluent English speakers, my mother earned a master’s in accounting and has a job in a Japanese company, while my father earned his GED and an associate’s degree and has a job that supports us. I never had to worry if my parents understood the handouts I gave them from school, or what the doctor had said, and I could even ask for homework help. All this was possible because my parents chose to go to school and take ESL classes.

However, I do have family members who came to America and never went back to school. They never learned English, and it’s harder for them. Occasionally, my parents have to help out and translate for them. My father went to my cousin’s school to help my aunt register her for school, and help translate for my aunt at doctors’ appointments. From a young age, I saw glimpses of how difficult it was to navigate a world that one could not understand.

That’s why when I came to MIT and first learned about the ESL program, I jumped at the chance to volunteer. Honestly, I did not even have much experience teaching, let alone teaching English, but I did have a lot of experience learning languages in school (even now I am still taking classes) and felt this was something I needed to do. Freshman year, I started off as a substitute and have since continued as a permanent tutor. While my teaching skills may have been lacking, the great thing about volunteering for ESL at MIT is that there is so much support. The ESL coordinators read your concerns about students and try to help, offering sessions on pronunciation, textbooks and other materials. While I may have had doubts on my ability to teach English, to my great fortune I had the coordinators to guide me.

There is that old cliché that the students are the ones that teach the teacher. Well, it is true. The students I have met with come from a variety of economic, social, educational, and cultural backgrounds. All have a variety of life experiences that they are so open to sharing, even if I am meeting with them for the first time. My very first student I substituted for was an engineer in his home country. Another student loved gardening and I helped her find a particular flower she was looking for online. One person I met was learning Chinese. My first perma
nentic student loved short stories, and my current student loves pupusas, even bringing some to class. (He taught me how to make them but mine do not taste nearly as good.)

Every time I step into a class, seeing the students’ motivation and willingness to work hard to improve only motivates me more. I see their value as people and members of MIT. That is why after undergrad, I want to become a doctor and work with immigrants and minorities, to help others navigate the healthcare world. I have a long way to go, but I think the end will be worthwhile.

The ESL program at MIT is special, and so are the many students who are a part of it. The program is so valuable to its students, and to all those they come in contact with. Language brings us together and we become stronger as a community. That is why I, and we as undergraduates, graduates, employees, and faculty and members of the MIT community, have to do all we can to support the ESL program.

---

**Tips for Teaching**

*List created by Janet Walzer, Former Teacher with MIT's ESL Program for Service Employees*

1. Don’t underestimate how difficult new words are to learn and retain.
2. Engage with your students about their culture and customs.
3. Don’t use materials that rely heavily on understanding pop/local culture; try to find practical materials.
4. Recognize that you might feel you’re repeating something a lot but that’s not how students experience it.
5. Be flexible when it comes to materials and lessons – there are a lot of different ways people can learn.
6. When teaching reading comprehension, emphasize to the students that the answers lie in what they read and not what they might know about the subject themselves; emphasize going back to the passage to look for the answers.
7. Ask for feedback from your students to gauge their interest and to evaluate your own lesson plans.
8. Don’t do the same type of lesson each week – shake it up.
9. Serve as a resource for matters other than ESL (e.g., if they need help navigating the MIT system).
10. Give the students feedback as much as possible so they can see their own progress.
Complete the crossword below

flu  begin desserts noun beet quarter shovel rash slow university snow
shoelace estimate ESL telephone soup knead fingers cubicle nourish

Across
3. White flakes from the sky  8. Used to make calls
5. Provide with food  10. Cord used to fasten a shoe
8. Dark red vegetable  11. Tool used to move dirt
14. Tool used to make bread
15. 25 cents
19. Liquid meal
16. Not fast
17. Educational Institution
18. Office work area
19. Cakes and Pies
20. Approximate or guess

Down
1. You have ten of these on your body
4. Not fast
6. Educational Institution
7. Office work area
9. 25 cents
12. English as a second language
13. Person, place or thing (grammar)
14. Opposite of finish
15. Poison Ivy reaction
16. Viral infection with fever, aches

English as a Second Language Program
Building NE49-5000
77 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139
esl-admins@mit.edu
hrweb.mit.edu/esl