COVID-19 struck.

This did not deter Estela, an MIT Facilities service staff member or her tutors. In short order, they were able to reinvent their classes to take advantage of remote tools and continue making amazing progress.

Armed with ironclad motivation, Estela was able to overcome day-to-day worries and keep her long-term goal in sight: improve her English to the point where she would be prepared to tackle college-level classes for the next step in her career.

The ESL Program for MIT Service Employees has been helping MIT custodians improve their work and lives for the past 12 years through weekly ESL tutoring sessions tailored to each person’s needs. From vocabulary related to daily custodial and maintenance tasks, to assistance in understanding and passing various licensing requirements and exams, to general life and cultural coaching, our volunteer tutors (whether MIT employees, students, or friends of MIT) have been putting their all into this wonderful service to the MIT community.

You may remember the story about the custodian who used his newly acquired English skills to discuss the custodial cart design with the manufacturer’s engineers, sharing his ideas for a more ergonomic design and for making the cart quieter so ongoing classes would not be disturbed as the cart rolled by. The resulting new design is now part of the MIT custodial fleet. This is just one example of how the MIT community benefits from our service employees’ newfound confidence.

The hoisting exams, high school equivalency, and more – the ESL program finds and provides the resources needed for students to achieve their goals. In Estela’s case, this is preparing for college, so she can pursue her dream of continuing her education by taking classes toward a college degree.

We recently received a letter from her detailing how much the ESL Program has helped her achieve the first step of her dream: acceptance at a local university. This was no easy feat: she has had to work hard on learning many new words and concepts, and on improving her language skills to the point where she felt comfortable writing essays and going through the rigorous admission process. And with the help of her dedicated tutors, she has succeeded!

Estela’s own letter is a testament to her achievements – peppered with advanced-level idiomatic expressions and vocabulary, a beautiful writing style, and great structural flow. To quote one of her tutors: “It’s a wonderful program and I am so proud of what Estela has achieved so far.”

Estela’s efforts were matched by those of her volunteer tutors. They contributed their experience with remote teaching, research, and creating lesson plans tailored to Estela’s needs and aligned with her goals; in addition, they offered encouragement and advice. Estela’s wonderful tutors have been way more than just tutors, serving as mentors, friends, and coaches.

Ryan MacDowell, an expert in online teaching at MIT’s Teaching and Learning Lab, and one of Estela’s volunteer tutors, has brought his expertise not only to his classes, but also to the community of ESL volunteers through his online tutorials on using Zoom and other tools to educate remotely. It is thanks to the collective brain of all the wonderful volunteers helping with the ESL Program that no matter whether we could still meet in person or not, learning and individual growth has continued uninterrupted.

In Estela’s own words: “Thank you for connecting me with the best of the best. [...] Keep doing your great work – lots of people will be positively impacted. Thank you very, very much.”
1. The mute button is your friend
Be aware that there is a delay in sounds and images, and your verbal acknowledgement may arrive in the middle of a word rather than between words and sentences. We tend to acknowledge that we are listening by saying “uh-huh,” but this can be disruptive when delayed. Staying on mute while the student is talking will ensure they can fully focus on expressing their thoughts.

2. The five-second rule
Counting to five after the student has seemingly stopped talking will allow for them to continue if they were just looking for the right word to use. In addition, if there is a delay in sounds or images, waiting will ensure we do not interrupt the student’s train of thought.

3. Minimize distractions
Pick a quiet room where you can fully focus on the student. When teaching in person we have the benefit of watching the student’s body language and hearing their voice with high-fidelity quality. But over the phone or in a virtual meeting, some sounds will not be as accurately reproduced – we will need full focus to understand the students and subsequently be able to help them improve their skills.

4. Let the student be your guide
Through the simple act of listening to your student and allowing them to talk about their life and the challenges they are running into, you will be able to gauge what their needs are, such as vocabulary they need for a doctor’s appointment, help pronouncing a particularly troublesome word, or assistance with their sentence structure. Keep the conversation open and flowing and soon you will have a good idea of how you can help your student.

5. 50% – 90%
Your student may only have the opportunity to speak English while on the phone/virtual meeting with you. Help them practice by asking open-ended questions and allowing them to speak 50% to 90% of the time, depending on their level and fluency.

6. Be sure visual props are visible on small screens
Most students will be on smartphones, and some will have rather small screens. If you do plan to use visual props like slides with text, pick large fonts or images that can be seen on a small screen. When you get to know your student, you can inquire about the kind of phone they have for an idea of how small you can go.

7. We are here to help
We have a wonderful team of ESL coordinators who are more than happy to answer any questions you may have, whether about additional resources available, how to address a particular issue a student is encountering, or just how to better communicate virtually with your student.

8. Have fun
Your hour with your student will be extremely helpful to them by allowing them to practice their language skills. Paying attention to what sounds off, and modeling correct sentences and sounds for them, will already provide plenty of guidance for them to improve. Whether using free-flowing – but still guided – chats, or using more structured approaches for students who wish to use books, this should not stop you from having fun. Soon you will realize your student is yet another friend you’ve gained, all the while having a great, positive influence in someone’s life.
The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the cessation of many aspects of normal life. However, at MIT there are students and tutors in the ESL Program for MIT Service Employees who have carried on meeting! They continue their progress in learning English to enrich both their work and home lives.

Our dedicated students and tutors have been meeting once (or twice) a week, though no longer in the classroom setting. They have embarked on learning through virtual means, from a class via a phone conversation, to exploring and using the latest apps and technologies.

These students who have continued learning use applications such as Zoom, FaceTime, Skype, and WhatsApp, and they have been covering topics such as pronunciation, reading, conversation, grammar, and even the U.S. Citizenship test preparation.

Though at times some topics are challenging in a virtual setting, tutors are saying that the classes are working well.

A major contributor to this effort has been Ryan MacDowell, Communications & Operations Officer in the MIT Teaching + Learning Lab. For our tutors, Ryan has held “Best Practices for Teaching Over Zoom” sessions, covering topics such as ways to structure ESL remote lessons, how to use Airtable to track your ESL learner’s progress (and a ready-to-use-template), and other topics and techniques. In the interactive sessions, tutors also shared experiences and provided their approaches to classes they have held.

With a variety of options from which to choose to hold these classes, our tutors make full use of everything available.

Clearly everyone continues to learn and share their desire for improvement – a terrific pursuit of achievement, by all, in all areas at MIT!

Tutor Feedback on Virtual Sessions

• I’m using FaceTime to speak with my student, which has been going great. We mostly work on oral fluency and communicating clearly when talking about opinions about the news or other issues that we’ve been thinking about throughout the week. We also work on pronunciation issues and work/professional phrases and idioms, since these are easier areas to work on over the phone than in written communication. We’ve formed a wonderful relationship so far sharing stories and opinions, and I’m grateful that technology has facilitated this despite not being in the same place!

• The first week I had a phone call where we practiced conversational English. Once we moved into more substantive activities – in this case flashcards – we realized that FaceTime would probably be easier. We’ve had a lot of success the last few weeks with FaceTime and practicing cards remotely.

• We have been meeting over Zoom. What has been working well is that Zoom allows us to both see each other face to face while I can also share my iPad screen at the same time. I tend to write down new vocabulary words, grammar structures, and also screenshare worksheets. When I write, my student copies down on paper, so it feels as close to white-boarding and note-taking as we can in this virtual era! Overall, I think this method is working pretty well!

• We are just video chatting over WhatsApp. That works just fine for studying for the civics test.

• We normally use Zoom and I use the books, clips from audio found in the internet (share screen with audio), and other resources found online.

• I make a presentation and I share my screen via Skype for my student to make notes during the class. I send the presentation after class for her to revise. This has been working out well.
Ryan MacDowell is the Communications & Operations Officer in MIT’s Teaching + Learning Laboratory. When the pandemic put an end to in-person instruction, the TLL staff pivoted to supporting faculty and students in teaching and learning remotely.

In spite of the intense schedule, Ryan found time in April 2020 to run a remote tutoring session for ESL volunteers. It was so good that we asked him back, and he presented Remote Tutoring 2.0 in January 2021.

Materials from that session, including slides and links to online teaching resources, can be found on the ESL wiki page at: https://wikis.mit.edu/confluence/display/ESLSE/Remote+Tutoring.

Thank you Ryan!

The ESL Program for MIT Service Employees seeks to help service employees improve their English communication skills in order to be more productive in their jobs and to build their confidence and morale.

If interested in volunteering please email: esl-admins@mit.edu

---

English as a Second Language Program
77 Massachusetts Avenue
NE49-5000
Cambridge, MA 02139

hr.mit.edu/learn/esl