Adolfo Freitas came to the U.S. from Portugal in 1993 and joined the MIT Facilities Department custodial staff in 2016. In 2017, he enrolled in MIT’s ESL Program for Service Employees because he could not read anything in English. He focused on phonics and by the end of the spring semester, Adolfo’s tutor wrote that he was making excellent progress toward his goal of being able to read in English.

In the summer of 2018, Adolfo started prepping for the U.S. citizenship exam. The pandemic ended in-person tutoring in March 2020, but with the help of his dedicated volunteer tutors, Jon Schwarz and Eli Sanchez, Adolfo was able to transition in the fall of 2020 to remote tutoring using FaceTime on his phone.

Adolfo says that practicing the questions on the flashcards with his English tutors helped him the most, but then studying them on the iPad was good for practice. It especially helped hearing different people’s pronunciations.

Adolfo also mentioned that the most difficult part of studying was learning about the U.S. Constitution. Having his tutors and his family help him practice the questions was valuable. Adolfo’s advice to others who do not know English is not to be scared of preparing for the U.S. citizenship test. He says, “If you practice you will pass.” He recommends to his co-workers that they get tutoring to help with this. Adolfo took the citizenship exam on February 2, 2022 at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) field office in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

Bravo! Well done, Adolfo!

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
77 Massachusetts Avenue
NE49-5000
Cambridge, MA 02139

hr.mit.edu/learn/esl
Where did you grow up?

Sally grew up in San Salvador, El Salvador, and after graduating from a Catholic high school she studied chemical engineering at university. Sally has a sister who studied industrial engineering as well as finance, and her mother was a teacher and father a lawyer.

What did you do before you came to the U.S.?

In San Salvador there were fewer opportunities in chemical engineering for Sally to pursue, so she worked in the bakery industry before moving to the U.S. She helped many bakeries export their products to the U.S., working on FDA approvals, and she enjoys seeing many of the products in the U.S.

When did you come to the U.S.?

Sally’s first experience of the U.S. was when she participated in a three-month-long student exchange program during high school. She was hosted by a family in Chicago, with whom she remains in touch. A few years back, with her three children, she visited the host family in their new home in Florida. When in Chicago she was struck by the big lakes, and the similarities Chicago shared with NYC (a big city, but with more order and fewer people). She recalls during her three months there that the host family spoke very little Spanish, and at the time she spoke very little English—she was thrown into the deep end, but with a dictionary in hand she was able to benefit greatly from the experience.

Where did you work when you first came here?

When her family immigrated to the U.S., she moved to Boston and initially worked in a bakery very close to MIT. She loves Boston, its history (she spoke about the Kennedy family), its culture (loves the duck tours), and sports. She enjoys sports and loves the atmosphere and crowds of big stadiums. Through MITAC, she has been able to see the New England Revolution at Gillette Stadium and she is looking forward to seeing the New England Patriots play there in the near future.

When did you come to MIT?

Sally started at MIT in February 2017 as a custodian with the MIT Facilities Department. She enjoyed her job, and with support from the ESL program on her resume and application, she received a promotion and is now a housekeeper with MIT’s Housing Department. As she reflected on five years at MIT, she shared that she enjoys her job and working with a close-knit team of five other housekeepers at Ashdown House.

Did you attend other ESL classes?

When Sally first moved to the U.S., she took ESL classes at local high schools in Randolph and Stoughton while she worked. When she learned about the ESL program at MIT, it was the perfect opportunity to support her continued learning. Since she started with the ESL program, she has been encouraging others to participate and to join a community that is committed to continued learning. Several of her colleagues have since started with the ESL program at MIT.

Why did you decide to attend the Peterson School?

Two of Sally’s coworkers had studied at the Peterson School before her, and she had heard it was a great experience. After seeking advice from a former supervisor, although she was nervous she decided to enroll in the Facilities Technician course. She threw herself into the course, and built confidence working through some of her course material with her ESL tutors.

How were you able to find the time to study, work full time, and take care of your family?

Sally is a family-oriented person. She loves spending time with her grandchildren (who are five years, 20 months, and 18 months old). The most difficult part of juggling study, work, and family was not being able to see them as frequently. Sally mentioned that her family has been incredibly supportive of her taking the course, encouraging her and working around her adjusted schedule.

(Continued on next page)
Interview with Sally Romero (continued)

What were your goals for ESL program? How long have you been participating in it?

Sally has been working on preparing for the U.S. citizenship process, learning about U.S. history and government, and working on the civic portion of the naturalization test. She has also been using the ESL program to improve her English comprehension.

How has the ESL program helped you at work? In other aspects?

Sally is now very comfortable with notes and memos at work, and is able to help others. Her encouragement has led to two colleagues in the Housing Department taking ESL classes, with another about to start at the Peterson School. Sally is a lifelong learner, and participates in the ESL program for herself, for her family, and for personal growth. She says it’s good to do something for yourself, and to keep improving.

Peterson course: Facilities technician Diploma

At the Peterson School, Sally completed the Facilities Technician course, receiving her diploma in December 2021 as a member of the Dean’s Honor List for the course. The semester-long course was taught in English, but Sally was very appreciative that her teacher welcomed her questions and gave her space to learn. As Sally noted, President Reif encourages us to ask questions when we are not sure. After one class on electricity, Sally emailed an article she had read on Nikola Tesla to her teacher, and shared that there was a bust of Nikola outside the Barker Engineering Library at MIT. Her enthusiasm was well received by her teacher, who shared the article with all her classmates, who in turn discussed the article in class.

Tutor experiences with remote ESL classes

by Pamela Manolakis

The ESL Program has entered into its second year of virtual classes between student and tutor. It seems like a good point to take stock of what these classes are like during Covid times and ask if there are lessons, techniques, and resources that can be shared to help students navigate the pandemic. We asked several of our tutors to share their experiences and give our readers insights into what ESL learning is like today.

Interestingly, virtual tutoring became more personal during Covid. Typically, during these sessions, family members and pets added to the background. The loss of meeting in person meant that student and tutor were able to see each other in their respective home environments, contributing to a more personal interaction.

Many appreciated the flexibility of classes that could be easily rescheduled. Everyone has a lot on their plates, whether with family, studying, work, or a whole host of other things. The ease of rescheduling an online class meant fewer cancelled classes and more continuity of learning.

Most tutors and students met via Zoom, as it has video and screen sharing capabilities and can be more interactive, especially when sharing worksheets or doing exercises. Students were able to share screens with their tutor (and vice versa) showing what they were working on together, be it stories, poems, or instructions.

The switch from in-person to remote learning was not without challenges, such as the inability to draw on a chalkboard or write on a piece of paper. Using Zoom was one way to overcome the lack of an in-person, visual learner experience.

(Continued on next page)
Tutor experiences with remote ESL classes (continued)

When Zoom was unavailable, FaceTime was used so that student and tutor could see each other. For things that needed to be written, the tutor would text the student so that they were able to maintain the ability to share written words. Flexibility was again key – one tutor recounted that they hadn’t planned for the case where they wouldn’t be able to use Zoom, but it happened, and they adapted!

That initial transition from in-person to virtual was difficult at first, in some cases because the student and tutor had never met before. What helped to break the ice were conversation exercises as well as reading and/or listening components. For some students, the emphasis was more on building speaking confidence. Practicing English conversation in a more unscripted manner worked well over Zoom. The ESL Cyber Listening Lab website (www.esl-lab.com) was very helpful; it has a wide array of listening exercises, vocabulary practice, and conversation prompts.

The lack of in-person classroom experiences sometimes made it difficult to read the non-verbal cues of the students. Checking in with the student regularly at the end of the class helped the tutors gather feedback on the class materials and make changes. For some tutors the hardest part of remote tutoring was working on pronunciation. Watching how a word is physically formed can be difficult over Zoom. To make up for this, the tutor would try to find online videos, but these are difficult to pull up in the moment.

When practicing reading, some tutors tended to read out loud and then let the student read the same material. Trying not to break up flow, and reviewing any questions or more challenging phrases after both read the section was helpful.

Many tutors found the use of the Ventures Workbooks to be helpful in making the class engaging, as these books are filled with various reading, speaking, and writing exercises.

Using short news articles (see previous page: breakingnewsenglish.com) as teaching materials was also a very useful tool to make the class fun and keep the student engaged.

Variety was also introduced by using popular songs to help with vocabulary and using super short stories that include many words that sound the same but mean different things in English; in addition, flashcards and practicing conversational English were both methods that worked well with tutoring from different locations. When the content of the cards was newer, it was helpful that they were working with material that could be pulled up online in order to help with pronunciation or word definitions.

When our tutors were faced with challenges, they definitely rose to the occasion to find methods and techniques to continue to improve and enhance the learning of English for our valuable MIT Facilities service staff! Way to go!

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**Pre-Listening ESL Cyber Listening Lab**

**What are the advantages and disadvantages of traveling by bus on a trip over flying or driving?**

**Idioms**

“hit the road” = start to travel

“It’s getting late. Let’s hit the road before it gets dark. I don’t like driving at night.”

“off the beaten path” = an area that people usually don’t visit

“When the bus stops in the next city, I want to take you to a restaurant off the beaten path. The food is great.”
I was chatting about the ESL newsletter with my student Trancito’s daughter Rebeca, and I couldn’t help but mention how I could see her mother’s values shining brightly through her own personality.

“That is the highest compliment!” said Rebeca. “She is my inspiration.”

Rebeca is a highly successful young person, deeply involved in helping the community and building a career through which she can make the world a better place. For Rebeca, her mother Trancito has always been a role model, and she is grateful to have had such a great example to follow.

I feel I have known Trancito all my life, and I can hardly believe we met only 10 years ago. As I was walking the tunnels towards Building 56 back in 2012, I was thinking about the chat I had just had with her other tutor at the time and was trying to imagine my student through all the wonderful things I had heard about her. I turned on the lights in the classroom, prepared my props and teaching materials, and eagerly awaited meeting Trancito for the first time.

The door opened slowly and a very shy and quiet “Hi” barely reached my ears.

That tiny, shy voice is now a confident voice that is better able to help and support her daughter, her family, her local community, and the MIT community.

When I asked Trancito about the most positive impact her newfound voice has had on her life, she proudly spoke of her daughter – a first-generation college student – and how without the ESL Program for Service Employees, she would not have known how or where to get the resources needed to help her daughter attend the college of her dreams. She mentioned how grateful she was for having had ESL tutors who were there to help her find information on the college application process and guide her through what was needed and when. Her newfound voice also allowed her to ask questions confidently, and to seek information on her own as she was working through the process with her daughter.

Rebeca is now a history and Spanish major at Mount Holyoke College. In addition, she has recently partnered with a health center in East Boston as a coach and mentor for the Greater Pilot Project, focusing on addressing the mental health crisis facing under-resourced youth in the Latinx community.

From Trancito, Rebeca has learned about true kindness and selfless giving. Not only has she always had her mother’s unconditional support, but as long as she can remember she has seen Trancito offer the same support and kindness to everyone around, whether a friend or stranger.

The evening I called Trancito to talk about this article, she had just returned home after giving a ride to one of Rebeca’s childhood friends who doesn’t have a car. I smiled as I recalled how serious she was about preparing to take her driver’s license test back in 2015, and how we set up two chairs to simulate the “car” experience, so she felt ready. She was very serious about studying the driver’s manual cover to cover, not to pass the test, but to fully understand how to drive safely. To Trancito, the new skills aren’t just for herself – she always uses them to help others as well.

I remember the day when Trancito told me she had qualified for a position with Housing and how happy she was that her new schedule would allow her to spend more time with her daughter just as the highly stressful college years were approaching. I also remember the sadness in her eyes as she wasn’t sure she would be able to continue her English classes once she’d moved to Housing.

Trancito’s sister, Silvia, had moved to Housing in 2011 and would have loved to be able to take ESL classes as well, especially as she was seeing Trancito’s confidence blossom, and how her newly acquired English skills made such a difference. Silvia has been with MIT for 14 years, 17 if we count her time serving at the Stata Cafeteria. She was able to join the ESL Program for Service Employees in the spring of 2021, meeting with her tutors during her lunch breaks and steadily becoming more confident in her English skills. One of her tutors even recognized her from back when she was tending the Stata Starbucks counter – you’ve probably met her too if you were around Stata in its early days as a building!

Trancito has also been able to rejoin the program during her lunch breaks, and her eyes light up when she speaks about her tutors and how grateful she is for all the wonderful and instructive conversations, tailored to her daily life.

She has recently discovered that her tutor and Silvia’s tutor are friends, and this is one of the hallmarks of the ESL Program for Service Employees – a web of helpful connections and friendships, where tutors learn as much from our students as our students learn from us.

A new friend may be right around the corner. And who knows, they may even help you find new strength and inspiration.
Can you fill in the answers from the articles?

2. A comment that expresses praise or approval of somebody
7. The system of laws and basic principles by which a state, country, or organization are governed
10. A person that you work with, especially in a profession or a business
11. A new or difficult task that tests somebody’s ability and skill
13. The ability to change to suit new conditions or situations

1. A belief in your own ability to do things and be successful
3. Aspects of a person’s character that continue to make them different from other people
4. To come into one’s own
5. The legal right to belong to a particular country
6. A person or thing that makes you want to be better, or more successful
8. To try to deal with two or more important jobs or activities at the same time
9. To reach the standard of ability or knowledge needed to do a particular job, for example by completing a course of study
11. An experienced person who advises and helps somebody with less experience over a period of time