

Managing Volunteers in Language Teacher Associations

Sara is the only English language teacher in her school. She wishes there were other English teachers with whom she could discuss her experiences and share ideas for classroom activities. Fortunately for Sara, there is an association for English language teachers in her region. Sara joins this association and finds a community of teachers who support her in her professional development. She eventually becomes a leader in this association and works closely with other volunteers to organize activities for the benefit of the association's members and to advocate for their learners and the English teaching profession.

Language teacher associations (LTAs) have been defined as “networks of professionals, run by and for professionals, focused mainly on support for members, with knowledge exchange and development as well as representation of members’ views as their defining functions” (Lamb 2012, 295). LTAs fulfill these aims by holding conferences, publishing periodicals, communicating with policymakers and the public to express members’ concerns, and creating opportunities for members to learn from each other in communities of practice. The two largest LTAs for English language teachers worldwide are the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) and the TESOL International Association. Many other LTAs have been established around the world for teachers in different regions. Check out the lists of IATEFL and TESOL International affiliates (Figure 1) to see if there is an LTA near you. If there isn’t, you

might gather with your colleagues to establish your own LTA. Uludag (2018) provides a description of the different ways LTAs are structured.

Many LTAs are nonprofit organizations and thus rely heavily on volunteers to carry out their mission. A volunteer is a person who donates time and labor in service to others. In the case of LTAs, volunteers play key roles in governing the association, planning and realizing national conferences and local workshops, editing and publishing newsletters and journals, raising funds and awarding scholarships, and managing social media and outreach, among the myriad of other activities in which LTAs engage. This article will outline the basics of volunteer management for leaders of LTAs and the people who volunteer in them. These steps are analyzing volunteer needs, recruiting volunteers, matching volunteers with tasks, orienting and training volunteers, supervising

and evaluating volunteers, and acknowledging volunteer contributions.

ANALYZING VOLUNTEER NEEDS

When we develop a volunteer system, the first step is to analyze our association's volunteer needs (Brudney 2016; Fader and Erickson 2017). Below are questions that we should ask ourselves.

- *What task(s) do we need volunteers for?* For example, could we use help with updating the website, on-site conference registration, or editing the newsletter?
- *What are the specific responsibilities involved in carrying out this task?* For instance, if the task is assisting with on-site conference registration, the responsibilities might be to accept payments, print name tags, and distribute tote bags.
- *How many volunteers are required?* Can the task be performed by one person, or will it require the efforts of several people?
- *What is the time frame in which the task should be completed?* Is this a task that can be done in one day, like helping with on-site conference registration? Or is it a task that requires a commitment of months, like conference planning? Or does it require years, like serving on the board of directors?
- *What is the time commitment for this volunteer role?* How many hours will the volunteer be expected to work on this task (e.g., two hours a week, ten hours a month)?
- *Should the volunteers have any special skills?* For example, a newsletter editor may need

to use publishing software to produce the newsletter. The association's treasurer may be more effective if they know how to use Excel or Quickbooks to maintain financial records.

- *Are there other relevant criteria?* For instance, to fill leadership roles, the association may have a criterion that the volunteer has been a member of the association for a designated length of time (e.g., three years, five years).
- *Who will supervise the volunteer(s)?* Who does the volunteer report to, and who will evaluate their performance?

Reflection: *Think about an association that you belong to and the kinds of activities it carries out. Could these tasks be performed by volunteers? If so, how would you respond to the questions above?*

By gathering your answers to these questions, you will have the information you need to create a volunteer job description. Appendix 1 provides a sample volunteer job description for a newsletter editor. The description indicates the job responsibilities, qualifications for holding the position, the weekly or monthly time commitment, the place where the work is to be performed, the term of volunteer service, supervisory relationships, opportunities for evaluation of the volunteer experience, and other relevant details (Brudney 2016; Herman and Jackson 2001).

When writing volunteer job descriptions, we must consider the nature of the task and whether it requires a one-time or an ongoing commitment, as these considerations affect who will be recruited for the position. Some volunteers prefer short-term commitments

Association	Affiliate List
IATEFL (https://www.iatefl.org/)	https://www.iatefl.org/list-iatefl-associates
TESOL International Association (https://www.tesol.org/)	https://www.tesol.org/connect/tesol-affiliate-network/worldwide-affiliate-directory

Figure 1. IATEFL and TESOL International affiliates

because they want to help but cannot commit to a long-term role. Others have the time and the passion to serve the association for a longer period (Brudney 2016; McKee and McKee 2012).

Another consideration is whether the task has to be completed face-to-face or online. Tasks that can be completed virtually include reviewing conference proposals, judging award or scholarship applications, editing a newsletter via email or Google Drive, and holding meetings via Skype or Zoom. Online volunteer opportunities expand the reach of your recruiting efforts, as tasks can be fulfilled by volunteers who live outside your city or region. Additionally, tasks that can be completed online give volunteers the flexibility of working at a time that is most convenient for them (Fader and Erickson 2017).

RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS

Once we have an idea of how many volunteers we need and have defined their job descriptions, we can start recruiting those volunteers. One way to recruit is to make announcements at meetings, in newsletters, and through social media. An issue with this method, though, is that there are people who *always* volunteer. They are quick to raise their hand, but they may not be the ideal person for the task. This method also leaves out other people who might volunteer if they were approached individually and given

some personal encouragement. Some people may doubt themselves and think, “I’ve never done _____” or “I don’t know how to do _____.” However, those people might be more willing to take on a task if someone personally invites them to participate (McKee and McKee 2012).

Another strategy for expanding your volunteer base is to invite new members to volunteer. You might even make volunteer recruitment a part of your membership application by adding a question asking new members how they would like to be involved. Here you can list some of the tasks for which you commonly need volunteers, as in Figure 2. Having an “Other” option allows members to share skills or interests they have that you may not have thought of. Instead of trying to slot the volunteer into a preconceived task, we can let the volunteer tell us how they think they can best contribute to the association’s mission (Zacapa 2018).

When you receive the contact information of a person who wishes to volunteer, follow up quickly with that person to take advantage of their interest. If you delay too long in contacting them, they may lose their motivation to volunteer because they think that the association does not really need their help or that you do not appreciate their offer. Furthermore, we are all busy people. The person indicated that they have time to volunteer with your association now. In six

How would you like to contribute to our association?

I would like to ... (Check all that apply.)

- Review conference proposals
- Judge scholarship applications
- Plan winter conference
- Edit newsletter
- Maintain website
- Promote association through social media
- Serve on a committee (Which committee? _____)
- Other _____

Figure 2. Volunteer question on membership application

months, they may be involved with other activities, their circumstances could be different, and they may no longer be available to volunteer. For these reasons, it is important to take advantage of the person's willingness to volunteer as soon as there is a relevant opportunity (Fader and Erickson 2017; Zacapa 2018).

Recruiting volunteers by making announcements at meetings, in newsletters, and through social media is an effective strategy for a one-time event when you need numerous people for a task that does not require any particular skills, like helping with on-site conference registration. However, if your organization requires a person with specialized skills to commit to an ongoing role (e.g., planning conferences, editing the newsletter, serving as treasurer), it is more effective to identify people known to have those skills and to approach those people personally (Brudney 2016; McKee and McKee 2012).

Another way to locate volunteers is to recruit them from partner organizations in your community (McKee and McKee 2012; Zacapa 2018). For example, LTAs may have established relationships with local teacher-training institutions. Students preparing to teach English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) could be brought in to volunteer at a conference or some other event. This is a great way for students to see what happens at association events and to integrate them into our professional activities. Another organization you might partner with is your local high school, since English language learners are also potential volunteers. Volunteering with your association could be a service-learning project and an opportunity for learners to practice their English language skills.

Reflection: *Think about an association in your community. How does it usually recruit volunteers? What new strategies could it add to its volunteer recruitment plan?*

We also need to know what skills the

volunteers bring in order to match the volunteers with tasks that they can confidently do and that play to their strengths (see the next section). It can be helpful, then, to ask volunteers to fill out an application for certain roles and to list their skills and experiences, or to submit a resume or curriculum vitae so that you can evaluate who is best for each position. For volunteer positions that involve some legal risk to the association (e.g., working with children and protecting them from abuse), additional screening procedures—such as interviews, references, and background checks—could be required before the person is accepted as a volunteer (Fader and Erickson 2017; Herman and Jackson 2001).

Once your volunteer system is established, maintain records of the people who have volunteered in different activities, when they volunteered, and how long they volunteered for (Fader and Erickson 2017). This will enable your association to keep track of the work your volunteers do so that you can acknowledge them and thank them for their contributions. And, when you need volunteers in the future, you have a ready list of volunteers to call!

Even though there are many strategies for recruiting volunteers, getting a volunteer to commit is sometimes difficult. If you ask someone to volunteer, and they say, “No,” they may really mean, “I can’t volunteer right now, but I could potentially volunteer at some point in the future.” Or they may mean, “I don’t really want to do that task, but I would do something else.” If a person refuses to take on a particular task, propose a smaller, less time-intensive task. If the person indicates that they cannot volunteer in any capacity, check in with them again in a few months. A person who is unavailable to volunteer now may agree to volunteer in the future (McKee and McKee 2012).

It is also important to consider whether volunteering is going to put a financial burden on the person. If volunteers are required to pay for expenses like background checks, training materials, or T-shirts, the cost could

impede some people from volunteering. If expenses are involved, think about how your organization might cover them. Additionally, some people may be enticed to volunteer with incentives like a free mug or T-shirt, lunches during meetings, or discounts on publications or conference registration (McKee and McKee 2012).

MATCHING VOLUNTEERS WITH TASKS

People are motivated to volunteer for a variety of reasons. For example, they may be a strong supporter of your organization's mission. In the case of LTAs, your volunteers are most likely members of the association and are probably teachers themselves. Volunteering can be a way to give back to the organization that has supported them professionally. Other people are very sociable; they like to volunteer because it allows them to network, meet other people, and make social connections. Still others see volunteering as a way to develop different skills, such as how to lead a meeting or put together a newsletter.

Along with carefully reviewing volunteer applications, conversing with volunteers to understand why they have volunteered with our association helps us match them with tasks that increase their motivation and encourage them to continue volunteering (Brudney 2016; Fader and Erickson 2017). For instance, a person who has volunteered for social reasons might enjoy working the registration desk at an event, as that allows them to meet new people. A volunteer who wants to develop their technological skills might create a slideshow for the next business meeting or be responsible for updating the association's website.

LTAs may have new volunteers every year. When someone is new to volunteering with your association, try starting them off on smaller tasks that require a lesser time commitment, such as helping to review conference proposals. This eases the person into a volunteer role, helps them build relationships with other volunteers, lets them

see how things work in your organization, and allows them to develop their skills so that they can take on larger tasks as time goes by (McKee and McKee 2012).

***Reflection:** Have you ever volunteered? What was your motivation for volunteering?*

ORIENTING AND TRAINING VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers may be skilled and enthusiastic, but they may not be familiar with the LTA, its structure, or its policies and procedures. This is where an orientation process can be helpful (Herman and Jackson 2001). One way to provide this orientation is by developing a volunteer handbook that explains the association's mission and vision, describes its activities, and outlines volunteer roles. The handbook could also include information on policies and procedures, such as how to report harassment or how to request a refund for expenses. If multiple volunteers are inducted at the same time, this same information could be presented in an orientation meeting. Moreover, the volunteer can be asked to sign a volunteer contract (see Appendix 2 for a sample) to indicate that they understand their role and that they commit to fulfilling it (Fader and Erickson 2017).

Another way to provide orientation and training is to build in opportunities for mentorship (McKee and McKee 2012). For instance, a volunteer may start as the Assistant Chair of a committee before moving into the Chair position and later into a Past-Chair role. Having this overlap in service between new volunteers and continuing volunteers allows for mentoring to occur. You might also have two people in each role, with overlapping terms. For instance, there might be two co-editors for a newsletter, with each person serving for two years (e.g., one person might serve 2022–2024, while the other serves 2023–2025). During that one-year overlap in service, one person can mentor the other.

Depending on the tasks your volunteers have to complete, there may be some need for a

formal training event, either face-to-face or online. For example, volunteers may need training to review conference proposals to attain higher levels of interrater reliability. As mentioned earlier, some people are motivated to volunteer because they want to network and make social connections. Community-building activities during your training event will help people get to know one another. For instance, volunteers can each be given a card with either a trivia question about the organization or an answer to a trivia question (e.g., “In which year was The Japan Association for Language Teaching [JALT] established?” and “1976”). Volunteers then mingle and find another volunteer with a card that relates to their card. They introduce themselves and discuss their volunteer roles. In this way, volunteers will feel more comfortable working together and less shy about asking questions or seeking help.

Also, we should recognize when it is advisable to send volunteers for training from outside experts (McKee and McKee 2012). You may need someone to volunteer as treasurer, but no one in your association has sufficient experience in this position. Perhaps a person willing to do the job does not have the necessary familiarity with accounting or financial practices. In this case, your association may need to send this person to training provided by an external entity. Organizations like NonprofitReady (<https://www.nonprofitready.org/>) offer online courses on a variety of topics related to nonprofit management. Additionally, international LTAs like IATEFL and TESOL International provide workshops and support to regional associations affiliated with them.

***Reflection:** Think about an association you belong to. How does it provide orientation to its volunteers? How might it strengthen its orientation and training program?*

SUPERVISING AND EVALUATING VOLUNTEERS

To support the work of volunteers, you might want to create a reporting structure

so volunteers know who to turn to with questions and that there is someone to supervise task completion. Ideally, an LTA would have a designated volunteer coordinator. A small organization might have one volunteer coordinator for the whole organization. However, a larger organization may need different volunteer coordinators for different tasks, such as conference registration, proposal reviewing, overseeing the mentorship program, and so on. The volunteer coordinator keeps track of volunteer records and knows who is supposed to be doing what and when. The coordinator is the point of contact for the volunteers, so when the volunteers arrive for duty, they know who to check in with and who to go to with questions. If volunteers are helping at an event, it is a good idea to distinguish the volunteers from other participants by asking them to wear a T-shirt, button, or name tag that says “Volunteer” so that they are easily identifiable (Brudney 2016; Fader and Erickson 2017).

It does occasionally happen that volunteers do not show up when scheduled or do not complete a task they have committed to do. Recruiting more volunteers than we estimate we will actually need can ensure that activities continue functioning as planned. If, by chance, you have more volunteers than are needed, you might assign two people to share a task—for example, to serve as co-chairs of an event or co-editors of a publication. Additionally, you could ask those “extra” volunteers if they can think of other ways they might contribute to the association. As noted earlier, volunteers may have skills that we are not aware of and may be able to contribute in unique ways that have not already been defined.

Volunteering is a job, and just like any job, we need to give volunteers feedback on their performance (Fader and Erickson 2017; Zacapa 2018). With long-term volunteers, meeting periodically with individuals provides a chance to let them know what tasks they are doing well (e.g., “The membership report you wrote was very helpful”) and to identify areas where they are not meeting

expectations and may need more support. This performance-review process should be based on the volunteer job description and the volunteer contract that the volunteer signed, and the conversation can be focused on those documents. For instance, the contract might state that attendance at meetings is required, but the person has not been attending the meetings. This conversation gives you an opportunity to find out why the person has not been attending and whether there is anything you can do to assist. You might need to schedule the meetings at a different time or hold them online to help that person meet their volunteer commitment.

Giving feedback, though, should be a two-way process. An individual meeting also allows the volunteer to provide feedback to the LTA about their experience as a volunteer—what has worked well for them and where they feel they need more support (Zacapa 2018). For instance, you might have a newsletter editor who says, “I’ve been getting a lot of submissions, but these submissions need a lot of editing. It’s taking more than the ten hours a month that was indicated in my volunteer contract. I think we need to recruit a co-editor.” The person might not have brought up the issue on their own, but when they have an opportunity to meet individually to talk about their volunteer experience, they will be more likely to share their concerns.

Reflection: What kinds of questions would you include on a survey to seek feedback from volunteers about their volunteer experience?

Also, volunteers bring extensive professional experience to their roles. We assume that LTA volunteers are teachers or school administrators; however, they may have previously pursued other kinds of careers, perhaps in business or the military, that allow them to bring a different perspective to the organization. Volunteers might have ideas on how to improve processes or procedures, enhance communications, or organize events more effectively. These individual meetings provide a channel where volunteers can share their ideas to benefit the association. In sum,

the feedback process goes from the volunteer supervisor to the volunteers but also from the volunteers to the association.

It is also relevant to note that, yes, you can fire a volunteer. There may be situations where a volunteer is causing problems, to the point where the association needs to inform this person that their services are no longer needed. Some potential issues are that the volunteer is involved in perpetrating sexual harassment, mishandling funds, or not fulfilling their commitment and not responding to the feedback you have given them. Although associations are usually more concerned about how they can *get* volunteers, we do sometimes have to let volunteers go (Brudney 2016; Fader and Erickson 2017; Herman and Jackson 2001; McKee and McKee 2012).

ACKNOWLEDGING VOLUNTEER CONTRIBUTIONS

Consider these two scenarios:

Scenario 1

Rubén is a volunteer newsletter editor. He has solicited article contributions, edited and formatted the newsletter, and distributed it to the membership for 12 consecutive months. At the end of the year, the president of the association sends out a message to membership thanking “all the volunteers who made this year a success.”

Scenario 2

Ali is a volunteer newsletter editor. He has solicited article contributions, edited and formatted the newsletter, and distributed it to the membership for 12 consecutive months. At the end of the year, the president of the association sends a personal message to Ali thanking him for the great work he has done producing the newsletter. The president also sends out a message to membership thanking “all the volunteers who made this year a success,” a message that lists the names of the volunteers with a sentence describing the

contributions of each one. Volunteers also receive a “thank you” gift that was donated by a publisher.

Which of these two volunteers would feel most valued?

Some volunteers relate experiences in which they have given hundreds of hours to an organization, and it seems that nobody notices or cares. Of course, volunteers work to benefit the organization, not for personal glory. However, if an LTA does not acknowledge the contributions of its volunteers, the volunteers may decide not to continue because they do not feel they are really making a difference.

There are many ways to acknowledge volunteers and the contributions they make to our association (Brudney 2016; McKee and McKee 2012; Zacapa 2018). Most obviously, we can recognize volunteers verbally at meetings and events or via email announcements. When using this strategy, be sure to recognize the volunteers by name, identify the task(s) they have done, and explain how they have contributed to the success of the association. This form of recognition is easy to do, does not cost anything, and takes only a few minutes.

Another way is to present certificates or plaques thanking volunteers. Organizational leadership could also send volunteers a formal letter of appreciation or a handwritten thank-you card. These sorts of recognition are important when people need to show employers documentation of the volunteer work that they have done.

A further strategy is to recognize volunteers in the organization newsletter or website. An organization could publish a list of volunteers who have contributed to different efforts or create a volunteer spotlight, or volunteer of the month, where the volunteer is profiled with their picture and the different volunteer roles they have been involved with over the years.

Additionally, an association might hold a

low-key event, like a breakfast, just for volunteers, to thank them for their service and to provide them with an opportunity for social interaction. An association might give its volunteers inexpensive gifts, such as flowers. An organization could also approach businesses to ask them to donate gift cards, for restaurants or other services, which are then given to volunteers. An association could give their volunteers some swag with the organization’s name on it (e.g., mugs, tote bags, T-shirts). In this case, the gifts are more special if they are products that the general membership does not also have.

Finally, an association might establish an annual award to acknowledge a special volunteer. This person could be recognized at a ceremony, be highlighted in the newsletter, and be given a plaque. This type of recognition is appropriate for long-term volunteers who have made substantial contributions to the organization.

Reflection: What are some culturally appropriate ways to recognize volunteers in your country?

WHAT COULD GO WRONG?

Considering the guidelines presented in this article, read the following scenario and identify what types of problems could occur.

Scenario

Your association is having a general business meeting. You need people to help with registration at the next professional-development event on Thursday at 6 p.m. You ask the group, “Who can volunteer with registration?” Several people raise their hands, and you say, “OK, be here on Thursday at 6 p.m.”

What could go wrong?

Here are potential issues:

- The task is not clearly defined. People are needed to help with registration, but

what exactly are they expected to do? Will they be handling money? Printing name tags? What are the tasks that need to be accomplished?

- The volunteers do not know who to report to. They arrive at the event, and many other people are there. The volunteers do not know who is in charge. A person has not been designated to manage the volunteers at this event.
- The volunteers only raised their hands. Their names and contact information have not been noted. It is unclear, then, how many volunteers are going to be there. Furthermore, on the day of the event, if the volunteers are not there, there is no way to find out if they are just running late or if they are actually going to show up.
- If the event starts at 6 p.m., and the volunteers arrive at 6 p.m., there is not adequate time for orientation and training. Even though a task such as passing out tote bags may not be that complex, it is important to allow time for the volunteers to receive an orientation about the task they are to complete so that everything runs smoothly.
- There may be volunteers who do not fulfill their commitment. If the volunteers' names are not documented and they have not signed a volunteer contract, they may not feel committed to the job.
- Since you have not collected information from the volunteers, it is going to be hard to acknowledge them later and thank them for the service they performed on that day.

CONCLUSION

LTAAs would find it hard to function without the work of volunteers. By establishing a framework for volunteer management, associations will be better able to utilize volunteers to meet their organizational goals. Using effective strategies for analyzing volunteer needs, recruiting volunteers,

matching volunteers with tasks, providing orientation and training, offering supervision and evaluative feedback, and acknowledging volunteer contributions will support a culture of volunteerism within your association.

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APPENDIX 1

Sample Volunteer Job Description: Newsletter Editor

[Language Teacher Association's name] publishes a digital newsletter six times a year to communicate with its membership and to publicize its activities. The newsletter contains announcements of association events, reports from leadership, and articles written by members. The newsletter editor solicits materials for the newsletter, works with authors on revisions, and edits and formats the newsletter prior to distribution. This is a volunteer position with a two-year commitment.

Responsibilities

- Establish a publication schedule for the newsletter.
- Disseminate a call for article contributions two months prior to the publication date.
- Solicit reports from association leadership one month prior to the publication date.
- Evaluate article submissions and make decisions to accept, reject, or defer publication.
- Correspond with contributors about the status of their submissions and the nature of any required revisions.
- Select relevant photos and images to illustrate texts.
- Proofread and edit all texts to be published and format texts using the existing newsletter template.
- Forward the newsletter to membership coordinator for distribution according to the publication schedule.

Requirements

- Be a member of [Language Teacher Association's name] in good standing.
- Demonstrate attention to detail and adherence to deadlines.
- Possess strong communication skills, including the ability to write clearly and knowledge of APA citation style.
- Have access to the Internet and facility with email, word-processing, and publishing software.

Time Commitment

20 hours a month

Work Location

Flexible/Online

Term of Service

2 years: From August 1, 2023, to July 31, 2025

Supervision

The newsletter editor reports to the vice president of the association. The editor has no supervisory responsibilities.

Evaluation

The newsletter editor's performance will be evaluated by the leadership team after the first year. The editor will meet with the vice president of the association at that time to discuss the review and to share feedback on the position and its responsibilities.

APPENDIX 2

Sample Volunteer Contract: Newsletter Editor

We, [Language Teacher Association's name], welcome your desire to volunteer in the position of newsletter editor from August 1, 2023, to July 31, 2025. By signing below, you agree to:

- Fulfill the responsibilities outlined in the volunteer job description (see attached).
- Communicate with the membership coordinator and the vice president about any issues that impede you from fulfilling the responsibilities of newsletter editor.
- Abide by the policies and procedures of [Language Teacher Association's name].
- Interact in a courteous way with association leadership and contributors to the newsletter.
- Participate in an annual meeting with the vice president to evaluate your experience in the position.
- Maintain membership in [Language Teacher Association's name].

Volunteer

Print or Type Your Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Language Teacher Association's Representative

Print or Type Your Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____