

TESOL Italy 48th Annual Convention

December 1-2, 2023

Getting to the HEART of ELT

The title of TESOL Italy’s 48th National Convention is “Getting to the HEART of ELT”. This year’s title is a play on the common idiomatic expression “to get to the heart of” something, which means to discover or understand the essential features of a problem or issue. For TESOL Italy members, the word “HEART” also signifies that this process of discovery and understanding—not to mention ELT as a whole—requires empathy and love: for our learners, for our colleagues, for our profession, for our societies, and for our world. In our view, this sentiment is intentionally aligned with the DEI (*diversity, equity, and inclusion*) Initiative of TESOL International Association, our parent organization. We recognize that we could have just as easily used the plural form of “HEARTs” to indicate that the core features of ELT are embedded in specific contexts and may be perceived differently by each practitioner according to their lived experiences. Regardless of how you perceive the HEARTs of ELT, the word “HEART” should also be read as an acronym which stands for some of the core features of ELT which we hope speakers and participants will explore during our National Convention.

Given this year’s broad focus, the potential themes of the Convention are limitless, but some of the HEARTs important in the Italian context, include:

Humanizing diversity

Empowering learners and teachers

Agency fostering

Raising awareness

Translanguaging

Highlighting Democracy

Engaging learners and teachers

Advocating for learners and teachers

Reflecting on practices

Transforming perspectives

Over the past two decades, Italy, like many nations, has become a much more diverse society. This is reflected especially in the composition of classrooms at every level of education. Diversity presents many opportunities, in general, and in language education, in particular. But especially “new” diversity also presents certain challenges. One of the greatest challenges currently faced in Italy is that the diversity of student populations has not yet been reflected within the teaching profession. Put simply, although women are well-represented among teachers in Italy, albeit less so in leadership positions, other populations are marginalized. With this in mind, this year’s National Convention also seeks to confront attendees with speakers who might explore the aforementioned HEARTs of ELT from *underrepresented* and *less-privileged* perspectives. The organizing committee will as always welcome the perspectives of persons of color, the LGBTQ community, immigrants, refugees, and representatives of other marginalized groups who are active in TESOL in Italy and around the world.

The HEARTs of ELT in Brief

Humanizing diversity implies telling authentic stories of learners and teachers from marginalized backgrounds and sharing the best practices educators have employed to meet diverse needs.

Humanizing marginalized learners and teachers is a first and necessary step toward realizing equity and inclusion in education and beyond.

Empowering learners and teachers begins with giving the marginalized a voice in the planning and delivery of curricula. Decision making in education should be driven by the actual experiences and needs expressed in complexly dynamic classrooms.

Empowerment cannot be endowed at the discretion of those in power. Empowerment is derived from the actions and decisions taken by the marginalized. **Fostering agency** must therefore remain a primary objective of 21st-Century language education. Students must develop competencies and strategies which permit them to take an active role in their education. Teachers must emerge as *change agents* within their profession and within society.

Language teaching has always been about **raising awareness**. Traditionally, the focus was on raising *linguistic awareness*. Gradually, it was recognized that *cultural awareness* is equally essential to becoming an effective communicator with additional languages. In the 21st Century, we must also work toward raising *critical awareness*, that is, the ability to recognize, question, and subvert all practices which result in the oppression or marginalization of learners and their teachers.

Translanguaging has become a well-established concept in applied linguistics. Research has demonstrated that languages are not stored and recalled independently of one another in the human mind, but that they are intricately intertwined within a unitary linguistic repertoire. Yet, educational policy and practices tend to adhere to outdated monolingual models which forbid the use of additional languages in the classroom and during high-stakes assessments. We must challenge the “monolingual myth” and the “native speaker bias” at every turn. This also entails a recognition of the intrinsic value and abilities of non-native English speaker teachers (NNESTs) and the role of English as a lingua franca (ELF).

Perhaps no educational subject is better equipped for **highlighting democracy** in the classroom than ours, as it provides a safe space where different cultures and languages interact and the marginalized are encouraged to speak up and speak out. Unfortunately, education has also become a prime target of anti-democratic misinformation, rhetoric, and policies. In addition to teaching communication skills, we are increasingly called on to teach toward ideals such as social justice, civic engagement, media literacy, and inclusion.

Motivating learners is the key to their empowerment, equitable treatment, and inclusion. It could therefore be argued that engaging learners is the core task of language teachers. However, in our focus on learner motivation, we often neglect teacher motivation. Given the burden society places on the shoulders of teachers in the 21st Century, we are at risk of fatigue and burnout. Teacher wellness should become a priority and our core mission should shift to **engaging learners and teachers**.

Realizing DEI objectives necessitates **advocating for learners and teachers**. In many contexts, those who enjoy power and privilege in educational systems and throughout society must advocate for the marginalized, at least initially. But the marginalized must ultimately feel empowered to invoke their agency and voice.

Reflecting on practices is fundamental in education. Given the complexity of societies and classrooms nowadays, it is crucial to reflect not only on what works and does not work in the classroom, but also on 21st-Century educational objectives and our changing roles in society. Now, more than ever, we must engage in introspection and actively participate in communities of practice.

We must engage current trends in research and take a leading role in closing the gap with practice. The 21st-Century teacher must be a *reflective practitioner* and *teacher researcher* at once.

Each of the objectives outlined above constitute an element of *transformative education*, the goal of which is *transforming perspectives*. If we want to construct a more equitable and inclusive world, we must first motivate and empower individuals who take informed, evidence-based decisions and actions. Developing plurilingual literacy and oracy skills is essential, but teachers and learners also need to learn to empathize with others and collaborate in diverse teams to solve complex problems. Transformation starts with educational practices, but when done right, it can quickly evolve into educational and political reform.

The organising committee is particularly interested in submissions which explore these and related themes in connection with current and emergent trends in TESOL, including the ways in which **technology, digital literacies, online learning, artificial intelligence, early language learning, teacher education, professional associations, and content and language integrated learning (CLIL)** can help transform perspectives and realize DEI objectives.