Diversifying Language Educators and Learners

From “ELs can’t” to “With appropriate support and equitable access, ELs can and will.”

When I decided to become an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) educator back in 2012, I was driven by my personal experience as an English learner (EL) arriving in the U.S. at the age of 16. I thought of teaching English to immigrants as a career in which I would have the opportunity to give back and teach my students the most necessary skill they would need to succeed in the United States of America—English.

Throughout my teaching career, I have focused on learning skills, theories, and practices that could help expedite my students’ literacy and language learning process. Looking back, it seems that all that mattered to me was learning how to best teach English. But I have come to realize that to teach ESOL I need to first acknowledge my students’ mental, emotional, and physical needs. Language teaching must come second.

During my first 2 years of teaching I looked for knowledge, skills, and information that could help me decipher what I was experiencing as a novice ESOL educator. I did not understand why my students could not focus, or why they were not engaged in my classes when I was strictly following the principles of preferred and renowned theories and practices in the Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) field. In 2015, I finally found the answer when I read the groundbreaking book, Advocating for English Learners: A Guide for Educators, by Diane Staehr Fenner. The concept of advocacy and the power it has to ensure equitable access to language learning for all ELs helped me understand what I was experiencing in the classroom with my students.
Advocacy in TESOL

Advocacy, defined as “working for ELs’ equitable and excellent education by taking appropriate actions on their behalf” (Staehr Fenner, 2014, p. 8), is increasingly seen as a moral and civic duty in TESOL. In today’s landscape, many ESOL teachers are using advocacy as an instrument to protest the social injustices our ELs are exposed to in their schools and communities. For example, in 2018 I was a colleague and I shared six testimonios by ESOL students and families that reflect some of the many struggles and barriers ELs have to overcome just to attend school and learn English (Pentón Herrera & Obregón, 2018). For me and other passionate ESOL teachers, advocating for our ELs has become a human, moral, and professional responsibility; after all, what kind of teacher would not want his/her students to have a peaceful life, be happy, and succeed?

There are many ways to support ELs, all of which are important and necessary to help immigrant students and their families achieve success in school and in their lives. A good starting point is to focus on advocating at the school (K–12) and community levels where ESOL teacher advocacy can most immediately help lead to change.

In School

One of the primary concerns for ESOL in K–12 learning environments is access to quality language and literacy education. Some ELs, for example, arrive in our schools with limited or interrupted formal education and may not know how to read or write in their native language. These literacy concerns need to be addressed in all of the ELs’ classes to provide balanced literacy, language, and content learning across their schedule.

However, some general education teachers as well as other school personnel are quick to underestimate the ability of ELs to rise to the occasion, feeling it might be too much work for them. Our duty as ESOL educators and advocates is to shift this harmful, deficit mindset of “ELs can’t” to “with appropriate support and equitable access, ELs can and will.”

Issues like the one described above are making K–12 advocacy increasingly important to ensure equitable, accessible, and quality education for ELs. The reality is that “general education teachers are often unprepared to work with English Language Learners in spite of their growing number and diversity” (Linville, 2016, p. 100).

Personally, I have seen first-hand how the lack of preparation and support from many general education teachers has impacted ELs’ success in mainstream classes as well as their motivation to continue attending school.

For this reason, appropriate support and equitable access for ELs is essential during the registration/intake process, during the school year, during summer school, as well as throughout the year in the form of continuous individualized support.

During the intake process, it is important for ELs and their families to be asked important questions about their affective (mental and emotional health), linguistic (language proficiency in native language), and cognitive (learning needs) realities. Some ELs might arrive in the United States experiencing the effects of trauma, family separation anxiety, or culture shock. Similarly, some students might arrive from refugee camps with limited formal schooling or with previously identified special education needs. K–12 schools frequently ignore these three components during the intake process and, as a consequence, ELs suffer. Creating a thorough intake process that provides more clarity about the ELs’ situation is of utmost importance if we are to effectively understand, care for, and support our ELs’ mental-emotional, linguistic, and learning needs.

In addition to creating a thorough intake process, continual schoolwide training focusing on culturally sustaining pedagogy and a growth mindset needs to be implemented during the school year for all school personnel. The attitudes and mentality of school personnel matter because they shape the culture inside the school building, the way teachers remain flexible and supportive of ELs in their classrooms, and how mainstream peers treat and support their EL classmates. Furthermore, continuous schoolwide training focusing on culture-as-asset also helps school personnel become aware of their ELs’ cultural diversity and practices, which might be different from American cultural practices and norms. Understanding our ELs’ cultures is more than a cliche—it is a requirement for those involved in their education. For example, a schoolwide training focusing on cultural diversity and appreciation can help explain why an EL from China may not maintain steady eye contact when talking to authority figures, why it is insensitive to elevate Spanish conquistadores in a classroom with Indigenous Latinx ELs, or why pointing with your finger to an object or a person might be considered offensive for some Muslim ELs.

Similarly, during summer school it is important for schools to offer educational programs in which ELs can continue to learn and practice their English and literacy skills. As a high school teacher, I have seen many of my ELs’ language abilities regress over the summer. Continuous instruction throughout the year expedites ELs’ language acquisition and academic development. An excellent example of effective summer instruction for ELs can be found in the international high schools in Maryland’s Prince George’s County Public Schools (PGCPS), which offer continuous instruction for ELs during the summer. The
ELs at these international high schools show the greatest language growth of all ELs within the county (Batel, Roth, & Campbell, 2018).

Finally, an additional practice to incorporate is continuous and individualized support for our students. As an ESOL teacher and advocate, you are in a position to know more about your ELs than anyone else in your school, making you a potential advocate. Many of my high school ELs, for example, arrive with transcripts from their home countries that often can be used in the U.S. to earn academic credits and sometimes even graduate from high school a year or two sooner. Small things like asking ELs for their transcripts, teaching them how to apply for free or reduced lunch, or sharing information about clinics where they can get vaccinated at a reduced rate or for free are practices that reflect commitment to our ELs and will help ensure their well-being in our schools.

These actions might sound trivial, but they can make a huge impact on ELs’ ability to stay in school, knowing that someone is advocating for them until they find their voice.

In the Community

The only support that many ESOL families and students receive is from neighborhood-based centers such as religious institutions, charitable clinics, and non-profit organizations in their communities. However, ESOL students and their families often need to be guided to these organizations to learn about them and the services that they offer.

Advocating in the community means creating communication bridges between community and nonprofit organizations that support immigrant families, the school, and the immigrant families. This involves making human connections with individuals at each institution as well as creating a document that lists points of contact for each organization and the services they provide, if possible, in the native languages of ESOL students and their families. This document can then be shared with ESOL students and their families to make sure that they know about the services available in the community at low or no cost.

Another way to advocate in the community is to actually partner with these non-profit organizations to help them better serve the immigrant families in your community. For example, the Centreville Labor Resource Center (CLRC) in Virginia, serves a large population of Ixil speakers. This indigenous group from Guatemala has been recognized as distinct from the Spanish-speaking populations served and the CLRC has tailored its services to serve the Ixil population, respecting the differences between their language, cultural identity, and social challenges and those of their Spanish-speaking counterparts (Pentón Herrera, 2019).

Similarly, CASA de Maryland provides direct services in workforce development and training, employment placement, financial and language (English and Spanish) literacy classes, and well as legal and tax services to help immigrant families successfully integrate into their new communities in the U.S.

Community organizations such as CASA de Maryland and CLRC are invaluable assets for immigrant families and students. As ESOL educators and advocates, it is our responsibility to learn more about these types of organizations in our geographic areas and understand how we can collaborate with them to better support our ESOL families and students.

Conclusion

Throughout my career as an ESOL educator, I have seen the impact that advocacy has had on the ELs in my classroom, school, and in the community.

Advocacy is at the heart of what ESOL educators do, it is the reason why we teach ESOL, and now is a crucial time for a focus on advocacy. Advocacy has become my pedagogy, my reason for staying in the classroom, and my motivation to continue fighting for my ELs. I believe that if we want to ensure safety, peace of mind, equitable access to language learning, and success for all our ELs, then teaching must come second, and advocacy must come first.

Robert J. Marzano once said that teaching is an art and a science (2007). But teaching ESOL in the United States today is an art, a science, and a calling—it requires knowledge, skills, creativity, endless passion, motivation, sacrifice, and the ability to continue fighting for your ESOL students, no matter what. For this reason, I exhort ESOL and mainstream educators alike to advocate for their ELs by individualizing the ELs’ intake process in schools, talking to their leadership about the need for schoolwide continuous cultural training, and offering summer programs to expedite their language and academic development. EL success is, indeed, within reach, but it can only happen with our support and advocacy.

Luis Javier Pentón Herrera currently serves as Maryland TESOL’s Past President in Silver Spring, Maryland.

References


