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Voices from the Sunshine State: Program and Policy Advocates

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Chapter 2

Voices from the Sunshine State: Program and Policy Advocates

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When the world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful.

Malala Yousafzai

Introduction

As educators, we are engrossed in a world that pushes us to critically examine *what is*. Particularly in language education, we explore the various theories and practices involved in learning new language(s)—or expanding our linguistic repertoire, depending on your paradigmatic stance. No matter our position—whether it refers to our jobs or to an ideological stance—we are advocates. We are thus challenged to understand our diverse roles as advocates, which, as Foley and Valenzuela (2004) demonstrate, come in many forms.

We expand Staehr Fenner’s (2014) definition of advocacy—working for students’ equitable and excellent education by taking appropriate actions on their behalf—by recognizing the importance of including the voices of those most affected by the issues, and not simply speaking for them. The *them* in this case is a group that we refer to as *emergent bilinguals*, students who, in the United States, are in the process of learning English as an additional language. Most often, this group is referred to as English language learners (ELLs) or limited English proficient (LEP). However, we know that “ELLs are in fact emergent bilinguals” (García & Kleifgen, 2018, p. 3) since through school (however it is defined, depending on age) and English, they become bilingual, functioning in their home language(s) and English. To ignore their bilingualism is to perpetuate educational inequity by failing to recognize that bilinguals differ from and have unique learning needs compared to monolinguals (García & Kleifgen, 2018). Knowing and referring to these students as emergent bilinguals recognizes bilingualism as a cognitive, social, and educational resource, and has key consequences both for students and for teachers, policy makers, parents, the language education profession, and U.S. society at large (García, 2009). What follows is a compilation of examples of advocacy from our TESOL community in Florida. Because our understanding of advocacy is broad and inclusive, the examples provided range in who participated, in what capacity, and for what duration.

Sunshine State Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (SSTESOL) has become a source of forces for empowerment in advocacy. Its diverse members continue to fulfill their roles in ways to positively impact emergent bilinguals' language development, cultural development, and academic achievement. As such, they work diligently to help emergent bilingual students succeed while holding schools and education leaders accountable for their performance outcomes. Their voices as advocates for emergent bilinguals and their families, teachers of emergent bilinguals, and the various programs that serve emergent bilingual students are crucial to preparing them for academic success in and beyond the classroom. This chapter sheds light on a few of them, namely classroom level advocacy, policy/legal advocacy, and research as advocacy.

We begin this chapter by providing questions that may be useful to SSTESOL members, readers, and friends. How can I build a purposeful community for language development that leads to positive effects on emergent bilingual learners PreK-12 and beyond? What can I do in my classroom, school, district, college, university and community? How can I collaborate with other non-school based communities and organizations?

Classroom and School-Based Advocacy

Teachers of emergent bilingual students play vital roles in shaping an inviting and engaging teaching and learning environment. They are often involved in curriculum writing, class and teaching assignments, school policy and assessment development, and service on leadership and curriculum teams. Their passion and commitment to providing an equitable and excellent education in the Sunshine State involves being a mentor, a link to families and communities, a counselor, and a resource to faculty members who are assigned to teach emergent bilingual students in all subject areas. SSTESOL members past and present from around the state engage in advocacy from their classrooms and their schools. Their advocacy takes many forms, sometimes successful and other times not, occurring at all age/grade levels. Here we offer exemplars from the field.

As both 2020-2021 SSTESOL President and Emerald Coast TESOL Local Chapter President, Dr. Arlene Costello has created, led, and demonstrated that "Coffee Chats" are one form of organizing teachers to engage in meaningful and honest discussions regarding successes and challenges related to emergent bilingual students. This action began in Pensacola when Arlene, an experienced advocate and mentor to her peers, joined three ESOL teachers in an informal chat over issues that could impact their classrooms as they prepared for the 2019-2020 school year. This included establishing a trusting environment in order to discuss issues around assessment, curriculum, instructional models of ESOL class delivery, as well as effective advocacy for the anticipated changes in their school's ESOL department. Educators such as Leigh Gilliam, Nathlee Osborn, Yuliya Williamson, Milagros Sessions, and Meagan Baker shared experiences and responded through active listening and problem solving, when necessary. The experience revealed that through sharing, many educators find that they have similar experiences and/or beliefs, can brainstorm together, and eventually become (or deepen) a support system for one another. In fact, the continuous support for each other was one of the outcomes of the first Coffee Chat. Each subsequent Coffee Chat demonstrated the need for more Coffee Chats, now mostly occurring twice monthly on weekends. Thus, Coffee Chats provided an avenue to empower teachers to advocate for "equitable as well as excellent education in the United States" (Staehr Fenner, 2014, p. 1).

Dr. Rosa Castro Feinberg, who has had a decades long career as an educator and school board member in Miami-Dade County, remembers that during the early 1960s, one of the most vexing problems at the middle school was that newcomers would not shower after their physical education class. As the ESOL teachers in the school, Pat Pagliaro, Diana Hardowin, and Rosa went to visit the physical education faculty

to search for solutions. As soon as they saw the shower area, they understood that the problem was that there was no privacy. After recommending a modest investment in plastic shower curtains, they were relieved to see the problem resolved.

Another case involves a more equitable use of technology for students in the ESOL program. Although many of the foreign language classes in the district where Rosa was working had language laboratories, the emergent bilingual students had to make do with a Language Master and sometimes a tape recorder with a set of headphones. Rosa arranged for a long-term loan of a wireless language lab from a vendor and for the district to buy that product. The condition for purchase set by the district obtained a positive result on the evaluation of the pilot program. Such evaluation was designed by Rosa along with other teachers, who also met the condition for purchase, causing the school to become the first in the district to offer the benefits of that technology for students in an ESOL program.

Rosa also made changes to class schedules and types of classes from which emergent bilingual students benefited. For example, while serving as the ESOL teacher at an inner-city middle school in the heart of a Haitian neighborhood, she realized early on that most of the emergent bilingual students were not doing well in their mainstream classes. Rosa thus requested specialized classes that offered a focus not only in basic English but also on the language used in their content classes. The principal agreed and the children benefited from the change. Similarly, Rosa recognized the necessity for many of her Haitian students to have access to Haitian Creole language arts classes, just as the many Hispanic students had access to Spanish language arts classes.

Figure 1

At the 2019 Southeast Regional TESOL conference hosted by Sunshine State TESOL, Dr. Rosa Castro Feinberg gave a Keynote address to speak about her advocacy work in Florida and the current pressing issues facing the education of emergent bilingual learners/ELLs. In her speech, she offered advice on how K-16 educators can become advocates for their ELLs



Carla Huck, ELL Instructional Leader for the School District of Lee County, created an ELL [Action Plan Template](#) based on work completed in partnership with guidance counselors, administrators, and teachers at a local high school. An ELL Graduation Task Force was also officially formed and launched in June 2019 to guide all high schools in the area through data analysis, research on challenges and best practices in helping ELs graduate, programmatic planning using WIDA ACCESS for ELLs scores, recommended curriculum materials, and extended learning opportunities. Carla has maintained constant contact with the Guatemalan Chamber of Commerce, which led to the establishment of a formal mentoring program at a local high school. As such, many students are able to see themselves reflected in the business community. Through the mentoring program, a deeper connection with families was built, often through parent meetings at school. In addition, the mentoring program sparked an interest in one of the members, who owns a Mayan language translating company, to offer free courses for qualifying seniors.

In a different case, Intensive English Program instructor Joe Heilman recounted the challenges that several Vietnamese students were experiencing related to their visas, including the lack of visa approval to study in the United States and the need to leave due to their lack of visa renewal. Joe realized that he needed an ally to assist students in overcoming barriers that obstruct their quest for education in the U.S, and found Emerald Coast TESOL, a chapter of SSTESOL, as an anchor in cases that impact his international students.

Whether they realize it or not, teachers begin to engage in advocacy work by focusing their efforts within their classrooms. Some may feel empowered to expand their impact to the district and community levels, and eventually, witness a greater influence of their advocacy efforts on the national scene, such as the Day on the Hill coordinated by the TESOL's Policy and Advocacy Summit each year ([2019 highlights](#) & [2020 Virtual Summit](#)).

Organizational Policy/Legal Advocacy

As SSTESOL's voice on Capitol Hill, Arlene recently joined with one hundred TESOL members from 35 state affiliates with a unified mission: to advocate for education issues and fair immigration policies. Because of the work of TESOL advocates during TESOL's Day on the Hill, Congress passed the federal budget for 2019-2020, which was signed by President Trump and avoided any government shutdown. Nevertheless, the work to resolve immigration policies continues without immediate resolution in sight.

The 2007 veto of Florida Senate Bill 2512/House Bill 1219 is an example of a successful and highly visible advocacy effort at the state level by Sunshine State TESOL members and allies. State Senator Stephen Wise, an influential chair of the education finance committee, sponsored a bill that aimed to lower the teacher training requirements for reading teachers with emergent bilingual students from 300 clock hours of in-service training to 60 hours. SSTESOL benefited from the advice of Arnhilda Badía, a former state representative and SSTESOL member who helped demystify the legislative process. Steps taken included advocacy roles filled by parents, students, teachers, principals, supervisors, professors, retired educators, and representatives of other organizations. Despite best efforts, the bill was adopted unanimously by the Senate and passed in the House with only six dissenting votes from Representatives Anitere Flores, Bill Heller, Carlos López-Cantera, David Rivera, Marco Rubio, and Darren Soto.

LULAC Florida and other organizations subsequently became involved as allies to launch a campaign for a veto. At conferences and workshops, members announced the veto campaign and asked audience members to make calls to the governor's office at that exact time. The team reviewed the governor's calendar and arranged to intercept him whenever possible to deliver a message face to face. They posted the academic and legislative rationale for our position in the comments section of newspaper articles, then copied the articles and comments to send to the governor and to those who might influence him.

While every call and every email was important, the most visible activists were those who appeared on radio and television programs and were quoted in newspaper articles. This group included Candice Harper and Ester de Jong, who frequently cited their own recent publications to explain why just being a good teacher without specific TESOL preparation is not enough to be a good ESOL teacher. Professors Elizabeth Platt, Joyce Nutta, Deborah Giambo, Eric Dwyer, Teresa Lucas, and Oneyda Paneque, former principals Maria Acosta and Migdania Vega, high school ESOL teacher Mercedes Pichard, and retired teacher Rochelle Cisneros were among the pioneers in our efforts to take full advantage of what various media outlets could provide.

Since five of the six Representatives who voted against the bill were members of the Florida Hispanic Legislative Caucus, we called on that group also. On June 27, 2007, then Representative René García,

Chairman of the Florida Hispanic Legislative Caucus, sent a letter requesting a veto to Governor Charlie Crist. Upon granting the veto, the governor subsequently quoted portions of this letter in his own statement, explaining his reasons for doing so.

Currently, in 2019, efforts to correct the flaws in the state's plan to implement the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) have taken up most of SSTESOL's advocacy efforts since 2017. With the help of TESOL state and national organizations, LULAC state and national organizations, the Joint National Council for Languages, UnidosUS, and NAACP Florida, we have succeeded in bringing about important improvements over the original drafts made available for comment by the state. Chief among those improvements was the elimination of the proposal to replace the English language proficiency test with the state's high stakes English Language Arts assessment. Tony Erben, Arlene Costello, and Ryan Pontier were part of the leadership group on these efforts, with expanded participation by graduate and high school students in advocacy events. We utilized meetings with editorial boards, resolutions supporting our positions from city and county commissions, sign-on letters, position statements and issue papers, organizational resolutions, social media, sessions with policy makers, and media interviews. When speedy publication was essential, we secured space in education blogs.

The state plan still does not include progress in gaining English language proficiency and the performance of each individual subgroup as part of calculations for school report card grades. Additionally, it still does not provide native language assessments in the content areas for English language learners for whom they are appropriate. However, through the continued advocacy efforts of our members and allies, two bills are pending for the 2020 Florida legislative session to address some of the remaining problems, including native language assessment and the establishment of a state advisory council on the education of emergent bilinguals/English language learners¹. The former directly addresses one of the compliance problems in the state ESSA plan and the latter aims to provide a mechanism for a systematic expert review of additional concerns.

As these examples show, in our roles as teachers and educators, we are inevitably engaged in advocacy on behalf of our students and programs. What we learn in the process of that advocacy should be published to reach the largest number of our colleagues. As such, advocacy for even one student may have implications for adjustments to state or district policies, which will in turn affect many students.

Research/Publication as Advocacy

As Foley and Valenzuela (2004) make evident, it is possible to engage in research—and publication—and also be an advocate. In other words, it is not a requirement to be involved in the activities noted above (although neither is there anything wrong with them nor would it hurt to do so) to engage in advocacy. A researcher can publish based on empirical research, theoretical groundings, literature reviews, or even critiques of policy. A researcher may also draw on specific epistemological and methodological approaches that allow for an investigation and presentation of findings that not only advocate for a group of people, particular policy, or certain instructional approach (among others), but also exercise a practice of co-planning and co-learning. Members of Sunshine State TESOL have a rich history of engaging as advocates through publishing their research along all points of this advocacy continuum.

The research presented here spans age ranges (i.e., PreK-adult), geographic location (i.e., urban, rural), program types (e.g., dual language, bilingual, ESOL, general education, ESL, foreign language), and perspectives (e.g., foreign language, ESOL, bilingual). The variation in program types and perspectives,

¹ Unfortunately, legislative leaders did not permit either bill to be heard in committee, and the bills died. This work will be taken up in subsequent legislative sessions.

including instructional approaches, is particularly important given Sunshine State TESOL's 40 year history. The organization began by seeking members from the already existing Florida Foreign Language Association (FFLA), whose members then contributed to our own cause (Castro Feinberg, 2019, email communication). Then, given TESOL's inherent focus on English, the majority of research has honed in on issues surrounding so-called English learners. However, in more recent times, members have expanded our focus, drawing attention to the "OL" (i.e., other languages) in "TESOL." The previous focus on English may have also been the result of Florida's designation as an "Official English" state, sometimes misinterpreted as "English Only." Nevertheless, Sunshine State TESOL's members have contributed greatly to our collective understanding of teaching and learning in myriad educational contexts that include bi/multilingual students.

Publishing as advocacy in the 1980s in Florida saw bilingual education as a central issue, given the transition from an progressive period of history regarding language and bilingualism to a dismissive one (Baker & Jones, 1998). Santiago and Castro Feinberg (1981) brought awareness to both inequitable opportunities and inequitable outcomes for Hispanic students, including those in our state. School attendance at predominantly monolingual white schools, low enrollment compared to white students, and lower assessment scores are just a few of the markers highlighted as the authors made an explicit call for strengths-based bilingual education for students both learning English and wishing to maintain their home language of Spanish. Included are specific recommendations, encouraging stakeholders to draw on mandates set in legislation such as the Civil Rights Act, *Lau v. Nichols*, and the Bilingual Education Act. Santiago and Castro Feinberg also draw attention to Hispanic students of all ages. Willig (1985) followed with a meta-analysis showing the effectiveness of bilingual education.

In the 1990s, Castro Feinberg continued her advocacy via publishing, focusing on the *Lau* and *Brown* cases (1990, 1995), bringing greater attention to bilingual education (Castro Feinberg & Morencia, 1998), and diving deeper to highlight two-way bilingual schools (1999). Joyce Nutta, recognizing the importance of the technology boom, began to investigate uses of computers for teaching grammar (1998) while engaging a broad audience in thinking about what it meant to teach and learn languages virtually (Feyton & Nutta, 1999). Her intuition proved to be predictive, as Florida currently sees many ESOL-endorsed teachers implementing "strategies" such as placing emergent bilingual students in front of computers to learn English (Dwyer & O'Gorman-Fazzolari, forthcoming).

The early 2000s brought a swell of noticeably more empirical advocacy in the form of publishing with foci ranging from a continued interest in bilingual education through foundations of bilingual education (Castro Feinberg, 2002) and the use of technology in language learning (Nutta et al., 2002; Jin & Erben, 2007; Erben, Ban & Castañeda, 2008; Erben & Sarieva, 2008) to the intersection of bilingual education and special education (Paneque & Barbetta, 2006; Paneque & Rodríguez, 2009) and teacher education for future teachers working with emergent bilingual students (de Jong & Harper, 2005; Erben, 2004, 2005; Govoni, Wright, & Wubbenhorst, 2005; Govoni, 2006; Harper & de Jong, 2004). Paneque and colleagues urged us to reject the deficit narrative that bilinguals are inherently in need of remediation, challenging the field to better understand the differences between language differences and language delays/disorders. de Jong and Harper made salient the fact that "just good teaching" is not effective teaching for emergent bilingual students, while Erben, Govoni, and colleagues supported knowledge of our growing field and provided roadmaps for us as teacher educators. Nutta, Erben, and colleagues' focus on technology—especially computer-assisted technology—positioned us to consider equitable learning options for emergent bilingual students.

In the second—and current—decade of the 2000s, research as advocacy has maintained a focus on bilingual education and explored teacher education in greater depth, with a particular challenge to prepare educators to work with emergent bilinguals within inclusion models (Coady, Harper, & de Jong, 2011, 2016;

de Jong, Harper, & Coady, 2013; Dwyer & O’Gorman-Fazzolari, forthcoming; Grigorescu & Dwyer, 2012; Ramos, Dwyer, & Pérez-Prado, 2013) while expanding to include methods of ESOL (Govoni, 2011; Nutta, Mokhtari, & Strebel, 2012; Nutta, Strebel, Mokhtari, Mihai, & Crevecoeur-Bryant, 2014; Wheeler & Govoni, 2014) and bilingual education (de Jong, 2011); systemic functional linguistics (Avalos et al., 2017; de Oliveira, 2015; de Oliveira & Avalos, 2017; Jones, Smith, & de Oliveira, 2018; Ramírez, Sembiente, de Oliveira, 2018); and language development, instruction, and policies in early childhood (Gort & Pontier, 2013; Gort & Sembiente, 2015; Pontier & Gort, 2016; Sembiente & Gort, 2015). In all cases, these publications address critical issues in education, provide different perspectives of the issues, and offer ways to think about and effect education equity. Coady, de Jong, and Harper explored the realities of preparing mainstream teachers to work effectively and appropriately with emergent bilinguals, warning us of the challenges that an inclusion model poses. Dwyer and O’Gorman-Fazzolari, finding that no more than 5% of ESOL-endorsed mainstream teachers observed working in inclusion settings, drew on ESOL/bilingual strategies when working with emergent bilingual students, provided evidence that the warnings Coady and colleagues issued were indeed real and valid. This time period saw an uptick in the need to understand how language functions in various contexts, as was the case with the work of de Oliveira, Avalos, Sembiente, and Ramírez. Finally, in addition to drawing attention to oft-overlooked early childhood education contexts, Pontier and Sembiente observed that teachers—through their naturalistic languaging practices—regularly contested language separation policies while simultaneously modeling languaging practices that mirrored their community. As such, they posited that the ways young children are expected to use language in educational contexts is at odds with the languaging demands of life outside of their more formal early learning environment. Such claims call our community to action—a form of advocacy in and of itself.

The publications of SSTESOL members over the last 40 years show the power of advocacy in the form of research, even when not explicitly intended to serve as such. Our members are passionate, diverse, knowledgeable, and devoted.

Conclusion

SSTESOL is the trusted authority for advocacy and expertise in English and academic language in the state of Florida. Its mission is to provide leadership and advocacy in language policy issues and access to professional development opportunities, resources, and lively interactions in a professional network at all levels. SSTESOL is your ally in Florida TESOL.

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Resources

The authors of this chapter identified websites that provide information, tips, links to news and editorials as well as action alerts that readers might find useful. We paid particular attention and focused on those sites that are novel and also those that have been tested over time and are likely to continue throughout the next decade. We encourage you to review and investigate these websites regularly to stay up to date. We also hope that you will find them to be meaningful in your educational and advocacy experience.

[Center for Applied Linguistics \(CAL\)](#)

[¡Colorín colorado!](#)

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[ESOL Florida Portal](#)

[ESSA Title III Grant for English Language Learners \(9/20/2016\)](#)

[Florida Association of Bilingual and ESOL Supervisors](#)

[Migration Policy Institute](#)

[NAFSA Advocacy](#)

[National Education Association's ELL advocacy guide](#)

[Staehr Fenner, D. \(2013\). Advocacy for English Learners: An Overview](#)

[Sunshine TESOL Advocacy Pages](#)

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