

From comfort zone to challenge: Toward a dynamic model of English Language teacher advocacy in secondary education

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A growing body of educational research in TESOL has looked at the many roles that English language teachers serve within their institutions, including the prominent role of nurturer/caretaker (e.g., de Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Farrell, 2011; Fritzen, 2011). Yet very little research has considered how the role of the EL teacher changes—or should change—over a student’s educational trajectory. In this essay, we draw on conversations with secondary students and teachers to highlight the importance of a multifaceted, dynamic conception of EL teacher roles, particularly regarding their advocacy work with and for students. We emphasize three themes that are central to this conception of advocacy: aspiration, collaboration, and transparency. We conclude by discussing how this conception of advocacy as *ethical care* (Hos, 2014) plays out during intake, advising, curriculum development, and other pedagogical decision making.

In our respective roles (one as a researcher, the other a program administrator), we have had dozens of conversations with English learners (ELs) preparing to graduate high school. In these conversations, we often encounter contradictory statements about EL teachers. As newcomers, students usually describe their EL teachers as “nice” and “helpful.” Most say they would not have transitioned successfully into U.S. schools without EL teachers’ support. However, many of these same students express concerns later on that EL teachers are holding them back from achieving their long-term educational goals (e.g., Shapiro, 2014, 2016). Students resent being placed in “sheltered” classes that feel socially isolating and academically unrigorous. They tell us,

- “Sometimes they’d put me in an ESL [English as a second language] class that was a little bit lower than I think I should be in ... but they wouldn’t move me into a higher one ... I got frustrated.”
- “I’m just saying, maybe I should get pushed a little harder.”
- “I already knew that I’m not gonna learn nothing from [EL classes], because most people, you hear them talk in their own language and you cannot pay attention to the teacher.”

Ultimately, many ELs begin to see these courses as a detour in their educational journey: Studies find that long-term placement in “sheltered” EL courses often becomes a hindrance to their linguistic and academic growth, as well as to their goal of integrating socially with the rest of the school community (e.g., Callahan, 2005; Kanno & Kangas, 2014; Valdés, 2001). EL teachers, in turn, come to be seen as critics and gatekeepers, reminding students that they’re “just not ready” for more challenging coursework, despite multiple years of sheltered or pull-out instruction (e.g., Faltis & Arias, 2007; Olsen, 2014). One teacher we work with brought her students to visit a “mainstream” (i.e., grade level, content area) class, partly in response to their complaints about being placed in EL classes. The students observed what their peers were doing academically and, according to the teacher, “realized that they couldn’t do that.” The teacher saw this as justification for keeping students in lower level EL classes. But we wonder: Was there a missed opportunity for reflection here? How are the EL courses preparing students for their future in the “mainstream”? And if the necessary skills are not being taught in EL courses, when will students learn these skills?

These questions not only point to a need for changes to the EL curriculum and instruction, but also highlight the importance of a *role shift* on the part of the secondary EL teacher—a shift toward long-term advocacy, not just short-term support (e.g., Staehr Fenner, 2014). Our central question in this essay, therefore, is: *What is needed for students to experience EL teachers as advocates throughout their high school careers?* We posit that our field needs a more dynamic notion of teacher advocacy—one that takes seriously students’ educational goals and lived experiences, recognizing that these shift over time. In such a model, care is demonstrated not only through “sheltering” newcomer students (Fritzen, 2011), but also by preparing them to take on higher levels of academic challenge, and serving as advocates alongside them as they pursue their goals (Hos, 2014; Kanno & Kangas, 2014). This conception of advocacy requires that teachers work not only to support ELs within the existing school system, but also to effect changes within that system. Through this work, EL teachers can promote shared responsibility for ELs throughout their schools, as a central part of schoolwide conversations about educational equity (e.g., Honigsfeld & Dove, 2019; Staehr Fenner, 2014)

What does this dynamic advocacy look like? First, it means that the work of EL teachers must be *aspirational* and *collaborative*. For example, in the initial intake process, teachers can encourage a more robust discussion of each student’s future goals, leading to an educational plan aligned with those goals. This planning can help to ensure that the expectations of students (and their families) are in line with those of school staff. A mismatch in expectations, after all, can have dire consequences. In one typical case, a high school student we work with was advised to take low-level classes that would enable him to graduate in 4 years, though his “dream was to go to college.” He had to take—and pay for—several noncredit, remedial courses in college, to make up for the gaps in his academic preparation. While some students’ goals might seem out of reach (such as those of a 17 year-old, level 1 newcomer who declares that she wants to become a medical doctor), the aspirations that underlie those goals (e.g., to work in healthcare, to give back to the community) can and should be taken seriously. EL teachers can serve an important role, in fact, in helping students explore more realistic alternatives (such as pre-nursing or medical technician programs), while still recognizing and valuing students’ “aspirational capital” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77).

EL teachers can also honor student aspirations in their instructional practice, by thinking carefully about curricular articulation and avoiding *over-scaffolding* (Daniel, Martin-Beltrán, Percy, & Silverman, 2016). Research finds that EL content courses tend to be much less rigorous than their mainstream counterparts, and that a sustained lack of rigor has a harmful effect on students (e.g., Callahan, 2005; Olsen, 2014). While the metaphor of classroom as “comfort zone” is appropriate for a newcomer EL curriculum, students at higher levels need successful engagement with academic challenges (Fritzen, 2011). With their depth of knowledge about each student, as well as their expertise in academic language and literacy development, EL teachers are uniquely positioned to help students find their “working edge,” so that they are equipped to encounter academic rigor across the curriculum with confidence. This shift toward increased rigor can only happen through collaboration between EL and mainstream teachers, so that both groups understand when and how to “stretch” and “push”—two themes central to the metaphor of a “coach,” which many EL teachers say is central to their professional identity (de Guerrero & Villamil, 2000).

Perhaps the most important aspect of a dynamic advocacy role for EL teachers is *transparency*. EL teachers are accustomed to acting as advocates for their students, but often do so without the students’ knowledge or assent. One student we spoke with conveyed frustration upon realizing that his EL teachers had graded his writing for effort rather than proficiency: “How did they read it? How did they even understand? How did I get an A?” he asked, angrily. In this case, as in so many others, lack of transparency eroded the students’ trust in the EL teachers’ belief that he was capable of high levels of academic achievement.

In their work with mainstream colleagues as well, EL teachers often advocate for understanding or accommodation—more time, simpler language, modified assignments. But advocacy for *more* challenge, and more *appropriate* challenge, can also be extraordinarily helpful. And of course students can be powerful advocates for themselves, including by seeking placement in non-EL or higher level courses, as indicated in earlier quotes (see Kanno & Kangas, 2014). EL teachers can support students’ self-advocacy by outlining exactly what prerequisite skills, test scores, and so on are needed for movement to the next level or mainstreaming. The language used in these conversations could shift from “you’re not ready” to “this is what you’re going to need,” and still be entirely truthful. Of course, in order to be able to offer this sort of guidance, EL teachers need guidance themselves about the academic and linguistic demands of the mainstream curriculum. Enacting this dynamic advocacy role requires that EL teachers see their work systemically, beyond what happens in their classrooms and programs. It may well require structural changes, as well, such as time and compensation for sustained dialogue with mainstream colleagues—not to mention for more in-depth advising conversations with students and their families. At the high school in Miriam’s district, for example, EL teachers have compiled a list of master schedule requests for the next academic year, which will enable coteaching, co-planning, and other collaborations between EL and mainstream teachers, as well as increased flexibility and choice for ELs in their course selection. EL teachers have also received release time and/or stipends, so that they can visit mainstream classes, meet with faculty colleagues in other departments, and review their sheltered curriculum. The goal of these efforts is to expand the role of EL specialists, so that there is greater institutional integration for both EL students *and* their EL teachers (Staehr Fenner, 2014).

Thinking systemically is also crucial to the aforementioned goal of increasing academic rigor in the sheltered EL classroom. Increasing rigor for its own sake may not lead to more equitable outcomes for English learners, if other educational opportunities remain the same. When EL teachers see the “big picture,” they are better able to situate their courses within the school’s curricular landscape, as well as to ensure that mainstream courses are accessible to ELs. For example, one of the EL teachers at the high school has been in conversation with his mathematics colleagues about how to successfully transition ELs into the mainstream. While the conversation at first began as a call from the math

department for more “rigorous” sheltered EL math courses, it has evolved to include discussions of pedagogical needs on the part of the mainstream teachers, resulting in a new opportunity for coteaching. This case provides an example of how the mission of an EL program can shift from “remediation” to “mediation” across the curriculum and institution (Shapiro, 2011). This shift will likely have a greater and more sustainable impact on educational equity than sheltered courses alone.

These sorts of initiatives require a system-wide ideological shift as well—that of putting ELs first, rather than last, in educational decision making. The needs of these students must be at the center of conversations about school schedules, curricula, and policies, rather than being treated as an afterthought. This approach may require a mental and emotional shift as well on the part of EL teachers. We must be willing to let go of our protectionist tendencies—not because we care less, but because we want to ensure students’ success well beyond our programs. What if the EL teacher who helped students survive the first week of school was the same person who “kicked their butts” (as some of our students succinctly put it) when it comes to thinking like a scientist, writing a literary analysis, or taking notes on U.S. history texts? Indeed, we have talked with students who have had this experience. One reported proudly that her “regular [non-EL] English class . . . was easier than the EL English class.” This experience increased her confidence, she said, as she completed high school and transitioned to college.

Our argument is not that any one EL teacher should “do it all.” Rather, it is that the role we play in students’ lives can and should change as they progress linguistically and academically. We do not abandon our professional identity as nurturers (e.g., Farrell, 2011; Fritzen, 2011); rather, we demonstrate our commitment to students through an increased focus on academic rigor and multifaceted advocacy—enacting what Hos (2014) calls *ethical care*. As explained by a former student, who now works with his local school district as a family–school liaison: “This is about making family . . . you bring all kids together and you’re telling them . . . what is good for them . . . [saying], ‘This is what you need to be. We want you to have a family, a future, and we’ll be working hard on you.’”

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