Response to TESOL's position statement on the linguistic rights of deaf students

Sarah Compton
The 2010 TexTESOL State Conference is now history but hopefully you were able to attend and now share with me the memories of a vibrant and inspiring gathering of professionals who came together from across the state and nation to share ideas and experiences. Our conference theme was “Steady Bridges Over Strong Currents: Building Sturdy Foundations to Master Language Challenges.” As I expressed to conference goers, so many strong currents push at TESOL professionals today from every direction…these currents might include: legislated or program imposed mandates, decreased funding or diminished resources, research requirements, deadlines, local or regional politics, technological changes, immigration or refugee issues, and many other challenges. When buffeted by these currents, TESOL professionals seek the steadiness of colleagues, mentors, and field experts. Sturdy foundations are formed and built upon by seeking professional development opportunities that encourage us to share, to learn and to grow in this unique profession.

Although the conference is over and the guests and guest speakers have gone home, TexTESOL II remains as one of the “steady bridges” for you. Our mission continues to be an organization that encourages professional development, provides opportunities, and promotes leadership development. Now as TexTESOL II returns to its usual routine of smaller, local meetings and events, I know that I can count on our members’ energy, interest and good will that was so evident during the conference.

I would be remiss if I did not once again express my deepest thanks to all 2010 State Conference committee chairs and committee members and to all of our on-site volunteers; you made me proud to be a member of TexTESOL II.

Between newsletters, be sure to stay connected with TexTESOL II by visiting our website, www.textesoltwo.org. I may also occasionally contact the membership via email (with your permission on the membership form) so don’t dismiss a message from EaglesMom with TexTESOL in the subject line.

Until next time,
Call for Submissions

The TexTESOLII Newsletter invites submissions from those wishing to share interesting information, research, or stories concerning the teaching of English to speakers of other languages.

Article Length: All articles should be between 350 and 700 words in length. Please also include a brief bio statement up to 50 words in length; contact information is optional.

Images: We also encourage the submission of high resolution images to accompany articles. Please contact the editor for details.

Possible topics include but are not limited to:

- ESL
- EFL
- K-12 Contexts
- Adult and Higher Education Contexts
- Bilingual Education
- Technology
- Teacher Education
- Program Innovation
- Professional Development
- Sociocultural Issues

For more information or to submit an article, e-mail the editor at: shannon.sauro@utsa.edu
From time to time TESOL issues position statements on a variety of issues that center on English language instruction. The purposes of the position statements are to “improv[e] public policy and understanding” and to address “a broad range of issues related to the field” (http://tesol.org/s_tesol/seccss.asp?CID=32&DID=37). With the recent release of the Position Statement on the Rights of Deaf Learners to Acquire Full Proficiency in a Native Signed Language (July 2009), TESOL expands its reach to include an issue directly related to English language teaching: the linguistic rights of deaf students.

The position statement succeeds in achieving its goal to influence public policy and increase awareness of deaf students’ linguistic identities and language learning needs in at least three specific ways. First, the statement dispels a common myth about sign language. Second, deaf language learners are framed as members of a linguistic minority rather than as a disabled population. Third, the statement broadens the scope of bilingual education to include signed languages and signed language users.

A common misconception is that sign language is a universal language used by all deaf people. The position statement repudiates this circulating myth by stating that deaf students “utilize a native signed language” and have a “right to become proficient in a native signed language and in written or spoken language(s), including English.” Together, these statements suggest that, like spoken languages, signed languages are both natural and native languages. As is the case for speakers of languages other than English, deaf learners’ understanding and mastery of their native (signed) languages affects their ability to acquire literacy skills in a spoken or written language.

Turning to the goal of improving public policy, the position statement effectively challenges the dominant discourse on deafness in current US special education policy. With the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), deaf individuals were framed as members of a disability group. TESOL challenges this disability paradigm by contending that deaf individuals are members of a linguistic and cultural minority. The statement argues that the Deaf community has a unique “linguistic identity” and signed language is key to full participation in the Deaf community. Furthermore, the position statement supports “an accessible high-quality education for all learners of English, including Deaf students.” In short, deaf students are positioned as language learners, and, therefore, attention should be paid to fostering their acquisition of a native signed language.

Perhaps the most significant contribution this position statement makes is advocating that the scope of bilingual education should expand to include deaf students and signed languages. The debate within the field of deaf education, according to the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center at Gallaudet University, has centered on questions such as “What language should be used to teach them?”, “What language should they use to communicate?”, and “How should deaf children be taught to read and write?” (http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu/Clerc_Center/Information_and_Resources/Info_to_Go/Language_and_Literacy.html). Bilingual educators and English language teachers have likewise grappled with these questions for decades. Much like bilingual educators, educators of the deaf have carried on an uphill battle to use students’ native signed languages as the language of instruction in the classroom.
By expanding its scope of inquiry and advocacy to include signed languages and users of signed language, TESOL extends an invitation to the field of deaf education to come and see what the field of English language teaching can contribute to answering the questions that continue to be debated amongst deaf education experts. Similarly, deaf education experts can offer new insights into many of the issues that concern English language professionals.

In short, TESOL’s recent position statement is groundbreaking. It lays a foundation upon which both English language teaching professionals and deaf education practitioners can build a partnership to advocate for deaf students’ linguistic rights and promote multilingual education programs for deaf students and all learners of English. TESOL is to be commended for issuing such a cutting-edge statement. The statement can be accessed at http://tesol.org/s_tesol/bin.asp?CID=32&DID=12563&DOC=FILE.PDF.

Sarah Compton is a practicing American Sign Language interpreter and holds an MA in TESL from the University of Texas at San Antonio. She can be reached at compton.sec@gmail.com.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS HELD ELECTRONICALLY

TexTESOL II elections are traditionally held at the Fall meeting but since TexTESOL II hosted the TexTESOL State Conference in November and did not have a Fall meeting, it was decided to hold the election electronically. E-mails went out to all TexTESOLers whose memberships were up-to-date as of October 15, 2010. Responses (votes) were collected over a period of two weeks. The TexTESOL II Board is grateful to all of those members who took the time to participate in the election.

Officers re-elected are:

President - Rita McSorley, current President of TexTESOL II having been elected in October 2009. Rita is a retired Adult Education administrator who currently works part-time as a trainer for the South Central GREAT Center and as supervisor with NISD Adult Ed.

1st Vice President - Tom Lawrence is the sitting 1st Vice President/Program Chair having been elected in October 2009. Tom has been a member of the staff of the Defense Language Institute English Language Center since 1997.

Past President - Nancy Bentley Dunlap is the current Past President having served as President from 2007-2009. She has been the Adult Education Coordinator for NISD for 14 years.

Newly elected officers are:

2nd Vice-President (Membership) - Sharon Marr is a veteran public school teacher. She currently works part-time as an ESL instructor for NISD’s Adult/Community Education program and is completing her MA-TESOL degree at UTSA.

Secretary - Alison Williams, a UTSA student in the MA-TESL degree program previously taught ESL in the NEISD Adult Education program and is currently interning with the NISD Adult Education PACE ESOL program for transitioning students.

Treasurer - Rhonda Labor is a veteran teacher and ESOL Curriculum Supervisor for NISD Adult Ed with a business degree and accounting background.
LINDA SALEM NAMED TexTESOLer OF THE YEAR

One of the special events of the 2010 TexTESOL State Conference was the Awards Luncheon held on Saturday, November 13th. Naturally, the presentation of the TexTESOLer of the Year awards was a highlight of the luncheon. Named the 2010 TexTESOLer of the Year for TexTESOL II was Linda Salem.

Linda, born in Chicago to Iraqi parents, was raised in Baghdad. She attended Baghdad University and graduated at the top of her class with a B.A. in Education/TEFL. Within two years of graduation, Linda returned to her native United States at a time when her familial home was governed by a dictator and was reeling from a long war. Linda taught ESL for a Michigan school district and served as an Arabic linguist for the U.S. Army before finding her way to San Antonio.

In San Antonio, Linda has taught both ESL and Arabic for NEISD Adult Ed, NISD Adult Ed, Northwest Vista College and the International Language Center of San Antonio. She also earned her Masters Degree in Education from the University of the Incarnate Word in 2007.

It is for her body of work with the refuge community that Linda was chosen for this award. She began teaching Somali refugees in 2005 and has been involved with this unique community ever since. Perhaps because she herself has experienced leaving the only home she ever knew to start a new life in the U.S., Linda has a special connection with these special ESL students. She is not only a teacher; she is a friend, an advocate, a mentor for countless refugees and their families. Linda is a staff member at the Center for Refugee Services, a nonprofit organization that assists the refugee community in San Antonio with resettlement needs. Linda founded and organized the World Refugee Day Celebrations in San Antonio in 2009 and 2010.

Congratulations to Linda Salem, TexTESOL II’s “TexTESOLer of the Year!”
Just a couple of years ago, most ESL teachers had never even met a student from Saudi Arabia, and now Saudis are beginning to fill classes in intensive English programs at US universities. Why have these Saudis flocked to the US, as well as to other countries around the world, and what are their goals beyond English? Is there anything that we teachers need to know in order to better understand who they are and optimize their classroom experience?

In a recent round-table, held in mid-October, a group of Saudi male students spoke for themselves. They volunteered to talk about a range of issues important to them and their country. The author selected them for their diversity in representing various areas of Saudi Arabia, English language ability, family situation, and amount of time in the US. A follow-up round table will be held with Saudi women.

**Why are there so many Saudis learning English?**

Saudi Arabia has undergone a lightning-fast developmental process since the early 1970’s when oil money was used to accelerate the modernization of a country that is ancient in origins with a forbidding climate. The government recognized that the training of business people, scientists, and engineers required by a highly technological society is vital. Many of these tasks have been done by guest-workers, who constitute a majority of workers in technical positions. Diversification from an exclusive oil-based economy is equally important.

The idea behind bringing back ideas from many different countries is to help to balance traditional or conservative interest groups with a more rational, modernistic way of thinking. Saudi Arabia has the goal of becoming one of the top 10 investment areas of the world by 2010, the so-called 10x10 Mission. Having an open society, with knowledge and tolerance of a variety of cultures, is vital to meeting this goal.

The students who will be returning with their foreign education in just a few years are those who will create the infrastructure for new industries, for example, tourism, nanotechnology, and nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, thus creating jobs. In many private companies, where there are presently a large number of foreigners working, Saudis will possess the technical and managerial skills to take over many of these jobs, not to mention expanding business.

The students cited ARAMCO (Saudi Arabian Oil Company as an example. The company has gone from a virtually American-run entity to a Saudi-managed company, with some foreign consultants.
ARABIAN EXODUS CONT.

What Do the Saudis Want YOU to Know?
1. The Saudis expect no special treatment, even during the month-long fast of Ramadan, but are grateful for recognition of the celebration of Eid-al-Fitr, at the end of Ramadan, which to them is like Thanksgiving and Christmas rolled into one.
2. Not all Saudis are rich. Often, they are asked about the expensive cars they drive, and those oil wells in the back yard! In fact, statistics state that 22% of Saudis are below the poverty line.2
3. Saudis are not terrorists! Much laughter ensued after this comment, but they recognized that often the media paints a negative picture of them and their country. They all expressed sorrow about 9/11 and reiterated that it did not represent the Saudi people but a small group of fanatics.
4. It is important to separate Saudi culture and Islam. Islam is a religion found in many different forms all over the world. Saudi Arabia has many cultural manifestations, which come not from Islam, but from Bedouin tribal traditions and history.
5. Coming from a society where there is strict, legal separation of the sexes, working together in groups is a challenge for everyone. For men, it is stressful to work with Saudi women, as the level of formality and decorum is very high.
6. Everyone agreed that Saudi Arabia is changing rapidly. It is inevitable and desirable for women to drive, for example. However, these changes cannot be made overnight and must evolve from the further economic and social development of the country.
7. The Saudis find that international students are probably better informed about Saudi Arabia than U.S. citizens.
8. The students state that they are treated in a friendlier manner in San Antonio than they are by fellow Saudis at home.

Teaching Implications
It is important for instructors to allow students to formally communicate about their country and culture, which many of us do. One of the most successful ways of doing this was when students were assigned to give presentations about the misconceptions concerning their countries in an Oral Communications Level Three class. The results were not only unexpected, and sometimes funny, leading to lively discussions afterwards.

When placing Saudi men and women together in groups, remember that both are under pressure to behave in a very formal way and may not work together as smoothly as when mixed with other nationalities. If it becomes necessary to place them together, it is better to have two women to one man. However, don’t be surprised if the man is sometimes “shoved aside.”

In the everyday details of teaching, it is easy to forget the big picture. As with many students, we are dealing with the “movers and shakers” of society. However, because of the importance of Saudi Arabia in the world, and large number of Saudis at schools in the U.S., we are not only educating them to go on to higher education here, but to return to their country and bring about economic and social changes, often modeled on their experiences abroad. Fundamentally, we are making friends for our country and we are helping these young people fulfill the Saudi government’s mission to accelerate the economic and social development of the country.


Having studied at the master’s level in Islamic Culture, Carol Costello has a special interest in “getting the story out” about the Saudi students in our classrooms. She has taught English in Europe and the U.S. for over 20 years, obtaining the MA-TESOL from UTSA in 2009.
The 2010 Tex-TESOL conference kicked off in true Texas style early Friday morning with coffee and kolaches at the Crowne Plaza Riverwalk Hotel in downtown San Antonio. The first keynote speaker, Clint Swindall, regaled the audience with true Lonestar chutzpah and separated the “Oh Yeahs!” from the “Oh Nos!” Riding the wave of his motivational “Tell me something good” early morning message, the audience thronged out to begin the first round of presentations.

The sheer number of simultaneously offered treats made it difficult to choose from the ESL smorgasbord. Dr. Salas-Iznardí’s 21st Century Skills presentation focused on the idea of creating life-long learners out of adult education students and getting them the multi disciplinary skills they need for success and employment, especially the ability to innovate creatively. He called for educational reform and made the disturbing point that among the 30 most developed nations, only the US has a population of children who are less educated than their parents. He called for less time being spent to prepare kids to pass standardized tests and more focus on practical knowledge and how to apply it in the real world.

Dr. Laura Sicola delivered a well-crafted, cogent keynote presentation Saturday morning that called to action researchers and practitioners alike to build bridges between research and practice toward an informed practical application that is relevant to learners. She led the audience through various practical applications of theory and group exercises. She eschewed the notion of research for its own sake and called practitioners and researchers alike to rally around the refrain, “So what?” “What’s the practical value?” She called for researchers to give back to teachers and make their findings accessible. She called on teachers to not simply dismiss research but to explore best practices, to become highly qualified and exceptional, and to know the current state of the field.

Another presentation highlight that echoed Sicola’s refrain of bridging research and practice was David and Yvonne Freeman’s “Essential Practices for English Language Learners.” Again, this well-crafted and delivered workshop offered effective practical teaching strategies grounded in current research.

Perhaps hardest to capture on paper, but most profound, is the inspiration and benefit of being immersed in, and permeated by, a field of like-minded colleagues and professionals in our TE-SOL universe.
The following excerpts are from an interview conducted with Laura Sicola, Saturday keynote speaker at the 2010 Tex-TESOL conference.

What advice do you have for new teachers?

Try to find a mentor. That’s really important. Teaching is not a new science. It’s not about starting from scratch. You can find someone at your institution who’s very good at what they do. Ask if you can sit in on their classroom and watch; ask if they’ll sit in on your classroom and give you some tips. Ask if they’ll take a look at your lesson plan. Ask if they have other strategies they’d recommend for teaching.

In K-12, classroom management is key. You can have all the theories in the world, but if you can’t manage the classroom, you’re lost. There are all the things you don’t really learn in a teacher education program that are going to have a huge influence on the success of the application of your degree in the classroom. Attending conferences is useful because you can get all sorts of new tricks and tips and ideas but it’s how you then interpret them and realize them in the classroom that matters. That’s why a mentor is so important.

And what you think you’re doing in your classroom is not necessarily accurate. What you plan in your lesson plan may not be what actually gets executed in the classroom. One of the things I recommend to all of my students is that you do some video recording in the classroom. Not of your students, but of yourself in action. Time it to see of your 60 minute class how much of it is you talking, or interrupting in group work. How many times do you say “Um”, how much do you fidget, how clear is your blackboard usage? How organized are you when you’re setting up an activity? You can have an observer in there giving you feedback but it’s not the same as watching yourself do it. You don’t need any other feedback once you’ve seen yourself on video.

In your experience as a classroom teacher teaching ESL, do you think there is a particular approach that creates a sound foundation to build from?

I think task-based learning is really valuable because it gives meaning, and purpose to the lessons, and it engages students. Project-based learning is also great. Task-based learning tends to come within project-based learning; project is a larger scale.

But it needs to answer the “So What?” question. Not only do researchers need to say “So what; who cares about this theory; how does it apply?” But the same thing holds true for children or adult learners to question their teachers and ask “So what? Why do I need to learn this form?” Because in order to accomplish “x”, or in order to build this, to build a boat, or a website, or in building a stage and putting on a production and writing programs and invitations, there are language functions that you need to do to do each of these. So pick a project first and then work backwards.

Or if you need to start bottom-up and you have to teach certain structures this semester then think about what project you could do that would encompass the use of all of these structures and then build from there. But give them the purpose, the “Why do we need to do this,” the “Why does it matter”.

Do you have a particular mission statement or philosophy?

Find a way to love what you do. You have to love what you do.
Overcome the Frustration of Employee Disengagement

Here it is … a business book that shows leaders of small and large organizations how to build a culture to overcome the frustration of employee disengagement. Engaged Leadership combines the popular business fable format with the more straightforward, how-to format to challenge readers to use what they learn. This book engages both the creative and the practical parts of the brain to teach smart leadership skills in an active and exciting way. A product of small and large business, author Clint Swindall is a recognized leadership speaker, trainer, and consultant.

“This is a slam dunk by Swindall! What a powerful read for any team member of an organization. A fun, enjoyable, insightful, and impactful lesson on how to apply the key concepts of engaged leadership to move your team forward.”

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For information on Clint please visit his website: www.verbalocity.com
Membership Application

Membership dues are $15.00 per year, and include the following benefits:

- Two issues annually of the TexTESOL II regional newsletter.
- Opportunities to network with other TESOL professionals.
- Discounts for TexTESOL II sponsored events including a fall conference and spring workshop.
- Scholarship opportunities for ESOL teachers and graduate students.
- Representation at the local, state, national, and international levels with TESOL and with policy-makers such as the U.S. Congress.

Date of Application: ___________________________________________________
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* Please supply your e-mail address so that we can keep you up-to-date regarding important TexTESOL II business and events. Your contact information will NOT be shared with other organizations or businesses. Thank you!

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Membership Letter/Card Sent: ___________
TexTESOL II: ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mark Your Calendars:

TexTESOL 2011 State Conference
Th-Sat, October 27-29 | Austin, TX

ESL Voices In Harmony
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