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Advocacy for Language Teacher Associations

There are many language teacher associations (LTAs) around the world, most of which are managed by volunteers and board members who make daily decisions that directly affect their LTA. These decisions are sometimes guided by initiatives proposed by members; in other cases, they emerge from pressing issues in the community. LTAs become visible in their community when they engage in actions that are considered valuable for the members they serve. However, at times, leaders might feel unsure of which actions are within the scope of their LTA and whether those actions will hurt or benefit their organization in the long run. In this article, I encourage leaders of LTAs to rethink their actions and efforts through the lens of advocacy. The article provides tools that LTAs can use to reflect on ways to best serve the membership and community while also building capacity for their organization.

As a past president of Maryland Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and past member of the TESOL International Association's Affiliate Network Professional Council (ANPC), I began to reconceptualize and understand LTAs' efforts as acts of advocacy through my own experiences. For example, during my time serving as a board member at Maryland TESOL, I reflected on advocacy and explored ideas of how to best serve the Maryland TESOL's membership and the English learners in our state. I debated who should be prioritized in our organization, often wondering if the focus should be on serving our English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers, our English learners, or the TESOL profession as a whole. By engaging in deep reflection, I realized that advocacy—as both a concept and a practice—helped me understand and guide our efforts at Maryland

TESOL and became necessary for the survival of our organization.

To further delve into the topic of advocacy, I divide this article into three main sections. First, I explain and provide details about the topic of advocacy in general. Then, I explore advocacy from the perspective of an LTA and suggest four common forms of advocacy that LTAs around the world are exercising today. I finish the article by proposing three steps organizations can take to become advocacy-centered LTAs.

Let's Pause and Reflect

As leaders of LTAs, how do we determine what actions will hurt or benefit our organization in the long run? The response to this question may look different depending on the setting and context of the LTA; however, it is important

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to consider the definitions of both hurt *and* benefit *for the LTAs we serve.*

- *What do we mean by "hurting the organization"?*

- *What do we mean by "benefiting the organization"?*

The responses to these two questions will serve as a foundation for further exploration into the actions that could hurt or benefit the LTAs we serve.

WHAT IS ADVOCACY?

The concept and practice of advocacy are both transnational and transdisciplinary. As a result, defining advocacy is difficult, especially considering the different frameworks, understandings, and contexts where advocacy is used. For example, some consider advocacy to be a craft and associate it with persuading individuals to do what you want (Ross 2007), while others believe advocacy is "pleading or arguing in favor of a person, cause or idea" (Harrison and Prado 2019, 19). In the TESOL field, the most popular definition of advocacy was introduced by Staehr Fenner (2014), who defines advocacy as working for English learners' "equitable and excellent education by taking appropriate actions on their behalf … [and] stepping in and providing a voice for those students—and their families—who have not yet developed their own strong voice in their education" (8). For the purposes of this article, advocacy is approached from a different purview; that is, Staehr Fenner's (2014) advocacy definition

focuses on students, and we are interested in LTAs. Thus, for this article, I define advocacy as planned actions that members take (individually and collectively) to achieve the success of their LTAs.

Let's Pause and Reflect

Advocacy work varies, depending on context and needs. What does advocacy look like in your own context? How would you define advocacy, taking into consideration your LTA's actions and realities?

ADVOCACY AND ADVOCACY AGENTS

In the context of LTAs, people taking actions for the benefit of their organization can be considered advocacy agents. Advocacy agents are individuals serving at LTAs around the world who act to benefit their organization, the members it serves, and the profession as a whole. An important consideration is that, when advocacy agents take actions representing an LTA, these actions should be planned and approved by the leadership at that organization beforehand.

CONCEPTUALIZING ADVOCACY PRACTICES FOR LTAs

Before moving to Maryland, I did not know much about the TESOL association at my previous location. I had heard from other ESOL teachers that becoming a member would keep me updated on the association's yearly conferences. At the time, I felt that becoming a member just to stay updated on their yearly conferences was not beneficial

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for me, so I decided not to join. Then, after moving to Maryland and joining the Maryland TESOL board, especially during my time serving as president, I reflected on our goal and purpose as a professional organization. Previously, Maryland TESOL had had visionary presidents who created a strategic plan and laid the foundation for our organization to have a successful future, but I still wondered if there was more we could do in the face of the many changes we were experiencing within our state and country.

With the support of other board members in Maryland TESOL, we began identifying areas of improvement. Quickly, we worked together to update our organization's reach and services to serve our present and future members better. In every conversation we had, and in every decision we made, our members remained our primary focus; we wanted our organization to be a place where our members could find information on how to support their English learners and improve their practice. Through this journey, I became interested in researching the efforts and primary focuses of other LTAs around the world. Through my research, I conceptualized four primary types of advocacy practiced by LTAs globally, which I discuss further below. It is important to clarify that LTAs often focus on multiple forms of advocacy simultaneously instead of just one form. Similarly, depending on the leadership goals, the types of advocacy may change from year to year.

The four primary types of advocacy practiced by LTAs are:

1. Institution-focused advocacy (advocacy for the organization)

2. Member- and profession-focused advocacy (advocacy for teachers and professional development)

3. Learner-focused advocacy (advocacy for language learners and their families)

4. Language-focused advocacy (advocacy for language education)

Institution-Focused Advocacy (Advocacy for the Organization)

Institution-focused advocacy means that LTAs direct their efforts and actions to benefit their organization. This form of advocacy is usually adopted by new LTAs concerned about continuity or by veteran LTAs seeking to rebrand/refocus as an organization. An example of institution-focused advocacy is best shown by Mackenzy Julemisse, a TESOL Haiti leader, who wrote an article to advocate for his organization and seek international aid (Julemisse 2019). In his article, Julemisse situates TESOL Haiti as an institution concerned with Haiti's educational inequalities and engages in a global dialogue requesting assistance and support. Julemisse ends his article by stating that "to be frank, I would say that TESOL Haiti is imploring the leaders of TESOL International to help us to become an Institution which can be helpful to our community" (Julemisse 2019). Julemisse's actions remind us that advocacy agents may engage in advocacy in multiple ways, including writing, to benefit their organization.

Member- and Profession-Focused Advocacy (Advocacy for Teachers and Professional Development)

Member- and profession-focused advocacy means that LTAs focus their efforts and actions to benefit their membership and the profession. This form of advocacy is usually adopted by LTAs that prioritize their members' training and professional development (e.g., workshops, conferences, publications). Two examples of member- and profession-focused advocacy LTAs are ACPI-TESOL Costa Rica and the Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA). ACPI-TESOL Costa Rica's primary objectives include the following:

• [Offering] training to the professionals in the field of teaching English

• Supporting professionals legally

• Representing teachers with the Ministry of Education and other associations

- Looking for opportunities to improve English for its members. (ACPI-TESOL Costa Rica 2019)

At the same time, ACTA states that they "seek to advocate for and enhance the profile of the TESOL profession in Australia through a wide range of activities in local, regional, national and international contexts" (ACTA 2020). In the advocacy efforts of ACPI-TESOL Costa Rica and ACTA, we are reminded of the essential role of LTAs as spaces to empower and support the teachers/members they serve.

Learner-Focused Advocacy (Advocacy for Language Learners and Their Families)

Learner-focused advocacy means that LTAs direct their efforts and actions to benefit language learners and their family members. This form of advocacy is usually adopted by LTAs that prioritize language learners (K–12 and adults) and their families above all. Two LTAs that employ this form of advocacy are Carolina TESOL and Georgia TESOL (GATESOL). According to its website, Carolina TESOL is working to achieve specific goals based on the needs of North and South Carolina, the two states it serves. The steps Carolina TESOL is taking to achieve these goals include:

- Offering conferences, symposiums and discussion groups to educators serving English Language Learners and their families

- Working with state governments to encourage public school systems to provide effective services to all their non-native speakers

- Helping bridge the cultural and language challenges of foreign students and visitors. (Carolina TESOL 2022)

On the other hand, two of the four purpose statements of GATESOL are as follows:

- Work cooperatively to improve all programs that seek to provide students with the opportunity to acquire English language skills and proficiency.

- Promote understanding of the cultures of multilingual learners of English. (GATESOL 2022)

The advocacy efforts of Carolina TESOL and GATESOL remind us that the well-being of language learners and their families is also one of the responsibilities of LTAs.

Language-Focused Advocacy (Advocacy for Language Education)

Language-focused advocacy means that LTAs focus their efforts and actions to benefit the language they promote. This form of advocacy is usually adopted by LTAs that prioritize language teaching and learning. Two examples of such a form of advocacy are shown by NileTESOL and The Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT). NileTESOL's website describes itself as "a professional association for all those individuals who are actively involved in the development of the teaching of English and in teaching content in English in Egypt and globally" (NileTESOL 2022). Similarly, JALT shares that it "is a nonprofit organisation dedicated to the improvement of language teaching and learning. JALT promotes excellence in language learning, teaching, and research by providing opportunities for those involved in language education to meet, share, and collaborate" (JALT 2022).

LTAs may choose to align their advocacy efforts with those carried out by NileTESOL and JALT in cases where the language(s) they promote hold(s) a prestigious status in their society or community. Also, LTAs may adopt language-focused advocacy in cases where their primary focus is promoting and supporting the growth of heritage languages and bi/multilingualism. For clarification, LTAs engaging in language-focused advocacy seek to promote language(s) and language education in their contexts. Further, their language-focused advocacy may seek to influence government policy supporting language education in their contexts.

> **The first step to becoming an advocacy-centered LTA is to engage in self-reflection—we must look inside to understand how our efforts align with our organization's goals and objectives.**

Let's Pause and Reflect

- *What type(s) of advocacy best describe(s) your LTA's current efforts?*

- *What type(s) of advocacy will be best for your LTA, and why?*

- *Are there any other types of advocacy not described in the previous section that come to mind?*

BECOMING AN ADVOCACY-CENTERED LTA

In this section, I propose and explain three steps LTAs can use to become advocacy-centered organizations:

Step 1: Look Inside: Find Your Type of Advocacy

Step 2: Look Around: Shake the Organization

Step 3: Look Outside: Make Connections

Step 1: Look Inside: Find Your Type of Advocacy

The first step to becoming an advocacy-centered LTA is to engage in self-reflection—we must look inside to understand how our efforts align with our organization's goals and objectives. To do this, leaders must engage in candid discussions about their organization's priorities, services, and membership engagement. In these discussions, it is necessary to find which type of advocacy is most appropriate for your organization (i.e., institution-focused advocacy; member- and profession-focused advocacy; learner-focused advocacy; and/or language-focused advocacy). This is done by evaluating the actions and efforts taken (or that will be taken) by the organization (events, conferences, community gatherings, etc.) to engage the membership or those served. When evaluating their efforts, organization leaders have the opportunity to engage in candid conversations with board members where they explore how their actions align with organizational goals. As organizational leaders and board members begin this necessary process, some questions to consider are:

- What role does our organization fill in the community or society?

- Are our organization's goals and objectives still relevant for our membership? Has our membership increased or decreased since the goals and objectives were last updated?

- In what ways are our advocacy and outreach efforts aligning with our organizational goals?

- In what ways are our advocacy and outreach efforts benefiting those we serve?

- How has our membership changed since our organization adopted these goals?

- What is the current makeup of our membership (K–12 teachers, higher-education faculty, etc.)?

- How engaged is our membership with our organization? (How many members participate on our listserv? How many people attend our events? How many different volunteers contribute to the mission of our association?)

- How often does our organization reflect on

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its goals and objectives, and what actions is it taking to make them a reality?

- Are our actions (i.e., advocacy efforts) sustainable for our organization? Are these efforts truly beneficial for those we aim to serve and support?

When leaders and board members engage in these discussions, they must keep in mind that the primary objective is to improve the organization. In these conversations, leaders may find that there are areas of improvement for their organization. At this juncture, it is necessary to identify those areas of improvement and create teams to focus on each of those areas. As an example, a possible area of improvement may be low membership enrollment. It is important to explore the reasons why membership might be declining: Are the services provided not appealing to members? Are the prices too high for members? These are questions that the team assigned to this area of improvement will need to answer and find solutions for. Or leaders may find that the actions they have been taking as an association, which may be influenced by recent events in the community, do not align with their organizational goals.

A common challenge that leaders may find when engaging in self-reflection is that the LTA being affected by cliques or detrimental practices within the organization. In my experience, one of the most common examples of these practices is the "senior teachers' club," where board members remain in their positions indefinitely, and they become entrenched. Sometimes the reason given for this, or similar practices, is that retired teachers have the time and maybe the connections to continue serving the institution. However, this and similar practices

can stifle the creativity of the association, often pushing away younger teachers. Thus, I recommend leaders consider board-member rotation as a necessary practice to keep fresh ideas and approaches within the organization—and the requirement for board-member rotation could be written into the LTA bylaws. Leaders within the organization often struggle with these and other difficult but necessary realizations when engaging in self-reflection. However, they must keep in mind that change is always refreshing for organizations.

One last point I would like to share under Step 1 is that changing factors—such as politics, laws, and migration—in the province, state, or country may directly affect the organization and the language, learners, and professionals represented. For this reason, I recommend that LTAs consider creating short- and long-term strategic plans to evolve with the times and align their institution's services to benefit those it serves.

Step 2: Look Around: Shake the Organization
During Step 2, the teams created during Step 1 work together to find answers to the identified areas of improvement. Finding answers may require fieldwork. In other words, these teams may need to contact their members (via surveys, interviews, or focus groups), including those who left the association, to know what is working and what is not. Teams hoping to find answers to issues should ask relevant questions such as:

- What actions can we take to align our actions with our goals?

- What motivates our members to continue their membership (or what causes members to leave)?

> **Changing factors—such as politics, laws, and migration— in the province, state, or country may directly affect the organization and the language, learners, and professionals represented.**

- What services and support are we offering that are helpful?

- How can we improve, or what can we do differently?

Aligning advocacy efforts to the membership's needs could determine whether LTAs remain relevant for those they seek to serve. For this reason, asking other members (and yourselves) questions that identify what is working and what is not will shed light on how the organization's services can be tailored to be more attractive to the membership. After areas of growth (i.e., what is not working) and glow (i.e., what is working) have been identified, the teams should propose ideas or activities (e.g., community events, celebrations, workshops) that can be implemented to align the LTA's efforts with the organizational goals.

Step 3: Look Outside: Make Connections
After identifying issues and creating teams to understand those problems (Step 1) and proposing actions based on the identification of growths and glows (Step 2), leaders of LTAs must make connections outside their organization to expand their reach (Step 3). They should form a strong partnership with other organizations who are engaging in similar forms of advocacy to expand their networks, bring opportunities for future collaborations, and make their organization more visible in the community and at the provincial/state level.

For example, in my time as president of Maryland TESOL, our organization engaged in learner-focused advocacy to support English learners and their families. We maintained a strong relationship with a nonprofit organization in the community that was involved in advocating for immigrants at the state and national levels. To solidify our partnership, Maryland TESOL invited representatives from that organization to speak at our annual convention, and they, in turn, invited board members of Maryland TESOL to attend their monthly advocacy meetings. During this exchange and partnership between Maryland TESOL and the nonprofit organization, our board members became advocacy agents because their actions benefited our organizational goals and solidified our visibility within our community.

Let's Pause and Reflect

How can your organization use this three-step process (or a modification of it) to become an advocacy-centered LTA? Jot down your ideas and then read the section below for more guidance on what the process could look like.

Case Study: The Blue Language Teacher Association
In this section, I share a practical example of how a fictional organization that we will call the Blue Language Teacher Association became an advocacy-centered organization by incorporating the three steps described above.

Step 1: Look Inside: Find Your Type of Advocacy
The Blue Language Teacher Association has historically focused on promoting English as a foreign language in their country (i.e., language-focused advocacy). Their events and yearly conferences often focused on positioning English as an important language for the learners and the community. Their language-focused advocacy efforts, with a secondary focus on learner-focused advocacy, proved beneficial in the past for the

organization, which enjoyed popularity and visibility in the community. At the same time, these language- and learner-focused advocacy efforts contributed to a healthy membership.

Last year, however, the country experienced a terrible natural disaster, prompting large numbers of emigrants and a significant number of school closures. This paradigm shift prompted the leaders at the Blue Language Teacher Association to come together to engage in deep discussions about their organization's standing and situation. In their conversations, leaders realized that the actions they were taking to promote English were not attracting members anymore, and the membership significantly decreased in just a year, jeopardizing the survival of the organization. They proposed forming a temporary transition team with the primary goal of exploring the steps that needed to be taken to ensure the survival of the Blue Language Teacher Association.

Step 2: Look Around: Shake the Organization

The transition team identified that their organization's goals, objectives, and language- and learner-focused advocacy efforts were no longer appealing for their membership. The aftermath of the natural disaster shifted the community's priorities, decreasing interest in English language education in the country. This meant that a large portion of their members, many of whom were pre-service teachers and graduate students, was no longer interested in renewing their membership. This abrupt fall in membership and participation placed a strain on their association and its ability to survive.

Seeing this, the transition team identified an immediate need in shifting the advocacy efforts of their LTA. Instead of channeling their efforts into language- and learner-focused advocacy, the transition team proposed that the organization prioritize their survival (i.e., institution-focused advocacy). They suggested placing an additional focus on the members who were still active in their association (i.e., member- and

profession-focused advocacy). As such, the leadership implemented an action plan to connect with current members, asking for their input on how the association could serve them best while simultaneously holding monthly informal events in the community where members could connect, support one another, and network. At this point, the LTA transition team and leadership realized that stalling the downward trend in membership was vital to ensure organizational survival. After stalling this downward trend, the organization was able to focus on making connections outside their community and organization to continue expanding.

Step 3: Look Outside: Make Connections

Once the Blue Language Teacher Association took actions to stall the downward trend in membership, the leaders realized that the goals and objectives of the organization needed to be updated. Through this process of organizational reinvigoration, they reached out to possible members outside of their country. Using social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, the Blue Language Teacher Association transition team appealed to members and sister LTAs around the world and asked for their support. The leadership ran a social media campaign they named the "natural disaster support campaign," where they asked language teachers from around the world to join their organization as a member for a modest fee. Simultaneously, the Blue Language Teacher Association offered to do webinars for sister LTAs and their members in the hopes of recruiting members outside their country, which was also part of their campaign. Through this effort, the Blue Language Teacher Association increased its membership, which provided economic stability for the organization and ensured its survival for the foreseeable future.

FINAL THOUGHTS

A famous quote states, "You adapt, evolve, compete, or die." In my view, this quote is relevant for LTAs because one of the main

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reasons organizations cease their activities or become defunct is that their advocacy efforts do not directly align with their membership expectations. Advocacy is increasingly important for LTAs to stay current with the needs of the field and to remain relevant for the membership and communities they serve (Lamb 2012). LTAs must continually reinvent and reassess their goals and practices, ensuring their services remain connected to the members they serve. Through advocacy, an LTA's leaders can engage in planned actions to ensure their organization's sustainability and preserve a healthy and engaged membership.

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