Spotlight on the TESOL Teacher of the Year: Drew S. Fagan

interview by [Luan T. Nguyen](#)

Drew S. Fagan, EdD, is the 2023 TESOL Teacher of the Year. Fagan is an associate clinical professor at the University of Maryland, College Park, where he teaches applied linguistics and language education. He also coordinates the TESOL Program at the university and serves as associate director of the Multilingual Research Center. He holds an EdD in TESOL from Teachers College, Columbia University; an MA in linguistics from San Diego State University; and a BA in international relations and Spanish from American University.

He worked as a teacher, trainer, and educational researcher in Tokyo, Japan; Madrid, Spain; Baja California, Mexico; and Wuhan, China before becoming the first English Teaching Assistant Fulbright Fellow to the Slovak Republic, teaching English and U.S. culture to university students and researching language teaching method changes over the country's history. Read the [press release](#) from TESOL.

Following, Luan T. Nguyen, chair-elect of the TESOL Awards Professional Council, asks Dr. Fagan some questions to get to know him and his work a bit better.

Congratulations on this important award and outstanding achievement! What does being selected as the TESOL Teacher of the Year mean to you academically, professionally, and personally?

Thank you so much! I am humbled and honored to be considered among such highly esteemed colleagues in our vast global field.

Being TESOL Teacher of the Year highlights my life-long love of languages and learning about new cultures, as well as my embrace of continued professional development. Educators are learners: when we stop learning, we and the field become stagnant. When that happens, our students suffer. After more than 20 years in the field, I continue taking advantage of formal professional development opportunities. However, I also learn vis-à-vis engagements with my students in real-time. Who are they? Why are they here? What do they hope to gain from English as it relates to their worlds outside of the formal learning context? What have

been their struggles with the educational system? I have evolved into being the educator I am today as much through interactions with students as through any formal workshop.

This is also the culmination of more than two decades of working to ensure that anyone wanting to learn English for whatever reason can do so in a way that interweaves their lived experiences with their future goals. Our field has set out to ensure access to language learning is available for everyone. Central to this is being cognizant of working with different populations of students, families, colleagues, and communities, and understanding that everyone brings their own funds of knowledge to the table. Having this understanding at the outset can empower students to take the lead of their own English learning experiences.

**Tell us a bit about how and why you became a TESOL professional.**

As I mentioned earlier, I always had a passion for learning languages and about different cultures. In college, I double majored in Spanish and international relations, with a goal of going into the Foreign Service and working at embassies. While studying in Madrid, Spain, I interned at a local nonprofit translating education documents for their various projects and enjoyed learning about different education systems around the world. Upon returning to DC, I interned at the Embassy of Spain's Education Office, where I was tasked with preparing the office for various language teaching conference presentations. This increased my passion for languages by adding a teaching angle that I had not considered before.

Upon graduation, I started a job teaching English in Tokyo, Japan. Initially, I was not prepared for how intricate and nuanced the English language was to teach since I had not formally studied it outside of grammar classes in elementary school. I was soon enamored with English and delved into it further as both a teacher and a student. It was because of my own self-drive and self-study into the English teaching field that I was promoted to a teacher trainer within 6 months of starting (one of the youngest in that language school's history to date). It would be another year before I started my postbaccalaureate education in the field.

How have you supported your learners during the pandemic and in the new normality? What advice would you give to TESOL professionals on supporting their learners?

The key to supporting learners has been flexibility in terms of how students attend class, how I deliver class content, and how in-class activities are structured. While the original challenge in 2020 was getting used to being in a fully virtual mode, the challenge now is holding all courses and assignments in a hybrid format. In some cases, this is because students are still getting COVID-19; in other cases, students who are away for professional or personal matters still want to join class. While teaching in a hybrid mode allows for these students to participate like never before, it is difficult holding essentially two classes simultaneously but having it run smoothly as one class.

As a discourse analyst, I pay particular attention to not only how I interact verbally with in-person and online students but also my nonverbal conduct (eye gaze to computer, gestures toward computer, etc.). I ensure that my virtual students' interactions are as similar to the in-person students' as possible. I see this change toward hybridity in teaching not as a challenge anymore but as another way that we as educators can be more equitable in terms of addressing our learners' vast and ever-changing needs.
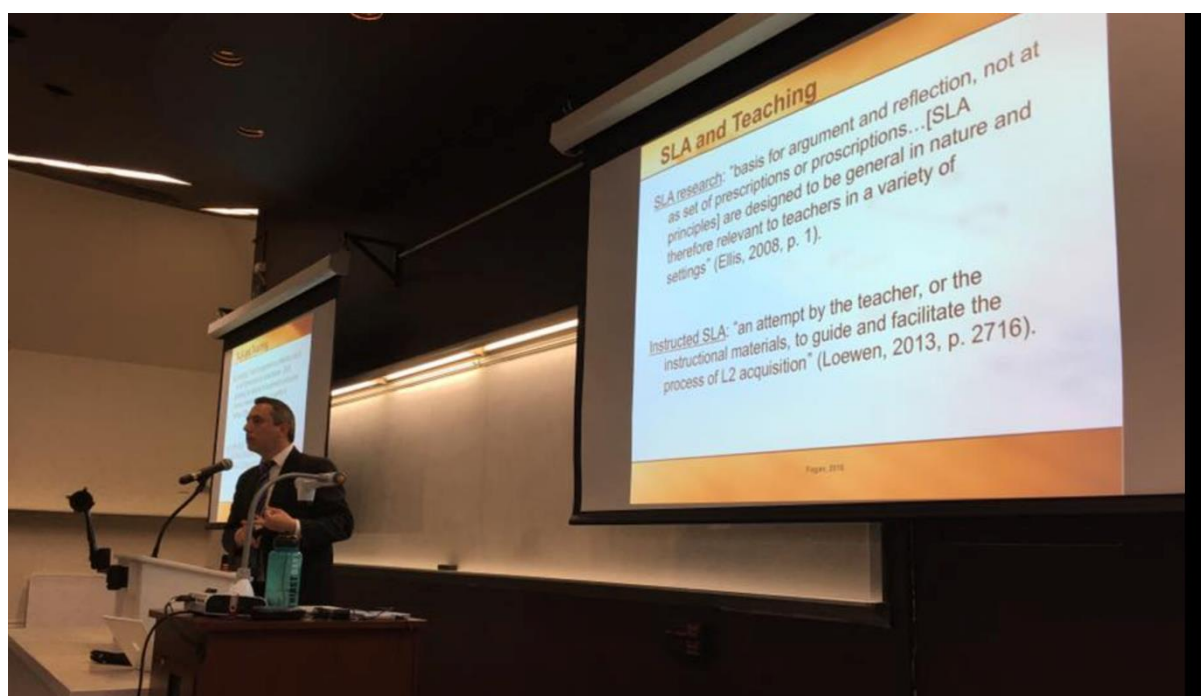
Tell us a bit about how you advocated for equity, diversity, and inclusion in education and your experiences working with and/or leading nonprofit organizations that support learners.

I am an educator who advocates for equity, diversity, and inclusion at all levels. In class, each student has a voice in the construction and flow of the interaction. I provide pathways that interweave their prior experiences with course materials, allowing them to reflect on how these new concepts can be connected to and build upon what they have already accomplished. I strategically and systematically manage classroom interactions to allow for the fluidity of student ideas, discussion, and debate to be prominent in the interaction, all the while ensuring that the day's objectives are achieved.

I also advocate at the region and state level for English learners and their educators. I was an invited member to the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) External

Stakeholders Committee for the Every Student Succeeds Act Maryland State Plan, which emphasized that all teachers and staff across the P–12 curriculum are responsible for English learners' "academic achievement and language proficiency." I was also an invited member of MSDE's Blueprint for Maryland's Future- Workgroup on English Learners in Public, where we reevaluated current state-wide English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) teaching practices, programs, and teacher certification requirements and made recommendations toward ensuring English learners had educational equity across the curriculum. I am now working to help draft and pass new legislation in the Maryland House of Delegates and Senate that would legalize state-wide bilingual education and bilingual teacher certification.

My work as the current Maryland TESOL Association president has focused on equitable access to educator preparation across the state, particularly in areas which historically did not have a large English learner population but which over the last decade have had large increases. I codeveloped and currently coordinate the Maryland TESOL Mentorship Program; its vision is to provide a collaborative state-wide space for TESOL professionals at all stages of their careers to help further their productivity as educators and advocates of English learners through working with others with whom they otherwise would not be able to connect.

What advice would you give to early career TESOL colleagues? More specifically, how can they continue to support learners and advocate for equity, diversity, and inclusion in education inside and outside the classroom?

Educators in TESOL are more than English language experts. We are counselors, de facto content teachers, cultural liaisons, interlingual administrative assistants, peer educators, and advocates, to name a few roles. A lot of this work in TESOL is not currently formally discussed and assessed in teacher education programs but rather viewed as on-the-job training (though some of my former TESOL students say it feels more like being thrown into the deep end of the pool and figuring it out on your own). To alleviate this, look for a mentor who can guide you toward your future TESOL potential. This person may be in your school, or you may connect with them through other professional outlets, such as language teacher associations.

Stay open to the possibilities of what you could do in our field. While teaching is the core of much of our work, there are many ways that you can be part of the TESOL profession and advocate for English learner equity outside of the classroom.

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Luan T. Nguyen is a current lecturer at Ho Chi Minh City Open University, Vietnam. He holds a PhD in Education at the University of Newcastle, Australia, where he has been working as a casual academic in the School of Education. His research interests include teacher education and development and educational technologies.