



TESOL Board Connect: Looking Back to Move Opportunities Forward

by [Ayanna Cooper](#)

This year marks my second term as a TESOL Board Member. I can remember the call as if it were yesterday that I was elected. Serving during a pandemic has been nothing like what I expected or could have prepared for. The old saying and song lyric “the show must go on,” could not ring more true for me. Despite setbacks, viruses, Zoom fatigue, shutdowns, and social distancing, TESOL the association is still standing, as it should be. What I can attest to is the work we have done—but there’s still so much left to do. In the spirit of the Akan Twi and Fante languages, the word [sankofa](#) means “looking back to your roots in order to move forward.” The Sankofa is a mythical bird who can fly forward while looking back, all while holding an egg that represents the future.

This article is an opportunity for me to look backwards while thinking about the future. The following less commonly known fun facts about me are ones that I’ve drawn from over the years as an educator, author, and civil rights activist in order to serve the organization and its members to the best of my ability.

- At age 5, I played Rosa Parks in school play. I remember it being an important role. It was one of my earliest memories of learning about racism, power, and privilege.
- I was a Girl Scout, for a short time, but also played one in two commercials. I still remember my lines.
- I conducted my first dual language program model audit in eighth grade. Informally, of course, but I remember thinking critically about what my Haitian French-speaking classmates were doing in French class. How come I didn’t know they were bilingual? How come they didn’t teach us French?
- I staged a small protest in high school against historic fugitive slave posters that were hung up during Black History Month.
- During my yearlong student teaching experience in college, I created and taught a civil rights curriculum for elementary students. I still have some artifacts.
- I performed as part of a belly dance troupe.
- I have always taught multilingual students but didn’t learn until years later that TESOL was the best specialization ever.

Those experiences and countless others have contributed to my commitment to serve and advocate for racial, linguistic, and authentic diversity, equity, and inclusion. Yes, even belly

dancing! You'd think that, by being in uncomfortable positions more than once, it would get easier. Not for me—discomfort has become something I expect and hope to keep pushing for. Not uncomfortable to the point of immobilization, but rather having the courage to keep improving during especially challenging times.



My hopes for the future include supporting authentic initiatives that create more inclusive opportunities for groups and individuals who have not been included regularly and who have been, inadvertently or not, overlooked. Clearly, we are doing the work! Research initiatives, publications, presentations, and the like need to be revamped equitably to reflect the raciolinguistic diversity of the field. Optics matter! Culturally responsive pedagogy affirms the need for students to see themselves reflected in what they are being taught.

The same holds true for professionals: We must see and have our contributions included, widely shared, and acknowledged. One of my recent projects includes supporting and working alongside school leaders who are creating learning opportunities for students to reclaim their native language. How exciting and thought-provoking is that? I also have the opportunity to support preservice educators (who may or may not become language teachers) who have an undeniable commitment to justice and liberation in their classrooms and beyond.

The future generation of TESOLers will inevitably be made up of those who, like myself, entered the profession through nontraditional routes. Let's be sure to look back and see who might be missing. Let's extend a hand and invite them to be part of one of the most diverse international language associations, TESOL International Association.

This year, 4 February marks what would have been the 109th birthday of Rosa Parks. Her words and actions still serve as more than a reminder: "You must never be fearful about what you are

doing when it is right.” TESOL the association must commit to and continue to do what is right for its members and for the profession as a whole. Looking back while preparing for a brighter future is imperative if we are going to live by our [mission and values](#) as “professionals advancing the quality of English language teaching through professional development, research, standards, and advocacy.”

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