

# Jonathon Fernow Interview

Interviewers: Andy Kilger and Sam Allen.

Andy: This is Andy Kilger and Sam Allen and we will be interviewing Jonathon Fernow for the local history project. It's May 13, 2004.

Sam: So, tell me a little bit about your background, and how you first came to work for the District.

Fernow: How far back do you want me to go?

Sam: As far back as you have time to.

Fernow: I was born at a young age and my parents were missionaries in Argentina and so I received all my schooling in Spanish through the seventh grade. And then I attended... I came back at the end of eighth grade-the middle of eighth grade and then I attended Gresham High School, I went to Warner Pacific College I got an Elementary Ed. Degree. I taught in the Cayman Islands at a school. I taught first grade for two years. And then I've taught at a variety of schools. I've taught ESL at the elementary, middle schools and high school levels, and college. And I've taught first grade for six years and I've taught a sixth grade class. And currently I've taught in the summer Migrant program since 1995. This'll be my nineteenth year of doing summer school. And so I've had that long history I taught at Glencoe High School in '85 and then I left and I've taught at J.B. Thomas for three years and I've taught at David Hill Elementary School for about six years. Right now I am an ESL TOSA (Teacher on Special Assignment) for the District for Title 3 ESL. I used to be the coordinator for the... Before unification I was the ESL-Migrant coordinator for the high school district and that's when I wrote this paper. And so I've worked off and on. I've been working in the District, since, like, '93, steadily except for two years. In '98 to 2000 I went back to the Cayman Islands and was a principal at a school there.

Background

Sam: So, why do you think you chose to take this on as a career?

Fernow: Teaching or ESL?

Andy: Both.

Fernow: Both? Well I always felt like your lifelong accomplishment should be important and teaching is so rewarding and makes such a change in lives of students that I love teaching and I love passing on that information and that knowledge and molding lives of students. I kind of fell into ESL by accident in that when I first came back I taught first grade and there were no openings in anything but ESL and since I'm fluent in Spanish I got into ESL and ever since then I've really enjoyed teaching English as a Second Language.

Why Teaching

Sam: So, can you just tell us a little about your experience teaching in the Migrant program and then a little bit about your experience teaching ESL, as well?

Fernow: In the Migrant program I first started out as a classroom teacher, I taught first grade for two years and then I was the Resource Teacher for about three or four years and I've been the Head Teacher, we call it Head Teacher, but it's really as Principal of the program. We serve about six hundred students in the elementary levels and our goal is to, since kids move around and have gaps in their education, our goal in the Migrant program, in summer school, is to bring them up to grade level during the summer so that when they start school again in the fall they're at grade level and they're not behind. I think I've gravitated towards ESL in that I can relate to students what it's like to come back. I couldn't understand the academic language even though my family spoke English at home. I really suffered. I went from a straight A Spanish student to a D and F student in English. And so I can relate well with the students coming in from other countries, even though English was my first language with my family, but I didn't have academic language and it took me about two or three years to catch up, even being a native speaker. And so I think I have a lot of empathy and knowledge and since most of our ESL students in our district are Hispanic I can relate well with them.

Migrant Program  
+  
ESL

Andy: Can you tell us what sort of methods are used for transitioning the ESL students into the mainstream classes?

Fernow: At what level, the high school or elementary?

Andy: Both. Just cover everything.

Fernow: Yeah, one of the things that, I speak from the elementary level, one of the things we do is we have to give the students enough English so that they can benefit from the education in the regular classroom. And so at elementary level we have English as a Second Language until they can understand the teacher in the classroom. And so we teach basic survival at the beginning, basic vocabulary and it moves on towards academic language and get a lot of support in that some of it may be cultural as well where the students may not have had prior background, and so we have to build that for them. And we also do Spanish Literacy, which is, research says that if you can do something in your first language you'll be able to do it four times faster in your second language. And if our goal is for our students to read in English and Spanish is their dominant language we find that if we invest two or three years in Spanish literacy and get them up to a third grade level that they can transfer those skills and learn to read in English four times faster. And as a present they can also read in Spanish but our whole goal is for them to be fluent in English.

Andy: And when you transition it's, like, they go to normal classes and they still have the ESL working with them, don't they?

Fernow: Depends what you mean by transitioning classes. In reading we have what we call a transition class and if they've been in Spanish Literacy we put them in a transition

Diff btwn conversational & academic language

how to teach

2



class and that transition class is very short, it's for about ten to thirteen weeks and at that point we say: 'you already know how to read in Spanish, these letters are the same in both languages, you don't have to learn those over again. These ones are different (and we point those out). And these ones we don't have in Spanish so you have to learn them (they're usually blends and diphthongs, you know, like the s-h sound. It isn't a Spanish sound so that's something that they have to learn.)' And as soon as they have that they are able to decode just about anything in English. And their comprehension will only be as good as their level of language. We give support. To be out of ESL they have to get a four on a Woodcock-Muñoz. And so once on the test it shows that they have academic language and the test out, compared to their peers, grade wise. And they're successful in the class, we exit them from ESL, but we monitor them for two years. So for two years, we kind of have a safety net underneath them supporting them. And then if they fail, if they're starting to have trouble we look at them and if it's a cultural or a language problem, we may put them back into ESL. If it's not, if it's just, you know, they're lazy and they don't do their homework then in the same way that we don't put all the lazy kids back in ESL, we don't bring them back into ESL. But we watch them for two years to make sure that they're doing well in the mainstream.

Transition  
for kids  
(mainstream)

Sam: So, what do you feel are the greatest obstacles for Hispanic students trying to further their education?

Fernow: You have a broad group there because if you asked me the same thing 'what problems do English speakers have?' You know you have a variety of skills. Obviously, if the language isn't their first language then they have to learn English so that they can be successful in the class. A part of the Hispanic population, their biggest problem isn't language, their biggest problem is socio-economical, in that they don't have a lot of experiences, and they don't have the resources. Where maybe your parents will take you to the zoo, and on family vacations, and take you to OMSI, these students, you know, have both parents working for minimum wage and so they don't have the enriched vocabulary or experiences that other students have and because of that when they're trying to learn things there's not as much 'schema?' to attach concepts to and they fall through the cracks. But it's more of a poverty issue than a language issue for those.

social econ.  
impact

Sam: So, how do you feel about the program's effectiveness overall?

(The ESL Program)?

Fernow: (The yes upper rim)? I think statewide the ESL programs in the state as far as exiting students we have the highest percentile of exiting students. Of our ESL population more of our students are exiting than the rest of the state. We're an example to many places since we have such a long history, such a big population, many districts look to us to see what we're doing and we're always trying to improve on it.

Results

Sam: Okay, well now we're going to transition into talking about the dropout report which you did in '95. So, I kind of want to know about the reasons behind it, what motivated you to do it, some of the methods that you used, and what you eventually saw.

Why he did the dropout report

Fernow: At the time that I got the job as coordinator for Hillsboro High School District for ESL and Migrant, I was also getting my Master's at Linfield College and at Linfield they said that 'you need to do a thesis, you need to do a project, and it can be on anything.' And so going into a new job, I went to my boss and I said 'what is the one thing that we want to know about the ESL program at the high school level and middle school level?' and at that point he said 'we're really concerned about the dropout rate and could you do some research into that and find out why it's happening and what are the reasons. We think we know what the reasons are but we would like that to be tested.' And so it was two for one, the District said that is something that concerns us and I needed to find a project for my Master's, to finish my thesis, so that's why I did it.

indicates District concern

Sam: Okay. Now, as for some of the methods that you used to collect your data.



Fernow: I did two things. One I spoke at every middle school and high school, to the ESL population, and I gave a little speech on how important education is and staying in school and then I would ask them pointblank what they thought were the reasons for students dropping out. Who did they know and why did they dropout? And so I went to every school and I handed out the survey and stood inside every school as the ESL programs filled it out. And then I looked at all the data that came back. And the second thing I did was I followed up on every dropout, every student that dropped out, I would contact and ask them why did they dropout and what was the reasoning and what things can we do to get you back into school, what kind of problem solving. And maybe share with them some options that maybe they hadn't thought of. And so when I did that and then I received information and I gathered through oral presentations, and during group interviews, and during the survey that I handed out and then follow up interviews with those that had dropped out already, I gathered that information.

Andy: In the report what were some of the, first of all, causes that you found for the dropout rate, and also some solutions to those problems?



Fernow: So, the District at the beginning they thought that many of these kids were considered dropouts because no other high school asked for their transcripts, but we think many of them go back to Mexico and enroll in school at Mexico and it's another country they never requests the transfers and so we think our dropout rates are inflated because many of them look like dropouts but in reality they're going to school in Mexico, they moved back. I followed up on it and there are only about two or three instances where I found that to be true, and in both cases they came back. They came back and were not going to school. Probably the two biggest reasons that I found is, one, for economic reasons, either the family needed them to work or they were starting families at a very early age, somebody got pregnant in their relationship, for working reasons they had to drop out. They either had to support a family or, you know, start a family. The second biggest reason that I ran across was that many students didn't come with previous education, maybe they came back and in Mexico they were only at a third of fourth grade level and so when they came they found high school work extremely hard and survived for a year or two and then dropped out.

how dropout rates are figured



Andy: And did you come up with ways that the school district can lower these rates?

Fernow: Yeah, one of my recommendations is that just the fact of following them and getting their story and finding out. When I followed those that had dropped out, I gave them options, I connected them with Miller Ed. or get their GED or go back and finish later on. Or if they said 'I have to stop right now', pointing out that many of them messed up in that many of them said 'I just need to work for three or four months to help out the family and then I'll go back to school.' But the two or three months that they chose were the last two months of the first semester and the first two months of the second semester and then they didn't have enough hours for either semester, whereas it would have been better for them just to work during the entire first semester and get credit for the second semester. I connected them with programs like the PASS program that was out of Woodburn and now it is within our district, where they can get credit for classes on a self-study basis. They would read the material and then take a test and they can do that. So just connecting them to resources at the time was one thing I did. Some things, like the family not having enough money to survive or starting a family, other than being able to give them money to do that, there wasn't much I could do about it.

Sam: So now, almost ten years after you conducted this study, do you still see the same problems?

Fernow: I think there's a big concern statewide and probably district wide in addressing this, I know that the dropout rate is one of the things that the District focuses on reducing and they're never happy with whatever the rate is. I think we developed programs where people who are pregnant can continue to go to school, you know, and have their baby at school. Miller Ed. has expanded the Twilight program and, you know, they can go at night, they can go in the middle of the day. Some schools like Glencoe, for example, every student that drops out they're called and they're followed up, and they have probably the lowest dropout rate in the state. They have received state accolades for really following up on students and when they contact them, they give the students direct options and try to talk them into finishing their school. The summer migrant program for the secondary they can make up credit over the summer and they can also take the PASS program so if they're only short one or two classes they can get credit for two classes over the summer school and it's real intense and then they're done. And so there's people that track that and really encourage them to take advantage of that.

*evidence of concern (district)*

*drop-outs*

*Ask: Do other schools do this?*

Sam: What do you feel are some problems that the District faces in providing for the needs of Hispanic Students?

Fernow: Well I think one thing that; one big problem is that our ESL population has doubled in the last seven years. Seven years ago we had fifteen hundred students and now we have close to three thousand, two thousand nine hundred and something, right close to three thousand. And so when it doubles, many classroom teachers, some are better than others at handling the needs that ESL students have. The District is trying to incorporate SIOP which is Sheltered Instruction Objective Protocol, which is just good teaching that says that for every lesson there is a direct goal, a direct language objective that they want

*population increase*



the students to know. And then they have scaffolding and support so that if they want the students to learn a particular thing, there's a way to move them from point A to point B. But with this growing population we need more and more teachers that are trained to know how to teach to students that maybe don't understand them just by using English and language and learn some techniques on helping them with that. And whereas before we had a small population and we used to send all the kids to ESL, you know, to be fixed and the regular teacher didn't have direct contact with them, now one in five students in elementary is ESL and so you have schools like W.L. Henry where 80% of the students are ESL, it doesn't pay to send 80% of your students off to ESL for half an hour, that classroom teacher now, who has the students all day, has to teach language and has to focus on ways to give instructions so that her whole class understands and I think that one carrot that we're holding out is the SIOP method. Not only are the ESL students going to benefit and understand, but the low students and the special ed. students, and all students will understand clearly what the purpose is and come out of the class with what they need to know. And so as our population grows the District realizes that they need to have the personnel to back that up and give that support.

Wow!

Sam: So, just give a few more thoughts on if you think the District has made any progress in implementing the ideas from your report.

Fernow: Yeah I think the District's come a long way. One big step that they did because of necessity was when they unified the seven districts to make Hillsboro one big school district. There are many schools within the district that had very limited understanding of ESL or almost no ESL whatsoever. And so when we unified one good thing that happened to... (silence). And the concept of how to teach ESL and so that kind of helped making the best resources available to everybody kind of improved the program of many schools. Right now, though, we continue to grow and we continue to have a large need to continue to look at these practices. Being research-based and knowing what current thoughts are on ESL, one of the biggest changes, I guess, is whereas before, Cummings, who stands out as being one of the great researchers for ESL, he used to say, for example if we're doing a dual language if we're teaching Spanish Literacy he said 'don't mix the two, don't mix English and Spanish, only do English or only do Spanish but don't mix them because that will confuse the student.' And now, you know, five or six years later he's saying 'you know what, I think I was wrong. I think there's no research that shows that having both at the same time will benefit.' And now we're looking at data across the nation they've done longitudinal studies showing that the most effective way of teaching students that speak another language is to have a dual language model where you teach in both languages, and those students come out the very highest overall, by middle school and high school. Whereas the least effective method is just a regular pull-out or immersion, where you just throw them in the classroom, an English classroom and hope that they pick up what they need, and in many schools unfortunately that is what most ESL programs in our District look like. And so as we look at research and as we look at ways of providing service, we are following research and for the first time in the history of the District, we have a dual language at W.L. Henry where they are teaching both in English and in Spanish, and it's a magnet school and we know that that's the most effective method and so now we're starting to use that and now they're going to add one

Evaluation

impact of unification



grade every year. When I was at David Hill Elementary School, when I first started, we had kids at the sixth grade level that couldn't read in English and couldn't read in Spanish and were maybe at a second or third grade level in sixth grade. And obviously when they went on to middle school they struggled and many of them dropped out. Since we've started Spanish Literacy I think our sixth grade classes now, we started about six seven years ago, we're seeing the first kids in middle school now that benefited from starting from kindergarten and I can say that at the elementary level all our kids aren't four or five grades below grade level now, they're very fluent in Spanish and they're maybe a year or two behind in English still but they're not like the five or six years behind that we used to see. And so it's very rare that they're struggling as bad as they used to. So we've made I think great strides in training our staff, we've made great strides in what we provide as far as ESL, we've made great strides in looking at brain research and the latest research on ways that students learn and the most effective practices in second language acquisition.

Sam: Do you think that the program has helped to lower the achievement gap?

Fernow: To lower the achievement gap? I think that district wide; I don't think we're there yet. I think what we find is many of our ESL students were invisible years ago before No Child Left Behind because their tests didn't count, but now everyone has to have a test and every school is evaluated and so suddenly these invisible kids are visible and they're not achieving and it kind of forces the District to kind of look and say 'wow. What can we do?', and makes it important for AYP that all their sub groups are succeeding in the schools. And this year I think they're looking at special ed., which we would expect, but the ESL and the Hispanic and the socio-economic group, the SES, those are the four groups that overall in the District are not meeting benchmark. And so then, as a district we look at that and say 'we really need to do a better job.' And schools that before, they knew they had an ESL program but they didn't exactly how well it was going. Now I'm very concerned as the first year and second year not meeting the AYP comes around and those are published in the papers and there are strong repercussions that can happen to you if they don't fix it. So now many schools are really concerned and that aspect, that's been good, those kids are getting the attention that they need, and that is really looking at what they can do to better meet those needs.

Sam: Alright, well here's our research question, take a look at that. Do you have anything else to add to what you've already said?

Fernow: I think that as the District has grown and has expanded I think that there are several things in place from the state that are forcing communities to look at the students and help them. One of the newest ones is the state before only required that we have an ESL program with the funds that they sent, now they said not only do you have to have a program that's competent but we want to see growth, we want to see after five years we expect your kids to be out of ESL. All the research does say it takes five to seven years and in most cases higher, and the state knows that but they said the feds are giving them five years. And so now all across Oregon they're going to be looking at that and seeing if students exit ESL after five years. What's the percentage of students exiting? And they

expect somewhere between 11% and 13% to exit every year. And if they don't then just like AYP has repercussions, the ESL programs from every district will be monitored and looked at. The second thing that they're going to look at for growth is for every week Woodcock-Muñoz assessment which gives them a score of one, two, three, and four. And at four they exit. They expect each one of those small corps: all the students that are ones, all the students that are twos, all the students that are threes, they expect 70% of each one of those groups to move up to the next level. And there's going to be a statewide ESL test that they are going to give at every level and starting next year, we won't look at the Woodcock-Muñoz scores anymore, we'll look at the statewide test, and they're going to expect growth from every school district. And if the school district doesn't have growth, then they put them on the plan, they'll have the right to address how they're going to improve that and there's a real strong bite coming down from the state. Whereas after three or four years if they don't see improvement, they will come into a school and remove any barriers that they see, and those barriers may be ESL staff, replace the ESL staff, maybe the principal of the school, they'll replace that, maybe teachers at large, and so it's kind of like 'wow, we better make sure that this doesn't happen.'