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Experience Speaks: On Coteaching and Collaboration

by Judith B. O'Loughlin

Introducing Coteaching

Most ESOL teachers have felt a sense of isolation as key educators of English language learners. Their work has kept them separated, both physically and academically, from the mainstream very much because of the purpose for and content of their instruction. The purpose for "pull out" in elementary school and separate English language periods of instruction in secondary school is to provide students with instruction that would facilitate the development of social language (Basic Interpersonal Communication, or BICS), the introduction of key vocabulary, and basic concepts of content learning (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Skills [CALP]; Cummins, 1979, 1981). Unfortunately, this also means that ESOL teachers have traditionally taught in a "bubble," separated not only from the mainstream content curriculum, but also from the grade-level and secondary content team meetings.

Collaboration, coteaching, team-teaching, and degrees in this terminology, as well as degrees of implementation, have been discussed in a variety of academic learning environments, from whole school to classroom implementation In the *MetLife Survey, Part I* (2009) 80% of school personnel interviewed stated that schools with higher levels of collaboration contribute significantly to increased student success. "Tools for Schools," published by *Learning Forward* supports the use of lesson study to create a "collaborative change environment." Teacher teams observe one another, analyze lessons, and collaboratively plan improved instruction. Algebra Team: Overview of Teaching Styles (Warburton & Jones, 2011) visually demonstrates collaborative lesson study in action.

Challenges

Moving from collegial collaboration to coteaching means facing a number of challenges both in and out of the classroom. For both elementary and secondary classrooms teachers, implementing a

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coteaching model means addressing perceived challenges of:

- a lack of time to differentiate instruction for ELLs,
- variability of student academic levels and specific instructional needs,
- tools and materials needed to tailor instruction for a variety of levels, and
- inadequate preparation to communicate with ELL parents and students.

Preparing for Success

Implementing a collaborative coteaching model whether in one "pilot" classroom, throughout a school, or adopted as a model for a school district requires a comprehensive focus that includes a number of key factors. Within the district-wide context, administrative support and ongoing leadership is a must. Among the key factors for implementing an effective coteaching program, these, in particular, are the most essential:

- establishing effective and open lines of communication for team-teaching partners with all instructional and support staff members and administrators;
- providing quality training before embarking on a coteaching model;
- creating opportunities for sustained professional development for all teachers working with ELLs;
- insuring that the choice to coteach is voluntary and not mandated;
- basing the choice of coteaching team on factors such as an ability to be flexible, a positive attitude toward making changes in roles and responsibilities, experience differentiating for different learning abilities, and an openness to share "turf";
- providing for parity in roles and responsibilities for the team; and
- creating a school schedule with a "secure" daily planning period for coteaching partners.

Preparing for a coteaching model should ideally begin a year before actual implementation.

Choosing the Right Participants

Team-taught classrooms are classrooms in which two teachers collaboratively share the instruction of all students. Coteaching allows for ELLs to develop social and academic English, learn grade-level content, and progress toward meeting academic standards. With two specialists, differentiated sheltered academic learning is possible. Coteachers develop standards-based instructional units and implement differentiated lessons and assessments. The goal is for both teachers to be equally able to teach all lesson components. Each teacher's ability to present the lessons, implemented through a variety of sheltered techniques, demonstrates that both teachers value all students' learning needs.

One of the most difficult decisions is to determine which English language learners to include in a cotaught class. Choosing which ELLs would benefit from this instructional setting, teachers and administrators should take into account the students' language ability levels; performances on language tests; number of years in an ESL/ELD program; and such student personal characteristics as resilience, tolerance for errors, and ability to work in different grouping configurations. Sometimes scheduling drives the class composition, thus choosing the students to be included in the cotaught setting because it "fits" the grade-level or specific student's schedule. This is neither educationally sound nor an appropriate choice for any student; appropriate placement decisions should be considered for both native and nonnative English speakers.

Implementing Successful Collaboration

The Physical Setting

The physical set up and appearance of the team-taught classroom should allow for both teachers to have comparable amounts of space. Each teacher should have a workspace and location for storage of learning materials and important documents. Each teacher's name should appear on all class documents (including assignments, assessments, and parental correspondence) as well as be posted in prominent places in the classroom. The classroom should indicate to students, similarly to shared instruction, that the teachers are equal partners and that the classroom is their community.

Instruction

Getting started with a coteaching model requires that coteachers start slowly, determining how to share turf, observing each other's delivery of content and classroom management. Generally, one teacher should do the teaching while the other teacher observes the instruction and students' task-performance, class participation, and behavior. Often, in conjunction with observing, the observing teacher may also "graze," or walk around the classroom, observing students' task performance and offering assistance where and when needed.

In the beginning, developing a balance between academic instruction/delivery and creating a collegial/collaborative relationship is important; both components are equally important and interdependent. Student academic achievement suffers when coteachers, for example, focus more on developing a collegial relationship. Consequently, a team that is "all business," or focused solely on academics, loses the opportunity to build a learning community.

Moving from the "getting started phase" into the full coteaching instructional model involves a variety of grouping configurations for instruction such as, but not limited to, the following models:

- *Tag-team Teaching*: Each teacher provides an aspect of the lesson with a group of students; they switch groups and present the information again with the new group.
- *Teach and Reteach*: One teacher provides the main lesson to all

students; students who require additional instruction in the main lesson components work with one teacher who "reteaches" key ideas, and the other teacher works on additional advanced aspects of the lesson.

- *Teach and Elaborate*: Teachers work together with the whole group. One teaches the key ideas of the lesson and the other teacher "elaborates"—models an activity, provides examples, visuals, or hands-on practice.
- *Teach and Write/Chart*: One teacher instructs, while the other provides visuals for the instruction. Both teachers take turns performing each role.
- *Parallel Teaching*: Each teacher introduces the same content, but with differentiated strategies for the particular groups' needs.
- *Station Teaching*: Learning stations are set up around the classroom. Small groups of students are assigned to each station and rotate to all stations. Both teachers facilitate as well as observe task completion at each station.

Formative and Summative Assessments

The key factors involved in facilitating comprehension and conducting formative classroom assessments based on coteaching include:

- Promoting participation through a variety of modalities and acknowledgement of what the student is able to do at each proficiency level—verbal and nonverbal—which could include drawing, sorting, manipulating objects, movement in the classroom, thumbs up/thumbs down, etc.
- Structuring questions to student's current proficiency level, such as asking "right there" questions at a lower proficiency level and "think and search" questions at a more advanced proficiency level.
- Breaking down tasks into sequential parts and pacing the introduction of each new task/part of the content, according to the student's indication of comprehension.
- Providing questions in advance of class discussion to provide students with "think and/or rehearsal time."

For summative classroom assessments, coteachers should collaboratively test materials, taking into consideration the type of and expectations for student performance, with or without supports or modifications. Supports could include, but would not be limited to, inclusion of word banks, bilingual dictionaries, and structured questions with embedded answers. Modifications could include fewer questions, simplified directions and question prompts, and minitesting sessions (rather than one large/long test).

Administrators and coteachers will need to work together develop policy and guidelines for grading English language learners in cotaught classrooms. There are many possibilities to consider, such as double grading (e.g. effort and response/performance) of class projects and written papers, use of portfolio assessments, which could include student assignment artifacts, performance and observation checklists,

and rubric criteria for different proficiency levels.

Further Considerations

Creating the optimal coteaching classroom includes a number of key factors, including the personal choice to team teach, common planning time, and equity and interdependence of partners. Open lines of communication, of course, are key to successful collaborations. Coteachers should feel they can discuss anything with one another, from shared working conditions to implementing instruction and developing assessments. Coteachers must be flexible and accept the things that do not turn out as planned. They must commit to creating the optimal learning environment for all students through ongoing learning, exceptional lessons, and appropriate assessments for all learners.

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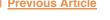
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