

Collaborative Teaching: Addressing ESL Teacher Concerns

<http://blog.tesol.org/collaborative-teaching-addressing-esl-teacher-concerns/#>

Twelve years ago, I was interested in how collaborative teaching might work for our ESL program. I had read about ESL teachers who were “pushing into” the general education classroom to collaborate with classroom teachers and wanted to see for myself. After meeting with administrators and some classroom teachers, I had the advantage of being able to choose the teacher, the grade level, and the subject area for this experiment. I decided to push into Ms. Parson’s 3rd grade social studies class, where I had a group of intermediate English learners (ELs).

Ms. Parson was enthusiastic about the collaboration because she had worked with collaborating teachers from the special education program in our school and had found it to be beneficial to her special ed students. I talked to Ms. Parson about doing more than working with my small group of ELs on the fringes of the classroom. I wanted to coteach social studies to the whole class so that I could demonstrate techniques and scaffolds that work well with ELs. I thought at the time (and still do) that good strategies for teaching ELs were good for all students. Ms. Parson agreed to share instruction and planning with me. This became a wonderful collaboration that benefited all of the students in her class.

Ideal ESL and Classroom Teacher Collaborations

Ideally, an ESL/classroom teacher collaboration involves two credentialed professionals who are partners in the instruction of the lesson. They share the responsibility for planning lessons so as to provide differentiated instruction in a manner that is not always possible for one teacher. Lesson planning time is built into their schedules. Collaborative teachers are using the same physical space, and ELs are not pulled out of the classroom for one of the teachers to instruct. Although small heterogeneous groups may be pulled aside for reinforcement, ELs are not isolated from mainstream students.

In elementary schools, ESL teachers generally come into classrooms for one instructional period each day. I spent 2 hours each week coteaching in Ms. P’s 4th grade social studies class. Together, we were able to lower the teacher-to-student ratio and combine our talents to provide comprehensive instruction for all of the students in her room.

The Flip Side of Collaborative Teaching

Over the past 10 years, collaborative teaching has become more popular as school districts search for ways to best serve the needs of their ELs. Collaboration with general education teachers is not new to most ESL teachers. We have always collaborated with them to support the ELs in their classrooms. Most elementary ESL teachers have also been teaching content-based ESL for the past 10 years. We are not strangers to the idea of teaching English through content. If you ask ESL teachers who have tried coteaching, you will hear both negative and positive responses.

Compare the coteaching experience of Paulo, a “push in” ESL teacher in a large New Jersey elementary school, to the experience that I had with Ms. Parson. Paulo teams with five different teachers each school day. He also teaches two classes of beginners in a pullout setting. Because of his workload, he is unable to plan lessons with his coteachers. When he

goes into some classrooms, the teacher turns the students over to Paulo and uses the time as a prep period. In others, he is helping a few ESL students at the back of the room while the classroom teacher works with the rest of the students. Usually, he serves as a classroom aide, roving around the room to help students who do not understand the instruction. He is not necessarily scheduled into a classroom when the students need him most. This is collaborative teaching at its worse.

Administrators need to realize that ESL professionals are not classroom aides. They should not be relegated to the back of the room with ELs. What is the point of “push-in” ESL if students are kept on the fringes of classroom instruction? Both teachers have a contribution to make. The classroom teacher contributes knowledge of the curriculum while the ESL teacher brings knowledge about teaching strategies for ELs, second language acquisition, and diverse cultures.

Concerns About Coteaching—And How to Address Them

Despite the benefits for ELs when teachers collaborate, ESL teachers that I have talked to over the past few years cite many concerns. They do not want to lose ownership of their students or be relegated to the status of an aide. They feel that collaboration is a lot of additional work—especially if they are coteaching with many different teachers. They are also concerned about ESL beginners, who they feel do not really benefit from learning in the large group setting. One teacher that I spoke to insisted adamantly that coteaching does not work.

It is my impression that in order to feel gratified with their collaborative experiences, ESL teachers need to:

- have input into their schedule.
- see beginning ELs in a pull-out setting.
- coteach specific subjects and be scheduled into the classroom each time the subject is taught.
- have time to plan with the coteacher.
- enjoy equal status with the coteacher.
- receive professional development with the coteacher.

In Conclusion

I think the benefits of collaboration outweigh the drawbacks. It is obvious to me that a combination of pull-out and collaborative instruction may help ease the transition of ESL teachers as they learn to support the content area instruction of their ELs. School districts need to hire more ESL teachers and consider the needs of collaboration when they place ELs in classes. Professional development is key.

When teachers share the responsibility of instruction, lessons are more creative because two people are planning them. The Common Core Standards introduce the idea that every teacher should be a language teacher. ESL teachers need to step up and help general education teachers meet that goal.

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