

Co-Teaching: A Look-Back, a Look-Ahead, and the Look-Fors

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This article discusses approaches for assessing co-teaching and introduces an observation and coaching tool named I-TELL (Integrated Teaching for ELLs Observation Tool), which allows for direct collection of evidence on each of the collaborative indicators described.

Tags: Elementary, Middle School, Secondary

A lot of questions continue to surround co-teaching and teacher collaboration for the sake of English language learners (ELLs). Most questions relate to daily instructional practices (what to do and how to do it), some to research (what type of evidence supports co-teaching for ELLs), and others to student outcomes (how co-teaching impacts student learning). At a recent professional development session, we asked participants to jot down their burning questions on index cards so we could make sure we addressed all their concerns by the end of the day. The following list of questions is a representative selection of what practitioners wanted to know:

- How do you find the time to collaborate?
- What is the most effective way to co-teach?
- What if my co-teacher does not want to collaborate?
- I don't want to be just an aide in the classroom, but how can I support teachers if I don't feel comfortable with the high school math and science content?
- Who is responsible for grading?
- How can we share the classroom space when I feel I am entering another teacher's territory?

We have been collecting questions like these since the onset of our own collaboration on the topic of co-teaching over a decade ago. These questions have guided us in our quest to learn more about ESL co-teaching practices in K-12 classrooms. They have also informed our research agendas and have kept us focused on issues relevant to the most current trends in the TESOL profession. Our first book, *Collaboration and Co-teaching: Strategies for English Learners* (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010), is organized around key questions that teachers have asked about collaborative approaches to services for ELLs, and we have made every effort to answer those questions comprehensively. However, each time we work with a new group of educators, we seem to encounter a new question they raise, a new concern they voice, or a new challenge they face.

The one question that caught our attention—and prompted the writing of this article—was the following: *What should administrators look for when they observe a co-taught lesson?* In light of high-stakes teacher evaluation systems in place across the nation's schools (Danielson, 2013), it is an even more urgent question to address today. We concur that teachers and administrators must be in agreement about—or better yet, collaboratively

develop, pilot, refine, or in one word, co-own—the hallmarks of meaningful collaborative practices, and more specifically, the elements of effective co-taught lessons.

Evidence is accumulating about why school leaders need a clear understanding of collaborative practices. For example, in an in-depth case study of co-teaching pairs, McClure and Cahnmann-Taylor (2010) noted that mandated co-teaching program without administrators' understanding of and support for teacher collaboration ignored "real differences in practice and epistemology, often leaving co-teachers to make their way through these challenges on their own" (p. 111). They also concluded that co-teachers who participated in their study "all resisted the notion that co-teaching is a simple and neutral endeavor and confirmed the need for sustained dialogue and support as they worked to collaboratively develop their co-teaching" (p. 122).

Administrative support for a collaborative approach to ESL services (and other inclusive services), or the lack thereof, has started to be addressed in the literature (Capper & Frattura, 2009; Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008; Causton & Theoharis, 2014; Dove & Honigsfeld, 2014; Harvey & Teemant, 2012; Honigsfeld & Dove, 2012b; Piercey, 2010; Scanlan, Frattura, Schneider, & Capper, 2012; Scanlan & Lopez, 2012; Theoharis, 2007; 2009; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011); we also noticed an emerging need to focus our attention on working with school leaders both in our research and publications (Dove, Honigsfeld, & Cohan, 2014; Honigsfeld & Dove, 2015) as well as in our daily work in the K-12 schools. Pawan and Ortloff (2011) noted that additional research is needed to determine "how leaders and administrators articulate collaboration policies and participate in their implementation" and "whether collaboration is more effective when leaders externally provide support for the collaboration (e.g. scheduling common preparation times) or when they become part of the collaborative process alongside teachers and provide collegial leadership" (p. 471). Based on our own research (Honigsfeld & Dove, in progress) and field work, we find that there is a growing interest in and need for tools to reflect on and assess co-teaching, yet there continues to be little guidance or limited resources available on what meaningful co-teaching lessons look like or how to make evidence-based observations about the effectiveness of co-taught lessons.

A Look-Back at Assessing Co-Teaching

A more inclusive approach to serve English learners has been around for decades. Mabbott and Strohl (1992) were among the first to include collaborative services (referred to as *pull-in* or *push-in*) in a comprehensive overview of program models available to serve ELLs. They claimed, "the strongest argument for the Pull-in [Push-in] model is that, when *properly implemented* [emphasis added], it does most to integrate LEP students into the mainstream while still giving them the support they need" (p. 29). While the collaborative approach to ESL services was celebrated in this early publication and many more to follow, what is meant by *proper implementation* is often determined differently by different educators in their local contexts. (see for example, Duke & Mabbott, 2000; Honigsfeld & Dove, 2012a; Fall 2012 Special Theme Issue of the *TESOL Journal* dedicated to collaboration and co-teaching).

Dahlman and Hoffman (2012) even suggested the need to recognize the uniqueness of each

collaborative context and allow for an organic change process to take place. They cautioned, “for it to yield lasting effects, co-teaching must be integrated into a school’s philosophy and become part of the organization’s culture and practice through genuine connections to existing practices” (p. 42). As such, co-teaching is expected to evolve uniquely in various schools and districts and also look distinctly across individual contexts. Yet, we search for some sort of common understanding of what co-teaching for the sake of ELLs is expected to be (Glenda Harrell, July 27th, 2014, personal communication).

Among others, Davison (2006) extensively researched collaboration among ESL and content-area teachers with a special emphasis on the nature and challenges of developing collaborative and co-teaching relationships. In her developmental model of co-teaching, she noted five levels of commitment to the practice. She introduced the term *partnership teaching* and emphasized some critical, observable characteristics of such teaching:

Partnership Teaching is not just another term for “co-operative teaching.” Co-operative teaching is where a language support teacher and class or subject teacher plan together a curriculum and teaching strategies which will take into account the learning needs of all pupils, trying to adjust the learning situation to fit the pupils. Partnership Teaching is more than that. It builds on the concept of co-operative teaching by linking the work of two teachers, or indeed a whole department/year team or other partners, with plans for curriculum development and staff development across the school. (pp. 454–455)

There is an emerging line of research devoted to documenting the impact of teacher collaboration and co-teaching on student learning. Pardini (2006) described the results of an ongoing, multi-year initiative in the St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS) in Minnesota, where traditional ESL programs have been completely replaced by a collaborative program model. ESL and general-education teachers on all grade levels team teach. Pardini (2006) recognized the role the *School Collaboration Assessment Rubric*, developed by the ELL department in consultation with Jennifer York-Barr played in the enhancing the collaborative work of the SPPS ELL Department: “The rubric measures how well schools are doing in areas such as planning time, professional development, student placement, team teaching, assessment, and reflection. Its purpose: to assess individual school collaboration efforts, set goals for continued improvement, and guide professional development plans” (p. 25).

In 2007, York-Barr, Ghore, and Sommerness investigated the process and outcomes of a three-year implementation of a collaborative inclusive ELL program model. They not only noted that teachers shared “a strong and nearly unanimous sense that students were highly advantaged by the inclusive and collaborative instructional models—academically, socially, and in terms of classroom participation” (p. 321), but also reported positive achievement gains due to the collaborative practices.

Causton-Theoharis and Theoharis (2008) also noted significantly increased reading achievement scores over a three-year period in a Madison, Wisconsin school that moved to a full inclusion model eliminating all pull-out services both for special education students and

ELLs. Through an extensive restructuring of the school that used already existing human resources and required no extra cost, collaboration and co-teaching practices became the dominant service delivery format yielding impressive achievement results. Schoolwide variables for creating a successful inclusive program were detailed in the study, but what remained largely undefined. Based on a thorough review of the literature, Hendrickson (2011) summarized the essential features of best co-teaching practices as follows: administrative support, professional development, parity, voluntary partnerships, common planning time, establishment of common expectations, shared resources, shared accountability for student outcomes, developmental nature of the co-teaching relationship, and implementing different models of co-teaching.

Santana, Scully, and Dixon (2012) noted that co-teaching teams need feedback and support regarding their co-teaching practices. Expanding upon on Santana's (2008) earlier work on what constitutes a successful partnership in the context of ESL co-teaching in New York City public schools, Santana et al. (2012) identified several non-negotiables for administrators as well as developed and piloted a tool called CO-TOP (CO-Teaching Observation Protocol). The ten dimensions of the tool were designed to collect evidence on:

- (a) common planning and collaboration,
- (b) mutual, collegial, and professional respect,
- (c) in-depth familiarity with students' content and language needs, (
- (d) clear, unambiguous language and content objectives,
- (e) appropriate scaffolds.
- (f) advocacy for ELLs,
- (g) authentic student participation and engagement,
- (h) differentiation for assessing learning,
- (i) learning as demonstrated by student work,
- (j) planned extension and reinforcement activities to practice material presented during lesson.

Most recently, Van den Akker (2013) adapted a co-teaching rating scale by Gately and Gately (2001) to help identify ESL and mainstream teachers' strengths and weaknesses in the co-taught classroom. Key dimensions of her tool include items that may be clustered around (a) verbal and nonverbal communication skills, (b) understanding of the curriculum and students' instructional needs, (c) co-planning including language modifications, (d) methods and materials used in the lesson, (e) student-centered lesson delivery showing flexibility and a variety of classroom management, and (f) reflection on the practice.

A Look Ahead

Though initially an isolated practice driven by local interests to make a more inclusive program for ELLs, it is now a more readily available program option for ELLs across the nation and internationally (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2012a). The role of the ESL teacher has been recently redefined by multiple professional organizations, researchers, and practitioners. ESL teachers "should be recognized as experts, consultants, and trainers well versed in teaching rigorous academic content to ELLs" (Staehr Fenner, 2013, p. 9). We also noted that ESL teachers' "expertise is critical in analyzing the academic language demands of the content curriculum,

developing and modeling lessons that successfully address academic language and content simultaneously, scaffolding oral language and literacy development, and coaching general education teachers in the most effective, standards-based instruction for ELLs. Instead of feeling marginalized and isolated—as is often the case—ESL/ELD teachers need to be nurtured into leadership roles” (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2015, pp. 54-55).

On September 16th, 2014, New York State Board of Regents have unanimously voted to change the long-standing state policy regarding English Learners also known as the Commissioner Regulation: Part 154. The comprehensive changes impact all aspects of education for ELLs including the following critical issues:

- ELL identification process and use of qualified personnel
- Parent notification, information, and meetings
- Retention of identification documents and review of records
- Student placement and due process
- New bilingual and ELL program requirements and provision of programs
- Development of a Language Proficiency Team (LPT)
- Grade span and program continuity
- Initial entry, reentry and exit criteria
- Identification and exit procedures for ELL students with disabilities
- Support and transitional services
- Professional development
- District planning and reporting

One of many changes that is going to further shape the curriculum and instructional delivery ELLs receive is in reference to the new bilingual and ELL program requirements. Pulling away from pull-outs and combining stand alone programs with collaborative, integrated ones is a long overdue, critical shift in the education of ELLs. New York State is now following many other states that incorporate collaborative or integrated services into the available program delivery options, positioning ESL teachers no longer to be seen as specialists working in isolation, but rather as equal partners and highly qualified teachers working alongside their colleagues.

Moving the ESL services into the mainstream classroom—whether in the elementary or secondary setting—is not without its challenges. One of them is developing a shared understanding of what are observable, measurable aspects of co-teaching that all educators—teachers as well as school building and district administrators, instructional coaches, mentors—can work with and turn into actionable recommendations as well as opportunities for improvement.

Co-Teaching Look-Fors

We designed an observation and coaching tool named I-TELL (Integrated Teaching for ELLs Observation Tool) to aid administrators, instructional leaders, coaches, and peer visitors in identifying features of successful co-teaching practices for the sake of ELLs. The tool in Figure 1 allows for direct collection of evidence on each of the collaborative indicators.

Figure 1
I-TELL (Integrated Teaching for ELLs Observation Tool)

	No Evidence	Emerging Evidence	Adequate Evidence	Exceptional Evidence	Documentation/Comments
Co-teachers collaboratively plan and develop instructional materials for the lesson					
Equity between the co-teachers is established from the onset of the lesson and maintained throughout the lesson					
Language and content objectives are addressed by both teachers					
Teaching roles and responsibilities are shared					
Two or more co-teaching models are used: Students in one group, teachers work together: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One leads, one teaches on purpose • Two teach same content • One teaches, one assesses Students in two groups, teachers work separately: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two teach same content • One preteaches, one teaches alternative content • One reteaches, one teaches alternative content • Students in multiple groups • Teachers monitor, facilitate and teach 					
Students are grouped purposefully in meaningful ways throughout the lesson					
Co-teachers interact with students and each other in ways that enhance student learning					
Co-teachers are familiar with and respond to the learning needs of all the students					
Co-teachers implement appropriate differentiated strategies for teaching academic language and content					
Co-teachers demonstrate respect and collegiality for each other throughout the lesson					
Co-teachers apply appropriate visual, graphic, linguistic and interpersonal scaffolds					
Co-teachers establish high levels of engagement and ensure all four language skills to be integrated: listening, speaking, reading and writing					

Co-teachers collaboratively conduct formative and summative assessments					
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Source: Honigsfeld, A., & Dove, M. G. (2015). *Collaboration and coteaching for English learners: A leader's guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. (p. 76-77).

As we invite our readers to work with the I-TELL Observation tool, we are also suggesting that it become a living document. One that is organic rather than static, one that gets changed, adapted, revised as needed, and one that is challenged and expanded to be more responsive to the local needs. Co-teaching for ELLs, in spite of its history, is a fairly new practice, and many school communities across the country are just beginning to take on this approach to service the learning needs of ELLs. For this reason, questions about co-teaching will continue to arise particularly as new initiatives or policies from district, state, or federal mandates are carried forward.

Developing a schoolwide understanding and process for ongoing collaborative practices for the sake of ELLs is truly key. Analyzing the challenges as they arise and finding solutions to these challenges collaboratively with those who engage in the practice will only serve to strengthen a co-taught instructional model. Moreover, it is important to note that common perceptions, routine practices, and broad-based as well as specific strategies for using two teachers in the same class will change and develop over time.

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