CHAPTER 11

COLLABORATION TO TEACH
ELEMENTARY ENGLISH
LANGUAGE LEARNERS

ESOL and Mainstream Teachers Confronting
Challenges Through Shared Tools and Vision

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The ubiquitous and pressing need to enhance instruction provided to
English language learners (ELLs) in the United States necessitates col-
 Collaboration between teachers of English to the speakers of other languages
 (ESOL), and mainstream (or content-area) teachers, to share their expertise.
 This collaboration can be manifested in a number of ways such as
coteaching, parallel teaching, and coplanning. In line with this argument,
scholars have recognized ESOL-mainstream teacher collaboration as a
powerful support system (Arkoudis, 2006; Creese, 2002, 2006; Davison,
2006; Dove & Honigsfeld, 2010; Gardner, 2006; Rushton, 2008), and
have acknowledged the need for a better understanding of the nature and
the process of collaboration between teachers. The study described in this
chapter builds upon earlier studies that have documented challenges in
teacher collaboration (Arkoudis, 2006; Creese, 2006; Davison, 2006;
Gardner, 2006). It sheds light on how teachers can overcome challenges and find ways to bridge pedagogical gaps by using and creating communicative tools and artifacts for teaching and learning.

CONTEXT

In this chapter we synthesize some of the lessons learned from a research project (Martín-Beltrán & Peercy, 2010; Peercy & Martín-Beltrán, 2009) which grew out of a university–school district partnership for professional development designed to enhance pedagogical practices for ELLs. This professional development series took place over 5 months for 26 teachers across 11 elementary schools. The primary focus was to unpack the benefits and challenges that exist in ESOL-mainstream teacher collaboration.

During the monthly professional development sessions, we observed teacher discussions related to opportunities and obstacles for teacher collaboration, and we identified three focal pairs who were willing to participate in interviews and observations of their coplanning, teaching, and debriefing of their lessons. The first pair (Kathleen and Gina) was working collaboratively at their own initiative. The second pair (Dorothy and Hannah) was collaborating together because their school district had asked them participate in a plug-in pilot project, in which ESOL and mainstream teachers taught ELLs together in the same classroom. Plug-in is an instructional model in which “the ESOL teacher instructs the student in the general education classroom, which can include instructing small groups during center time, coteaching, or modeling/guiding instruction with the classroom teacher” (Addison-Scott, 2010, p. 4).

The third pair (Samantha and Tanya) represented a pull-out ESOL model. Pull-out is an instructional model in which “the ESOL teacher instructs the student outside of the general education classroom in an ESOL classroom or separate area using the ESOL curriculum as a resource” (Addison-Scott, 2010, p. 4). These three diverse pairs were brought together to collaborate as part of the professional development carried out by the authors of this chapter, along with an ESOL instructional specialist from the school district in which the training occurred.

MEETING CHALLENGES THROUGH COLLABORATIVE TOOLS

From our observations of coteaching, coplanning, and teacher debriefing, we identified several key factors that teachers perceived as challenges or successes, situated in their teaching context. In order to conceptualize relationships as successful collaboration, we referred to Davison’s (2006)
evaluative framework, which describes more and less successful levels of collaboration between ESOL specialists and classroom teachers. Davison articulates five levels, ranging from Level 1, which is pseudo-compliance or passive resistance on the part of teachers regarding collaboration, to Level 5, in which teachers coconstruct their instructional practices, have a positive attitude about collaboration, and prefer collaborative teaching to working alone. We used Davison’s (2006) five levels and compared them with the teachers’ own conceptualizations of their collaborative effectiveness. When asked to describe their coteaching experiences, teachers often mentioned collaboration as an ongoing process of working through challenges together.

Because challenges in teacher collaboration are inevitable, it is important to identify tools that teachers can and do use to work through problems, and to develop, support, and sustain collaborative teaching practices. We found that teachers often mentioned the difficulties of collaborative teaching first, but the more interesting finding was how these challenges could become opportunities for teachers to learn together, especially when teachers used tools to enhance their collaboration.

The teachers in our study who worked through difficulties to teach collaboratively did so by creating and using tools that enhanced their collaborative efforts. As a result, they developed stronger collaborative relationships. This finding is visually represented in Figure 11.1, which illustrates the (a) challenges to teacher collaboration the teachers were experiencing and (b) the tools that they used to successfully meet those challenges. In Figure 11.1, we summarize the major challenges and tools that teachers identified as important in their collaborative teaching practices. We argue that by working through the problems and utilizing these tools for collaboration, teachers were developing and envisioning more successful collaboration together.

![Figure 11.1](image)

Figure 11.1. Working through challenges using tools for collaboration.
Challenge 1: Lack of Time

When asked about teacher collaboration, both ESOL and mainstream teachers most often mentioned the lack of time (see left box in Figure 11.1) during their workday to communicate with other teachers. This lack of time to communicate resulted in many other challenges such as misunderstanding about teaching and learning goals. Teachers worked to address the time issue by creating new tools or using institutional tools that already existed at their school or district more creatively to better serve their purposes for coteaching. For example, several teachers who participated in the professional development series mentioned calendars created by teachers or by their district that outlined lesson foci for each day. These teacher-created calendars were shared monthly via email or biweekly across grade level teams. The teachers used the calendars to compare common topics of study, and teachers explained that this was an efficient way to keep track of how many different teachers were using the district curriculum. One teacher explained that the calendar was a tool to centralize planning among the mainstream teachers, ESOL teachers, and other school specialists (totaling 10 professionals all working with the same grade level).

Several teachers mentioned that they used email regularly to check in with their teaching partners and to document their coplanning. Dorothy, an ESOL teacher, explained that while she and her mainstream teaching partner (Hannah) coplanned, she took notes, which were easily shared with other teachers—such as the special educator, reading specialist, and fellow grade level teachers—to raise awareness of ESOL issues and coteaching practices across the school.

In the following quote, Dorothy described a systematic checklist that she was creating to meet the challenge of communication between ESOL and mainstream teachers at her school.

I am trying to come up with a checklist that needs to be constructed weekly ... because there are some teachers that we do not catch otherwise ... to have more understanding on the part of the mainstream teachers to understand what things we do. A lot of people say, "they pull the kids out, they come back 45 minutes later with a sticker and we have no idea what is happening in between." ... This is also to alter and improve the communication within the ESOL team because we do not have a lot of chance to discuss the data and help each other ... I'm hoping that it will improve everybody's communication.

An adaptation of Dorothy's checklist is summarized in Table 11.1.

We found the school district's curriculum framework (henceforth CF) was an important institutional tool that facilitated communication
Table 11.1. Weekly Communication Log

**Questions for the mainstream teachers**
- Are you on the scheduled page in the curriculum? (This assumes all teachers have access to same curriculum framework, which in this case included content and language objectives)
- What do you see in this week’s curriculum that ESOL teachers should focus on with specific students?
- What would you like ESOL teachers to do to support your instruction?

**Questions for ESOL teachers**
- What are we doing in ESOL this week? (mention assessments, curriculum, supporting objectives, materials)
- How can we work together with classroom teachers this week?

between several teachers. The CF was a day-by-day planning guide that gave a detailed description of the daily objectives, skills, and activities that teachers should include in their lessons. ESOL teachers had access to the CF that mainstream teachers were using in their classrooms, and often referred to it independently to determine for what content and language they would provide support in their pull-out and plug-in lessons. While we are not advocating for heavily-scripted curriculum with no room for teachers’ professional judgment and expertise, the CF provided an important touchstone for teachers to quickly check in and coordinate instructional efforts.

The CF also provided ESOL teachers with a shorthand way to communicate with mainstream teachers about what they were both teaching. For example, Samantha (ESOL teacher) commented, “I will know what story they should be on by the pacing calendar and usually I will check and say ‘Are you on Day 2 of this story or are you behind?’ Dorothy (ESOL teacher) concurred, “I can read the curriculum [framework] and I sort of check in with the classroom teacher ‘Where are you in the curriculum? What are you doing?’”

Although this institutionally created tool was not designed specifically for the purposes of teacher collaboration, we found the teachers in our study took ownership of the CF when they used it as a tool to connect their own understanding of mainstream and ESOL instruction.

**Challenge 2: Lack of Clarity**
**About Shared Teaching and Learning Goals**

Another great challenge for collaborating teachers was the lack of clarity around shared teaching and learning goals. As previous research has
confirmed (Arkoudis, 2006; Creese, 2002, 2006; Davison, 2006), because ESOL and mainstream teachers often have different teacher preparation and separate planning groups within schools, they are often unaware of the instructional goals of their counterparts.

We found that the CF and shared lesson plans were also important working tools to help teachers mitigate the lack of clarity and to bridge their gaps in understanding about their counterparts’ teaching and learning goals. For example, Kathleen stated that the CF was a tool that helped her make sense of the brief interactions during grade level team meetings when curriculum was discussed in the context of other weekly teaching demands. Kathleen also explained that she used the CF as a basis to help guide her planning for the classrooms from which she pulled students out, because she was not regularly coplanning or coteaching with these teachers.

In the following quote, Gina, the mainstream teacher with whom Kathleen cotaught, also described the use of the CF as a mediating tool to link teacher knowledge and to negotiate teaching concepts.

I think it is also important to be willing to share the curriculum with the ESOL teachers because it is especially when they plug-in, they are not doing their own thing; they are meshing with you.

Clearly, the curriculum framework served as an important tool around which the teachers could build collaborative teaching efforts. However, it was not without its constraints and contradictions (see Martin-Beltrán & Peercy, 2010; Peercy & Martin-Beltrán, 2009). While it was evident that the CF was helpful to establish a common starting point to discuss what students needed to learn, teachers sometimes had differing viewpoints regarding how to use the CF. This dissonance about how to approach the curriculum framework did not lessen its value as a tool for collaboration; in fact, it could lead to fruitful discussions that could enhance teacher learning. When teachers did discuss their disagreements, they found that working through challenges together led to greater teacher collaboration.

In practice, working through challenges meant that teachers needed to recognize and address conflicts about teaching. Kathleen explained that she could admit to her coteaching partner when her instructional practices were not working well in the classroom, which led to a re-analysis of her teaching and further opportunities for learning and collaboration. In contrast, Dorothy admitted that she and Hannah were still “learning to work with each other.” The fact that they did not feel comfortable addressing any underlying disagreements about their teaching philosophy greatly hindered Dorothy and Hannah’s cooperation (see Peercy & Martin-Beltrán, in press). In contrast to Kathleen and Gina’s relationship,
which allowed them to take risks and tackle disagreements, Dorothy and Hannah did not seize the opportunity to work through disagreements in order to develop more successful collaboration.

**Challenge 3: Issues of Ownership, Division of Space, Labor, and Responsibility for Students**

The final category of challenges we identified in our data analysis centered on issues of ownership and the division of space, labor and responsibility for students. We found that the act of sharing space and teaching practices was often a delicate dance between teaching partners as they attempted to implement instruction without stepping on each other’s toes. Teachers explained that they needed to establish norms to agree upon how their physical environment would be divided and when these norms were not discussed explicitly, teachers confronted further obstacles.

Kathleen and Gina needed to talk through classroom management and organization issues—such as keeping materials in the same place, placing small groups in the classroom, and taking care not to talk too loudly—in order to resolve problems that would otherwise take away from their collaborative teaching. They noted that their friendship enabled them to confront these kinds of difficulties, which could have created friction and misunderstanding had they not shared mutual trust.

Kathleen and Gina, arguably the most collaborative—according to Davison’s (2006) descriptive framework—made use of several innovative tools in their practice which allowed them to interface smoothly when co-teaching. One of these was a system of using sticky notes when conferencing with students about their writing during Writing Workshop to indicate what the teacher had talked about with the student, and what areas the student needed to focus on for improvement. This sticky note was saved in the student’s writing folder until the next writing assignment, which allowed either teacher to reference what had been talked about before with the student. These written notes were a tool for communication, not only with the student but also between teachers. This allowed for consistency in their feedback to students, regardless of which teacher was meeting with the student and created an opportunity for coconstructed teaching that was focused on their common goal of student learning.

We found that shared assessment tools, like the informal teacher assessment described above, allowed teachers to confront the challenge of sharing responsibility for student learning. Another instance in which teachers re-created a tool that supported teacher collaboration was their use of a language proficiency continuum (Hill, 2001), which was used by the school district to help teachers assess student progress in English and
share that progress with parents. Samantha explained that discussing
where students were on the continuum provided an opportunity for her to
interact with mainstream teachers about the progress of the ELLs whom
they shared. She explained that she sat down with her mainstream
teacher counterparts and asked about each student’s progress in terms of
listening, speaking, reading, and writing on the continuum. Samantha
noted that this tool required much time on the part of both teachers to
talk individually about each student; however, the continuum created an
opportunity for communication between teachers that otherwise might
not have existed. Gina also noted that the language proficiency contin-
uum was useful because it provided a way for her and Kathleen, her ESOL
counterpart, to share similar feedback with parents of ELLs about how
their child was doing in school.

Another set of tools that Kathleen and Gina used were shared rubrics
to assess student performance on assignments. Gina explained that creat-
ing common rubrics was an activity that required negotiation on both
teachers’ parts, as she had to incorporate Kathleen’s practice of detailed
rubrics that were not as common in her own teaching. However, Gina
indicated that she had learned from this process, and this tool facilitated
common communication about teaching and learning practices.

Each of the pairs we observed demonstrated differing degrees of col-
laboration, supported by a variety of tools. Working through challenges
together often allowed pairs to envision their work as collaborative. Below
we outline elements of successful teacher collaboration.

**ENVISIONING SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION**

We found that the way that teachers envisioned their relationship and
their approach to teaching was critical to their successful collaboration
(Peercy & Martin-Beltrán, 2010). We use the term *envision* to describe the
teachers’ shared construction of teaching as an *ongoing process* that was
built through the development of common goals and the willingness to
discuss disagreements and recognize each other’s expertise while continu-
ously learning from one another (Peercy & Martin-Beltrán, 2011).

The teachers in this study with the most collaborative teaching rela-
tionship, Kathleen and Gina, explained that they had developed common
goals for teaching and learning. This was evident in their talk about
teaching and their shared teaching practices. Both Kathleen and Gina
thought it was important to make their expectations and thinking trans-
parent to students and devised shared rubrics for evaluating students.
The teachers sought out opportunities to work together and approached
their principal on their own, requesting to coteach together.
The second pair (Dorothy and Hannah), who struggled the most to work together collaboratively, had not yet developed a common vision as they articulated dissonance regarding their goals for teaching. Dorothy explained that it was challenging to lead a classroom together because they each had a different vision for the classroom; however, she never discussed this explicitly with Hannah.

Although the third pair (Samantha and Tanya) did not teach together in the same classroom, they were beginning to develop common goals for teaching and learning as they planned a lesson together and discussed ways they could build upon each other’s practices. In their de-briefing, the teachers explained how the students benefited from their collaboration on their lesson planning, and they acknowledged important advantages to developing common goals in their teaching of ELs.

IMPLICATIONS AND OUTCOMES FROM COLLABORATIVE TEACHING

As collaborating teachers worked through challenges and developed common teaching and learning goals, they were able to learn together and showed great potential to increase student learning as a result. Teacher learning emerged during their interactions around the tools discussed above, which were used to help them communicate about and develop their teaching and learning goals. In sum, this chapter acknowledges that challenges to coteaching are inevitable, given the everyday realities of teachers’ professional lives. The chapter suggests the utilization of shared tools as a way for teachers to confront such challenges, maintain successful coteaching practices, and engage in the lifelong process of learning together.

REFERENCES


