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Co-Teaching ELLs: RIDING A TANDEM BIKE

Content-area teachers and ESL teachers can address the needs of English language learners with a collaborative instructional cycle that starts with co-planning.

Andrea Honigsfeld and Maria G. Dove



Danielle Dodge and Paula Barnick first hopped on their tandem bike of co-teaching for English language learners (ELLs) more than three years ago. As teachers in New York's Valley Stream Union Free School District 13, they've moved from the fragmented, pullout model of English as a second language (ESL) instruction into a multifaceted partnership in which they teach English language arts and social studies to their 4th grade students. Their class consists of 24 students; 5 of them are English learners. The challenges of implementing the Common Core State Standards with ELLs—as well as other diverse students who might be multiple grade levels behind in their reading and mathematics achievement—prompted the teachers to try co-teaching during their English language arts block.

“There are certain things that just require two brains,” suggests Danielle, who tends to take a global approach to lesson planning. She explains that as the content-area teacher, she looks at the curriculum standards and establishes the general progression of the lessons; in turn, Paula, a teacher of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), examines the curriculum and anticipates what aspects will present the most challenges for ELLs, focusing on the vocabulary, literacy

subskills, and prior knowledge needed for upcoming lessons.

Paula expresses her appreciation for how the relationships are interconnected:

From students to teachers and students to students, the interaction of two adults working together closely provides the children with a powerful model of how the smallest to the largest tasks can be accomplished together, which they then apply while completing their own activities in tandem.

She believes that her co-teaching success with Danielle is the result of trust, respect, and high expectations, “which propel us through the curriculum on a daily basis.”

More Than Just Co-Teaching

The topic of co-teaching and collaboration for the sake of ELLs is gaining national attention. We have set it as our research and program support agenda and have, in recent years, devoted many articles and books to the topic. However, we continue to explore some essential questions: *What propels successful co-teachers forward? How are they able to keep the balance and move their ELLs faster on the road of language development than they would move in stand-alone programs?*

Through our own co-teaching practices, extensive professional learning, and instructional coaching experiences, as well as our decade-long research, we've identified three elements of successful, integrated collaborative instruction for ELLs in K–12 schools: (1) trust between co-teaching partners; (2) maintenance of the *entire* collaborative instructional cycle, which includes co-planning, co-teaching, co-assessment of student work, and reflection; and (3) leadership support.

Why is the entire collaborative cycle essential? Hopping on and off a bicycle might be a great way for a tourist to get around a new city to sightsee. But it doesn't work that way with the co-teaching tandem bike. It's unrealistic to expect teachers to meet their ELLs' linguistic, academic, and social-emotional needs if they spend their day hopping from classroom to classroom, attempting to deliver content and language instruction at multiple grade levels with different teachers.

Schools have a tendency to focus on co-teaching only. The danger here is that it may easily turn into a “push-in and pull-aside” scenario, in which the classroom merely offers shared classroom space without shared goals, shared instruction, and shared assessment. One of the concerns we

hear most frequently from educators is that the ESL teacher is relegated to the role of the helper who routinely has to ask, “What are we doing today?”

In contrast, when teachers put in place all four components of the collaborative instructional cycle—planning, teaching, assessment, and reflection—learning will flourish. The teachers have the opportunity to craft unit goals, lesson objectives, or learning targets with ELLs in mind. They can gather resources and materials that supplement and support instruction. They can design differentiated units and lessons with ample scaffolding, and they can conduct

formative and summative assessments together. Jointly, they can monitor student progress in both language development and content attainment, analyzing student data and planning interventions as needed. And they can reflect on the teaching-learning process that took place in the class.

In this article, we focus on the first two parts of the collaborative instructional cycle: co-planning and co-teaching. But first let's explore the foundation of the entire cycle: trust.



Imagine getting on the tandem bike of co-teaching. **Who sits in the front and takes the lead? Who takes the backseat?**

A Foundation of Trust

Imagine getting on the tandem bike of co-teaching. You have a lot to decide. Who sits in the front and takes the lead? Who takes the backseat? Who decides when to make a left or right turn? This requires trust. According to Bessette,¹ developing “a trusting relationship over the life of a co-teaching partnership may be the most critical issue of all.”

Neither classroom teachers nor secondary content-area teachers have proven eager to give up leading their lesson when a co-teacher is present, whether the co-teacher is there to support ELLs or students with disabilities. Co-teaching requires a delicate balance. Much like riding a bike, if you lean too much one way or the

other, the bike will fall over. However, when trust develops between two educators, their instruction is fully focused on the students rather than on the uncertainties of their work relationship. That focus keeps the tandem bike of co-teaching upright.

Trust comes from sustained opportunities for collaborative conversations in which co-teachers learn to value each other. Some key elements to building trust are shared goal setting, shared decision making,

joint risk taking, having high expectations of each other, relying on each other, and overcoming one's fear of vulnerability.

Co-Planning: The First Step

In the collaborative instructional cycle, co-planning comes first. For example, middle school ESL teacher Briana Cajamarca from Glen Cove, New York, who has been collaborating and co-teaching with content-area teachers for the past four years, sends a request form to any teacher she'll be working with to get “key information, such as essential questions, unit objectives, and vocabulary” before she steps into the classroom. This also gives her the opportunity to create and gather supplemental materials and research any

bilingual materials that may be useful for clarifying new topics.

To support teachers new to, or overwhelmed by, co-planning, we developed a three-phase co-planning framework (see fig. 1). Let's consider how a teaching team—a social studies teacher and an ESL teacher—might use this framework to collaboratively plan a co-taught lesson in a 9th grade social studies class with 25 students, 7 of whom are ELLs.

Pre-Planning (Completed Separately)

The team has identified the Great Depression as the topic for the upcoming joint lesson, and each teacher engages in the pre-planning phase. The social studies teacher decides on the content objective—to have students identify the causes of the Great Depression and its effect on the world. She selects vocabulary that all students will need to know, such as *recession*, *foreclosure*, *gold standard*, and so on. She reviews a PowerPoint presentation that she used the previous year to introduce the topic, creates a list of key questions, and considers how to engage students in a jigsaw reading, in which they would be grouped and assigned reading tasks at various skill levels to become experts on one part of the topic.

Meanwhile, the ESL teacher has selected a language objective aligned with the Common Core State Standards: for students to be able to cite textual evidence to better comprehend the text. She reviews the text the students will read—an article on the History website called “The Great Depression” (www.history.com/topics/great-depression)—and devises some questions to assist them in finding the major points of information. She also notices a patterned use of superlatives—deepest, longest, and worst—and decides to address this aspect of grammar with her ELLs.

Collaborative Planning (Completed Together)

After planning separately, the co-teaching team has a phone conference to plan jointly. They've already e-mailed each other their lesson plan ideas and reference materials. The team members agree on the content and language objectives they identified during pre-planning, but they decide that the text might be too challenging for some of the ELLs. The ESL teacher offers to create a summary page of information for students who need additional support with the content.

The co-teachers review the targeted vocabulary, and the ESL teacher identifies some additional vocabulary and idiomatic expressions to highlight during instruction, such as *justified*, *anticipated*, and *kick into high gear*.

They also discuss learning tasks, instructional strategies, and ways to configure the class for each activity. They decide to introduce the lesson together to the whole class using the PowerPoint presentation. After reviewing this presentation, the ESL teacher suggests that they modify it to include more photographs and additional vocabulary.

At this point, the teachers plan their individual teaching roles. Guided by the PowerPoint presentation, the social studies teacher will share new information about the Great Depression. The ESL teacher will verbally and visually scaffold the information by repeating what's been said, modifying some vocabulary words, jotting down notes on the board, and creating a timeline.

The teachers decide that students will be divided into

cooperative-learning groups after the lesson introduction. Instead of engaging in the jigsaw reading that the social studies teacher initially proposed, some students will read and annotate different aspects of the text with sticky notes while the social studies teacher monitors their work. Other students will work in a small group directly with the ESL teacher to review concepts and grammar.

For an assessment, the team decides on a Think, Pair, Jot, Share at the end of class. The assessment will be scaffolded to support individual students. Before they end their planning conversation, the team members review their roles and responsibilities.

Post-Planning (Completed Separately)

Each teacher on this team prefers to keep her own separate written plans instead of sharing one completed plan, as others may decide to do. The social studies teacher completes a text annotation guide and, as agreed, modifies the PowerPoint presentation to include more photographs and vocabulary. She also creates the Think, Pair, Jot, Share exit assessment.

The ESL teacher completes a summary page of the text, a grammar activity that emphasizes the superlative form of adjectives, and a modified Think, Pair, Jot, Share. The teachers finish writing their individual plans and share them with each other by e-mail.

FIGURE 1. A Co-Planning Framework

Phase 1: Pre-Planning (completed separately)

Partners in co-planning review forthcoming curriculum, select necessary language and content to address in upcoming lessons, and identify the background knowledge students will need to be successful. They devise possible language or content objectives on the basis of learning targets and standards and begin to determine resources, materials, and learning tasks.



Phase 2: Collaborative Planning (completed together)

Co-teachers come prepared to finalize the different aspects of their lesson either in a face-to-face meeting or using an agreed-on virtual platform. They negotiate content and language objectives, confirm how they will address and evaluate challenging concepts and skills, agree on their roles and responsibilities, and discuss how to configure the class for co-taught lessons.



Phase 3: Post-Planning (completed separately)

After establishing objectives, materials, roles, and responsibilities, each teacher completes various lesson-planning tasks (such as scaffolding activities), differentiating materials and assessments, finding alternative resources, creating learning centers or stations, and so on.

Co-Teaching: The Next Step

Without such careful planning, coordination of instructional delivery, and intentional use of assessment measures and tools that inform collaborative instruction, co-teaching will most likely fail. One teacher will have the responsibility for planning, instruction, and assessment, while the other will be relegated to assistant status.

True co-teaching looks different. There, teaching partners assume multiple, changing roles to deliver instruction that meets the needs of all students. At times, one teacher undertakes a leading role while the other teacher supports the lead teacher's instruction. At other times, both teachers may take on similar roles and responsibilities.

As researchers, professional

developers, and coaches, we've documented seven co-teaching approaches that we refer to as *models of instruction*. We've organized them to show the grouping configuration the teachers choose—one group, two groups, or multiple groups—as well as the roles and responsibilities of each teacher within that particular configuration:

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- One group: One leads, one “teaches on purpose” (assisting individuals or small groups of students who need extra help understanding the lesson).
- One group: Two teach the same content.
- One group: One teaches, one assesses.
- Two groups: Two teach the same content.
- Two groups: One preteaches, one teaches alternative information.
- Two groups: One reteaches, one teaches alternative information.
- Multiple groups: Two monitor and teach the various groups.

Note that in the first three models, the students remain as one large group, while each teacher's purpose is varied. In the next three models, the students are divided into two groups that may or may not be equal, and their teachers each assume a different role. In the final model, students are divided into multiple groups—from three to eight student clusters, depending on the size of the class, the lesson's purpose, and the tasks

to complete—which both teachers facilitate.

Leadership Support

For collaboration and co-teaching to work, a schoolwide framework designed around diverse student needs must be in place.² “The most successful co-teaching programs I've

worked with broker skills, resources, and time for not only co-teachers, but also for those students who benefit from the co-taught classroom,” suggested Martina Wagner, EL Supervisor for the Roseville Area Schools in Minnesota.

We've proposed such a framework to strengthen whole-school practices for ELLs. It includes an inclusive vision and mission; schoolwide disciplinary literacy, in which all teachers focus on students' learning both the content and the language of the discipline they teach; curriculum mapping and alignment, in which all coursework to address ELLs' needs is aligned with what native English-speaking peers are learning; collaborative planning, instruction, and assessment; explicit strategy instruction; and a focus on student engagement.

Administrators aren't the only ones to offer leadership support. Coaches and teacher leaders also play a crucial role in the success of co-teaching initiatives. Christine Seebach, long-time ESL co-teacher in an elementary

school, suggested to her principal that the school schedule each of the five ESL teachers to co-teach at one grade level. This, she noted, would “foster best practices by allowing the ESL teacher to be an integral part of that grade level.” This simple yet crucial step allows for greater coordination of services and improved communication among ESL and classroom teachers, service providers such as reading specialists, building and district administrators, and parents.

A Steady Ride

Riding the tandem bike of co-teaching can be a rewarding experience. It brings together two teachers with different expertise, talents, strengths, and abilities to synchronize instruction for the benefit of all students. It requires building a trusting partnership that must include all four parts of the collaborative instructional cycle. It also requires leadership support, beginning with a shared vision for equitable learning practices for ELLs. Get these pieces in place, and enjoy the ride! 

¹Bessette, J. (2008). Using students' drawings to elicit general and special educators' perceptions of co-teaching. *Science Direct, 24*, p. 1394.

²Dove, M. G., Honigsfeld, A., & Cohan, A. (2014). *Beyond core expectations: A framework for servicing the not-so-common learner*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Andrea Honigsfeld (ahonigsfeld@molloy.edu) is professor of education and **Maria G. Dove** (mdove@molloy.edu) is associate professor of education at Molloy College, Rockville Centre, New York. They are coauthors of *Common Core for the Not-So-Common Learner, Grades 6–12: English Language Arts Strategies* (Corwin, 2013) and *Collaboration and Co-Teaching for English Learners: A Leader's Guide*. (Corwin, 2014). Follow them on Twitter @andreahonigsfel and @profdove.

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