

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN 21ST CENTURY CLASSROOMS: CHALLENGES AND EXPECTATIONS

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The Epistemological and Institutional Challenges of Teacher Collaboration for English Language Learners' Literacy Learning

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Introduction

The principles promulgated by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2001) include the proposition that successful teachers contribute to the effectiveness of the school by working collaboratively with other teachers to maximize students' learning (Leonard & Leonard, 2003). This emphasis is of paramount importance for teachers working with English language learners (ELLs) to facilitate their language and literacy development. Given that many ELLs receive instruction from both regular classroom teachers and bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom teachers (Yoon, 2007, 2008), collaboration between these teachers is essential for students' success in school (Arkoudis, 2006; Davison, 2006). In spite of the emphasis on teacher collaboration that has taken place for over a decade in the United States, research on collaboration between these groups of teachers has not been

discussed in depth and is not well understood in the United States context.

To expand our understanding in this area, this paper reports on the survey findings from 75 elementary and middle school teachers' responses. The research questions that guided the study are (a) How do regular classroom teachers and ESL or bilingual teachers view their roles and view each other's roles in assisting ELLs' language and literacy learning? and (b) How does each group describe the support they receive or challenges when they work together? The study aims to enhance both groups of teachers' understandings of their roles and to provide teacher education programs with future directions for effective and systematic collaboration.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical lens that serves as a foundation for the current study is based on the work of Friend and Cook (2007). They defined collaboration as "a style for direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal" (p. 7). This definition includes several requirements for successful teacher collaboration. First, collaboration is voluntary. This emphasizes that collaboration is not possible by coercing people to interact with others. Although schools might mandate collaboration between teachers in planning and implementing programs, it is the individual teacher's own decision and choice to make collaboration successful.

Second, collaboration requires parity among participants. Parity, “a situation in which each person’s contribution to an interaction is equally valued, and each person has equal power in decision making” (Friend & Cook, 2007, p. 7), is an important principle for any professional teamwork to take place. Effective collaboration will not be possible if one individual exercises power over another or if one perceives that unequal status exists within a team of teachers. For instance, if area teachers project themselves as being more knowledgeable about what needs to be covered in the curriculum and see ESL or bilingual curricular goals as secondary in status, the ESL or bilingual teachers might perceive an unequal status in decision making. In this situation, parity is not likely to develop.

Third, collaboration is based on mutual goals. Friend and Cook (2007) stress that establishing at least one key goal that all members agree upon is a crucial principle in collaboration. Teachers do not have to set several goals in order to collaborate. However, setting one specific goal aimed at meeting students’ needs is essential. Even though some goals established within a group of professionals might actually conflict with each other, the greater goal for the best interest of the student should be foremost. For example, ESL or bilingual teachers might set certain language objectives while content-area teachers might consider content objectives as the priority. In this case, both professional groups need to consider the overall greater goal of designing lessons to meet the needs of ELLs.

Finally, collaboration depends on shared responsibility for participation. Although this principle emphasizes shared responsibility between participants, it does not mean that each

person will spend an equal amount of time achieving the tasks necessary for accomplishing the mutual goal. The essential factor will be how professionals actively participate in completing a task regardless of whether they spend more or less time than their collaborators. This principle implies that not only ESL and bilingual teachers but also content-area teachers need to be actively engaged in participating and sharing responsibility for ELLs in the classroom. Overall, this collaboration framework was helpful in analyzing the teachers' views of each other's roles and potential factors that supported or challenged their collaboration.

Setting, participants, and methods

The researchers collected data using an online survey at one elementary and one middle school campus in a Texas suburban school district that currently has over 5,000 ELLs. A total of 75 teachers participated in this study: At the elementary campus, 39 teachers participated (12 bilingual, 12 ESL, 15 regular classroom teachers) and, at the middle school, 36 teachers participated (8 ESL teachers, 28 regular classroom teachers). The teachers' average years of teaching experience differed slightly: 13 years (elementary regular classroom), 15 years (elementary ESL), 12 years (middle school regular classroom), 13 years (middle school ESL), and 9 years (elementary bilingual). The survey questions were asked to collect general information about the teachers' educational background, teaching experience, age, and the grade levels in which they teach. The data obtained from the short-answer questions, including the teachers' beliefs about collaboration, was used to answer this study's research questions. For example, the

questions for content-area teachers include (a) What factors would support your work with ESL/bilingual teachers in planning instruction for ELLs? and (b) What factors challenge your work with ESL/bilingual teachers in planning instruction for ELLs?

Data analysis and procedures

The researchers utilized a mixed-methods design that utilized both quantitative and qualitative measures (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003). Four major analytical processes were employed as part of the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First, the 75 teacher responses were examined as a whole to obtain general patterns. Second, the individual teachers' responses were analyzed to confirm or refine the general patterns. Third, responses between intragroups and intergroups were compared to find similarities or differences. Finally, the data was categorized into themes based on the research questions. Specific examples of selected teacher responses were compiled in support of the themes.

More specifically, each researcher looked at the quantitative data and qualitative data individually and discovered her own themes following the procedures described above. After the researchers completed their independent analysis, they shared their themes. When there were conflicting themes, the researchers revisited the data together and reanalyzed the data based on Friend and Cook's (2007) collaboration framework. The four components of collaboration (voluntary, parity, mutual goals, and shared responsibility) were useful lenses for the researchers to develop common themes. For the purpose of this paper, the

researchers concentrated on qualitative analysis of the short-answer survey questions.

Findings

One of the key findings in this research showed that both groups of teachers (elementary and middle school) reported having more “challenges” than “support” with regard to teacher collaboration for ELLs’ literacy learning. However, in the middle school surveys, a clear pattern emerged relating to the epistemological perspectives on teacher roles. For instance, some of the regular classroom teachers viewed themselves as content-knowledge teachers and viewed ESL teachers in a supporting role. They expected the ESL teachers to come to them in order to check on ELLs’ needs and to support their content teaching. For example, one middle school music teacher mentioned, “I need them [ESL teachers] coming into my classroom, as they do not understand my subject or my objectives.” A middle school history teacher stated, “I wish that ESL teachers were more accessible.”

Along with commenting on the ESL teachers’ need to come into their classrooms to understand their content, middle school teachers also shared their need to have ESL teachers become more focused on content objectives. A middle school English teacher said, “[ESL teachers need] recognition of the role of rigor, having an eye on the end product—that the student will be successful in our regular course work.”

In some content classrooms, especially those with newcomer ELLs, paraprofessionals were often assigned to the

classrooms. Several of the content teachers responded that they wanted more classroom support, with some asking for paraprofessionals while others preferred certified inclusion-ESL teachers. A middle school history teacher felt the need for “a bilingual aide or support person in the room with the very limited English speaking students.” However, a science teacher in the middle school expressed the need for “having highly qualified inclusion teachers rather than paraprofessionals come into the classroom [with ELLs].”

The ESL teachers tended to view themselves as “language teachers,” and acknowledged that the content-area teachers did not always have a deep understanding of language acquisition and ELLs’ needs. They shared their belief that the content teachers were not always aware of how challenging it was to learn a new language while also learning a new culture. For instance, one ESL teacher said, “[Content teachers] need flexibility and understanding for ESL students.” Another ESL teacher stated, “They do not understand the language barrier that ESL students face. They treat them exactly like a native English speaker.” Some of the teachers also commented on the fact that the content teachers did not see the ESL teacher as being on the same teaching level: “Some teachers don’t yet see the ESL Language Arts teacher as a core teacher.”

One ESL teacher noted, however, the positive effect of having many of her colleagues trained by the district’s ESL staff using Echevarria, Vogt, and Short’s (2000) Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) training. In her response, she appeared to consider her teaching situation to be more equitable due to the team having been through professional training and stated “My team has adequate

knowledge and experience in working with ELLs. If someone has not been through SIOP or any other related ESL training, then I think it would be a challenge.” This teacher’s response shows her certainty that additional professional ESL training, including the SIOP program, is helpful and effective for teacher collaboration.

Institutional challenges

Another major finding was that both elementary and middle school groups viewed their institutions’ initiatives as a challenge to collaboration. Although collaboration was deemed critical to their success with ELLs, it was seen as something the administration needed to sanction by building sufficient time into the school day for teachers to discuss and plan for ELLs’ needs. In fact, 34 of the 75 teachers surveyed mentioned time as being a major challenge to teacher collaboration. For example, these were some of the comments:

- “Time—everyone has different schedules or commitments.” (elementary ESL self-contained classroom teacher)
- “Finding time to meet with the ESL teachers is the biggest challenge.” (elementary teacher)
- “Scheduling conflicts—everyone has different conference periods/tutorial schedules.” (seventh grade special education teacher)
- “It would be nice to have the same planning periods so we could collaborate on lessons.” (middle school history teacher)
- “[We need] to have students assigned to the

same team to ensure follow up.” (elementary teacher)

- “Scheduling conflicts—different conference periods/tutorial schedules.” (middle school special education teacher)

Some of the teachers specifically named the administration as a challenge, noting the need for better teacher and team scheduling to promote common planning times. A number of teachers also noted the need for teachers to have a voice in teacher decision making and also the need for more high quality resources across classrooms. Selected comments include the following:

- “Having the resources available to teach, [expanded] technology, guided reading library, and the freedom to integrate language development activities throughout the subject areas.”

- Centering specifically on the administration, one elementary teacher added, “Factors that would support my work with ESL would be support from my administration.”

- One elementary bilingual teacher responded, “It is not the other teachers that challenge my planning. A good bilingual or ESL teacher knows how to plan good lessons. What I find challenging is new administration. Sometimes ideas are great but implementing them is a whole new concept”.

Institutional support for effective resources was another area of contention.

- A bilingual teacher noted, “[There are] not enough good materials that are age or content appropriate.”

- A K-5 music teacher stated her challenge was

“having different access to teaching materials, meaning, the ESL teacher might have a certain teaching aide to teach a concept, and I might not have that same teaching aide to teach the concept with (or vice versa).”

- One instructional specialist in the middle school shared her concerns about the need for supplying teachers with resources and strategies, and structuring tutoring groups.” Another middle school science teacher mentioned several institutional concerns: “Little time to plan, large class sizes, few resources.”

As shown in the responses above, the teachers appear to believe that the institutional’ initiatives on resources are one of the important components of collaboration.

Discussion and implications

The findings of this study expand educators’ knowledge of the issues related to collaboration and help them better understand barriers to teacher collaboration and how they affect ELLs. More specifically, these findings suggest that collaboration between regular classroom teachers and ESL/bilingual teachers is challenging due to both groups’ epistemological perspectives on teachers’ roles and the lack of institutional initiatives. Friend and Cook (2007) assert the necessity of parity in collaboration. However, it appeared that not all of the teachers in the survey viewed each other as co-equal partners. The teachers’ different epistemology of perception of their roles as “content” versus “language” teachers could hinder their attempts to promote collaboration. As Billett and van Woerkom (2008) stated, a personal

epistemology is comprised of an individual's understanding of knowledge. Teachers' views of their roles seem to be a major hindrance for teacher collaboration.

In addition, these findings did not adhere completely to the framework of Friend and Cook (2007), specifically in seeing collaboration as voluntary and not administratively mandated. Although some of the teachers commented that they were willing to meet on their own time, several believed the institution should provide support for their collaborative practice. These findings did not support the teachers as active agents who are making a personal decision to work collaboratively by devoting time outside of their curricular day to meet the ELLs' needs. The teachers appear to view that time should be allowed and given by the institutions, rather than carved out of their day by themselves. It was interesting that no teachers in this study indicated that they worked together for ELLs when time was an issue. Based on this finding, the question arises whether they truly believe that time is the key issue for collaboration. If time were not simply an excuse, there should be some components of collaboration outside of their curricular day. However, the current data does not show that the teachers allotted time for collaboration.

When reviewing the findings, issues of time, agency, and equity among teachers were prevalent themes. In using these data, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Establish understanding through the use of professional learning communities
- Develop focused professional knowledge about language acquisition and effective instruction for ELLs through ongoing professional development.

- Take classes such as the Sheltered Observation Protocol (SIOP) together with a team of educators and share understandings for effective instructional methods.

- Create a sanctioned planning time weekly during school hours to promote teacher collaboration.

- Build professional agency and equity. Just as teachers need to support agency and equity in their classrooms, they too require this same support within their faculty communities.

These recommendations addressing professional learning communities will help to promote teacher collaboration. However, there should be a shift of epistemological professional identities. Rather than viewing the teachers' roles from the perspectives of dichotomized professions (for example, content or language specialization), it will be important for teachers to see their roles as co-equal partners working together to meet ELLs' diverse needs. Along with an epistemological change, intensive and systematic institutional support will be critical for teacher collaboration.

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