



Sustaining collaboration: English-as-a-second-language, and content-area teachers

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ABSTRACT

This research is an investigation into English as a Second Language (ESL) and content area teachers' perceptions of collaboration after they completed a joint professional development program called the Collaborative Teaching Institute (CTI). The overall objective of the study was to identify how CTI and other joint professional development programs for ESL and content area teachers could better support sustained teacher collaboration. The study yielded information on the key actors, opportunities, tensions and conflicts in the collaboration between the two sets of teachers. The researchers also sought to identify specific types of activities that emerged when the teachers were successful in working together.

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1. Introduction

The exponential growth of the English language learner (ELL) enrollment in US public schools, illustrated by a 65.03% increase within a decade (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), has significantly outpaced the training of English as a second language teachers (ESLTs). According to Quality Counts (2009), an annual report on U.S. public education, at the time of reporting, approximately 5.1 million K-12 ELLs were being served by only 142,148 English as a Second Language (ESL) certified teachers. Given this shortage, the responsibility for supporting ELLs is increasingly shared by content area teachers, emphasizing the importance of collaboration between ESLTs and content area teachers.

This shared responsibility is particularly important because of mandates in the 2003 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which has resulted in the removal of many ELLs from ESL classes after three years or less and placing them in mainstream classrooms, in which they are expected to perform on standardized tests at levels comparable to those of English native-speaking classmates. Given this abridged preparation time, many ELLs do not do well, and their high school completion rates have been reported as low as 69.3% in comparison to the 89.9% completion rate of young adults who

speak English at home (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2008). Content area teachers in mainstream classrooms knowledgeable about ELL instruction may provide needed support, but only 29.5% of these teachers have had training in working with ELLs (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2008). Collaborating with their English as a Second Language teacher (ESLT) counterparts, however, would give content area teachers immediate access to knowledgeable support for the instruction of ELLs. Thus, collaboration between ESL and content area teachers is essential if the immediate and long term needs of ELLs are to be addressed.

Beyond the US, collaboration between English as foreign language teachers (EFLTs) and content area teachers is also becoming increasingly important. In South Korea, for example, the government has mandated that several subject areas at the primary level, including mathematics and physical education, be taught in English (Kim, 2008). In addition, the Korean government has steeply increased the number of hours of English Language instruction for students. Thus, from 2010 onwards Korean schools will need approximately 10,000 elementary and secondary English teachers (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2008), including many native English speakers from abroad who, along with Korean content teachers, must work with Korean EFL teachers. In China, where English is a compulsory subject, most schools in the largest cities will conduct math, science, biology, computer science and other subjects in English (Hu, 2002). Given that there are about

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300 million learners of English in China among its 1.25 billion people, collaboration between ESL and content area teachers is imperative to meet the country's goal of teaching English through the subject areas.

ESL and content area teacher collaboration is also instrumental in sustaining integrated curricula, which call for “the careful orchestration” (Hoewisch, 2001, p. 155) among teachers of various subjects so that the content of each is related to and reinforced by the content of others. Collaboration is thus important for content as well as language learning. The current study addresses this importance by looking specifically into the interpersonal interactions and organizational factors that sustain or challenge collaboration.

2. Research purpose

The research reported here is an investigation into ESL and content area teachers' perceptions of collaboration after completing a joint professional development program, the Collaborative Teaching Institute (CTI)¹. In this study, collaboration is defined as the collective action (D'Amour, 1997) undertaken by ESL and content area teachers to address the needs of ELLs. The research explored key factors that helped sustain collaboration beyond the completion of CTI. (See the *Method* section for a more detailed description of CTI).

Specifically, we investigated the complexities affecting ESL and content area teachers' collaboration in their respective workplaces, focusing on key actors, opportunities, tensions and conflicts between the two sets of teachers. We also sought to identify the types of activities that emerged when the teachers worked together successfully. The overall objective of our study was to identify how CTI and similar joint programs for ESL and content area teachers could better support sustained teacher collaboration.

3. Literature review

In this section, we review ESL approaches that lend themselves to ESL and content area collaboration. We also review existing research in ESL and content area teacher collaboration and identify gaps that this study addresses. Finally, we describe the frameworks that provided useful lenses and guided our study.

3.1. Pedagogical models for ESL and content area teacher collaboration

At the classroom level, ESL and content area teacher collaboration has been guided by Content Based Instruction (CBI) pedagogical frameworks. Mohan's (1986) Knowledge Framework (KF) is a useful starting point for discussing these frameworks. Mohan's framework, which contextualizes language learning in social practices or activities, resonates with Gee's (2001) conception of “big D” Discourse, in which reading and writing are always socially situated within the “different ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, believing, and using symbols, tools, and objects in the right places and at the right times...” (p. 3). Within a discipline, language and content learning are intertwined in that each shapes, gives meaning to and is necessary for the development of the other.

Paralleling Mohan's KF, curricular models have emerged for the integration of language and content instruction in the classroom. Stoller (2004) points out that there is a wide range of models from “content-driven” approaches with strong commitments to content-learning objectives (immersion, partial immersion, sheltered

subject-area courses)” (p. 268) to “language-driven” (p. 268) approaches that prioritize language objectives through content instruction. A review of these models reveals a continuum marked by three shifts of responsibilities in CBI from (1) primary assumption of responsibilities by the language teacher, to (2) sharing of the responsibilities by ESL and content area teachers, to (3) training of both cohorts of teachers in CBI so they can assume responsibilities individually or jointly in a classroom in which there are ELLs. These shifts are reflected in the models discussed here.

At one end of the continuum is Chamot and O'Malley's (1994) Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), whereby ESL teachers align their instruction with content area colleagues through the incorporation of content area topics in the language classroom; the development of academic language skills necessary for particular subjects as well as general academic performance (e.g. argumentative language skills); and instruction in learning strategies for the simultaneous acquisition of language and content. One of the tenets of CALLA classrooms is that ESL teachers do not repeat content in their classrooms but rather scaffold students' exploration of the content in greater depth.

Midway in the continuum, the conceptual framework for the integration of content and language developed by Snow, Met, and Genesee (1989) proposes a practical pathway for ESL and content area teachers to collaborate on language learning objectives in a content-based program. According to Snow et al. (p. 205), the objectives are derived from

- a. the second/foreign language curriculum
- b. the content area curriculum
- c. assessment of learners' academic and communicative needs and ongoing evaluation of their developing language needs

From these sources, content-obligatory and content-compatible language objectives emerged. In terms of the former, ESL and content area teachers collaborate to identify and teach language essential for understanding and discussing a particular topic or concept. Content-compatible objectives can be attained by focusing on language that is not content specific but rather supports student communication and engagement.

Toward the other end of the continuum is the Sheltered Instructional (SI) approach developed by Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2000), which extends support for ELLs beyond the two or three years of mandated ESL instruction by advocating systemic training and engagement of all teachers in the instruction of ELLs. The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) is both an instructional model and observation instrument to help teachers scaffold content instruction for ELLs. Rather than replacing methods and strategies used by ESL and mainstream teachers, the Sheltered Instruction approach complements them, thus serving as a point of convergence that ESL and content area teachers can use in analyzing, refining and discussing ELL instruction with each other.

These three models are among many that lend themselves to ESL and content area teacher collaboration in teaching English through content areas. The models, however, are under-researched (Stoller, 2004) and focus on the content but not the processes and contexts of collaboration.

3.2. Research in ESL and content area teacher collaboration

Research in this area has primarily focused on understanding collaboration through teacher discourse. A common theme is the unequal status of ESL teachers when they are in the classroom with content teachers and the considerable degree of mediation that ESL teachers must undertake to be acknowledged as equal contributors and leaders. Creese (2002) of Birmingham University

¹ All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

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