

# TEACHER COLLABORATION TO SUPPORT MULTILINGUAL STUDENTS DESIGNATED AS ENGLISH LEARNERS

## Ecological Perspectives and Critical Questions

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Collaboration between English as a Second Language (ESL) and content teachers to support multilingual students designated as English Learners is a growing but complex phenomenon in U.S. schools, and one that has continued to evolve during the pandemic and related disruptions to schooling. We draw upon ecological perspectives on language learning to consider critical questions about the relationships among collaborative practices, equity, systemic capacity, and instructional quality. Such considerations can inform educational practice and better frame empirical explorations of co-teaching and related forms of collaboration.

*Keywords:* collaboration, co-teaching, ESL, English Learner, equity

**No one** imagined that the COVID-19 pandemic – which was rapidly spreading halfway across the world in December of 2019 – would, over 2 years later, continue to bring society to its knees. Aside from healthcare, no other institution has undergone quite as radical a change in the way it operates as education. In current times, access to a free and high-quality public education has become even more tenuous for the most vulnerable of students (Kibler et al., 2022). In the United States, this population of students includes multilingual students bureaucratically designated as English Learners who, because of institutional limitations and inequitable schooling opportunities, are struggling to graduate from high school ready for the challenges of post-secondary life. English Learners in the secondary grades, many of whom were born in the US and some of whom arrived only recently, find themselves in a highly unstable, if not chaotic, school environment – a product of pandemic-induced staffing shortages (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022), fatigue, grief, and a realization that life might never go back to “normal.” Many organized efforts to support students academically have gone by the wayside in response to these conditions. Our work has focused on whether collaboration between teachers to support students designated as English Learners has also been erased or overlooked as a priority.

Collaboration among teachers for the benefit of students designated as English Learners can take a variety of interconnected forms. It can mean that two or more teachers (including subject area and language development specialists) collaborate on lesson plans to ensure that academic concepts,

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analytical practices, and language-related competencies are addressed. It also can mean that teachers jointly design assessments to best capture student learning, that teachers actively reflect together on the implementation and impact of a lesson in order to plan next steps, and/or that teachers simultaneously engage in the act of teaching a classroom full of students (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2019).

Of these practices, having two teachers together in the classroom (co-teaching) is the most easily visible (particularly to school administrators), but simply observing collaborating teachers' lessons is insufficient to truly understand the purpose and impact of collaborative practices. In the following vignette, for example, it is not clear if the ESL teacher was just assisting the students and content teacher (a role often described by educators as a "glorified aide") without any collaboration beforehand, or if their pedagogical actions were the result of careful planning and attunement to their students' language development trajectories:

*Two teachers (a content teacher and the ESL teacher) are presenting a lesson on the American Revolutionary War and the Battle of Bunker Hill. The content teacher leads the presentation. She walks around the classroom, referencing the slides as she discusses factual events and their implications. The students, who are a mix of monolingual English speakers and multilingual students designated as English Learners, are seated in table groups but are taking notes individually. From time to time, the content teacher makes reference to material learned in previous lessons. The ESL co-teacher interjects from time to time to offer an interesting aside or commentary. She too is walking among the students and at one point during her commentary, she stands by the smart board and points to the map on a slide.*

Several questions come to mind in this scenario: How do the ESL teacher and the content teacher conceptualize and operationalize their roles? Are there systematic norms that allowed the teachers to co-plan the lesson? If so, what were their objectives, and why did they design the lesson as they did? What kind of debriefing will they do after the lesson, and how will it shape future instruction? And what are English Learner-designated students able to do as a result of having access to these two teachers that they wouldn't have had access to otherwise? Such questions are complex and not answerable through observations of teaching alone. Addressing the questions above also requires nuanced exploration of collaborating teachers' lived experiences as well as their conceptualizations of students, teaching and learning, academic content, and importantly, language itself. They also require a holistic understanding of the "ecology" – or contextual factors at play inside and outside of the classroom and school – in order to understand the classroom practices that take place.

It is widely acknowledged that collaborations designed to facilitate the success of secondary students designated as English Learners were challenging for many educators before the pandemic. And although educators with strong collaborative practices established before the pandemic found these practices to be a source of strength during schooling disruptions (Kibler et al., 2022), collaborations taking place *during* the pandemic and in its aftermath have been even more complicated for reasons previously stated. So why continue? What are practitioners trying to achieve through collaboration, and is it worth it? In this essay, we argue that collaboration among teachers for the benefit of English Learners *still* matters and is perhaps more urgent than ever before. Notwithstanding, we submit that, as scholars and practitioners, we need to step back and take a more critical look.

### **Our Exploration of Teacher Collaboration**

Current bodies of literature indicate there is a need to conduct rigorous research to understand the presence and features of teacher collaboration as a strategy for strengthening students' academic understandings, analytic skills, and language learning. As a team of researchers and educators whose interest in collaborative practices is longstanding, we began to formally investigate these practices in

2020, as part of a new IES-funded National Research and Development Center to Improve Education for Secondary English Learners (<https://www.elrdcenter.wested.org/>). Our first efforts focused on simply understanding the presence of collaborative practices in U.S. schools. It is rare for state policies to mandate or systematically support teacher collaboration on behalf of students bureaucratically designated as English learners. Further, district-level information rarely accounts for collaboration, other than to label it as a form of “push-in” (rather than “pull-out”). However, in a national survey of school district leaders we conducted in 2021, we found that even during the pandemic, about 70% of public school districts who responded to the survey – representing urban and rural locales, large and small districts, and districts with relatively low and high English Learner populations – reported engaging in teacher collaboration to support secondary students designated as English Learners (Kibler & Palacios, in preparation).

But what does this collaboration entail “on the ground,” and why? Having conducted classroom research and English Learner program evaluations in secondary schools throughout the United States, we have seen a wide array of actions labelled as collaborative or co-teaching practices. We have seen the common but problematic interpretation of the “one teach, one assist” model, in which an ESL teacher attends the class with students to help them individually, but teachers do not collaborate on planning, leading instruction, assessment, or reflection. However, we have also seen educators deeply committed to engaging in meaningful collaboration. For example, one author of this article has helped facilitate a group of 15 (and growing) district leaders of English Learner Programs who meet monthly to work through problems of practice related to their collaborative models; together, they explore new ways to support teachers’ deep engagement in creating high-quality instruction that promotes students’ integrated conceptual, analytical, and language development. Additionally, many of our graduate researchers have been or currently are coaches and co-teachers supporting content teachers in their work with multilingual students designated as English learners, and their efforts extend far beyond the spare models of instruction that simply define collaboration as teachers’ shared presence in a classroom or participation together in meetings. What is the potential of this far richer approach to collaboration, and why? What conditions are necessary to support these practices? And how as a field can we work to develop an understanding of “collaboration for equity,” which is firmly rooted in the quality of instruction students receive and the progress they make, rather than simply the presence or absence of teachers working together in particular settings?

### **Taking an Ecological Approach to Collaboration**

Our study, and the work of our entire Center, is predicated on an ecological perspective (van Lier, 2004), one in which the micro-systems of classrooms are connected to the meso-systems of schools and in turn the exo-systems of districts, states, and large-scale policies, all of which create an interdependent and dynamic macro-system. To be clear, teaching and learning in the classroom are fundamentally shaped by the individuals present and their relationships, as well as the resources present and the interactions that occur within those spaces. In fact, it is the nature of the “fit” between those classroom features and the needs of students that creates the conditions and potential (or as van Lier [2002] explains, “affordances”) for learning. However, classrooms are shaped in profound ways by meso- and exo-systems in education, and both students and teachers travel across various micro-systems daily.

An ecological perspective illuminates many larger systemic concerns related to teacher collaboration: In the words of many educators with whom we work, it provides the “why” that can be too easily overlooked in research and daily practice. For example, this perspective allows us to see collaboration (and in turn, integrated instruction) at the secondary level as an approach that – through integrated language/content courses rather than add-on English Language Development classes – allows students to have greater access to the disciplinary content courses required for graduation; helps them avoid remedial tracking and segregation; and creates room in their school schedules to pursue passions and

interests through electives and enrichment courses. An ecological perspective also helps us see the influence of standardized testing, in that collaboration will likely remain an undervalued practice at the school level until it can definitively be tied to students' performance on standardized assessments. Further, taking an ecological view helps to explain why programs for students designated as English Learners do not afford the same programmatic supports, financial resources, and legal protections found in programs populated by students whose families hold greater social, linguistic, economic, and political capital.

An ecological perspective can also explain the persistent differences we have noticed between district policies and classroom-level implementation of teacher collaboration on behalf of students designated as English Learners. Rather than a pathological "problem" with collaboration, we see these differences as a natural outgrowth of the multiple interacting micro/meso/exo-systems that all play a role in teacher collaboration. In this sense, it is natural to expect shifts, as district-level policies on scheduling, curricula, planning time, staffing, and funding are implemented by schools in response to their particular teacher and student populations and subsequently taken up through choices individual teachers make in their collaboration together. The resulting variation is an inevitable response to each context's unique ecology, in many cases with ripple effects from "grassroots" contexts subsequently influencing school and district choices.

Many concerned with equity, however, contend that such variation can open the door to biased and discriminatory practices: Without "compliance" with specific district guidelines or implementation of a model with fidelity to top-down criteria, what can keep an inequitable system from overlooking already marginalized students? An ecological model, in which micro-, meso-, and exo-systemic layers are mutually influential rather than determined by a larger system, suggests ways in which there can be assurances of quality (and compliance) that are sufficiently resilient to the many different micro-systemic ecologies in which students learn. Lessons learned from on-the-ground teacher collaboration can be understood as informing practice and policy from the ground up, thereby valuing instructional responsiveness and quality over reliance on a single predetermined model without attention to what occurs within it. In this sense, having two teachers in the same room is *not* necessarily an ecological affordance for students designated as English Learners. Rather, equity is defined by the quality of the instructional opportunities afforded by teachers, an outcome that we argue is supported by (but not an automatic consequence of) teachers' collaborative practices. High-quality teaching and robust student learning must be the bar we use to measure the impact of collaboration. For example, in a lesson one of us recently observed, an ESL and content teacher were both present in a classroom in which the sole activity was having students individually fill out a memorization-oriented multiplication chart: Such instruction is unlikely to lead to robust learning or language development regardless of which or how many teachers are present. At the same time, however, ineffective collaborative practices are unlikely to lead to high-quality teaching and learning, and for this reason we have found it useful to frame current research on effective teacher collaboration (e.g., Davison, 2008; Pratt, 2014) as reflecting the characteristics of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). In this sense, collaborating teachers see the success of students designated as English Learners as a *joint responsibility*; their work is coordinated, reflecting *mutual engagement*; and they draw upon *shared repertoires* of pedagogical and professional practices. It is these values and practices that can help define collaboration.

### **Why Collaborate? An Ecological Perspective on Systems**

Even with empirical and conceptual clarity to define high-quality collaboration, in our work we have uncovered several ecological considerations that remain largely unaddressed in scholarship on teacher collaboration to serve students designated as English Learners. For example, what is the systemic "end goal" of collaboration? In some of the districts we have worked with, the pairing of ESL and content-area educators to co-teach has been an explicitly temporary strategy: Content-area teachers beginning an ESL

endorsement program are paired with ESL teachers while completing their coursework and are expected to eventually provide integrated language and disciplinary content instruction once endorsed as the single teacher in a classroom. We argue, however, that such arrangements are relatively uncommon. Rather, collaborative teaching solutions tend to be *compensatory* in nature, utilizing ESL teachers' expertise because of content teachers' (real or perceived) lack of expertise; or *pragmatic* in nature, designed to help content teachers address challenging content area disciplines and large groups of multilingual students. Much more rarely, especially at the secondary level, is an understanding that collaboration is neither compensatory nor pragmatic but beneficial in its own right – an arrangement in which the practice of collaborating is mutually enriching and professionally satisfying for teachers, and one that becomes a central part of their teacher identities.

Regardless of approach, however, ESL teachers' collaboration with content teachers is always (and only) a partial solution from a systemic perspective. An administrator we have spoken with sees full-scale co-teaching in all classrooms as an ideal solution, but the limited supply of licensed ESL teachers suggests that these challenges are long-term. Simply put, ESL teachers and their expertise will remain a finite resource, strategically rather than constantly present for content teachers and their students. Understanding this from an ecological perspective makes it clear that capacity-building is likely the most important goal of collaboration if the outcome of this work is improving teaching and learning for all students designated as English Learners. Having two teachers simply present in a classroom does not ensure quality instruction, and from the perspective of capacity-building, only having the ESL teacher assist individual students in the moment is particularly counter-productive for multiple reasons. First, without meaningful opportunities to share ideas and develop solutions together, content and ESL teachers' expertise will remain separate, and collaboration will not provide content teachers with expertise to design more equitable learning opportunities for their students designated as English Learners. Second, such a practice undermines ESL teachers' expertise, suggesting that they do not carry specialized professional knowledge that could be of use to content teachers. (The nature of ESL teachers' expertise is a complicated and nuanced issue, and one that is outside the scope of this essay; here, we simply mention it to describe the complex ecology that surrounds teaching and collaboration.)

### **Why Collaborate? An Ecological Perspective on Equitable Learning**

In concluding this essay, we end with what we consider to be the true "why" for collaboration. In response to the challenges of defining collaboration, we argue that as a tool for equity, collaborative practices are of value in the extent to which they provide the conditions for integration and inclusion for students designated as English Learners. Integration, as we describe it, typifies instruction in which disciplinary content understanding, analytical practices, and language development are integrated rather than separated, and in which disciplinary ideas and practices are central to what happens in classrooms. Integration can also apply to individuals: arrangements can bring together students from all language backgrounds to learn from each other, and it can bring teachers into conversation in ways that enrich their understandings. Inclusion, in our thinking, is broader, more profound, and fundamentally radical: Teacher collaboration is useful to the extent to which it provides genuine and meaningful opportunities to not only "include" but also to "center" linguistically marginalized students and their success in schools.

Moving forward, we urge researchers and educators to carefully consider the ecological systems in which instruction to support students designated as English Learners occur, and what the genuine goals of collaboration are. Specifically, it is necessary to consider critical questions about the relationships among collaborative practices, equity, systemic capacity, and instructional quality. Such considerations can inform educational practice and better frame empirical explorations of co-teaching and related forms of collaboration.

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