**Successful Coteaching: ESL Teachers in Mainstream Classrooms**
*by Jennifer Norton*

Raise your hand if you've been ever been asked to coteach with another teacher! In U.S. K–12 contexts, some schools increasingly use coteaching to address English language learners' (ELLs') language *and* content learning needs simultaneously. Often compared to a marriage, coteaching can be defined as an ESL teacher and a mainstream, or general education, teacher delivering instruction to ELLs within one classroom, negotiating one another's roles, attitudes, and content and teaching expertise.

## What Is Coteaching?

Coteaching should be designed based on students' linguistic and academic needs, the lesson's objectives, the type of activities in the lesson design, and coteachers' preferences and styles (Cook & Friend, 1995; Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010). Depending on the content and language learning objectives at hand, coteaching can take a variety of forms (see "Co-teaching in the ESL Classroom," Honigsfeld & Dove, 2008):

1. one teaching while one assists,
2. station teaching,
3. parallel teaching,
4. preteaching a small group as extra support for the upcoming lesson,
5. team teaching,
6. reteaching, and
7. one leading while one circulates and assesses (Cook & Friend, 1995; Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010).

In addition, coteaching ideally involves coplanning, coreflection on student progress, and teacher collaboration at a curricular level. Some coteachers may share a single classroom all day every day, whereas others may "push in" and coteach on only certain days or at certain times.

## Factors That Affect Coteaching Success

Research on coteaching in K–12 has consistently found requisite conditions for successful coteaching:

1. administrative leadership,
2. administrative supports such as common planning time and feasible schedules, and
3. coteaching preparation and professional development.

District- and school-level administrators can help establish clear roles, responsibilities, and expectations. This leadership sets the tone for teachers' attitudes and practices and can affect the effort put into coteaching. Administrators can determine logistical supports, such as regularly scheduled planning time and reasonable coteaching schedules.

At the teacher level, preparation for coteaching, knowledge of the subject matter, and the pressures of one's teaching position can affect how roles and ownership of classroom space are perceived. Furthermore, communication style, teacher compatibility, teaching philosophy, and attitudes toward ELLs have been noted as affecting coteaching (Weiss & Lloyd, 2003; DelliCarpini, 2009).

## A Coteaching Research Study

A small research study investigated how elementary ESL and general education coteachers across 38 schools (with about 11% ELLs) perceive one another's roles as coteachers (Norton, 2013). Sixty-one respondents self-reported their perceptions of their coteaching via an online survey, and four teachers participated in semistructured follow-up interviews.

The district started coteaching through a small pilot program and expanded incrementally. Now, "push-in" coteaching is required for elementary ESL and general education teachers; no "pull-out" instruction is done (see Haynes, 2016, for an explanation of each). The coteachers in the sample cotaught during regularly scheduled periods. Most general education teachers taught one grade only and cotaught with one or two teachers for less than half of a typical week, whereas most ESL teachers taught five to six different grades with at least five teachers for more than half of a typical week. Almost all respondents had common planning time once a week.

**Findings on Perceptions of Roles: Who Is Responsible?**

*Responsibility for Teaching Language*
Overall, the teachers in this study understood that ESL teachers' coteaching roles involved using language development expertise and general education teachers' roles used their expertise in teaching academic curricular content. However, some disagreement over specific roles and responsibilities surfaced. For example, 11.5% of ESL teachers and 22.9% of general education teachers considered *teaching language to the ELLs* in the class *their* responsibility, not the other teacher's.

*Responsibility for Classroom Management*
In addition, equal roles of coteachers were not a reality, given the ESL teacher's presence in the classroom for one daily or weekly time block. For instance, one general education teacher did the majority of the planning because she taught the class all week, regardless of the ESL teacher's presence. She designed the classroom management procedures, created most of the assessments, and communicated with parents, though her ESL coteacher shared ideas for classroom management and sometimes did grading. In another case, an ESL teacher felt her hectic schedule precluded grading with her coteachers, and she counted on the general education teachers to be responsible for the students on a day-to-day basis. However, she did perceive respect from coteachers regarding her expertise in language development.

The range of perceptions regarding the details of coteaching may be due to the uniqueness of coteaching pairs' working relationships. They may have the freedom to lay out their specific responsibilities depending on logistics, students' needs, or their teaching styles, or the range of

perceptions may be due to confusion regarding who is truly responsible for various aspects of general education classroom teaching and how to share accordingly.

### ESL Coteachers as Coaches

In the context of this study, ESL teachers appeared to be the main messengers about coteaching to general education teachers, and some self-identified as coaches or capacity builders whose goals included educating teachers about serving ELLs in the general education classroom. The onus was on ESL teachers to make entrees into the classroom and to coach or persuade general education counterparts to learn about coteaching. As Honigsfeld and Dove (2010) described, the leadership of ESL teachers can help shape inclusive teaching models. Given that ESL teachers often do "make the first move" in coteaching, developing ESL coteachers as leaders of coteaching can facilitate ongoing, effective coteaching relationships (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010, p. 13).

## Practices for Successful Coteaching: Redefining Borders

For successful coteaching practices, ESL teachers might consider

a) being proactive in grasping the general education curricula when coteaching,
b) *gently* assisting teachers in deepening their understanding of ELLs' needs, and
c) accepting the role of coteaching initiator in many circumstances.

General education teachers might

a) increase their knowledge of language development for ELLs,
b) offer curricular resources to assist ESL teachers in bridging content knowledge gaps, and
c) reflect on shifting away from a single teacher model to a coteaching model.

Establishing clear roles and responsibilities is important for coteaching (Arkoudis, 2006; Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010). When leading a transition to coteaching, policies must be established and disseminated in a coherent, strategic manner.

Administrators need to

a) coordinate across departments to ensure consistent messaging and joint training on coteaching implementation and
b) provide joint professional development for coteaching pairs that includes
    - content on teaching academic content and on teaching ELLs,
    - observing effective coteaching, and
    - being observed and receiving feedback.

School administrators can facilitate coteaching efficacy by creating manageable coteaching schedules and common planning time. Coteaching should not be used to stretch ESL teachers to serve larger "caseloads." Limiting the number of coteaching partners per person can facilitate

substantive coplanning, coteaching, and reflection on students' learning and how to tailor instruction to their needs.

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