



7 Ways to Overcome Coteaching Challenges

by [Felice Atesoglu Russell](#)

The Situation

Imagine you are an ESOL teacher in a middle school. It's the start of the school year and you find that you will be pushing into multiple mainstream classrooms and coteaching with content teachers as a part of your teaching load for the upcoming school year. As an ESOL teacher, you are most familiar with pulling students out of mainstream classes or supporting English language learners (ELLs) in your self-contained ESOL classroom. You think to yourself, "Okay, how hard can this be? Hopefully, the coteacher that I am assigned to work with will be excited to have some language support as they teach content."

As you get going, you realize that collaborating with your coteacher on planning, instruction, and assessment will not be as simple as you initially imagined. There is no common time to meet during the school day, neither of you have ever been in the role of a coteacher, and you are beginning to feel like an unwanted guest during the times that you push into the mainstream classroom.

As you reflect on your situation, you realize that you had little guidance around *how* to coteach before being asked to take on the role. You find you are getting overwhelmed by unrealistic expectations as you try to plan for your ESOL language support classes while at the same time trying to connect with your mainstream content coteachers to find out what the plans are for the day or week, what your role might be in those plans, and how you can best support your students who are learning English in the context of their mainstream content classes. You feel external and internal pressure but also a lack of control over your planning and work with your students, whom you genuinely want to support in the best way possible.

What is an ESOL teacher to do? How can you navigate this new terrain?

You know that with new standards requiring increased rigor for your ELLs, it's important to provide them access to core content while they are being supported in their English language development (Hakuta, 2011); however, you are beginning to wonder how this coteaching model is really helping. Because you have had little training in this type of collaborative model, you feel woefully unprepared to take on this type of collaborative planning, teaching, and assessment (Peercy & Martin-Beltran, 2011).

You end up chatting with Ms. Perez, an ESOL teacher from another grade level, and you find out

that while she also experienced similar frustrations at first, she has developed ways to overcome the initial challenges inherent with the coteaching model of serving ELLs. Ms. Perez talks about how she has developed consistent routines with each of her mainstream content teachers in order to establish rapport and ways of doing the work of coteaching.

Overcoming Coteaching Challenges

The situation described is not unique, as more ESOL teachers are paired with mainstream teachers in coteaching models of instruction for ELLs. Observations from research and practice suggest that when collaborating teachers of multilingual students draw on a shared vision, shared tools, and specific routines, these resources support teacher professional learning and collaboration (Martin-Beltran & Peercy, 2014). I advocate for seven ideas for overcoming challenges and making coteaching work for you in your context.

- 1. Draw on individual teachers' strengths and expertise.** What are you each good at? What do you each like to do? What resources do you each have access to? Recognize that each coteacher brings different knowledge and experience to the work. Draw on that diversity of expertise as you divvy up the work.
- 2. Develop a rhythm and a routine for sharing the work.** For example, plan every Monday after school or email an outline of the plans for the week ahead every Friday. Ensure that you are not starting fresh each week with the *how* of your collaboration. For example, if you are fortunate to have time every Tuesday during common planning, get into the routine of using that time to meet and plan. This way you are not having to take time to figure out how you will plan each week.
- 3. Actively seek out ways to avoid falling into traditional boundaries between ESOL and mainstream.** If you are working with a mainstream teaching partner who is territorial, find ways to support what he or she is already doing in class with the goal of supporting ELLs and, ultimately, providing more effective instruction for all students. One way to do so might be to suggest to the mainstream teacher that you will develop a graphic organizer for the upcoming unit. Another example is that you will pull-out significant vocabulary for the week ahead and come up with an instructional activity.
- 4. Realize that you will likely be paired differently in the future.** Coteaching assignments are not set in stone. You will likely be paired differently in the upcoming school year. Be responsive to your coteaching relationship by collaborating in ways that make the most sense with a particular coteacher. Make best of the situation while keeping the needs of your students in the foreground.
- 5. Recognize and honor the expertise that you bring in teaching language.** As ESOL teachers, your contribution to a cotaught content class holds great value. Recognize what you bring and share your knowledge. This in turn will translate to instruction that is most supportive for students who are simultaneously tasked with learning high-level content and developing their English language proficiency.

6. **Professional development in support of coteaching should involve both ESOL and mainstream teachers.** It is not enough to simply include ESOL teachers in this conversation. Coteaching involves both the ESOL and mainstream teachers. Professional development opportunities and supports should be directed to all coteaching teachers. Ask for your coteachers to be invited to any professional learning opportunities.
7. **Advocate for time at the beginning of the school year to find out expectations for coteaching and plan.** If possible, find time at the start of the year to make plans for the routines and shared tools that will be used in the upcoming school year. If you are provided with this time by your administration, use it wisely. If you do not receive any time, figure out how you and your coteachers will work around this constraint prior to students' arrival.

Acknowledge that it's not always easy and your collaboration will not always go as envisioned. As one coteacher in an elementary school put it, "I think sometimes you have to settle for not the way you think it should be, but the reality of how we're going to get through the day."

References

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