



TESOL Connections

Keeping English language professionals connected

Current Best Strategies for Working With Content Specialists

by Tamara Milbourn, Teresa Bruno, Quanisha Charles, Ariana Magee, and Tamara Stasik

Scholars and organizations have developed many theories and principles to support content specialists when teaching multilingual students. As an eminent example, TESOL's [*The 6 Principles for Exemplary Teaching of English Learners*](#) (Short, Becker, Cloud, Hellman, & Levine, 2018) has synthesized decades of research into guidelines to support best practices.

As many in TESOL know, Short et al.'s (2018) sixth principle is for teachers to engage and collaborate within a community of practice. However, because content instructors may express hesitancy about, or even resistance to, incorporating language support (e.g., Bacon, 2018) and possibly view language specialists as having lower status (e.g., Stewart, 2018), being a language specialist working with content specialists can be challenging.

A dialogue held during the [2019 TESOL Convention](#) about these issues provided participants an opportunity to (1) share experiences and (2) begin to build a community resource on interpersonal communication strategies to aid language specialists in their work. More specifically, the dialogue centered around the following questions:

1. What forms of support and opposition from content instructors have you seen or experienced in your work?
2. What interpersonal communication strategies have you employed or witnessed that have been especially effective/ineffective in facilitating the modification of content teachers' classroom practices to support multilingual learners?
3. What next steps need to be taken to support language specialists when working with content teachers?

The remainder of this article presents a summary of the notes participants shared with the authors detailing their small group discussions and the conclusions participants reached during a large group dialogue toward the end of the session. Furthermore, the authors, who all participated in the dialogue, have interwoven some additional points based on their own professional and academic experiences. Dialogue attendees mainly came from secondary and higher education, so these synthesized comments should be taken to reflect participants' experience in both contexts.

1. Supports and Opposition

Supports

When asked about the forms of assistance they had encountered from content teachers, attendees reported they felt most supported when content specialists

- showed a willingness to collaborate;
- implemented TESOL methodology (e.g., SIOP, visuals, graphic organizers);
- had positive orientations toward the work; and
- had access to professional development/training in teaching multilingual learners that was (1) part of new faculty/teacher orientation and (2) meaningful, convenient, and ongoing.

Additionally, attendees stated they felt validated when administrative, organizational, and legislative backing was present. For example, participants reported feeling bolstered when supporting multilingual learners in content classes was a sitewide initiative.

Opposition

Attendees reported opposition from content teachers often came in the form of their not understanding their roles in educating multilingual learners. Participants observed that content teachers sometimes viewed themselves solely as content teachers, not language facilitators. Participants noted that content specialists expected that language instruction should be left to the language specialist because

- time to collaborate was limited,
- content teachers were responsible for covering all material for state assessments, and
- inclusion of language acquisition may “water down” the content.

Participants also reported that content teachers’ current teaching styles/methods were often more traditional, which did not easily incorporate language acquisition pedagogy.

2. Interpersonal Communication Strategies

For the purposes of the dialogue, interpersonal communication was defined as the verbal, nonverbal, and written exchanges between people intended “to achieve a variety of instrumental and communication goals such as informing, persuading, and providing emotional support” (Berger, 2010, p. 1). The following chart highlights participants’ views on effective versus ineffective communication strategies for working with content specialists.

Effective	Ineffective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Supportive language <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ expressing empathy/admiration ○ modeling language of kindness/respect ● Collegial collaborations through <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ coplanning ○ open discussions ○ casual meetings ● Presence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ showing up! ○ attending new faculty orientation ● Supportive documentation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ sharing with faculty impact data using graphs/examples ● Short, concise emails <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ being personable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Categorical statements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ You need to... ○ I want to.... ○ I have <i>the</i> solution ● Communication of a deficit mindset of content teacher as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ being uninformed/unsuitable to work with students ○ lacking knowledge in the TESOL field ● “Sit and get” PDs with no <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ follow-ups ○ material applying to the content teachers’ context(s) ● Mass, cold emails that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ appear to be spam ○ are uncongenial

3. Schall-Leckrone and O’Connor

Attendees in the 2019 dialogue also had the opportunity to compare their current experiences to the findings of a similar discussion held at a previous TESOL Convention. In the August 2012 issue of *TESOL Connections*, Laura Schall-Leckrone and Kevin O’Connor published the article [“Fostering Content-Based Instruction Through Collaboration”](#) based on their participants’ discussion of the benefits and challenges of supporting multilingual learners in the content classroom. Thanks to vigorous discussion, participants did not have time to examine all the information from Schall-Leckrone and O’Connor (2012); however, 2019 attendees shared the following comparisons.

Although the English language teaching and learning landscape has evolved, many of the ideas discussed in 2012 were found to be still valid today. Language specialists in 2019 still strive to understand discipline-specific content knowledge, access content resources (such as texts, manipulatives, and scaffolds), and utilize their language expertise to analyze content area standards and instructional strategies. A remaining concern was the need for shared professional development with content area teachers and coteaching opportunities. The most common refrain, in 2012 and 2019, was that teachers must have time to collaborate and the ability and tools to communicate.

In addition, the importance of coplanning to strategize and implement effective instructional approaches has not diminished, though the strategies suggested have advanced significantly, especially because of the technology available. In 2012, utilizing electronic media for communication was more likely to be novel, while in 2019, cloud-based file sharing and online communication systems for teachers to share student data were discussed as commonplace in many settings. The increased access to digital resources and communication, however, has come

with challenges around consistent access and coteachers' proficiency level with the tools available. Furthermore, 2019 participants acknowledged that while access to resources has increased significantly, teachers can be overwhelmed by the wealth of information and struggle to choose the best resource for the language and learning objectives.

4. Next Steps and Conclusion

As is evident from the preceding summary, this effort to determine best practices for working with content specialists distilled concepts of successful support and communication strategies. Moving forward, the 2019 attendees identified three areas to improve:

1. Fostering stronger collaboration
2. Advocating for language specialists
3. Conducting further research

Both higher education and K–12 settings can make meaningful adjustments to structures already in place. For example, new teacher training and professional development opportunities before classes begin could include ESL presentations or workshops to consider language learners and coteaching possibilities. Part of this training should be about content teachers' roles in educating multilingual students in regard to language acquisition and how to use digital resources effectively when collaborating.

Not only should school districts and administration provide the space in existing programs to acknowledge student language needs and validate specialists' work already in progress, they also need to provide additional scheduling, advising, and funding for this essential work. Teachers and professors must be involved in these activities as well, especially in devising curriculum, learning guides, and teaching resources that are tailored to specific disciplines. Finally, conducting further research on models of goal setting, instruction, and assessment will aid in developing a stronger knowledge base and teacher relationships that support our students.

In sum, this brief report verifies ongoing concerns regarding communication between language specialists and content teachers. The authors endorse extensive material, pedagogical, and theoretical support to sustain language learning for students in content-based classrooms.

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