# The Call to Collaborate: Key Considerations as ELD and Classroom Teachers Begin to Align New Standards

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**Abstract**
*Classroom teachers and English Language Learner (ELL) specialists are being called upon to collaborate in new ways in order to align new English Language Proficiency standards with new content standards. Instead of viewing language as a bridge to cross before accessing content, now language and content are being promoted as a partnership between teachers of ELLs. Currently, teachers of ELLs are isolated from one other, resulting in a lack of continuity among language, literacy, and content. Teachers of ELLs require time to collaborate, but time alone will not address the complexity of collaboration; teachers must also be aware of the dominance of an idealistic perception of collaboration. For ELL students to be successful in academics, literacy, and linguistic proficiency, teachers of ELLs must consider how issues of time and collaboration in their own schools can be resolved and how schools can become more effective in connecting language, literacy, and content.*

**Keywords:** *English language learners, collaboration, language, literacy, content, teachers, specialists, standards*

### Introduction

Classroom teachers and English Language Learner (ELL) specialists are being called upon to collaborate in order to align new English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards with new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) (Linquanti, R., & Hakuta, K., 2012; Oregon Department of Education, 2014; Quinn, H., Cheuk, T., & Castellón, M., 2012; Valdés, G., Kibler, A., & Walqui, A., 2014). This marks a shift in thinking from language learning as a separate endeavor taught mainly by ELL specialists to language learning through constructing meaning in content areas, and this shift requires ELL teachers and classroom teachers to bring together language and content in new ways (Ciechanowski, K., 2013). Instead of viewing language as a "bridge to cross" before accessing content, now language and content are being promoted as a partnership between teachers of ELLs (CCSSO & ELPD Framework Committee, et. al, 2012).

While the new standards and new assessments that accompany those standards provide an opportunity for ELL specialists to work more closely in collaboration with classroom teachers, there are key considerations that must be addressed in forging these new

relationships. Primarily, teachers of ELLs need structured time together, but time alone will not address more complex and detrimental issues. One of these issues is a dominant view of idealistic collaboration, wherein collaboration is only done between teachers who like each other and does not involve the necessary yet difficult work of sometimes disagreeing (Honigsfeld, A., & Dove, M.G., 2010). The other critical issue that also needs to be addressed is the ELL teachers' comparatively lower status among teachers, which mimics larger national views toward ELL students (Creese, A., 2005). This paper presents evidence that these two issues can interfere with the successful integration of ELP standards and CCSS standards.

***The data revealed that classroom teachers, ELL specialists, and reading intervention specialists worked in isolation from each other.***

This paper presents data collected in 2010 from a qualitative study of twelve elementary teachers from two schools in the Pacific Northwest to answer the research question: "What are the discourses that teachers of ELL students negotiate?" The data revealed that classroom teachers, ELL specialists, and reading intervention specialists worked in isolation from each other and often did not find the opportunity to observe in each others' classrooms. This led to teachers not knowing what was happening with their shared ELL students. In order to align new standards and assessments, teachers of ELLs will need to address key issues that contribute to this isolation such as an idealistic perception of collaboration and differences in status among teachers.

The data from this study were drawn from twelve teacher interviews, twelve teacher observations, and two 90-minute focus groups in the fall of 2010 approved by university human research protocols. The study was conducted in two elementary schools in the Pacific Northwest with an ELL population of 15% or higher. At each school, the participants included two classroom teachers, two ELL specialists, and two literacy specialists. Overall, twenty-seven hours of data were compiled consisting of approximately fifteen hours of audiotaped interview and focus group data along with twelve hours of field notes from observations. The data for this article focus primarily on the interview question "When you are working with other teachers and specialists in your school, in what ways do theory, politics, or instructional beliefs play a part in collaborative decisions?" A qualitative approach was chosen for this project as a way to richly explore the themes that emerged from the participants' insights, experiences, and viewpoints.

Audio-data were digitally collected, and then transcribed using Transana, an open-source transcription and analysis software. After loading the media, the data was coded using discourse analysis by creating a series of episode files within Transana. The discourse analysis used in this study focused on Gee's (2011) concept of context as a reflexive tool in creating meaning. Gee (2011) provides four questions that lead the researcher to examine discourse. For example, one question that was essential for this strand of data analysis asks if the speech "creates or shapes (possibly manipulates) the context" (Gee, 2011, p. 85). This question examines how the

speaker's choice of language is responsible for the creation and sustained presence of a context, in this case the existence of the isolation of teachers fueled by an idealistic view of collaboration and reflection of status between teachers. For example, the comment from a teacher who reflected on the nature of collaboration as having "cool people to talk with" reflected a discourse of an idealistic vision of collaboration.

**The isolation of teachers of ELLs**

Current common practices separate ELP instruction from classroom instruction, often in the form of pull-out ELP instruction. This division is further solidified with separate assessments for ELP and state-required assessments for grade-level content. Both the ELL specialist and the classroom teacher are able to meet their assessment goals without intentionally weaving together language, literacy, and content. ELL students' linguistic and content needs cannot be separated and treated as distinct because they are complex and dependent upon each other. While a simple response is to teach language, literacy, and content separately, in doing so, we reduce the complexity of language for the sake of making it measurable and oftentimes meaningless (Dantas-Whitney et al., 2009). Our ELL students often move from one classroom where they receive content to another where they receive ELP instruction, without the necessary explicit connections between content and language.

***"That's not really my job."***

Different teachers of ELLs can often see themselves in charge of different parts of an ELL students' day. Current practice divides content, literacy, and language goals into separate entities, with little time allotted to putting the various perspectives together into a complete picture. Comments from the different teachers of ELLs reveal this isolation and separation.

- Classroom Teacher: *"I don't have to worry about the language development . . . that's not really my job."*
- Literacy Specialist: *"Primarily, what I'm doing is teaching kids how to read."*
- ELL Specialist: *"Our role is to teach the functions of language."*

These comments reveal a narrowly defined responsibility for content and language learning. The reality of testing pressures and lack of time together results in the day being divided up into discrete pieces. It is a false sense of efficiency where different teachers have isolated tasks and put the responsibility of connecting content and language on the shoulders of the ELL students themselves. While the clear goals and objectives of the ELL specialist, classroom teacher, or literacy specialist provide a focus for specific learning outcomes, they tend to not lend themselves to the co-creation of a more cohesive program for ELL students.

**The allocation of effective time together**

While it may seem obvious, for collaboration to occur teachers need dedicated structured time together. Effective and productive collaboration cannot happen during teachers' prep or transition time. Time is one of teachers' most valuable commodities and without it, collaboration will not occur (Santos,

Darling-Hammond, & Cheuk, n.d.). The data from this study reveal different perceptions of scheduled time together and confirm the reality facing teachers of ELL students who simply do not have enough time to talk with other teachers, share student data, and plan new approaches.

***"I don't have time to talk"***

Teachers spoke of not having enough time: "Everyone else is doing these amazing things and you might just not know it because you haven't gone down to ask them and they don't have time to explain." This comment speaks to how more immediate needs take precedence if structured time is not embedded in the busy school schedule, as observed below.

***[M]ore immediate needs take precedence if structured time (for collaboration) is not embedded in the busy school schedule***

- Classroom Teacher: *"I think that's a huge crutch in our system, that everyone else is doing these amazing things and you might just not know it because you haven't gone down to ask them and they don't have time to explain."*
- Classroom Teacher: *"We have a push-in (push-in is typically when the ELL specialist or assistant goes into the mainstream classroom and works with students in their home classroom, rather than pulling students out into an ELL classroom for instruction) so that's really nice from ELL and she comes and helps and I schedule writing at that time so she comes in and works with the ELL students."*
- Classroom Teacher: *"All of the ELL assistants are amazing and do great work but I don't have time to talk to them because they leave before my day is over."*

The two examples above demonstrated how classroom teachers discussed the role of the ELL assistants instead of the ELL teacher. One classroom teacher was clearly pleased at having an ELL assistant come into her classroom. Another classroom teacher spoke of not having enough time to meet with the ELL assistant who is amazing and does great work.

Moving beyond an "it's really nice" model to a model that builds upon and connects the expertise of all the teachers is what is currently needed for the challenging work ahead. Part of this work involves creating time and space for the teachers of ELLs to collaborate on both the co-planning of curriculum and the co-teaching of the lessons. The following data from this study describe how teachers of ELLs view this time allocation differently.

- Literacy Specialist: *"We get to meet with our teachers, half our staff about every other week, I think it is, and then the other half on the other – so twice a month we're meeting with staff so we get to meet with all staff once a month, that's what it is."*
- ELL Specialist: *"I might occasionally hear from a class, from grade level teams or classroom teachers, something that their kids are working on in class and that they are asking me to support in their ELL time."*

These comments reveal the difficulty of teachers finding common time such as "I might occasionally hear from a class".

Other teachers also spoke of complicated schedules of meetings with ELL specialists or literacy specialists as the norm. Accepting ineffective systems is an example of denying, being unaware of, or minimizing the marginalization of language goals. These comments reveal that teachers in this study accept the current schedules that are set up for teachers of ELLs to collaborate, and through that acceptance further perpetuate the isolation between the teachers of ELLs.

**The idealistic perception of collaboration**

An idealistic perception of collaboration is one that romanticizes work between teachers. This romantic or idealistic view is harmful because it limits not only who collaborates with whom but also limits the extent of these collaborative relationships. A complex collaboration between the various teachers of ELLs moves beyond sharing similar belief systems or simply bouncing ideas off of each other. Identifying the academic language demands to meet the new standards will require a more complex view of collaboration with possible differences in belief, approaches, and methods.

***"We have the same belief system"***

In an idealistic view of collaboration, like-minded people collaborate with each other and the difficult work of aligning goals rarely occurs. With idealistic collaboration, teachers do not choose to work with teachers outside of their own groups' belief system, such as the ELL specialists working among themselves, or classroom teachers forming a team without the ELL specialist. This is a limited view of collaboration and is revealed through comments collected from this study such as "people with the same belief system bouncing ideas off each other." This type of idealistic collaboration prohibits a complex perception of collaboration that acknowledges differences in beliefs.

New standards require teachers, both ELL and classroom, to work together to create new ways of teaching language, literacy, and content in pursuit of common goals for ELL students. An idealistic perception can ignore the often-difficult differences in opinions that complex collaboration presents. Complex collaboration requires teachers of ELLs to find new ways to connect language, literacy, and content goals by honoring the expertise of each teacher. While many positive results and feelings result from a unified identity such as teams, by nature, it is also accompanied by the exclusion of certain groups of teachers from the team. This is evident in the following data:

- Literacy Specialist: *"Well, our, our teams meet every week"*
- Literacy Specialist: *"Well, in Title 1, we have the same belief systems in how reading works and what's important about teaching reading so we have been very fortunate."*

Literacy specialists had positive comments about the time they met as "teams" sharing a similar belief system. A close analysis of subtle linguistic choices, such as pronoun choice or the use of the word 'team', shed light on the various ways that teachers perceived their relationships and status with each other (Gee, 2011). Both classroom teachers and literacy specialists spoke of their "teams", but ELL specialists did not refer to themselves as a team during the data collected for this study. If a

team approach includes and excludes, teachers can remain separate and divided, interfering with productive, complex collaboration.

ELL specialists in this study did not identify, as a "team", and the lack of active participation in the different meetings are an important piece of information. One ELL specialist spoke of how she "occasionally hears from a grade-level team or classroom teacher". She mentioned that classroom teachers "ask me to support in their ELL time", but does not talk about being a part of a team. This lack of inclusion can further exacerbate the misalignment between literacy, language, and content goals.

Teachers in this research study revealed different perceptions of collaboration. Regardless of the differences in belief systems, teachers must seek out expertise from one another for the success of their ELL students. Santos et al (n.d.) offered, "Educators with deep discipline knowledge and content pedagogical skills need to partner with English language development specialists to guide professional development" (p. 8). Likewise, the data collected from this study reveal a need to develop a more complex definition of collaboration that draws upon the expertise of various teachers.

***"You can bounce ideas off each other"***

Other teachers' comments perpetuated an idealistic and superficial perception of collaboration, such as "You can bounce ideas off" each other and "we've tried to talk about what are things that we're doing in literacy or what are things that they're doing in ELL that would help those kids." While the description of these current systems begins to address how teachers of ELLs can work together, these comments also reveal a lack of effectiveness and depth in aligning language, literacy, and content goals.

- Classroom Teacher: *"You can bounce ideas off and they will have information for you or share information that they can help you with."*
- Literacy Specialist: *"Each time we've gotten together we've tried to talk about what are things that we're doing in literacy or what are things they're doing in ELL that would help those kids with the vocabulary and the content."*

These perceptions can reveal an ineffective view because they place ELL specialists on the periphery of instruction instead of within a system that integrates language, literacy, and content holistically. Though ELL specialists are considered helpful sources of information or useful sounding boards for ideas, this perception views language, literacy, and content as separate entities and places ELL specialists on the sidelines as assistants or resources to be used at the discretion of the classroom teacher or literacy specialist instead of as co-teachers and essential colleagues for collaboration. This reveals a difference in status and perception of the ELL specialist.

***"We think for ourselves but try for consistency"***

A more complex and effective perception of collaboration between teachers of ELLs includes examining teachers' autonomy and differences in belief systems while also accepting the necessity of consistency, but not conformity, between the ELL specialist,

classroom teacher, and literacy specialist. This classroom teacher's comment reveals some of this complexity: "We think for ourselves and obviously we are our own teachers but we try for consistency". This comment embraces the need for autonomy and expertise while acknowledging the sometimes-difficult responsibility to work with other teachers.

- ELL Specialist: *"Last year, I worked with someone in the district who I disagreed with on many things. Her theory, politics, instruction were all completely opposing. We had the same job. We agreed to set aside our beliefs."*
- ELL Specialist: *"It doesn't come down to this policy or that policy. It comes down to listening. Everyone wants to learn. We want to help kids."*
- Classroom Teacher: *"You know, we think for ourselves and obviously are our own teachers but we do try for consistency. We try to do the same things with one another or do the same things as the other is doing."*

***Without confronting an idealistic perception, collaboration will remain something that like-minded teachers do with the people of their choosing during their prep periods and free time.***

Schools are filled with a wide variety of teachers, personalities, cultures, and methods for the best way to teach students. School relationships between teachers of ELL students often occur within seemingly respectful and polite school cultures, but the question remains concerning whether these polite interactions or idealistic collaborations are contributing to increased success for ELL students. Achinstein (2002) described the difference between a complex and idealistic vision of collaboration: "In their optimism about caring and supportive communities, advocates often underplay the role of diversity, dissent and disagreement in community life, leaving practitioners ill-prepared and conceptions of collaboration underexplored" (p. 421). Perceptions of idealistic collaboration interfere with effective collaboration, which may involve differences in ideas or methodology.

Teachers of ELL students must accept and create a complex view of collaboration, one that includes space for disagreement and difference (Achinstein, 2002; Arkoudis, 2006; DuFour, 2007). An awareness of this idealistic discourse regarding collaboration allows teachers to challenge established norms of dominance and move forward in seeking out different positions of power, voice, and dissent (Clarke, 2005; Gee, 1996; Miller Marsh, 2002). Respectfully working through places of discomfort and congeniality can lead to a rich weaving of expertise and experiences from each teacher that ultimately benefit our ELLs.

### *"It's a little more effective"*

Overall, teachers in this study did not seem convinced of the necessity to collaborate or of the actual effectiveness of collaboration. Some teachers were very clear about the positive effects of collaboration, such as "there's no doubt" to it being effective. Other teachers however described their collaborative efforts as just "a little more effective". What is clear is that teachers value collaboration differently.

- Classroom Teacher: *"There's no doubt that you know that working as a team has true benefits."*
- Classroom Teacher: *"When we have time for collaboration, it's a little more effective than when I'm doing my own."*

The adoption of new ELP standards and their alignment with CCSS Standards makes the need for collaboration more essential. For example new standards focus on the development of discipline specific language development, which is a place where ELL specialists can offer their expertise and time (Cheuk, 2013).

Without confronting an idealistic perception, collaboration will remain something that like-minded teachers do with the people of their choosing during their prep periods and free time. Teachers of ELLs who are engaged in complex and effective collaborative relationships listen and share expertise with the explicit purpose of aligning the content and language goals.

**Conclusion**

Dividing the curriculum responsibilities for ELLs into distinct parts puts an unrealistic burden and responsibility on ELLs to integrate language learning with content and literacy learning. This is a responsibility that all the teachers of ELLs must assume instead. As advocates and agents of change for our ELLs, we aim to seek out different ways of doing things that will disrupt ineffective patterns. This current system that isolates the content classroom teacher, literacy specialist, and ELL specialist has created a fragmented curriculum for ELLs. A response to this unproductive system must include the allocation of structured time, challenging the idealistic view of collaboration, and examining power structures within schools. York-Barr (2007) described this as "re-culturing instead of restructuring" and considers the need to examine larger ways of looking at, framing, and responding to relationships between teachers. The teachers in this study reveal this deeper need for structural and pedagogical change that hinges on awareness of the dominant discourses along with the complexity of collaboration and the allocation of time.

Collaboration between the teachers of ELLs has become increasing more necessary with the adoption of new standards, but one cannot ignore the layers of challenges. Once those challenges are acknowledged and addressed, teachers of ELLs can engage in more effective and productive interactions. Within the last few years, some promising practices have emerged whereby ELL specialists are essential creators in the planning of curriculum. Some schools have built upon their Professional Learning Team models to examine a professional book on co-teaching and collaboration (see Honigsfeld, A., & Dove, M. G., 2010). Other schools have dedicated time to co-planning curriculum around a Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD) model or Sheltered Instruction (SIOP) model. In these models, ELP standards have been integrated with content standards in model units of study. These are then taught in the mainstream classroom with both the ELL specialist and the classroom teacher co-teaching the lessons. While the co-teaching approach can look different based upon the strengths of each teacher and school, the key is to integrate opportunities for

all students to identify and practice language through focusing, modeling, and scaffolding academic uses of language. ELL specialists are able to lend their expertise on scaffolding academic language throughout classroom content and classroom teachers are able to identify where they can focus on academic language. New ELP standards are more relevant and accessible for ELLs when the ELL specialist and the classroom teacher plan and teach curriculum together. Each comes to the lesson with his/her own lens in regards to content and language demands, which result in a more cohesive and meaningful learning experience for our ELLs. This article presents data that describes why it is necessary to examine the ways in which we define collaboration, identify the isolation between teachers, and examine the different perceptions of status.

Separate standardized assessments for content and language might continue to dictate separate instruction, but new standards are asking for a closer alignment of content and language goals, which is best achieved by tapping into the expertise of all the different teachers of ELLs. This study concludes with three recommendations.

The first recommendation is that the teachers of ELLs including classroom teachers, ELL specialists, and literacy specialists have scheduled times to meet to align the new standards. This is a shared responsibility between the teachers of ELLs and their administrators. Through a close examination of ELP standards, teachers of ELLs can begin to uncover places of alignment, where both content and language goals can be strengthened within the same unit. Teachers need to advocate for more scheduled time together, while administrators need to find time within existing schedules to dedicate time to planning curriculum that aligns new ELP standards and new content standards.

The second recommendation is that teachers of ELLs, including classroom teachers, ELL specialists, and literacy specialists, discuss how a view of idealistic collaboration persists in their schools. Teachers need to honestly and critically examine with whom and how they collaborate with others within their schools. While there might be systems in place to check in with different teachers, these systems limit the degree to which ELL specialists can contribute their expertise on incorporating academic language. They also limit the degree to which classroom teachers can find places where language can complement content. Teachers who are pulled into working relationships with each other based on aligning new standards will move beyond an idealistic view of collaboration.

The third and final recommendation is that teachers of ELLs including classroom teachers, ELL specialists, and literacy specialists examine how larger structures of power and status are mimicked within their own school cultures. In pursuit of developing and teaching curriculum in which both language and content goals are met, it is important to first examine how the ELL specialist is valued within the school. Teachers of ELLs who are looking toward examining larger structures of power can ask questions such as: "What is the role of the ELL specialist within the school?", "How do we as a school value multiple opportunities to combine language and content, and where is that evident?" or "Where do we put into practice what we believe about the

teaching of language and content?" While teachers of ELLs need to self-reflect and closely examine their honest responses to these questions, administrators can also facilitate discussions of how to create equal status among the teachers of ELLs.

With the onset of new standards for content and language, ELL students need their teachers to weave together language, literacy, and content by advocating for time to engage in effective and productive collaboration with an awareness of the dominant discourses that isolate teachers of ELLs.

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