# Speaking the Same Language: Bringing Together Highly-Qualified Secondary English and Special Education Teachers

Lisa A. Dieker
Denise M. Ousley

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# Speaking the Same Language: Bringing Together Highly-Qualified Secondary English and Special Education Teachers

Lisa A. Dieker
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**Abstract**

The focus of this article is to provide practical tools to assist secondary special educators and English teachers to more effectively meet the needs of students with disabilities in the area of English/Language Arts. The articles focuses on ideas that emerged as two teacher educators brought together 6-12 English and special education preservice teachers in an attempt to prepare them for the changes in the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (2004) as well as to ensure greater access and success for students in secondary English classrooms. The authors provide an overview of a tool for planning a co-taught lesson, a modified cooperative learning tool for behavior and reading difficulties, several tools to assist with reading material at this level, and two activities that embrace nonfiction material and authentic assessment of material that allows for peer and teacher support in an inclusive English classroom.

**Keywords**

secondary special education, english/language arts, teacher preparation, highly qualified

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Our work started with funding from the Florida Department of Education that brought together a professor in special education focused on secondary issues and a 6-12 English Language Arts coordinator at our university. What started as a model to offer dual-certification at the secondary level has become a passion for providing tools that help our two fields speak a similar language for meeting the needs of learners who struggle at the secondary level. What we want to share are practical ideas as well as our "aha" moments which lead to novel and modified ideas that exist at the core of a strong inclusive classroom in secondary English. Of course, we believe the core of this work should be modeling co-teaching in higher education, showing how co-teaching can work, and taking risks ourselves. We found that prior to our teaching this class, we had almost seven months to create a common language and a core of ideas we wanted to present. However, this core was not evident when we introduced it to students who lacked a rigorous background in secondary literacy (special educators) or students who had limited knowledge about the field of special education (English educators). The semester started with strong resistance from both groups, but ended with a realization (especially as they moved into student teaching) that what we modeled and presented in this blended program was reality. We also kept at the core of our co-teaching the developmental stages of teaming (storming, norming, performing) and especially focused on storming (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). During initial collaboration, both groups showed concerns (and some may continue to storm forever) but as time passed, we found norming and in many cases, their performing to work across disciplines and more importantly, we found we were able to norm on how secondary special educators and English teachers can more effectively meet the needs of all students.

The need for collaborative preparation is critical as current mandates in IDEA 2004 are bringing many secondary teachers together with limited teaming preparation or ideas about how to work at the secondary level to support students who may lack basic skills needed for success. Two issues that impact students with disabilities at the secondary level are high stakes testing and the increasing diversity of the classroom population (Cartledge & Loe, 2001; Leavell, Cowart, & Wilhelm, 1999). To address these primary issues, we attempted to prepare special educators and secondary English educators to speak a blended language across the two fields. We decided to focus on blended preparation in English since the majority of the IEPs of students with disabilities have some type of focus on the need for reading (Lyon, 1995; Sabornie & deBettencourt, 2004). We started this journey knowing that in a perfect world two teachers (special and 6-12 English) would work together to ensure the success of all students. However, a lack of resources, complex school schedules, increased caseloads and teacher readiness impact these issues at the secondary level. Our intention in this article is to provide a brief overview of our journey, but more importantly to provide practical solutions and blended approaches related to the areas of co-teaching, cooperative learning, assistive technology, alternative reading materials and tools for alternative assessment in secondary inclusive classrooms.

## Co-Teaching

As the changes in IDEA 2004 are being implemented related to the term "highly-qualified," co-teaching is being utilized in more secondary classrooms. Although this article is not strictly about collaboration, a

few essential components of co-teaching were at the core of what we discussed and modeled related to dual preparation of our special education and 6-12 English teachers.

One of our first "aha" moments was noting the differences in both background and language between our two groups of teacher education candidates. The traditional special education preservice teachers had a range of experiences with literature, but not all in our group had recent or even rich experiences. In contrast, the 6-12 English teachers were very strong in literature and the writing process, but had limited skills in teaching students how to read or addressing unique learning or behavioral issues. Acknowledging these differences and the impossibility for any teacher to know "everything" was the first step to creating a meaningful relationship between these two fields. In our work we were never once afraid to say, "What does that mean?" or "I have never heard of that book or term." Second, as we co-taught our undergraduate students, we felt that it was essential to understand that a part of the teaming process is not always agreeing, and that agreeing to disagree and experiencing some type of storming between teachers of two different fields could be expected. Third, we acknowledged that collaboration can take more time, but that at this level, both teachers have to be realistic about the time they have to give. If a special educator is working across 6-8 teachers and an English teacher has 4-6 periods of over 150 students, both teachers have a ton of paperwork and other time commitments. Therefore, recognizing that co-planning must exist for true co-teaching and acknowledging the level of co-teaching that can occur due to other factors is important. When planning time is available, both teachers must commit to showing up at that time and using that time efficiently. Once both teachers are in a room together, we provide some key questions to assist in making their planning time as efficient as possible and providing a structure to assist in daily planning to meet the needs of a wide range of learners. *Prior to the start of the semester, these questions should be addressed:*

1. How will we address behavioral needs? - Consistency is a key to answering this question. What will the plan be that we use? The "happenstance" plan that whoever happens to be closest deals with the issue, or will one person take the lead in behavior? Also do we have a clear set of rules, rewards, and consequences established that we both agree upon?

2. How will we grade students in this class with varying skill levels and how will we communicate this grading system to the student and their family? - Deciding grading adaptations or modifications should occur at the beginning of a semester, and issues such as if students will be given credit for effort or specific IEP goals must be determined. Too many times these decisions are made at the end of the semester, which can cause friction and leave students unclear as to how they are being evaluated.

3. How will we modify assessments, and what modifications will be allowed for this student on state assessments? - Talking about each student's needs in the specific content area (in this case, English) helps to determine what specific needs are to be met by the special educator in the class to ensure the student's specific needs are addressed.

During daily planning we recommended that the team of teachers try to focus on these four areas as they plan effective lessons to meet the needs of all students. We recommended that they not fall into the trap of preservation on a negative discussion about a particular

student's behavior but instead focus on planning effective lessons that meet the needs of all students.

1. What is the primary goal of the lesson we plan to teach based on state standards? Having a specific goal helps the special educator understand exactly what the student with a disability should accomplish or if modifications or adaptations will need to be made to the primary goal.

2. Which of the five types of co-teaching will we use to most effectively meet the needs of our students? Deciding whether to use station teaching, one-lead-one support, alternative teaching, parallel teaching, or team teaching at the beginning of the lesson can save time and create a structure to help move the planning forward (For more information on these types, see Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend, 1989).

3. What instructional strategies will be taught to all students? – Using specific instructional strategies may be critical for students with disabilities and if this is the case, then will these strategies be used for specific students or for the entire class (e.g., using a think-pair share technique)?

4. What behavioral accommodations or social skills need to be taught as part of the curriculum to ensure we are meeting the needs of specific students with disabilities? Using students' IEPs, a discussion should occur around any social skills instruction that needs to be taught to the student (that could possibly be a goal for the entire class) or any behavioral needs that must be addressed to ensure student success (e.g., a cool down spot).

These questions were the result of another "aha" moment, realizing that only when both teachers have identified how they will meet the needs of their students as a team are they ready to implement instructional techniques that embrace a more diverse classroom. Therefore, once we had created a collaborative environment across the student-teacher teams, we found our next task was to provide them with tools to help them teach differently than perhaps just reading text, providing low-level texts to students, or simply lecturing to students. The instructional tools that follow (cooperative learning, assistive technology, brown bag exam, and nonfiction extravaganza) are examples that our student-teacher teams seemed to value the most in their collaborative planning.

*Cooperative Learning*

At the core of our discussion with these teams of preservice teachers was the belief that students with disabilities need to have the opportunity to help others, just as they may need to receive help in a general education classroom. With this in mind, we talked a great deal about setting up structures such as cooperative learning because when used correctly, it allows students with disabilities to give as well as receive help. This strategy also has strong support as an evidence-based practice (Gut & Safran, 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 1981; Kagan, 1992), and when used correctly, provides an avenue for students with disabilities to give and receive support.

We specifically encouraged the use of the cooperative learning technique called literature circles. Literature circles have been gaining prominence in the literature, especially at the elementary and middle school level, but when modified, this strategy could be an ideal tool for secondary students with disabilities. Literature circles combine the importance of cooperative learning where students are independent in what they contribute and depend-

ent in their learning. Literature circles also provide students with a pre- and post-reading strategy as well as a way to chunk (summarize) what has been read. These skills are all related to best practices in reading. Literature circles are usually presented as from a constructivist, student-centered perspective, designed to foster student collaboration and reading engagement through student-led discussions, questions, memories, and graphic and linguistic connections. According to Campbell Hill, Johnson, and Schlick-Noe (2004), traditional literature circles employ small groups of students who discuss a piece of literature through students' individual responses to the reading and through the context of the group's discussions. Students discuss plot, character, craft, and personal connections from the reading. Collaboration is the key to the literature circle experience, as students must read and respond to each other as well as to the work being discussed. For a secondary inclusive classroom, we created a simplified version of literature circles than what might typically be seen in the literature (Daniels, 2002). For general and special education students working together in co-taught classrooms, we introduced terms that we felt would be easier for students with disabilities to understand as well as a great deal more structure than is proposed in traditional literature circles. In the structure we presented, students could be reading in their group, the teacher could be reading to the class, or the text could even be read on tape or signed by an interpreter. The way the text is inputted could also vary based upon the reading levels and the needs of the students in the classroom. The terms we presented for use in the student literature circles were predictor, questioner, clarifier, summarizer, and artist. The job of each role was defined as follows:

1. *Predictor* – This student's role is to predict what they think will happen in the story next.

2. *Clarifier* – This student clarifies any word someone has difficulty pronouncing or to explain any concepts students have difficulty understanding. They are also designated as the person who has permission to call over the teacher if the group cannot address something.

3. *Questioner* – This person is to ask the group a question related to the text typically using a "who, what, when, where or why" type of question.

4. *Summarizer* – This student provides a verbal summary of the story (10 words or less) and the group counts as the student retells the main points of the story.

5. *Artist* – This student can be doodling while the reader is reading the story but the doodles should relate to the content of the story.

Since our teams of teachers immediately worried about putting kids in groups and working together, we also suggested a behavioral structure be added to the use of literature circle. This simple tool could address the potential needs of students with behavioral issues and allow the teachers to monitor that students clearly understand and are contributing members to their circles. With this tool, students are asked to rate each participants' behavior and academic contribution (see Table 1 below) as well as ensure that only the clarifier can call for the teacher's attention. We stressed these components to ensure that students were accountable to their peers both academically and behaviorally. Also, only allowing the clarifier to seek teacher assistance gives the students in a group a requirement that they must depend upon their peers, and changes a class of 30 students seeking teacher attention for support to only 6 students who are allowed to seek teacher assistance.

**Table 1**
**Behavioral Chart to Support Literature Circles**

| Peer (List name of peer who will be in this role) | Role | How well did they contribute to your learning | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Predictor | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10<br>Not at all A great deal | |
| | Clarifier | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10<br>Not at all A great deal | |
| | Questioner | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10<br>Not at all A great deal | |
| | Summarizer | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10<br>Not at all A great deal | |
| | Artist | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10<br>Not at all A great deal | |

*Assistive Technology*

Another "aha" moment that we had to address is the special education teachers' protests that their students could not read the material being suggested by the English teachers and the English teachers' assumptions that a lack of ability to read meant that learning could not occur. We quickly addressed this issue by reminding both sets of teachers that even though it is true some students might have limited understanding of the concepts presented, reading and learning are different variables. We introduced the teams to simple technological devices that students can use to modify reading material or have material read to them. We recommended reviewing sites such as http://www.bookshare.org to find ways to receive text in electronic format that can be used to support students with disabilities. Bookshare.org provides numerous books in electronic and even Braille format that can be used for students in the classroom. We then reminded teams that just getting text in a different format might not be enough for many students. We shared tools that assisted in modifying material once it is received in an electronic format (e.g., using AutoSummarize in Microsoft Word) or for the text to be read aloud to the students using Microsoft Word or Write Outloud, which both have voice output capabilities. At the secondary level, students also need to be taught coping strategies. If the point of the English class is learning to read for understanding, then these tools allow students with visual issues to comprehend material while not spending hours on the laborious task of reading mountains of printed material. These tools also provide a support structure for children who have print issues who need to pass English but may not be able to consume the text through the same modalities as their peers. Yet for other students, we continued to challenge the teachers to go back to the questions in the section on co-teaching reminding them they might need to modify their daily goals.

Some teachers (both general and special education) continued to struggle with the concept that a child not reading with his/her own eyes is not comprehending. We stood firm and often mentioned the work of Edyburn (2003), who shares that we will arrive in this country for students with print disabilities in reading when we treat them the same as we might a student who cannot see. Reminding these teachers that just because a student has the visual capacity to see print does not mean they have the neurological skills to process what they see. In this case, students may need something we referred to regularly as "wheel-

chairs for their brain" (Dieker, 2003). Just as we would allow a student with a spinal cord injury to use tools in our classroom such as a wheelchair, students with true print disabilities need that same support in our English/Language Arts classrooms to assist them in learning. The teachers seemed to be able to understand this issue and embrace their need to continuously explore and learn new technological tools to ensure students can learn the material at the secondary level.

*Nonfiction Extravaganza!*

The next "aha" moment we addressed was the all-to-common belief that reading a traditional work such as *Romeo and Juliet* is the only way to teach and measure student learning in a secondary English class. Therefore, a technique that we found both groups of teachers eagerly accepted as a way to embrace varieties of reading interests and reading levels in their classrooms was a technique called the Nonfiction Extravaganza. Instead of focusing on the typical (and at times dreaded) research paper, we have found this strategy to ignite the spark of student inquiry by offering a celebration of information, inquiry, and investigation.

This activity has great appeal for students who may have a disability related to processing traditional text by capitalizing on their love of random information. The Extravaganza can be used as the starting point for a larger research project or stand completely on its own. On the day of the Extravaganza, students form groups at tables with a collection of random nonfiction pieces at every table (see *Info-Kids* by Jobe & Dayton-Sakari, 2002 for several great ideas for nonfiction types of material). Each table holds at least 15 pieces of nonfiction (e.g. *The Human Body*, *Why Do Clocks Run Clockwise?*, *Volcanoes*, *FAO Schwartz Toys for a Lifetime*, *The Discovery Book of Comparisons*, *Who Knew?: Things You Didn't Know about Things You Know Well*, etc). Most bookstores have special sections of "bargain books" devoted exclusively to nonfiction. Additionally, a trip to the public library to gather a wide variety of nonfiction is a must-do prior to the Extravaganza.

Once settled at their tables, students are asked to do three things: "Explore, Post-it, and Move on." In the exploration phase, students have about twelve minutes to explore as many books as possible (if necessary, students could be paired with a peer or have material in electronic format). They are also told that if a selection does not appeal to them, to freely move on to the next title (which is great for students who have limited attention spans). When students find a bit of information that is "interesting, surprising, unbelievable, inspiring, gross, fantastic, or amazing," they are to grab a post-it (or index card, or card-sized sheet of paper) and write down the following information for each bit (a student can be assigned a scribe for this task):

Fact # 1,2,3 (and so on)
Table # (the table in the information was found)
Quote the bit that you want to remember
<u>Book title</u>
Author (if appropriate)
Page number

For example, one student's Extravaganza card might contain the following information:

1. TABLE FOUR
"50,000 tons, that's 3 million miles of steel wire have been used since the slinky was first released in 1945. That's enough wire to go around the earth 126 times."
<u>FAO Schwartz Toys for a Lifetime: Enhancing Childhood through Play</u>
By Stevanne Auerbach

Once students have rotated to all tables, they then choose one piece of information discovered during the experience to share with the entire class.

At the close of the extravaganza, students have been encouraged to participate in true inquiry, and to enjoy the non-linear nature of learning. For students with reading disabilities, who are often penalized for their highly individualized learning styles, the non-fiction extravaganza provides an opportunity to excel outside of the general structure of traditional English reading requirements. This strategy also provides a structure for students to work on their own as well as having the additional opportunity to give and receive from their peers.

*Brown Bag Exam*

The final "aha" moment was when we realized that even though these teachers were being prepared to teach together differently, they were still leaning on traditional methods of assessment. Therefore, we introduced an activity that was embraced with great enthusiasm by both groups and has been reported by many in their student teaching to produce great learning outcomes: The Brown Bag Exam (Ousley, 2004). Although many educators embrace collaboration in their daily classroom activities, few students are allowed opportunities to collaborate during testing and assessment. Atwell (1998) explains that the status quo in most schools "regards collaboration as cheating and learning as a solitary, competitive enterprise. Even though junior high students spend most of their day sitting with groups of twenty-five peers, they spend most of their time working alone" (p. 68). Student isolation increases with traditional testing, which can be one of the greatest times of struggle for students with disabilities at the secondary level, often needing to leave the classroom for assistance to master a typical secondary English assessment. This powerful mode of authentic assessment allows all students' needs to be met in the general education setting because peer support is expected and rewarded.

It is all fair game in a brown bag exam; students are permitted any available resource—class notes, texts, peers, their teachers—to explore ideas and connections with each item. Teachers and students can also alter the exam to suit students' needs, working in pairs or triads. Classes generally need two class periods to complete a brown bag exam. Teachers may also add a third period for additional writing experiences or journaling.

In the next few paragraphs, we provide the suggested steps for a first brown bag exam. Before students enter class, the teacher has provided several lunch bags with numerous items gathered from around the house, classroom, or school that relate to the story. The bagged items are waiting on students' desks with specific instructions to not open or shake the bags. Students are then informed that they may use whatever resource they need to complete the exam, and may retrieve texts, notebooks, and notes. The teacher then explains that each bag contains an item connected to the novel. The item could be related to plot, character, setting, symbol, theme, or a combination of all of these ideas. After opening the bags, students first have 8-10 minutes to jot down any and all ideas associated with the item. Students spend the first block of time listing ideas and associations (See Table 2).

Once students list their own connections and ideas, they form small groups (triads seem to work best) to discuss each item and add group members' connections. The small group discussions typically last 12-15

minutes, with time for each student to share, listen, and add new connections from classmates. After students discuss their items, they identify at least two passages from the novel related to the brown bag item. Next, the class discussion jumps from item to item, so each student may share what was hidden in the brown bag and connections they made in class. The entire class has an opportunity to add ideas for each item, creating an engaging class discussion, where all voices can add to the significance of each object.

For students with disabilities, the brown bag exam opens up several possibilities for success. First, students who did not connect or comprehend every line of the novel can still participate in the places where their item connects to the fictional and physical world of the story. Second, the exam uses real objects for students to hold and examine. Third, since the exam is a collaborative endeavor, the experience is a verbal one, celebrating students' use of verbal skills instead of just written skills. The outcome of this type of activity is that students' needs can be accommodated, peers can provide support, social skills are integrated into an exam, and students with some reading and/or writing disabilities have a much greater potential for success than in a traditional secondary English exam – not to mention that students report actually "enjoying" a test.

**Table 2**
**Brown Bag Exam**

Brown Bag Exam!

Brown Bag item: ___________________________________

Ideas connecting item to novel:

Additional comments from small group discussion

Passages from reading:

Final idea/Connection/Comment to share with the class:

*Continuing the Dialogue*

The ideas presented here may seem to provide simple approaches to the very complex issues facing our secondary general and special education teachers across the country. However, we have found that although we were both very strong in our fields, we stumbled along trying to find ways to bring these two worlds of secondary English and special education together. We believe our journey

represents the struggle we are witnessing and hearing about from many secondary teachers working to ensure higher and greater learning outcomes for students with disabilities at the secondary level. We believe with the higher stakes outcomes being expected of teachers, higher education must model both the practice of brining these worlds together as well as providing practical ideas that teachers and students can embrace in our middle and high school classrooms. Finally, we believe the time is now for 6-12 English teachers and secondary special educators to speak a similar language for one simple reason – to ensure the learning and success of all students. We plan to continue on this journey and assume, as we hope all teachers will, that there are many more "aha" moments and lessons to be learned as we work to ensure the success of students with disabilities in secondary English classrooms.

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***About the authors:***

Lisa Dieker is an Associate Professor in Special Education at the Department of Child, Family and Community Sciences at the University of Central Florida and her work focuses on middle and high school inclusion.

Denise Ousley is an Assistant Professor in 6-12 English/Language Arts in the Department of Teaching and Learning Principles at the University of Central Florida and her work focuses on English/Language Arts for diverse learners.

## Appendix A

### Suggested Steps for a Brown Bag Exam

**Step One:**

Open your Bag!

**Step Two:**

List all possible connections between your item(s) and the novel.

**Items may (or may not) fall into the following categories:**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| plot | character | theme | all of these |
| setting | symbol | event | something else entirely |

The item(s) in your bag might not even be in the novel.

*Start swimming on the surface then take a breath and go deeper….*

*Be open to thinking literally and metaphorically.*

*Use the first box to make a bulleted list of all the connections you see.*

**Step Three:**

Get into triads.

Each person shares connections and then asks group members for the connections they see.

Please list all additional connections in the second box.

**Step Four:**

Find at least two passages from the text connected to your brown bag item(s).
Copy them into the third box (ellipses are encouraged). Provide enough of the passage so that you (and others) can find it. Please be sure to include page numbers!

**Step Five:**

Choose one idea you'd like to share with the class about your brown bag item(s).
(This could be a bit about your discussion, connections, passages, initial reaction, or surprises.)
Note this in the final box and prepare to share with the entire group.