

## **Collaborative Teaching: Are Two Teachers Better Than One?**

by Judie Haynes

Over the past few years co-teaching has become more popular as low incidence school districts search for ways to best serve the needs of their English language learners. What is co-teaching? Does it work? Read this article to find out.

**Reprinted from Essential Teacher, Volume 4, Issue 3, September 2007,  
Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages  
(TESOL)**

*"The city is more crowded. We would need more signs and traffic lights,"* said one student. *"We would have to live in apartments,"* said another. Eight students in Ms. P's 4th grade classroom were squeezed into a 4 x 4 square marked by masking tape on her classroom floor. Four of the students were English language learners.

The class was brainstorming how living in the city compared with living in the country. The eight students in the first square concluded that living in a crowded city required different types of transportation and housing. They predicted that they would need more stores, signs and garbage collectors. Students were kinesthetically experiencing the concepts of crowding and privacy. They were gaining hands-on experience with the basic concepts of the unit. This was possible because Ms. P and I were collaborating and had time to plan together.

In a collaborative or co-teaching setting, the ESL teacher "pushes into" the general education classroom to collaborate with the teacher. Co-teaching involves two credentialed professionals who are partners in the instruction of the lesson. One professional is usually a classroom or subject area teacher and the other is a certified ESL teacher. They have equal responsibilities for planning instruction and there are a variety of ways this instruction is delivered. Together the two teachers are lowering the student-teacher ratio and providing differentiated instruction in a manner that is not possible for one teacher.

Co-teachers are using the same physical space. Students are not pulled out of the classroom for one of the teachers to instruct. Although small heterogeneous groups may be pulled aside for reinforcement, English language learners are not isolated from mainstream students in the back of the classroom. In elementary schools, ESL teachers may come into the classroom for one instructional period each day. I spent two hours each week co-teaching in Ms. P's 4th grade social studies class. Together we were able to lower the teacher-to-student ratio and combine our talents to provide comprehensive instruction for all of the students in her room.

Over the past few years co-teaching has become more popular as low incidence school districts search for ways to best serve the needs of their English language learners. What is co-teaching? Does it work? If you ask ESL teachers who have tried co-teaching, you will hear both negative and positive responses.

Compare the co-teaching experience that I had with Ms.P with that of another ESL teacher in New Jersey.

*Paulo is a "push in ESL teacher" in a large school district. He teams with five different teachers each school day. He also teaches two classes of beginners in a pullout setting. Because of his work load, he is unable to plan lessons with his co-teachers. When he goes into some classrooms, the teacher turns the students over to Paul and uses the time as a prep period. In others, he is helping a few ESL students at the back of the room while the classroom teacher works with the rest of the students. Usually, he serves as a classroom aide, roving around the room to help students who do not understand the instruction. He is not necessarily scheduled into a classroom when the students need him most.*

This is collaborative teaching at its worse. ESL professionals are not classroom aides. They should not be relegated to the back of the room with English language learners. What is the point of "push-in" ESL if students are kept on the fringes of the "real" instruction? Both teachers have a contribution to make. The classroom teacher contributes knowledge of the curriculum and of all the students in the class while the ESL teacher brings information about teaching strategies, second language acquisition and diverse cultures.

It is my experience that ESL teachers who are pushing into general education classrooms are generally more satisfied if they:

- have input into their schedule and whom they will be teaching with.
- co-teach specific subject and are in the classroom each time the subject is taught.
- have time to plan with the co-teacher
- enjoy equal status with the co-teacher.
- can discuss and decide their role and responsibilities in advance.

Here are some models that are used when co-teaching English language learners:

- **Teach and write.** One teacher teaches the lesson while the other records the important points on an overhead or chalkboard. ELLs benefit from this because information is being presented to them through different modalities. Station teaching. Students rotate through predetermined stations or activities. Each teachers works with all the students as they come through the station.

- **Parallel teaching.** The class is divided into two groups and each teacher delivers the content information to their group simultaneously. This allows teachers with distinctly different styles to work together.
- **Alternative teaching.** Teachers divide responsibility for planning. The majority of the students work in a large group setting but some students are pulled into to a smaller group for pre-teaching or other types of individualized instruction. The same students should not be pulled into the small group each time.
- **Team Teaching.** Teachers co-teach each lesson. This requires a great deal of planning and cooperation. Both teachers are responsible for all of the students.
- **Lead and support.** The lead teacher instructs the class while the supporting teacher provides assistance as she roams around the room. The supporting teacher may elaborate the important points or retell parts of the lesson. Ideally, classroom and ESL teachers should alternate roles so that one is not always the lead teacher. This type of instruction can be misused and the ESL teacher may find herself in a subordinate role.

There are many obvious benefits to co-teaching for students. ESL students have both academic and social benefits. They are exposed to the mainstream content but have the support of a second teacher. They are not pulled out of the class and learn with their classmates.

ESL teachers, however, cite many concerns. They do not want to lose ownership of their students be relegated to the status of an aide. They feel that collaboration is a lot of additional work especially if they are co-teaching with several different teachers. They are also concerned about ESL beginners, who they feel do not really benefit from learning in the large group setting.

I think the benefits of collaboration outweigh the drawbacks. When teachers share the responsibility of instruction, lessons are more creative because two people are planning them. It's nice to have another adult in the room to be able to provide a range of support to students and to share those "ah-ha" moments.