Building Effective Partnerships Between Pull-Out ELL Teachers and Classroom Teachers
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Abstract

In order to maximize achievement for English Language Learners (ELL), pull-out ELL teachers and classroom core teachers must forge a successful partnership focused on student achievement. Little formal teacher training prepares teachers in how to make that relationship effective, and as a result, classroom core teachers and ELL teachers sometimes struggle to collaborate effectively. This article gives practical tips for new and experienced classroom and English Language Learner (ELL) teachers looking to build a collaborative relationship that will improve ELL student achievement in core subjects. This practical article includes the responsibilities of the ELL teacher, as well as the responsibilities of the classroom teacher in the relationship. There are guidelines for effective collaboration where ELL student success is the focus. These practical field experience-based tips can help bridge the gap between formal training and the practicalities of how to build collaborative relationships in a K-12 setting to increase ELL achievement.
Building Effective Partnerships Between Pull-Out ELL Teachers and Classroom Teachers

By 2015, the number of ELL students in the United States had risen to 9.5% and almost 4.8 million students (Digest of Education Statistics, 2017). With that many ELL students, and an increasing numbers of newcomers, most English Language Learner (ELL) teachers have had some version of this scenario play out at the beginning of a school year. The ELL teacher arrives at a teacher’s door for pull-out English lessons. Teacher A says, “Thank goodness you are here! You can have her/him. I don’t know what to do with her/him anyway. She/He can’t do what we are doing right now. I don’t think he/she understands a word I say. I can’t believe that I am expected to teach this student when she/he can’t even speak English!” At this point, the ELL teacher probably hopes that the student was not close enough to hear or did not understand Teacher A’s exasperation, and wonders how to work cooperatively with this teacher for the rest of the year in order to help the ELL student succeed.

What should ELL teacher and classroom core teacher collaboration look like in a pull-out situation? What are the responsibilities of each teacher, and how can they help each other? How can they make collaboration work when there is little time to collaborate in person? These tough questions need to be answered before a scenario like the one above plays out.

Responsibilities of ELL Teacher

1. *Be understanding.* Classroom teachers have a whole class to take care of, not just ELL students. While Teacher A’s response and words above are not appropriate, situations like this happen when classroom teachers feel alone and frustrated. They need the help of the ELL staff and administrators to feel capable of teaching ELL students effectively.

2. *Be willing to provide resources and professional development.* This can be a tricky area for ELL teachers. They do not want to make classroom teachers feel inadequate or
inferior. Yet, ELL teachers will have access to professional development and classroom resources that can help a classroom teacher. The ELL teacher must interpret what each classroom teacher wants and ask them questions about what resources they need. Then, when the ELL teacher provides those resources, the ELL student benefits and the ELL teacher and the classroom teacher begin to develop trust and a working relationship.

3. *Listen to the insights and observations of classroom teachers.* Pull-out ELL teachers see students for minutes each day or maybe every other day. ELL students spend most of their time with their classroom teachers; therefore, who knows them best? It may well be the classroom teacher, so ELL teachers must respect their insights and observations. A classroom teacher may be the first person to notice a sight or hearing problem or she/he may observe that the ELL student is having trouble making friends, etc. Keep an open line of communication between the ELL teacher and classroom teacher, so both teachers can help the ELL student.

4. *Serve as a liaison with the parents.* This does not mean the ELL teacher should do all of the communication with the ELL families; however, there may very well be language barriers that a classroom teacher must navigate. The ELL teacher can help translate or find a translator for conversations. Many times the ELL teacher also knows the families better because she/he has worked with them for several years. Therefore, she/he can provide the classroom teacher insights into family dynamics, culture, and school expectations. The ELL teacher and classroom teacher can meet with ELL families together to show a united front in helping the ELL student learn.

5. *Be a cultural advocate for your ELL students.* Make sure that the classroom teachers are aware of religious and cultural holidays, as well as the dietary restrictions of each ELL
student. Keep the cafeteria personnel informed as well. Help classroom teachers understand why certain student behaviors might be the result of cultural differences. For example, teachers often demand that students look them in the eye when they are speaking to them. In several cultures, such as Japan, China, Puerto Rico and Native American cultures (Hansen, 2010), looking an adult in the eye would be considered rude or disrespectful. Help teachers understand some of the general cultural customs of a home country, keeping in mind that customs may also vary from family to family. These cultural concepts are important for classroom teachers to know, but they are still “surface culture” (Sackman-Ebuwa, 2018). Teachers also need to know the “unspoken rules (shallow culture) and unconscious rules (deep culture)” of the ELL students in their classes. (Sackman-Ebuwa, 2018) This requires teachers to look far below the surface to learn about the cultures of their students, such as customs of social interaction, how they make decisions, and working relationship preferences. The ELL teacher can facilitate this learning process.

**Responsibilities of the Classroom Teacher**

1. **Be open.** Yes, having ELL students can be difficult, but be open to the experience. Look at it as a chance to grow as a teacher. Work with the ELL teacher to make the experience easier, more enjoyable, and a valuable experience for both the teacher and the student.

2. **Be willing to accept help with ELLs.** Classroom teachers are not expected to know everything about every ELL student or ELL learning situation. Tell the ELL teacher what resources and professional development support are needed, and take the help
that she/he offers. This will make the classroom setting more effective and help build a support system for classroom teachers.

3. *Share what you know about the ELL students because you spend the most time with them.* ELL teachers may work with the families over several years, but a pull-out ELL teacher spends a much smaller amount of time with ELLs than the classroom teacher. Make sure to share any observations about medical conditions, behavior issues, social relationships, or other concerns with the ELL teacher. No detail is too small, as sometimes these observations can identify health conditions or social issues much sooner.

4. *Be a good communicator with ELL parents.* Decide what items are most important to communicate to ELL parents and plan ahead. This may require a translator and/or help from the ELL teacher. Never use the student as a translator, as this is against Office of Civil Rights policy and can cause many issues (Office of Civil Rights, 2015). If a situation arises where a translator is not available, a smile and telling the parent how much you enjoy their student in class always works. Tell them and show them that someone will call them later to talk.

5. *Make your room and class welcoming to all students.* This can be accomplished with class labels in the students’ home languages. It is also an enthusiastic welcome to all new students when they first arrive in class. Try to incorporate some aspect of their home culture into the class curriculum.

**Collaboration**

1. *Set a time to meet or stay in touch electronically.* In an ideal world, the ELL teacher and classroom teacher would be able to have a set time to meet each week. In the real
world, this rarely happens. Therefore, staying in contact by email or some other electronic means on a regular basis is essential.

2. *Set expectations.* Let each other know what you need and when. Set times that class content will be given and completed work will be returned. Keep to those deadlines, and if something comes up, be sure to let the other teacher know when they can expect the content or work to be available to her/him.

3. *Decide who will take care of which tasks.* Who will plan content for the ELL student? Who will make the test accommodations, if needed? Who will communicate with ELL families? What part of the content will be taught by the ELL teacher, if any? In the case of planning, either the classroom teacher will plan content or it should be planned together. The classroom teacher knows the content best; therefore, it is desirable for the classroom teacher to learn to make test accommodations for ELL students. The ELL teacher can facilitate that learning process. If the ELL teacher is teaching content, it is essential that she/he knows it well enough to teach it, has the resources needed, and understands how the ELL students will be assessed.

4. *Always go to the other person first if there is an issue.* Misunderstanding occur, as do unexpected circumstances. Always go to the other teacher to find out what is happening and how the team can work together to find a solution. Avoid bringing an administrator into the situation, until all efforts to work out a situation in the team have failed. This can erode trust, which may be hard to rebuild.

Pull-out ELL classes are a popular method of providing services, but not always effective. A strong collaborative relationship between the ELL teacher and the classroom
teacher can make a pull-out situation work. That collaborative relationship requires communication, patience, careful planning, and a willingness to work together. When those factors are present, ELL students can succeed at levels at or near their English-only peers.

