

K-12 Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration: An ESL In-service Model

Annela Teemant,

Brigham Young University, Utah

Nancy Giraldo,

Granite School District, Utah

ESL students are taught by content and language teachers who share a school building, but may not share their frustrations, concerns, or expertise for working with ESL students across academic disciplines. Often, teaching schedules, the physical layout of a school, or the socio-political milieu make cooperation among faculty difficult. Although many school districts provide content-area teachers with formal ESL in-service development, ESL practitioners often remain the lone expert on ESL issues within individual schools. ESL students, however, need academic support from all their teachers. Given the circumstances, ESL practitioners are in a position to initiate cross-disciplinary collaboration, and to create both formal and informal in-service opportunities within their schools.

At the National Center for Science Teaching and Learning, language educators had the opportunity to cross academic boundaries to listen to science teachers in Florida (N=9) and Ohio (N=4) discuss teaching second language learners. Analyses of the focus group data (i.e., discussion and written feedback) and surveys completed by pre-service science teachers (N=48) provide insight into successfully pursuing cross-disciplinary collaboration. This article describes a model for creating effective ESL in-service opportunities in K-12 settings.

An ESL In-service Model

Working within a school's system, ESL practitioners must be strategic in advocating for and pursuing cross-disciplinary collaboration. The Appendix represents our three-step ESL In-service Model. In this model, ESL practitioners begin by focusing on an identified concern of content-area teachers. Next, they decide whether to approach collaboration with content-area teachers informally or formally within their schools. Finally, ESL practitioners select an appropriate strategy for conveying information to colleagues. These steps in creating in-service opportunities are described further.

The Concerns. The content of ESL in-service opportunities must focus on the stated, real-world concern of teachers. Our research revealed that the four defining con-

cerns of content-area teachers are how they view learners, language, teaching, and resources. Understanding these concerns and the problems they suggest are essential to appropriately tailoring, and packaging the ESL message for an in-service audience.

Concern 1: View of Learners

Content-area teachers know that ESL students face many challenges in adjusting to a new culture, language, and school system; however, they lack the type of detail about their ESL learners that would be genuinely useful in facilitating student learning. Content-area teachers had many questions about ESL learners' home, school, and community environments.

First, content-area teachers agree that they lack information about their ESL students' home environment: What language is spoken at home? What cultural background and expectations do they have? What attitude does the family have toward higher education? What science background do they have? Some teachers wonder what students' motivation and attitudes are toward learning English.

Second, content-area teachers are concerned about the classroom environment. Some teachers reported that they avoid calling on ESL students in class, and preferred to wait for students to volunteer answers. Other teachers felt that ESL learners are too passive in the classroom. One science teacher perhaps best capture the complexity of the feelings facing teachers of mainstreamed ESL students by admitting.

I have some conflict in the classroom. The [ESL] students come in, and they do gravitate to the back. I find myself, sometimes when I talk to them, simplifying too much. The other conflict that I have is what about the other students, the normal English speaker? What's their concept about what I'm doing? Is this boring to them? I guess the conflict within me is "What can I do? I can't stop, but how do I go on?"

To prepare for our focus group discussion in Florida, two seasoned high school science educators asked their school counselor to invite a group of their former and current ESL students, six in all, to talk to them about their school and science experiences. Significantly, this was the teachers' first effort to talk in depth with any of their ESL students. One teacher shared that, "It really opened my eyes to sit down with these students at the table and see a different aspect of them: what their concerns are, and how they feel about coming into my class. It changed my whole concept."

Finally, affective factors that influence language and content learning go beyond the classroom to the community as well. One teacher expressed concern that their students face community biases, such as the attitude that "This is America, and I don't want any

of those people coming in.” Another teacher noted that, “I never hear anybody say, ‘Let’s learn a little Spanish.’ It’s always, you know, ‘*They* better learn *our* language.’”

Whether the focus is on the home, classroom, or community environment, how the individual ESL student manages, learns, and prospers is unclear to many content-area teachers. The focus seems to be on the *outcomes* rather than the *processes* of survival. One science teacher said, “I really have to admire them [ESL students]. I don’t know how they come from these other countries, and are seemingly better than our students that already know English. How do they do it?”

Concern 2: View of Language Learning

Content-area teachers are not bound by second language theories, research, or practice in articulating their views of what it means to learn a second language. Many of the attitudes they have toward language learning are based on intuition. Content-area teachers’ language learning concerns were revealed most often through the following two questions: 1) Should students be mainstreamed before they have English fluency? and 2) If they are mainstreamed, what should I expect of my ESL students?

A majority of the teachers we surveyed (77%) agree that students cannot wait for English fluency before entering the content classroom. Nevertheless, many teachers are confronted by people who do not want ESL students mainstreamed. For example, one teacher said:

I hear that all the time. Not just from teachers, but from spouses of teachers, and parents of my students who are English speakers. “What are they doing in here? If they can’t speak English, they’re wasting my child’s time.” I have always had trouble explaining why they’re in my classroom, even to myself.

In addition to this issue of fluency, content-area teachers want to know if they should have the same learning expectations of ESL students as they have of native English speakers. Content-area teachers express uncertainty about how to 1) match language abilities to content learning expectations, and 2) judge what is easy or difficult for the ESL learner from a linguistic perspective. Poor oral language skills do appear to be unsettling for some teachers as reflected in the following types of comments: a) “He never says anything in class;” b) “He has been here six months, why isn’t he speaking more?” or c) “Why doesn’t the student answer questions or read orally in class?”

These comments reflect possible misconceptions about language learning. First, content-area teachers may not understand that comprehension precedes production in language learning, or that oral production carries a heavier linguistic load than listening

or reading. Using the right words, in the right sequence, with the right tenses can be overwhelming when the ESL student does not have good control of the academic content *or* the language. Second, a content-area teacher may not recognize that the use of rich visual or written support materials provide ESL students the linguistic support they need to develop language proficiency. Third, science teachers appear to view vocabulary as the quintessential element of language. They believe we reach ESL students through word-lists and dictionaries: specialized, bilingual, science dictionaries. Determining whether ESL students have problems with the language or with academic content requires a broader view of language learning, one that involves extended discourse, negotiation, and demonstration of understanding in a variety of appropriate contexts.

Content-area teachers are uncertain about what to expect from their ESL students in terms of language development and content learning. Working in isolation, these teachers develop their own, sometimes erroneous, view of language and language learning.

Concern 3: View of Teaching

A vast majority of content-area teachers were not prepared during their undergraduate studies to deal with ESL students in the classroom. Content-area teachers indicate that they lack a sound ESL-based rationale to guide their choices in teaching, modifying materials, and testing.

The first teaching question content-area teachers have is what is the *best, most effective*, and *easiest* strategy, technique, or method of conveying academic content to ESL students. Although they ask about the way to teach ESL students, they themselves report using a diversity of teaching strategies, such as the use of concept maps, semantic webs, hands-on activities, cooperative learning, drawing, and learning logs.

While some science teachers told us that they initially looked forward to participating in required ESL endorsement programs, they soon became resentful when they saw the content of such programs. One teacher said that endorsement programs suggest teaching strategies that good teachers use already. Another teacher felt the endorsement programs were insulting because “We’re already doing these thing, but we just don’t have them labeled as an ‘ESL strategy.’” Some endorsement programs may not effectively focus the attention of content-area teachers on second language acquisition, negotiated interaction, effective teacher talk, and the importance of including both language and content objectives in lesson planning.

The second teaching concern content-area teachers have is knowing what materials to use with ESL students. Teachers want to know whether they should use special, bilingual, or simplified materials, and what modifications to materials will work.

The third common teaching concern for content-area teachers is knowing how to assess ESL students' knowledge of content (e.g., science, history, math). Bernhardt, Destino, Kamil, and Rodriguez-Munoz (1995) also feel that this concern is well-founded in that second language students must demonstrate "knowledge in a language over which they have only partial control," (p. 6). Content-area teachers want to know whether they should grade, how they should grade, and how much special help they should give their ESL learners on classroom tests.

Concern 4: View of Resources

Content-area teachers view resources as personnel and facility concerns. They are interested in what resources and personnel are available to help them assess ESL students' reading level and language proficiency. They are concerned about large class sizes, time constraints, heterogeneous language and ability grouping, funding for support programs, and native speaker jealousies toward ESL students for the special programs, resources, and attention given to them.

Our data suggests that many content-area teachers are not accustomed to thinking of their school's ESL teacher as a partner, ally, or accessible resource for meeting the needs of ESL students. Interdisciplinary cooperation is hindered by both perceptions and logistics. Regarding perceptions, one ESL teacher summed up the feelings of many ESL professionals by saying, "I'm willing to work with content teachers; why aren't content teachers willing to work with me?" In terms of logistics, one science teacher notes, "The whole design of schools is against this concept [of cooperation]. I mean they built the schools to keep teachers from communicating, and they've separated us so we hardly see each other except for faculty meetings." These obstacles to collaboration can only be overcome by strategic planning.

The questions that a science teacher may ponder in one corner of the local high school may be well within the grasp and expertise of the ESL teacher down the hall. When a content-area teacher asks "Why don't they talk to me," the ESL teacher can provide family, language, cultural, or affective realities about language learning that may help the content-area teacher understand a student's silence, passivity, or expectations. Dialogue between content-area and ESL teachers about appropriate expectations and effective classroom practices would be beneficial for ESL learners. The public school reality is that these teachers rarely cross paths. Opportunities for collaboration must be created.

One science teacher observes that "Teachers don't have the time to go and look for things. You have to provide it for them in very concrete ways." Another teacher reminds us that "Most teachers have one thing in common: they care about students. . .[approach

us] through these students, and you're going to reach a lot more teachers than if you come to [us] from a professional 'we're-going-to-make-you-do-this' approach."

In summary, the learner, language, teaching, and resource concerns of content-area teachers reveal the challenges teachers face in meeting the needs of ESL students. These concerns should serve as foci in our cross-disciplinary efforts to educate and advocate for ESL students and programs.

The Approach. Although formal, school-level, or endorsement-type in-service opportunities have high visibility and punctuate the importance of ESL issues, more informal approaches to in-service could be explored to support content-area teachers in their individual, day-to-day, and on going efforts to meet ESL students' needs. ESL practitioners could use informal print, one-on-one, or small group approaches, or more formal school level in-service to initiate and create opportunities for collaboration.

As represented in the Appendix, content-area teachers could easily be given a one-page printed handout on a relevant ESL issue to review at their own convenience. Or they might respond more positively to an ESL teacher's input on a one-on-one basis when it focuses on a particular student's progress in their class. ESL teachers may also initiate collaboration by approaching small groups of content-area teachers with similar concerns. These small groups may be defined by discipline (i.e., math teachers), grade (i.e., fifth grade teachers), schedule (i.e., first lunch period), or faculty friendship.

Content-area teachers are pivotal colleagues in educating ESL populations. Content-area teachers would benefit by being seen as learners themselves; that is, as learners with cognitive, social, and affective needs related to learning new content. For example, content-area teachers may face their own social or affective obstacles in teaching ESL students. Approaches to in-service must be planned to account for different cognitive learning styles, and to help teachers, as learners themselves, overcome the biases and limitations that hinder them from instructionally supporting their ESL learners.

The Strategy. Many strategies for presenting ESL-focused information to content-area teachers exist for the creative and strategic ESL practitioner. Teachers' awareness of ESL students can be heightened with printed materials by circulating single-theme monthly flyers, using bulleting boards to display student work, or distributing language-related surveys (e.g., Richards & Lockhart, 1994). This information should be limited to concise, one-page, summaries of what content-area teachers want to know, with examples easy to grasp. Even providing the faculty lounge or library with ESL books, articles, or audio-visual materials may be helpful.

One-on-one, content-area teachers are more apt to ask specific language, culture, and pedagogy questions. Cross-disciplinary dialogue can be initiated by entering the content-area teachers' classroom. One-on-one efforts with content-area teachers should

focus on individual student progress and classroom visits. Using a problem analysis worksheet may be useful.

Although small groups may emerge naturally, there is also benefit in targeting a different department to work with each month. Working with small groups of content-area teachers allows an ESL specialist to 1) discuss teaching practices that help ESL students, 2) demonstrate language objectives for specific content lessons, or 3) help teachers develop prototypical assignment files.

Clearly, school level in-service workshops and professional development days are the most formal and expensive approach to ESL education. Other school level strategies include encouraging content-area teachers to attend local ESL conferences, sponsoring activities showcasing language diversity, or creating formal links between departments within schools. These strategies develop awareness and ameliorate prejudices.

Conclusion

Content-area teachers often work in isolation, in independent classrooms, and rely on intuition about learners, language development, and teaching practices to address the needs of ESL students. Although content-area teachers are not always receptive to our advocacy and teaching efforts on behalf of ESL students, ESL practitioners can play an important role within their schools to initiate collaboration and create in-service opportunities that meet the day-to-day needs of their content-area colleagues.

Whether an ESL practitioner utilizes print, one-on-one, small group, or school level in-service opportunities will depend on each school's readiness to discuss ESL students' needs. In communities where language and culture diversity are just beginning to emerge as school issues, informal in-service approaches may yield the most benefit.

There is a need for cross-disciplinary collaboration between various content domains and ESL specialists. Laying the ground work for such collaboration requires understanding the in-service audience's concerns, and then selecting an approach and strategy that meet your school's needs. Taking advantage of both formal and informal in-service opportunities can help teachers who share a building also share their concerns and expertise across academic boundaries for the benefit of ESL student populations.

References

- Bernhardt, E., Destino, T., Kamil, M., & Rodriguez-Munoz, M. (1995). Assessing science knowledge in an English-Spanish bilingual elementary school. *COGNOSOS*, 4(1), 4-6.
- Richards, J. C., & Lockhart, C. (1994). *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

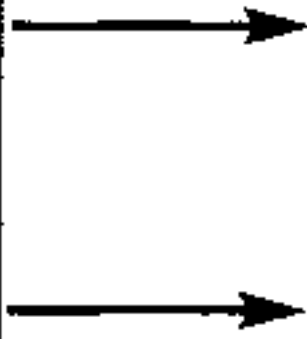
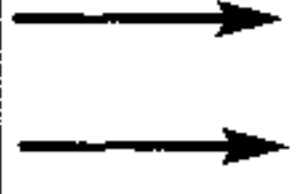
About the Authors

Annala Teemant (Ph.D.) is a faculty member in Brigham Young University's Department of Teacher Education, in the U.S. She has expertise in second/foreign language public school teacher education, ESL/EFL/ESP teaching and research, and distance learning.

Nancy Giraldo (M.A.) is a Teaching Training Specialist for Granite School District, Salt Lake City, Utah. She has taught ESL endorsement classes for the Utah State Office of Education. She teaches and supervises K-12 ESL/Bilingual and content-area teachers.

APPENDIX

K-12 ESL In-Service Model

CONCERN	APPROACH	STRATEGY
	<u>Print</u>	Share monthly fliers Make bulletin boards Distribute surveys Display student work List and offer resources Provide student info Share relevant articles Provide useful texts to faculty
* Learner	<u>One -on-One</u>	Focus on individual students' progress Visit each others' classroom Work through school counselors Respond to specific questions Develop materials
* Language		
* Teaching	<u>Small Group</u>	Encourage interviews/panel discussions with students Create sample assignment files Use audio-visual materials Target a department a month: Identify concerns and provide alternatives Discuss lessons from a second language perspective Teach useful Spanish (etc.) to English-speaking teachers
* Resources		
	<u>School Level</u>	Invite faculty to ESL conferences Encourage workshops on multiple intelligences & multiculturalism Encourage talent shows or other events that showcase diversity Establish formal links between departments