

Critical Education, Critical Literacy, and Co-Teaching for ELLs

by Maria G. Dove and Andrea Honigsfeld

Using critical pedagogical methods, ESL and general-education teachers can work to create shared classroom spaces where together they can provide a context for all students to develop meaningful learning. This innovative approach to teaching can be accomplished by establishing a collaborative school culture and co-taught classes for ELLs.

Co-Teaching or Inclusion as an instructional delivery model for English learners has been practiced for some time, yet, its methods have been infrequently documented. Within one class setting, a general-education and an ESL teacher share the responsibility for planning, delivering, and evaluating instruction for ELLs, some of whom have unique linguistic, academic, and socio-cultural needs. Coupled with critical education, which prepares all students to be agents for social change, when ELLs learn alongside their native English-speaking peers in the co-taught classroom, participatory learning and critical empowerment can take place.

What Is Critical about Critical Education?

Critical education is an educational practice that assists students to examine familiar situations in unfamiliar ways. What better way to empower students than to have all of them sharing the same classroom for instruction? In addition, critical education assumes teachers will learn important things from their own students; therefore, they must listen differently to what all students have to say (Shor, 1987). In essence, the co-taught classroom may be developed into an ideal shared

learning space that helps eliminate the yours-versus-mine mentality some general-education and ESL teachers have when considering ELLs and their English-only peers. When not only space but pedagogical practices (planning, instruction, and assessment) are shared as well, a co-taught ESL program promotes the idea that all students in the same class are ours.

What Is Critical Literacy?

Critical literacy, a part of critical education, teaches students the ability to read texts in an active, reflective manner in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships. Text is defined as a "vehicle through which individuals communicate with one another using the codes and conventions of society" (Robinson & Robinson, 2003, p. 3). In other words, texts can be songs, novels, conversations, pictures, movies, and all interactions students observe or participate in.

Why Is Critical Literacy Important?

The development of critical literacy skills enables students to interpret messages in the modern world through a critical lens and challenge the power relations within those messages. Teachers who facilitate the development of critical literacy encourage students to interrogate societal issues and institutions like family, poverty, education, equity, and equality. Students are able to critique the structures that serve as norms as well as demonstrate how all members of society do not experience these norms in the same way.

How Do Co-Teaching Practices Support Critical Literacy Development?

When classes are co-taught for critical literacy, teachers create experiences that offer students opportunities to actively construct knowledge. Schools become spaces where all students, both ELLs and native-English-speaking youngsters, are able to

question and explore issues significant to their lives. Teachers engaged in critical literacy serve less as instructors and more as facilitators of conversations that question traditional power relations.

What Is Our Critical Reflection?

This brief article could not be complete without adding our own critical perspective on teacher collaboration, and, more specifically, on the co-teaching approach to ESL service delivery. Based on our review of the literature and our ongoing research (Honigsfeld & Dove, in press), we have found that collaborative practices develop within the context of a collaborative school culture that has the following five components: shared vision and mission; curriculum alignment; shared instructional practices; ongoing shared professional development; student-centered approach. See the table at right, A Summary of Key Features (Honigsfeld & Dove, forthcoming).

Table 1. (on next page)

A Summary of Key Features of a Collaborative School Culture and Their Implications for English Language Learners (Honigsfeld & Dove, forthcoming)

References

- Honigsfeld, A., & Dove, M. G. (in press). ESL co-teaching and collaboration: Opportunities to develop teacher leadership and enhance student learning. *TESOL Journal*.
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Table 1.

A Summary of Key Features of a Collaborative School Culture and Their Implications for English Language Learners (Honigsfeld & Dove, forthcoming)

Features	What it is	What it means for ELLs
Shared Vision and Mission	Clearly agreed upon desired outcomes, shared values and goals that focus on all students	A culturally responsive school in which ELLs are not marginalized
Curriculum Alignment	Through curriculum mapping and coordinated curriculum development programs, coherence is established	Curriculum changes and modifications consider ELLs' linguistic and academic needs. ELLs are meaningfully included in mainstream curriculum learning
Shared Instructional Practices	Planning, implementation, and assessment practices are coordinated among all faculty	Differentiated instruction is designed and implemented with ELLs in mind
Ongoing shared professional development	Individual teacher learning is integrated into collaborative efforts to enhance all teachers' practice	All faculty interacting with ELLs understand and implement research-based methods for instructing and interacting with ELLs
Student-centered approach	Instructional focus is on the needs of the learner; students develop their own understanding through active learning techniques	ELLs are able to build their background knowledge and complete self-selected projects at their own level of linguistic ability

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