ESL and Classroom Teachers Team Up to Teach Common Core

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It started with an after-school conversation last spring between two teachers.

Barbara Page, a veteran English-as-a-second-language teacher, and Meredith Vanden Berg, an 8th-grade science teacher, were discussing a student from Somalia who had just arrived from a refugee camp in Yemen and landed at their ethnically diverse middle school in Beaverton, OR.

Vanden Berg wanted to know what more she could do to help the girl—who was just beginning to learn a few words of English—understand what was going on in her science classroom.

"I don't like when I see students staring off into space when I'm teaching and I know it's because of the language," said Vanden Berg. "What could I be doing to convey the core concepts without completely losing her?"

That discussion was the spark for what has evolved into a much closer collaboration between ESL and content teachers at Meadow Park Middle School as they fully embrace the Common Core State Standards in English/language arts and mathematics this academic year.

Along with their math teacher colleague, Allison Shultz, Vanden Berg and Page have begun picking apart the standards, stripping them down to the essential concepts, simplifying the language, and developing strategies that all of them can use to support English learners.

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in both content and ESL classes.

It's a kind of collaboration and discussion that educators say needs to happen at schools across the country as teachers now stand on the front lines of helping an increasingly diverse student population meet the demands of the new standards.

Every student, whether a native English speaker or a second-language learner, is expected to engage in conversation and discourse in the classroom, read and understand complex texts, and make effective oral and written arguments, among other high-level language practices in the new standards.

Both Shultz and Vanden Berg credit Page with helping them better understand how their own language of instruction can pose a major barrier to students whose English proficiency is still low.

"I see now how much we as content teachers take for granted," said Vanden Berg. "It takes a lot of words to explain the periodic table or an atom."

**Shifting Relationships?**

The nation's roughly 45,000 ESL teachers—many of whom split their time among schools with little chance to co-teach or plan with content teachers—have expertise and strategies that experts say all teachers will need to ensure that English learners are not shut out of the rigorous, grade-level content that the common core envisions will prepare all students for college and careers. Special education teachers, too, say schools need to foster closer collaboration between them and content teachers to support students with special needs.

But what role will ESL teachers play in this groundbreaking shift to the common core? Will there be a broader move to co-teaching or tighter collaboration between ESL teachers and their academic-content colleagues? What, if any, common core professional development are ESL teachers receiving, and how is their expertise being tapped?

Earlier this year, the TESOL International Association, the professional organization for teachers who specialize in working with English learners, raised those issues during a convening of ESL professionals who work in school systems in and around Washington. There was strong consensus among the group that ESL teachers, in addition to working directly with students, need to be deployed as consultants to content teachers who will need guidance on how best to support English learners.
"If held to the same high and rigorous standards as their peers, the learning curve for English learners is going to be longer and higher than most of their peers and therefore, the teachers who teach them need to be much better equipped," said Rosa Aronson, executive director of the Alexandria, VA-based TESOL group.

“What ESL teachers bring to the table is deep understanding of how language is acquired, the importance of teaching academic language, and the cultural issues for students who are English learners. They are often closer to their students and families than content teachers and can be strong advocates for these students.”

**ESL Teacher Status**

In many schools, ESL educators have not traditionally been seen as being as central to the enterprise of teaching students as their subject-matter peers, said Aída Walqui, director of teacher professional development for WestEd, a San Francisco-based research group.

Often itinerant among schools, ESL teachers may serve multiple grade levels and are viewed by their content-area colleagues as being solely responsible for developing students’ language skills. They are likely to spend their instructional time with English learners in stand-alone classrooms in the so-called “pullout” approach, though some districts, such as St. Paul, MN, partner ESL and content teachers to keep English learners in mainstream classrooms for all or most of the day.

ESL teachers are also less likely to become principals and take on other leadership roles in their schools than their content-area colleagues. All of that, said Walqui, makes elevating and recasting the role of the ESL teacher even more challenging.

“This is a major dilemma,” she said. “What should the role of the ESL teacher be in this dramatically shifting environment of the common core?

Walqui argues that ESL teachers themselves, as well as their content-area peers, need to reconceptualize what language is and evolve from their concentrated focus on vocabulary and grammar or on how to make a request or express a hypothesis.

“Students are too often engaged in the production of sentences with vocabulary they have learned,” Walqui said. “But a sentence is an isolated unit of
language that would never really count as deep engagement with academic work, which is what the common core is all about.”

**Content All Day**

Deep engagement with content is how a network of 16 high schools that specialize in serving recently arrived immigrants in California, New York, and Virginia approaches instruction for English learners.

“Every teacher is a teacher of language and content,” said Claire Sylvan, the executive director and president of the Internationals Network for Public Schools, based in New York City. “If you want these students to learn rigorous academic content and gain dexterity in the new language, you better be doing more than 15 minutes a day of English language instruction and better be doing rigorous content all day long.”

In the Internationals network schools, students with varying levels of English proficiency, as well as those in different grade levels, are purposely mixed in classrooms. That way, more-experienced students help “acculturate” the newer arrivals, and a team of teachers sticks with the same group for two full years. That team—consisting of math, science, English/language arts, and social studies teachers, at least one of whom is also an ESL expert—share responsibility for the same cohort of students over time.

Each school is autonomous, but the network provides hundreds of digital lesson plans and other resources that integrate language instruction with content. Any teacher among the 16 schools can tap those.

“All the units our teachers have developed are designed to have students using their language in group projects, talking with each other, and actively engaged in discourse, no matter how imperfect it may be,” Sylvan said.

While most of the teachers working in the Internationals schools are not necessarily trained in second-language acquisition or in how to work with English learners when they are hired, principals screen aggressively for prospective faculty members who are willing to learn.

**‘Push-In’ Model**

At another New York City school, John J. Pershing Middle School, where 40% of students are English learners, Marcus Artigliere and his team of six fellow ESL teachers are working together, and with their core-content peers, to craft
common-core lessons in English/language arts and math that outline explicit supports and "scaffolds" for ELLs, based on their proficiency levels.

They are doing that at the same time the school is shifting from pulling its ELL students out of mainstream classes for explicit language instruction to a "push-in" model in which the ESL teachers are always in the classrooms with content teachers.

"We think this is the only way that the shift to the common core is going to work for our English learners," said Artiglieri. "The goal is that you have the ESL professional right in the room to model for content teachers how you scaffold the content for English learners."

In Broward County, FL, where state law requires all academic content teachers to have some training in the theories and practice of teaching second-language learners, the district's curriculum and instruction team has created open-source digital professional development resources around the common core, in addition to face-to-face training.

The district has produced a series of webinars to address particular instructional shifts in the new standards. Each webinar also has a companion webinar specifically targeting teachers who work with ELLs. Teachers in school-based professional learning communities watch the webinars together then discuss strategies and supports they can use for all students.

"All of our teachers, whether mainstream content teachers or ESL teachers, are getting this professional development and are doing it together," said Vicky B. Saldala, director of the district's English-as-a-second-language department.

Saldala's team wrote a "best practices" document for English learners meant for all teachers in need of understanding what types of classroom activities and supports work best for ELLs at different proficiency levels and in different subject areas. It also breaks down which supports are most effective across the four language domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing.
Principal’s Role

Key to meaningful collaboration and inclusion of ESL professionals in the rollout of the common core, said Aronson, are principals and district administrators willing to give faculty members the time and space to work together.

“The principal plays a huge role for encouraging and facilitating an inclusive school culture that promotes ESL teachers and content teachers working together, but unfortunately, they are the ones who often erect the biggest barriers to this,” she said.

At Beaverton’s Meadow Park Middle School, Principal Toshiko Maurizio is backing the work of the three teachers who have taken the lead in devising common core support strategies for the school’s English learners. She has carved out staff-development time for them to collaborate and share their work.

Their work is particularly challenging because ESL teachers like Page do not work alongside content teachers in the classroom. English learners are pulled out for language instruction as part of their school day, and they are grouped based on proficiency levels, not grade level.

To help cross those barriers, Page created a Google document that all teachers in her school can access to write what key concepts they want their ELL students to understand in an upcoming lesson or unit. She plans her language instruction around those core-content requests, though she says it’s an imperfect process.

“I’m really working on my juggling skills,” Page said. “Folding in the core content at grade level into language instruction is really tough, especially when you are working with students at different grade levels. We don’t have it all figured out, but we are trying. We are committed.”

“Toshiba, you're the smart kid in the back.”

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