

Transitions for Students and Teachers: Using a Co-Teaching Lesson Format to Teach Fourth-Grade Social Studies

by Katya Kats

When teachers collaborate and combine their talents, everyone benefits.

—Greg McClure (McClure & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010)

The United States Supreme Court in the case of *Lau vs. Nichols* held that “. . . there is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum: for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education . . .”

In *Lau*, the Supreme Court decided that ESL English language learners (ELLs) who have access to the same facilities, books, teachers, and curriculum as the non-ELL students may still not be receiving meaningful education. Why then do we take ELL students who are relatively proficient English speakers out of the classrooms to learn English when their classmates are learning content material at the same time? They are, after all, expected to learn the same curriculum as their mainstream classmates do, but are not given the same time or the same instructional expertise to do so. Research shows that when ESL students are pulled out of the classrooms, they score significantly lower on standardized tests than their counterparts (Gately & Gately, 2001).

Harmony Hill School at Cohoes School District historically has a high number of ELLs from a variety of countries. When they are newcomers without any English language skills, they are pulled out for ESL instruction according to their English proficiency. As soon as they reach the intermediate level of proficiency on the NYSESLAT, I try to leave them in their classroom for content areas, such as math and social studies, supporting ELLs with ESL methodology and using a slightly modified curriculum. In addition, they spend time with me learning new vocabulary and topics that are not part of the curriculum for any particular content area.

This format is extremely important when teaching fourth-grade social studies, where the students begin to study the history of State of New York and the United States in greater depth. Learning American history is crucial for immigrant children for better acculturation, integration into American society, and understanding the context of current events.

Recognizing social studies as an important subject for the immigrants, as an ESL teacher I try not only to teach the English language, but also the social studies curriculum. After discussing this curriculum with the fourth-grade teacher, Ms. Mary Ellen Quinlan, I spent ESL time in her classroom for social studies co-teaching. Co-teaching can be defined as two or more educators sharing instructional responsibility for students assigned to the same classroom (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008, p. 8). We base our social studies lessons on the Q&R Reading Program for Test-Wise Students (Raphael & Au, 2010), a strategy-based preparation program aimed at improving students' reading comprehension and their ability to apply higher level thinking to the test.

Teaching American history to ELLs often presents special challenges. Many of these students grew up in circumstances that simply do not provide them with enough background and cultural tools to understand the concepts of colonization, equality, independence, or freedom of speech. The native English-speaking students can also benefit from the presence of the ELL children, who bring cultural diversity as well as a different perspective and commentary on the issues, all welcome in a discussion in a social studies class.

For example, in co-teaching students about the reasons the English colonists had for declaring independence, we divided our fourth-graders into three groups: Loyalists, Patriots, and neutral citizens. We asked them to justify their reasons for staying loyal to the British king, for wanting a new country, or for the inability to make a decision about either. I provided my ELLs with the necessary vocabulary, which we revised and reviewed every day—e.g., to *be loyal*, to *pay taxes*, *Sons of Liberty*, *representation*, to *elect*, *Redcoats*, *result*; my ELLs included all three groups: the Loyalists, Patriots, and neutral citizens. After discussing the reasons, students came up with a short writing piece, justifying their choice.

It was a rewarding process to learn how to co-teach. Ms. Quinlan and I have our own views and procedures on teaching fourth-grade social studies. We do not share ethnic or linguistic background, native country, or religion; what we *do* share is our love for teaching and our commitment to providing all students with the same opportunities for learning American history. With this in mind, we developed communication strategies that consistently kept us informed about one another's lesson plans and led to the process of shared decision-making. We consider our collaborative method of teaching ELL students to be a great success in helping our ELLs learn and progress in the classroom.

Classroom teachers are fully responsible for academic achievement of all students, including the ELLs. ESL teachers can bring many assets to the subject matter instructional time, such as their ability to connect with students' home language and culture and to support their emerging bilingualism. Co-teaching allows the ESL and the classroom teachers to share responsibility for the students' academic achievement. By evaluating their classroom composition, co-teachers can modify the weekly subject matter curriculum and the classroom materials and advance the necessary verbal and literacy strategies ELLs need to achieve academic success (Dove, 2010).

We hope that our collaboration helps all the students (including ESL) to meet national, state, and local standards for social studies, as well as English Language Arts. We strongly believe that teachers' cooperation can lead to higher academic achievement of all students, ESL and mainstream.

References

- Dove, M. (2010). Grassroots approach to co-teaching for English language learners. *The Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 74, 8–14.
- Gately, S., & Gately, F. (2001). Understanding co-teaching components. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 33(4), 40–47.
- Honigsfeld, A., & Dove, M. (2008). *Co-teaching in the ESL classroom*. Rockville Centre, NY: Molloy College.
- McClure, G., & Cahnmann-Taylor, M. (2010). Pushing back against push-in: ESOL teacher resistance and the complexities of coteaching. *TESOL Journal*, 1(1), 101–129.
- Raphael, T., & Au, K. (2010). *Q&R Reading Program for Test-Wise Students*. McGraw-Hill Education (2d edition)
- Villa, R., Thousand, J., & Nevin, A. (2008). *A guide to co-teaching* (2d edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Zehr, M. A. (2008). *Research on push-in versus pull-out*. Retrieved from <http://newteacherresourcecenter.blogspot.com>

Katya Kats teaches ESL at in the Cohoes School District. She received her BA in TESOL and MSW from SUNY, Albany. Her research interests include tips and strategies for successful co-teaching content areas to ELLs in the inclusive classroom. [<KKats@cohoes.org>](mailto:KKats@cohoes.org)