Instructional Coaching and the Content-Area Teacher: Enhancing Classroom Practices
by Maria G. Dove and Stephanie Colagiacomo

Coaching as Professional Development
Instructional coaching is an approach to professional development that involves teachers in a collaborative effort to gain specific knowledge and skills as a result of professional conversations between the coach and the instructor. This practice has the potential to provide teachers with individualized, targeted support for teaching English language learners (ELLs) in their content-area classes. Coaching not only helps teachers to develop new instructional strategies, but it also can affirm that the instructional approaches already being used in the classroom are beneficial for second language learners.

Among the many rationales for instructional coaching, an increase in student achievement is a primary concern (Joyce & Calhoun, 2010), particularly among school leaders. In order to improve academic learning, however, teachers need to understand ELLs’ unique learning challenges and their “wide variety of educational and cultural experiences . . . as well as their considerable linguistic differences” (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008, p. 7).

Background
This article supports the practice of instructional coaching and the value of professional conversations by documenting the perspectives of the authors—two veteran educators: an instructional coach with over 30 years’ experience teaching ELLs (Dr. Maria Dove), and a veteran ELA middle-school teacher charged with teaching classes that contained only ELLs (Stephanie Colagiacomo). The authors participated in an instructional coaching plan over a period of one school year in a middle school setting in Suffolk County, N.Y. They met bi-monthly during the course of a regular school day and participated in a coaching-session format that included pre-observation meetings, lesson observations, and post-observation meetings.

The ELA teacher began Period 6 by showcasing individual student projects using a popular television program, American Idol, as a format for their presentations. Individual students were “judged” by three of their peers, who had an ELA assessment-like rubric as their judging guide.

The lesson for these students was well planned; it was truly student centered and organized to develop students’ English language skills. Given this teacher’s considerable classroom expertise, what impact might an instructional coach have on such a teacher who appears to engage her students so very well? How might professional conversations between an instructional coach and an experienced content-area teacher improve instruction for ELLs?

During their meeting times, the ELA teacher expressed her concerns for her ELL students. Among many topics of conversation, she shared her anxiety over her ELLs’ potential performance on the state ELA assessment, inquired about strategies for teaching various lesson components, questioned the effectiveness of certain materials and techniques, discussed her concerns about individual students, and explained her approaches for classroom management and keeping students’ attention. The instructional coach listened attentively, shared her personal experiences working with ELLs, offered information pertaining to concerns, suggested possible instructional strategies, and worked to develop a rapport and build trust with the ELA teacher.
The Coach’s Perspective

The instructional coach, held the belief that a collaborative approach should be the objective for the professional conversations that occurred during each coaching session (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010). Subsequently, both participants, the coach and the ELA teacher, maintained an equal partnership in the process by developing a team approach to the coaching situation. As partners, they brought to the table their own instructional and student expertise, and together they determined what course of action was necessary to best meet the unique needs of the ELLs in the class.

The coach maintained strict confidentiality about what occurred during each phase of the coaching sessions. Remaining nonjudgmental, she affirmed successful classroom techniques for teaching ELLs and offered suggestions for instruction in a framework that was grounded in research and best practices. The instructional coach emphasized that any suggested approaches and techniques for teaching ELLs must be adapted to the teacher’s individual teaching style. It was understood that the ELA teacher would not incorporate every recommendation; instead, the teacher would select strategies to use that were negotiated through the discussions that took place in the coaching sessions. In addition, the coach’s collaborative interactions with this particular faculty member helped to cultivate and affirm her own personal coaching skills.

The ELA Teacher’s Perspective

The ELA teacher believed that the monthly coaching meetings helped her to develop instructional strategies that propelled her ELL students to levels of improvement; she stated that their academic growth was evident on their exams and their written essays. Even her students were able to identify the difference in approach to teaching. One student, in a thank-you note to the ELA teacher, expressed her gratitude for the interactive lessons, which challenged her “to learn English in new and exciting ways.”

During one of the first coaching sessions, the ELA teacher felt encouraged to model good test-taking and learning practices on a daily basis. It recommended that the content of each lesson be broken down through interactive methods of instruction. As a result, she developed a role-play activity called “Prove Your Answer to the ELA Judge.” Students, using critical-thinking skills, had to defend their answers to a series of practice ELA assessment questions in a mock courtroom setting.

Throughout the year, the ELA teacher reported that she continued to motivate her ELLs using many innovative activities that were supported by the coaching sessions. Students created flip books to bring grammar to life, wrote rap songs, created board games, engaged in sports-like competitions, and participated in role plays. To enhance the students’ interactive experiences, many classroom activities she utilized a multitude of props including costumes, scenery, and microphones to maximize participation.

The ELA teacher believed that the coaching sessions not only helped her to prepare ELLs for the rigorous state assessments and their future academic challenges, but also inspired her to become an instructional coach for her own students. She concluded that the coach-teacher interactions allowed for immediate feedback and validated successful practices, which worked to further enhance and refine the teacher-student interactions that occurred in the classroom.

Conclusions

Instructional coaching for the sake of ELLs can benefit all teachers in spite of their level of expertise in their content area of instruction. This type of professional development can draw
teachers out of isolation to work collaboratively to develop strategies that are most effective for ELLs. Veteran teachers often have their classroom practices affirmed through coaching practices, and the level of professional conversations and support from coaching can engage all teachers to experiment with new classroom activities to enhance the learning process for second language learners.

References

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