

# **From Co-Planning to Co-Reflection: The Power of Elementary and ELL Co-Teaching Teams Using the Collaborative Instructional Cycle**

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## **ABSTRACT**

As K-6 Indiana classrooms continue to diversify, effective collaboration between elementary and English Language Learner (ELL) co-teaching teams becomes even more crucial. This qualitative research study navigates how Honigsfeld and Dove's (2015) Collaborative Instructional Cycle—co-planning, co-instruction, co-assessment, and co-reflection—is integrated in elementary settings. Findings from two focus groups reveal that common planning tools, clear instructional roles and responsibilities, integration of background knowledge, and flexible reflective practices measurably impact instructional practice and increase student outcomes. This article suggests practical implications to foster inclusive and successful co-teaching learning environments.

## **Introduction**

As our society becomes increasingly multilingual and multicultural, the K–6 classroom is a microcosm of diversity. This shift demands a major rethinking of how we teach. English Language Learners (ELLs) are not just students acquiring a new language. They are navigating complex cultural landscapes while striving to succeed academically. To truly serve them, educators must embrace a pedagogy that is responsive, inclusive, and transformative. Currently, only 28 of 50 states have requirements for general education pre-service and in-service teachers to have some sort of training to work with ELLs. According to Ellis et al. (2023), 71% of

Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) allocate fewer than two instructional hours to working with ELLs, and 88% of EPPs do not offer opportunities to teach ELLs.

As statistics like these emerge, the need for more data-driven decisions led us to facilitating focus groups. We recognize that teacher educators need to take advantage of every opportunity to work jointly with local school partners to inform their collaborative practices. Specifically, for this research, we focused on the practice of elementary teachers co-teaching with teachers of ELLs. Given the limited studies highlighting how co-teachers might model equitable collaborative practices, our study focused on a theoretical framework designed to be utilized by K-6 teachers. To gain information about elementary co-teaching practices, we held focus groups structured around the four interconnected phases: co-plan, co-instruct, co-assess, and co-reflect. We framed our study through the lens of Honigsfeld and Dove's (2015) Collaborative Instructional Cycle to interpret the focus group data we gathered and analyzed to explore the research question, *what role does the Collaborative Instructional Cycle have on collaborative practices for K-6 content and ELL teaching teams?*

We began reviewing literature on Honigsfeld and Dove's (2015) Collaborative Instructional Cycle. We also found it imperative to review literature on successful co-teaching practices and partnerships in elementary ELL classrooms. Lastly, we reviewed literature about aligning spaces and schedules for effective co-teaching due to an apparent lack of shared space and schedule gleaned from our focus groups.

## **Literature Review**

### **Content and ELL Co-Teaching Partnerships**

Essential qualities for effective co-teaching partnerships are trust, respect, communication, and shared responsibility. Bauler et. al. (2019) argued that ELL and content

teachers showcase resilient co-teaching practices even with minimal planning time. These co-teaching teams demonstrated trust and a mutual commitment to student outcomes, as opposed to strictly adhering to one co-teaching model (Box, 2023). Studies reinforced this, indicating that effective co-teaching requires intentional relationship-building, professional development, and a collaborative culture (Box, 2023; Hendrickson, 2011; Bauler et.al., 2019; Beck & Pace, 2019; ASCD, n.d.).

Co-teachers who regularly plan and reflect more effectively differentiate instruction for ELLs. Other studies emphasized the importance of defined roles and shared responsibility (Martin-Beltrán et al., 2012). When co-teachers have clear role expectations and responsibilities, they are better able to meet ELLs' content and language needs (ASCD, n.d.; Bauler et.al., 2019; Hendrickson, 2011; Beck & Pace, 2019). Similarly, studies found that co-teachers who used collaborative tools and engaged in co-reflection were more successful in aligning their instruction (Martin-Beltrán et al. 2012; Bauler et.al., 2019; Hendrickson, 2011; ASCD, n.d.).

Research also argued that co-teaching encourages inclusive classroom settings where ELLs feel supported, which increases participation and confidence (Friend & Cook, 2017). Additionally, collaborative instruction promotes higher-order thinking and language growth by embedding scaffolds and culturally responsive practices into lessons (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016).

### **Aligning Spaces and Schedules for Effective Co-Teaching**

Shared classroom spaces and aligned schedules are required for effective co-teaching. While collaboration time is essential, it is not sufficient without other components of co-teaching (Vintan & Gallagher, 2019; Hendrickson, 2011; Bauler et.al., 2019; Beck & Pace, 2019; ASCD, n.d.). Teachers must also have access to a shared space with resources to fully implement co-

teaching instruction (Vintan & Gallagher, 2019; Brendle et al., 2017). Both teachers being visible in the shared classroom models a balanced partnership. Supportive school leadership plays a critical role in creating spaces and schedules that prioritizes time for collaboration (Box, 2023; Colorín Colorado, 2022; McTigue et al., 2023). Without this leadership support, co-teaching often collapses or becomes superficial. By embedding co-teaching into master schedules, school leadership can provide joint professional development and foster a culture of shared ownership (Colorín Colorado, 2022; Snyder & Bae, 2017).

Studies indicated that aligned schedules and collaborative spaces create instructional continuity for ELL learners. This structure fosters equitable access to grade-level standards and increases opportunities for scaffolding, which links to increased academic achievement and engagement. (Vintan & Gallagher, 2019; Brendle et al., 2017; Salend & Duhaney, 2011; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013). Furthermore, co-teaching teams collaborating in the same space model inclusive practices, fostering a welcoming classroom environment, which leads to ELLs demonstrating increased participation and social-emotional growth (Salend & Duhaney, 2011; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013).

### **Honigsfeld and Dove's Collaborative Instructional Cycle**

The Collaborative Instructional Cycle is the foundation for elementary and ELL co-teaching practices. The four interconnected phases are co-planning, co-instruction, co-assessing, and co-reflecting. Co-planning builds the foundation, intentionally integrating content with language objectives. Co-instruction ensures students receive both content and language through aligned practices, using language data. Co-assessing builds on shared assessments that include appropriate modifications, and co-reflecting allows teachers to collaboratively review outcomes and adjust instruction. The phases are designed to make sure that elementary content and ELL

teachers share responsibility in language and content instruction (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010; Nordmeyer & Honigsfeld, 2020). Nordmeyer and Honigsfeld (2020) emphasized that the cycle supports ELL students' academic growth. Furthermore, the cycle promotes professional learning among teachers. When the cycle is implemented as designed and with administrative support, teachers and ELL students are supported in their language and content needs. While the framework's phases are designed to be cyclical, teachers have flexibility when it comes to implementing co-teaching structures—such as team teaching—to meet diverse student needs (Dove & Honigsfeld, 2020). When ELL and elementary teachers respect each other's expertise, they are more likely to engage in professional and reflective co-teaching practices.

### **Methodology**

The qualitative study adopted an interview research design to learn about collaborative practices among elementary and ELL co-teaching teams. Researchers held two semi-structured focus group sessions via Zoom with five co-teaching teams representing a variety of settings and grade levels. The research questions and protocols were guided by Honigsfeld and Dove's Collaborative Instructional Cycle, focusing on their four interconnected phases: co-planning, co-instruction, co-assessment, and co-reflection. This intentional research design guided participants through consistent questioning while encouraging deeper exploration of individual experiences and reflecting on instructional decision-making. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic coding. Patterns were identified, categorized, and organized into themes aligned with the phases of the Collaborative Instructional Cycle. This research approach resulted in thoughtful and descriptive insights into how co-teaching teams integrate collaborative practices in their elementary classroom contexts with ELLs.

### **Research Positionality**

From Co-Planning to Co-Reflection

As former K-12 educators, we recognize the intricacies of co-teaching to support content and language domains. Our lived experiences led to our inquiry into aligning co-teaching practices around the Collaborative Instruction Cycle. As current teacher educators, we are working to transfer the practice into higher education to prepare future teachers for effective co-teaching realities in today's classrooms. As practitioners-researchers, we are committed to understanding how successful K-6 co-teaching practices can inform our instructional practices. Facilitating focus groups comprised of elementary and ELL co-teaching teams has allowed us to amplify voices and best practices.

### **Participants**

We reached out to elementary school administrators with a call for content and ELL co-teaching teams' participation. We intentionally focused on elementary co-teaching teams because we are currently teaching future teachers. Five co-teaching teams from different elementary schools participated in our study. All five teams were teachers in the Midwest.

Table 1 shows the breakdown of the participants. Two of the co-teaching teams are situated in urban settings, two are in suburban settings, and one is in a rural setting. Three of the teams were in their first-year co-teaching together, one team was in their second-year, and one was in their eighth-year co-teaching together. Two of the teams were co-teaching in a fifth-grade classroom, one team was in a fourth-fifth grade split classroom, one was in fourth-grade, and one was co-teaching in a second-grade classroom.

Table 1-Teams and Grade Levels

<b>School</b>	<b>Setting</b>	<b>Grade Level</b>	<b>Years Co-Teaching Together</b>
G	Urban	4/5 split	1

K	Urban	5	1
N	Suburban	5	8
S	Rural	2	2
R	Suburban	4	1

We chose Honigsfeld and Dove’s Collaborative Instructional Cycle through which to analyze the data captured in our focus groups. As we created the two focus group interview protocols, we utilized the Collaborative Instructional Cycle model that outlines the four interconnected phases (i.e., co-plan, co-instruct, co-assess, and co-reflect). According to Honigsfeld and Dove (2015),

When teachers put in place all four components of the Collaborative Instructional Cycle—planning, teaching, assessment, and reflection—learning will flourish. The teachers have the opportunity to craft unit goals, lesson objectives, or learning targets with ELLs in mind (p. 57).

This framework highlights the positioning of content and ELL teachers as co-creators of plans, instructional practices, scaffolds for instruction, modified assessments for data collection, and reflection of data collected. To address our research question, *What role does the Collaborative Instructional Cycle have on collaborative practices for K–6 content and ELL teaching teams?*, the framework allowed us to navigate how the four phases of the cycle are evident in elementary co-teaching teams’ instructional decisions.

**Data Collection**

Using Honigsfeld and Dove’s Collaborative Instructional Cycle as the theoretical framework, the data analysis focused on exploring how elementary and ELL co-teachers engaged in collaborative practices. The four interconnected phases provided a lens to examine collaborative practices and instruction. Through thematic analysis, we first transcribed the focus groups and began the process of identifying codes by highlighting patterns that aligned with the four phases. The codes were sorted based on trends. As we continued to analyze the codes, themes emerged that reflected the Collaborative Instructional Cycle. The emerging themes that aligned closely with the four phases were: Shared Docs, Shared Vision: Convenient Co-Planning; Co-Teaching in Sync: Double the Minds, Double the Impact; Beyond the Test: The Power of Background Knowledge; and Quick Takes: On-the-Fly Reflections. To increase the trustworthiness of the analysis, a third researcher coded responses. We then compared our coding and discussed inconsistencies until we agreed on the final codes. This process enhanced inter-rater reliability. We also gave the focus group participants the opportunity to review the transcriptions to check for accuracy.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Drawing from our focus groups, the analysis revealed several important findings: First, when co-teachers made time to plan together—incorporating common documents and shared planning times—their plans for instruction became more aligned. Second, co-teaching was best implemented when teachers worked together to define their roles and create a shared physical space. This provided the opportunity for one co-teacher to focus on content while the other co-teacher focused on language. Third, when teachers incorporated appropriate scaffolds into their plans, the assessments became more accessible for ELLs. Fourth, co-teachers recognized the value of co-reflection and showcased tremendous flexibility to engage in co-reflective practices.

These data helped us better understand best co-teaching practices and guided us in making suggestions for meaningful improvements. While there were multiple findings derived from the focus groups for each of the four interconnected phases, we chose to illuminate the findings that were coded most frequently.

### **Shared Docs, Shared Vision: Convenient Co-Planning**

Based on focus group data, the top way that participants co-planned was the use of a collaborative Google document. When in-person co-planning was not possible, teachers use Google documents to co-plan. Implementation of a shared Google document included collaboratively typing and highlighting their contributions, allowing for asynchronous co-planning. This method helped them stay organized and ensured that both teachers could contribute to the planning process. Bauler et. al. (2019) and Box (2023) highlight that resilient co-teaching practices thrive even with minimal planning time, provided there is trust and shared responsibility. The use of Google Docs exemplifies this resilience and mutual commitment, allowing co-teaching teams to maintain instructional alignment despite scheduling constraints. The excerpts below derived from the focus groups showcase the use of collaborative Google documents to co-plan. We further identified if the speaker of each excerpt was the content or ELL teacher.

Unfortunately, in our PLCs, we do not really do much content talk. It ends up being a lot of other things. Then it is not even worth the co-teacher having to sit there and listen through all that. So, we tried a Google document. I would type something and highlight it, and then she would type something, highlight it. [Content]

We used to plan right after school. However, with family obligations, we work best from

home in the evenings. We use Google docs. [ELL]

Given the challenges with co-planning time evident in the excerpts, it is apparent that co-teaching teams must demonstrate flexibility using multi-modal planning tools. Intentional co-planning is foundational to the next interconnected phase.

### **Co-Teaching in Sync: Double the Minds, Double the Impact**

During the focus groups, the participants discussed their clearly defined roles during instruction within common physical spaces. A notable feature of co-teaching through our data analysis was divide and conquer. The excerpts below are examples provided by the participants.

Because we had common planning, we could literally divide and conquer during instruction. We shared the space and we would pull kids left and right and work with kids that needed scaffolds and language objectives. [ELL]

Since we have been doing this for a long time, we can read each other like a book. We have things down to a science. She can walk in, and we can divide and conquer. I can be like, “Hey, based on yesterday’s lesson, can you do this?” [Content]

Since we had already created the color-coded lesson slides, I walked into her class with additional visuals like labeled diagrams, vocabulary images, and sentence frames to support language learners. [ELL]

The teachers’ collaboration and shared planning allowed them to divide instructional roles and responsibilities, provide additional support to meet student-specific needs, and communicate effectively as lessons unfolded. Participants discussed the implementation of color-coded slides to signal instructional transitions between the co-teachers. The visual color-coded system facilitated smooth coordination between the co-teachers and provided lesson continuity. This reflects the co-instruction phase of the Collaborative Instructional Cycle, where aligned practices

ensure delivery of both content and language. Martin-Beltrán et al. (2012) emphasize that defined roles and shared responsibility enhance instructional effectiveness for ELLs. The use of visual systems and shared space also supports Vintan and Gallagher (2019) who argues that aligned schedules and shared environments are essential for successful co-teaching. Intentional co-instructional practices mentioned above illuminated the importance of well-orchestrated transitions during co-teaching.

### **Beyond the Test: The Power of Background Knowledge**

Analysis of the focus group on co-assessment revealed that pre-teaching content and exposure to background knowledge were identified as factors that the co-teachers suggested improved student assessment results. The following excerpts were derived from the focus groups and provide examples of co-assessing.

Prior to the test, the ELL teacher has been trying to build a little background knowledge, for example, a nonfiction topic we haven't covered very much. So, the kids know at least what they're reading about before they take the test. [Content]

In our classroom, all students are able to experience success because we recognize and validate their background knowledge, even if it is in their native language. [Content]

All students have prior knowledge gained from schooling and life experiences no matter where they occurred. Our students' schema provides a basis for learning. [ELL]

The implementation of background knowledge-building activities was a strategy the co-teachers included to optimize student performance on assessments. The focus group data suggested that validating student background knowledge supported content understanding and promoted equity on assessments by minimizing barriers associated with unfamiliar language and content.

This finding aligns with the co-assessment phase of Honigsfeld and Dove’s framework, which advocates shared assessments with appropriate modifications. The emphasis on validating students’ prior knowledge, even in their native language, supports Friend & Cook (2017) and Murawski & Bernhardt (2016), who argue that inclusive practices and culturally responsive instruction enhance student engagement and achievement. Additionally, Salend & Duhaney (2011) and Villa, Thousand, & Nevin (2013) note that inclusive classrooms foster social-emotional growth and academic success, which is evident in this finding.

### **Quick Takes: On-the-Fly Reflections**

One significant finding that emerged from the focus group data was the practice of on-the-fly reflection—quick, informal evaluative reflections that occurred during or just after instruction. Co-teaching teams shared experiences when they engaged in real-time conversations to reflect on lesson effectiveness. The following two excerpts from the focus groups highlight these informal reflections.

I’m really hoping we’ll be able to figure out something next year where we can have a little bit more time to work together and reflect. It’s a drive-by. [ELL]

We reflect when our students are packing up or during transitions. [Content]

These spontaneous reflective conversations served as a calibration for the co-teaching teams to adjust upcoming instruction, focusing on the critical and responsive elements of collaborative reflection. This practice exemplifies the co-reflection phase of the Collaborative Instructional Cycle, which encourages ongoing review and adjustment of instruction. Nordmeyer and Honigsfeld (2020) supports this by stating that the cycle promotes professional learning and responsive teaching. Moreover, Honigsfeld and Dove (2019) emphasize that mutual respect and

trust between co-teachers foster reflective practices, which are critical for continuous improvement.

### **Implications**

As society grows more multilingual, the K–6 classroom reflects these specific diverse needs, requiring elementary and ELL co-teaching teams to revise and update their instructional approaches to meet the needs of all students. As we explored the data collected from our co-teaching focus groups, the findings indicated that there are manageable and quick modifications to current co-teaching practices that have the potential to increase student academic achievement. The following implications support each of the four interconnected phases.

For co-planning, the use of a shared Google document allows an elementary and ELL co-teaching team to construct lesson plans that support both content and language objectives. For example, when drafting a fourth-grade math lesson plan on classifying triangles and quadrilaterals, the elementary teacher might upload documents about lines and angles, while the ELL teacher adds a word bank for student responses. By contributing asynchronously, the co-teaching team ensures that the lesson includes appropriate scaffolds, despite the limited time available for in-person planning.

Regarding co-teaching, dividing roles and responsibilities allows both teachers to maximize instructional impact. For instance, during a fifth-grade science lesson on the solar system, the elementary teacher might begin a whole-group discussion prompted by color-coded slides to introduce key concepts. Based on the color of the slide, the ELL teacher leads an activity to introduce key vocabulary with visuals and native language support. Given that the co-teachers co-planned and identified transitions based on the color-coded system, they can shift

roles seamlessly. The elementary teacher is facilitating content exploration while the ELL teacher reinforces language objectives.

Co-teachers can intentionally connect to students' prior experiences to support assessment design and preparation. For example, before a third-grade reading assessment on fact and opinion, the elementary teacher might explain how an author uses facts to support specific points in a text, while the ELL teacher uses visuals to connect to students' prior experiences. The co-teaching team invites students to share their knowledge—even in their native language—to validate and activate prior knowledge.

In-the-moment reflections allow co-teaching teams to make immediate instructional modifications. For example, during a first-grade math lesson on addition strategies, the elementary teacher might recognize that the majority of the students are struggling with number lines. While students are lining up to go to lunch, the elementary and ELL teachers briefly discuss adding line charts and manipulatives for the next lesson. These quick, casual reflections support both teachers staying aligned, promptly responding to individual needs, and constantly making improvements without formal meetings.

### **Limitations**

When researching co-teaching models, several limitations can affect the validity of the findings. One major limitation was the minimal number of participants involved in the study, which reduces the generalizability and reliability of the findings. Future studies could potentially increase participation by leveraging technologies, such as employing social media to digitally solicit participation.

Additionally, there was considerable variability in how co-teaching teams implemented the Collaborative Instructional Cycle, ranging from planning with digital tools to never finding

time to co-plan. This variability made it challenging to draw conclusions across the focus group data, as the effectiveness of co-teaching may depend largely on the specific context within which the co-teaching existed. Future studies could include additional contextual information about participants and their current co-teaching knowledge to make the data more uniform and potentially generalizable. For instance, researchers could add additional questions on the informed consent form to streamline participant familiarity.

### **Future Recommendations**

Based on the findings from our focus groups, we suggest future research explore different co-teaching models and which models are most effective in different classroom and school contexts. Research could explore the impact of leadership and the nuances of co-teaching teams. For instance, research could focus on how the school context impacts the Collaborative Instructional Cycle.

Additionally, future research could place importance on missed opportunities for resources to support co-teaching teams. This could include research that focuses on professional development opportunities that district and school leaders could participate in to provide intentional and targeted support for effective co-teaching practices. For instance, research could focus on professional development available for leaders that makes co-planning a non-negotiable. These recommendations address some of the challenges illuminated through this study, which lead to improved co-teaching practices that respond to student academic needs.

Honigsfeld and Dove's Collaborative Instructional Cycle is designed to be flexible across all academic settings. Future research could also benefit from this study being replicated with secondary content and ELL co-teaching teams. At the secondary level, this model is even more necessary as the academic content and language demands are more rigorous for all students.

While logistically assigning an ELL co-teacher to all content areas is a challenge in the secondary setting, a study could navigate co-teaching through the lens of the four interconnected phases.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study underscores the importance of effective elementary and ELL co-teaching practices, using Honigsfeld and Dove's Collaborative Instructional Cycle as a framework. Data derived from the focus groups explored the role of the four phases in authentic classroom settings. Findings highlight the importance of common planning practices, intentional roles and responsibilities during instruction, finding relevance in student's background knowledge, and flexible co-reflective practices. To meet the content and language demands of all learners, K-6 co-teaching teams must purposefully engage with all four interconnected phases of the Collaborative Instructional Cycle.

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