

# FROM THE FIELD

## Maximizing the Impact: Benefits of EL Instructional Coaching in Low Incidence EL Setting



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There are several terms that refer to English learners in professional discourse today: English language learners – ELL; students with limited English proficiency – LEP; newcomer English learners; immigrant students; emergent bilinguals, and language minority students, to name a few that are used most frequently. In this publication, we use English learner – EL. Although the body of learners comprising K-12 EL student population is diverse and varies by their country of birth – United States or abroad, age, previous schooling experience, and cultural background among other factors – they all have one common characteristic: a low level of proficiency in the English language, which becomes an impediment to learning by making public education less-/inaccessible to these individuals.

As classroom teachers report *working with ELs* in the top five challenges of their work (Markow & Cooper, 2008), school districts across the nation are working to find the best ways to address this problem. EL instructional coaching (IC) is often considered, among other options. When an EL instructional coach and his or her general classroom colleague start working together on adjusting instructional practices to make content more accessible for ELs, their collaboration may follow a variety of coaching models. The model of choice in this EL IC case exploration is partnership coaching (Knight, 2017). It takes effort, time, and accurate scheduling to establish contact with the teacher, set up an observation session, conduct it, analyze, determine and discuss difficulties, devise solutions, model if needed, implement instructional changes, and set up a classroom visit for the new practice observation session, starting the coaching cycle over. How could the effects of this carefully orchestrated planning and research work of EL coaches and classroom teachers of ELs be maximized?

Generally, a low incidence school district has 25 percent or less EL students within its total enrollment (Consentino de Cohen et al., 2005), which means that unless special clustering is implemented, the number of ELs in regular classrooms is random and can be between one and five students, on average. There are many low incidence EL school districts with multiple mainstream classrooms with one or two ELs, so it is easy to see why some may look at the work that goes into supporting these few students as another long-term commitment into which school districts are obligated to put resources without fast, big returns in the form of improved scores on standardized assessments. It is only natural that an EL IC and the classroom teacher choose to approach the needs of the district's ELs more holistically and inclusively, making sure they orchestrate instructional adjustments to maximize the benefit and make them relevant for more students. As a result, they cluster students by academic English ability and include native speakers of English who

need additional support in accessing and acquiring content through language.

Should the benefits of working with an EL instructional coach be extended beyond reaching the EL population of the classroom? Is clustering ELs within one classroom practical? With English learners at the heart of our work and the primary focus of our efforts, who else stands to benefit from such explicitly differentiated instruction?

The pay-off of investing time and effort could be increased when the same enhanced teaching practices are used in small group instruction. Even when there are three or more English language learners in class, each individual's levels of proficiency — and consequently needs for scaffolding — may differ significantly, so during small group instruction EL students can be assigned to different groups based not only on their academic language abilities, but also on content knowledge. In other words, ELs don't have to always stay in one group: they can and should be included in small groups based on their content knowledge and other social factors.

The following sample support questions can help guide instructional exploration during coaching sessions: Are there other non-EL students, whose reading is not on grade level? Struggling or reluctant readers who also need a boost in academic language development? What EL instructional strategies could positively influence learning for the entire class? In other words, an EL coach walks in a school with specific few students in mind all the while keeping an eye for instructional opportunities to maximize student performance and make the learning experience more meaningful for every student, whose needs could be met using enhanced instructional practices and sometimes minor adjustments to their routines.

## Two sensible approaches to classroom observation in low incidence EL setting

When an EL instructional coach is not sure what classroom to start with and has a hard time justifying entering other teacher's classroom domain for initial observation — a feeling commonly shared and reported by coaches of many content areas, not EL-specific, — they can take either a quantitative or a qualitative approach, among others (Nuss, 2019).

- **Quantitative:** make a list of EL students at school by teacher and determine priority classrooms with the most ELs; show the list to the teacher, explain your reasoning, and thus avoid the awkward why me conversation.
- **Qualitative:** go through the list of EL students and pick ones with the lowest proficiency, making work with their classroom teachers a priority. As much as

possible, frame initial conversations centered on the EL student, not their teacher. By concentrating on the discussion of the EL students and their needs, position the mainstream colleagues for deeper reflection on their instruction; whether or not classroom teachers implement the changes EL IC advocates remains to be their practice decision that we should respect.

## Additional experience-based action points for an EL IC working with classroom teachers of ELs in inclusive low incidence EL environment

- **Expert status:** Investigate what instructional practices-focused work is being implemented at the district level and in your particular school. School administration is usually eager to draw on local resources and often open to coach's contributions. Don't be too shy to offer help and certainly assertively support the initiatives currently in place. In the spirit of sharing the wealth of knowledge, plan and conduct a professional development session for mainstream colleagues. If the EL coach is not sure he or she can handle an entire PD session, take on a part of it or do it as a team: a small segment of a PD session conducted well will help a new EL instructional coach to establish their instructional leadership. In this session or during a staff meeting, a coach might introduce the district's EL Instructional Coaching program and the Why behind it. It's OK to ask for help: an ELL specialist is a teacher and not necessarily an expert public speaker. A specialized PD is in order when an EL IC is asked to perform functions outside of his or her regular ESL teaching practices (Nuss, 2019).
- **Data-driven decision making:** EL IC should be an expert in school and district's English language proficiency assessment programs already in place and know EL students. Get comfortable with details of ELL data and bring this knowledge to the classroom teachers. In addition to familiarizing the teacher with the online sources of EL data they need to know to inform and differentiate instruction, I like to have individual EL student data printed out for classroom teachers for easy reference. Based on the comments of my mainstream colleagues, they truly appreciate the differentiation: many of us in the teaching profession appreciate the paper-and-highlighter-in-hand kind of learning.
- **Working with a few teachers at a time** helps to minimize the "singling out" effect. Experienced instructional coaches taught me to start the work in a new school with the teacher who has a great reputation: this helps to alleviate the fear of teachers

treating future interactions with ICs as that of implied professional deficiency.

- **Communication is the key:** talk to the teachers you select and directly inform them of your role and job duties. Explain why their class was chosen using qualitative or quantitative reasoning: it is about the students, not the teacher. Once the observation session is planted in the teacher's mind, he or she may have ideas about how to use the coach's visit to benefit their students, so ask the teacher's opinion on where they could use another set of eyes when you come for the first observation session.
- **Brainstorm** with the district's leadership or one's coaching cohort a sample introduction email and wording ideas. In my consulting services, I often share what works well.
- **Have suggestions** for the teachers on what you could be observing; some ideas for this: time ELs and other students are on-task, number of EL's social interactions, and ratio of positive/negative EL peer and/or teacher interactions.
- **Decide on the follow-up conversation** (you do need one): time, duration. Keep in mind that the longer your follow-up session takes – the less inclined the teacher will be to set up another one.
- **Time:** have a good understanding (talk to administration ahead of time) where the time to meet with the teacher will come from (prep or specials time, substitute teacher – strongly preferred; other). Give the teacher your reflection questions for the follow-up session in advance. Be sure to not deviate

from your original list of questions and the time frame requested. If you do run out of time, it is better to reschedule than to lose credibility. See a sample list of reflection questions recommended by Jim Knight in his *Impact Cycle* (Knight, 2017).

- **Always think ahead:** what is the next step? Prioritize, ask meaningful questions, and advocate for the EL students and their families!

No matter how well-prepared the EL coach is — there can always be a situation when the connection with the teacher is never forged, or the teacher-coach partnership fails to produce expected results: that human factor! It is best to learn from the experience and move on, mainly in the direction of professional development for coaches supporting EL instruction: research special literature, attend professional conferences, network in the field, and reflect on personal practice. After all, professional development targeting mainstream teachers of linguistically diverse learners and classroom teacher support by EL instructional coaching is largely unexplored — particularly in the low incidence environment (Teemant, 2014), with some evidence suggesting that instructional coaching represents a promising focus for professional development of mainstream teachers of diverse English learners.

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