Coteaching English Language Learners: An ecological perspective

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There is little doubt that classrooms in US public schools are becoming more culturally and linguistically diverse. Recent demographic trends indicate that English Language Learners (ELLs) represent the fastest growing segment of the public school student population. The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA) (2007) reported that between 1996-2006 the enrollment of ELLs in US public schools increased by more than 65%, compared with just over 9% for the total student population during the same period. What is less clear, however, is how to go about supporting the simultaneous language and content needs of such students. Despite decades of research on integrating language and content instruction (Mohan, 1986; Crandall, 1998; Chamot & O’Malley, 1994; Davison & Williams, 2001; Snow, 2005; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008) and recent conservative reform efforts (e.g. NCLB) that have brought increased attention to the instructional needs of ELLs, little has changed in terms of actual educational outcomes for these students. English language learners consistently lag behind native-English speaking peers on standardized assessments (Fry, 2007), and Latino students, who represent the majority of ELLs, have a dropout rate of 27% compared with 7.3% of their White counterparts (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2004).

As school districts struggle to find ways to improve educational experiences for ELLs, many are moving towards more inclusive practices (Verplaatse & Miglicci, 2007; Platt, Harper, & Mendoza, 2003). Traditional pull-out models that segregate ELLs for English language development are being discarded for coteaching and push-in approaches that combine the expertise of the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher and the grade-level teacher into a single coteaching setting (Dove & Honigsfield, 2010). These partnerships appear to present logical solutions to the dual-challenge of facilitating language and content
development for ELLs, and they are frequently marketed by school districts and state education offices with rhetoric that narrowly highlights their inclusive and collaborative nature (McClure & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010). The underlying assumptions behind policy and program decisions that mandate coteaching appear obvious at first glance: bringing the ESOL teacher into the “mainstream” classroom provides the much needed second language acquisition and pedagogy knowledge (TESOL, 2010) into the mainstream context, eliminating the need to pull-out ELLs, thereby decreasing the amount of core curricula missed. A decidedly functionalist and instrumentalist notion pervades; facilitating language and content development requires little more than language and content specialists working together. However, what emerges from the literature and the experiences of actual coteachers yield a more complex picture. For example, coteachers seldom have sufficient planning time together and language specific tasks and knowledge are often subsumed by content concerns of the mainstream curriculum that are driven by state and local accountability systems (Creese, 2005; Harper & de Jong, 2009). Further, coteaching partners may need significant time to work through their own challenges that arise as a result of ideological differences regarding race, immigration, or pedagogy.

As such, coteaching ELLs is both a pedagogical and a political process that, at its core, involves the construction and nurturing of a complex relationship—a teaching partnership that is influenced by interconnected systems of policy and knowledge, as well as by individual differences between the teachers themselves. Therefore, the role of broader sociopolitical and cultural contexts must be considered; institutional and societal perspectives on bi/multilingualism, immigration, and diversity for example, significantly impact coteaching relationships and the language and content learning opportunities for ELLs in cotaught classrooms. Given this understanding and the prevailing achievement gap between ELLs and
native English speakers, in this article I locate coteaching ELLs within a critical framework that conceptualizes educating linguistically and culturally diverse students as a political act motivated by concerns for equity and justice (Bartolomé & Trueba, 2000; Darder, 1992; Nieto & Bode, 2008). Further, I argue that current conceptualizations present coteaching ELLs as either a neutral and unproblematic practice (Coltrane, 2002; Pardini, 2006) or one that is bound by inequitable power relations between ESOL and collaborating teachers (Arkoudis, 2003, 2006; Creese, 2005, 2006). In their own ways, these perspectives oversimplify coteaching, and, as a result, fail to recognize the complex range of possibilities afforded by coteaching.

To address these limitations, I suggest the need for an ecological perspective at both the broader policy and administrative levels, as well as in the practice of coteaching at the classroom level. In the sections that follow I briefly review recent literature on coteaching ELLs and discuss influential works in language education that take an ecological perspective that have informed my thinking. Finally, I use data from recent coteaching studies (McClure & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010; McClure, 2012) to illustrate the limiting nature of instrumental perspectives and the potential power of an ecological model of coteaching.

**Coteaching Defined, and Interrogated**

While coteaching ELLs is relatively new in US public schools, inclusive practices of mainstreaming ELLs into the “regular” classroom have been on the rise since the late 1980’s (Davison, 2001; Verplaetse & Migliachi, 2007). Recent literature suggests that as ELLs are increasingly mainstreamed into the regular classroom, ESOL teacher knowledge and expertise are devalued and marginalized (Davison, 2001; Harper & de Jong, 2009). Harper and de Jong describe this as the “diffusion” and “supplanting” of specialized language pedagogy and knowledge by more general “best practices” aimed at educating all students. As a result, ELLs
have been increasingly physically included but have had limited opportunities for interaction and access to language and content development in mainstream classrooms (Harklau, 1994; Harper & Platt, 1998). Coteaching is a practice that seeks to address this by not only including the ELLs in the mainstream, but the ESOL teacher as well.

Borrowing from the special education literature, coteaching can be defined as two or more educators sharing instructional responsibility for students assigned to the same classroom (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008). While the actual implementation of coteaching as an instructional practice may vary depending on local contexts, researchers have identified a range of models frequently used in the classroom. These include everything from coteachers sharing full instructional responsibilities as “team teachers” to models where one teacher leads instruction and the other “roams” to provide support to individual students (see Friend & Cook, 2007 for a full discussion of these models). In ESOL settings coteaching seems to be predicated on the premise of fostering language and content development for ELLs in the most inclusive and efficient manner possible. Under the current climate of accountability, pulling students out of the classroom for focused English instruction is often frowned upon by mainstream teachers because it disrupts ELLs’ exposure to core content instruction (Migliacci & Verplaetse, 2007, McClure, 2008). Bringing the ESOL teacher into the regular classroom, then, is the logical next step. Combining the language acquisition knowledge and pedagogy of the ESOL teacher with the content knowledge of the mainstream teacher appears to address this concern (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Instrumental model of coteaching
While this instrumental model of coteaching recognizes the unique contributions of both the ESOL and grade-level teacher, it fails to acknowledge how the sociopolitical, historical and cultural context can affect the potential outcomes of collaboration. The historical marginalization of ESOL teachers and knowledge is just one such example that alludes to the limitations of an instrumental perspective. ESOL teachers can claim substantial areas of expertise such as knowledge about the English language, first and second language development, relevant language teaching methodologies (Hammond, 1999), as well as assessment practices and the role of culture in teaching (TESOL, 2010) to name but a few. Despite this fact, many states position ESOL teaching certification only as a peripheral “add-on” endorsement, not as a full-fledged stand-alone area of licensure. As a result, this institutional positioning of the ESOL profession as peripheral contributes to social and educational contexts where ESOL teachers are often seen as specialists and tutors instead of fully credentialed teaching professionals (Olsen, 1997; George, 2009). Such concerns rest outside of formulaic approaches like the model presented above. Left unaddressed (by policy makers and administrators pushing coteaching), these issues place limitations on coteachers’ abilities to enact the types of partnerships that are often marketed as collaborative practices where coteachers are co-equals in the classroom who share instructional responsibilities and teaching equally (GADOE, 2008, p. 6). Pushing beyond instrumental notions to consider how social and institutional positioning affects teaching partnerships helps us begin to conceptualize coteaching as a more complex and dynamic practice.

While there is very little research on coteaching ELLs in US contexts, what has been written often presents a power-neutral and unproblematic endeavor. Coteaching as such is conceptualized as a methodology or best practice that emerges from a functional/instrumental perspective. In a discussion of one school’s transition from a pull-out model to coteaching,
Coltrane (2002) observed, “When teachers collaborate and combine their talents, everyone benefits” (p. 6). While it is difficult to argue the potential benefits that collaboration presents, Coltrane’s comment here, much like the representation of coteaching in Figure 1, oversimplifies coteaching and fails to acknowledge that it is often a contentious practice.

Similarly, Pardini (2006) reported on the success of coteaching efforts in St. Paul public schools in Minnesota. Despite having one of the fastest growing ELL enrollments among urban centers in the US, the school district’s implementation of coteaching is “by all accounts working to narrow the achievement gap” (p. 21) between ELLs and native-English speaking students in reading and math. Indeed, according to Pardini, the data demonstrate a consistent narrowing trend since the district implemented coteaching. However, it is problematic that Pardini offers no discussion or description of coteaching in the district or any of the challenges of coteaching. Without addressing the messy and problematic elements involved in collaborating across disciplines, such pieces present coteaching as a quick fix to the enduring challenge of providing language and content instruction for ELLs. Consequently, an increasing number of schools and school districts continue to adopt/pursue coteaching with little attention given to challenges associated with coteaching or the time and support necessary to build strong coteaching relationships.

It is critical to point out that instrumental notions of coteaching recognize two constituent and complementary elements for a successful coteaching model: language knowledge and content knowledge. From Coltrane’s and Pardini’s accounts we are led to believe that as long as these two elements are in place then coteaching should lead to content and language development for ELLs. However, like all teaching endeavors, coteaching partnerships do not operate in a cultural vacuum; it seems that if we hope to replicate the successes Pardini
describes, it is critical that we understand the ecology of successful coteaching models. How do they come to be and evolve, and on what factors do they depend for their success? How are they supported and nurtured within classrooms, schools, and school districts? Perhaps more importantly, how do the constituent elements of each of these ecologies respond when they come into prolonged contact with one another within the same classroom? How does coteaching between ESOL and grade-level teachers change understandings of who “the” teacher is, and thereby shift conceptions of how teaching and learning unfold? Conceptualizing coteaching from an ecological perspective provides insight into these questions and offers a view that recognizes both the complexity and possibility of coteaching ELLs.

**Coteaching within Specific Sociopolitical, Historical, and Cultural Contexts**

Before turning to a discussion of what an ecological model of coteaching might look like, it is important to recognize that coteaching partnerships are embedded within specific sociopolitical, historical, and cultural contexts, and that these contexts have real and lasting implications for coteaching ELLs. A number of scholars in international contexts (Arkoudis, 2003, 2006; Creese, 2005, 2006; Davison, 2006) and decidedly fewer in US contexts (George, 2009; McClure & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010) have documented that coteaching ELLs is a complicated social endeavor often marked by prejudice, hierarchy, and inequitable power relations.

Most recently, McClure and Cahnmann-Taylor (2010) documented how dominant monolingual perspectives in the US South can result in bilingual ESOL coteachers’ experiencing oppressive teaching conditions marked by linguicism (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1986) and other forms of prejudice. In her study with four first-year middle school ESOL teachers, George (2009) found that the ESOL teachers in her study struggled to gain legitimacy as professionals among
the grade-level teachers with whom they were collaborating. While some of this tension can be attributed to challenges common among all first year teachers, George asserted that the teachers’ “frustration with collaboration [was] stemming from a variety of structural issues such as a lack of training, no designated co-planning time, and a general misuse of their time and expertise” (p. 43). Similarly, in her work with one pair of secondary coteachers in Australia, Arkoudis (2003) documented that the science teacher enjoyed greater epistemological authority compared to the ESOL teacher because traditional content-area disciplines like science hold a more powerful and “legitimate” position than ESOL, which was seen as peripheral to content. ESOL teachers’ work was conceptualized as a form of support and facilitation as opposed to legitimate socially sanctioned knowledge like science. Using discourse analysis, Creese (2005, 2006) found that grade-level teachers’ discourse of transmission of grade-level content was valued over the ESOL teachers’ discourse of facilitation and support. Similar to findings from McClure and Cahnmann-Taylor (2010), Creese’s work (2003) has also shown how the coteaching relationship becomes more complicated when the ESOL teacher herself is a member of the language minority community. These bilingual coteachers, she argues, constantly mediate and negotiate their positions on language, race, and ethnicity, revealing a complex reality that involves both colluding and resisting institutional discourses.

The studies above approach coteaching ELLs from a variety of research and ideological perspectives; however all demonstrate that coteaching ELLs is indeed a complex process affected by issues of power and hierarchy. Figure two captures a fuller picture of some of the complexities of coteaching in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Davison’s (2006) work with coteachers in Hong Kong compliments these studies and explicitly addresses the interdependent nature of language and content teaching and learning. To facilitate the theorizing
and evaluation of coteaching, Davison developed a 5-stage model of collaboration. The model progresses from *pseudocompliance*, basically a rejection of collaboration and preference for the status quo, to *creative co-construction* which is characterized by critical reflection and normalizes collaboration as the preferred approach. While findings from Davison’s study also indicated that coteaching partnerships were often characterized by “an imbalance of authority, responsibility, and opportunities for input” (p. 456), Davison begins to offer a more fluid and holistic perspective from which to consider coteaching ELLs. The highest level of collaboration in Davison’s model is characterized by interchangeability between coteachers’ roles and a sustained practice of critical reflection. Instead of articulating ELLs’ language and content needs as a binary to be relieved by two distinct teacher roles, Davison highlights their interrelated and compatible nature, suggesting a pedagogy of content-based ESOL instruction combined with ESOL-conscious content teaching (p. 456). I take Davison’s work here as a starting point from which to develop an ecological perspective on coteaching.

**Figure 2 Here**

**Towards An Ecological Perspective**

From a natural sciences perspective ecology is the study of large entities (ecosystems) at the natural level of integration (Odum, 1950). As such ecology is useful in describing phenomena in their context as well as a way to understand both the context and the interactions that come together to create that context. Given the dynamic realities of coteaching ELLs created by historical and current sociopolitical contexts surrounding language, immigration, and the academic achievement of ELLs, an ecological perspective that interrogates relational aspects of systems in contact seems helpful. How do the larger entities, in this case language and content, react and change as a result of sustained contact with one another? As one of society’s most
pervasive cultural and social institutions, schools then can be understood as the natural site of integration of the diverse ecologies represented by language and content teachers and pedagogies. Ecological perspectives on language and language teaching and learning are not new, and it is not my intent to cover the vast literature on ecology of language in this article. Indeed there is a broad range of empirical and conceptual work that takes an ecological perspective on language and language teaching and learning (see Kramsch & Stefensen, 2008, for a thorough review of historical and future directions of ecological perspectives in language and language education). Here I intend to briefly review a few key works that help illuminate some common features of an ecological perspective in language education and then, using data from recent studies, illustrate how such a perspective, in conjunction with attention to sociopolitical and historical contexts, can facilitate coteaching models that attend to the interrelated and interdependent nature of language and content.

**Ecological Perspectives on Language Teaching and Learning**

Hornberger’s influential work on the continua of biliteracy (2003) is grounded in an ecological framework. She presents the continua of biliteracy as an ecological model, situating research, teaching, and language planning in a multilingual global context, highlighting the multilayered ways languages come into contact with and overlap one another (2003, p. 323). Haugen (1972) described language ecology as “the study of interactions between any given language and its environment” (as cited in Hornberger, 2003, p. 320), the environment entailing physical, psychological, and sociological elements. Hornberger draws on this understanding of language ecology to conceptualize languages as living and changing in an ecological system along with other languages and interacting with their sociopolitical and cultural environments. From this ecological perspective, Hornberger developed three ideological themes (language
evolution, language environment, and language endangerment, p. 323) to inform language policy in multilingual contexts.

Other scholars have suggested an ecological model for language teaching and learning. From the perspective of content-based instruction, Garner and Borg (2005) assert that an ecological perspective on English language teaching recognizes the multifaceted interaction between the language classroom and the particular political, economic, social, cultural, historical, educational, and institutional context in which it is situated. While they refrain from suggesting a universally accepted definition for “an ecological perspective,” they do propose the following common elements: an ecological perspective is holistic, dynamic and interactive, and situated (p. 121). These elements help to locate coteaching as occurring within specific contexts, and the emphasis on seeing language teaching and learning from a holistic and dynamic perspective accounts for the multilayered interaction across relationships (e.g., between teacher(s) and students, teacher and teacher, and all participants and context, etc.).

Writing from a sociocultural lens (Vygotsky, 1978), Hawkins (2004) extended this ecological perspective specifically to the language classroom. She provides a thorough description of an ecological view on second language classroom teaching and learning, stating that classrooms are complex ecosystems, where all of the participants, the practices, the beliefs, the forms of language … the social, historical and institutional context(s), the identity and positioning work, the politics and power relations … and resources, the activity and task designs, and the influences of the multiple local and global communities within which they are situated come together in fluid, dynamic, and ever-changing constellations of interactions, each one impacting the other. This is not a static process,
but one that shifts with each new move/interaction, and as new organisms enter the environment, as ecological systems do. (p. 21)

Coteaching from Instrumental and Ecological Perspectives

An ecological perspective of coteaching provides a hopeful response in particular to studies that present coteaching as a logical and foolproof method for meeting the language and content needs of ELLs. Technical and instrumental notions previously discussed keep language and content concerns neatly compartmentalized and assume they will be addressed singularly by language and content teachers. Conversely, ecological perspectives recognize the interrelated and overlapping nature of this process in classrooms. In this section I make the argument that an ecological perspective is most needed at the institutional and administrative level where policy and program design decisions occur, as these decisions have direct impact on how schools and teachers enact coteaching in local classrooms. To illustrate this connection, I draw on data from recent studies of coteaching in northeast Georgia, a region that has experienced tremendous growth in its ELL population in recent years. One study documented bilingual ESOL coteachers’ use of performance-based focus groups as a way to re-live and re-rethink responses to what the teachers perceived as a mandate to coteach (McClure & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010). The other is a descriptive case study of the coteaching experiences of an ESOL teacher and her mainstream colleague in a fourth grade classroom (McClure, 2012). Data from these studies were collected as part of a larger, ongoing investigation into the practice of coteaching in the Southeast. I have chosen these studies because they examined both ethnographic data collected at the classroom level as well as data from the broader context in which the coteaching was situated.

Instrumental Framing and Policy
Attention to how coteaching is conceptualized at broader levels of policy and program design is increasingly important, particularly as collaborative practices continue to gain purchase among current education reform initiatives (e.g., see Baca, 2009, for a discussion of the role of collaboration in Response to Intervention for ELLs). When coteaching is conceptualized at the institutional and policy level from an instrumental perspective it conveys the notion that coteachers are “ready made” to collaborate (Arkoudis, 2006). One of the ways in which institutional framing impacts coteaching can be seen in the policy language used to define and promote it. As an example, of the six approved instructional models for serving ELLs in the state of Georgia, coteaching is singled out with an extended description that defines it as being research-based and characterized by instructional parity between the coteachers. In addition, the description concludes with the following endorsement: “The GADOE encourages school districts to explore this model” (p. 6). While this endorsement of coteaching may seem harmless, interviews with teachers and a district administrator suggest that this framing encouraged a more aggressive, if unofficial, policy of “pushing collaboration to the max” as one teacher put it. One ESOL Coordinator explained in an interview how the coteaching had evolved in the district:

We started the process [of moving to coteaching] probably around 2005, and then over the next year or two we asked teachers to start scheduling push-in as much as they can. The state did tell us that we needed to put it in place and that every year we should do more. So that’s what we’ve done, and they [the state] started the monitoring process, asking us to report and collect that information to show that we were increasing our use of coteaching. (INT, 2009/01/30)

Teachers in the district expressed similar views that demonstrate how coteaching seemed to be understood as a straightforward process requiring little time and coordination between ESOL and
grade-level teachers. Leila, one of two ESOL teachers in an elementary school described her initial experience with coteaching in the district:

At the beginning of the school year we were encouraged by our district to coteach as much as we could. And I had never done it before so we didn’t want to completely fill my schedule up coteaching since I had no idea how to do it. But the other ESOL teacher at my school had worked with four kindergarten teachers the year before. So she had to do it with them again and to increase her segments, [be]cause that was the thing, they wanted us to increase our segments from the past year. So she ended up doing a 1st grade too. I felt pretty lucky, because the pressures were coming from the district level that we had to do it, and my administration [at the school] allowed me some flexibility that first year. (INT, 2008/06/04)

Another ESOL teacher who was coteaching in a second, third, and two fifth grade classrooms everyday commented on how the district failed to provide any substantive professional development:

You know, they kind of rolled it out like this is the next best thing you know, and then they just kind of let it fall. Maybe that first year [2006] it was like they actually spent some time on it. Now, there’s no attention paid to it, no training offered. It’s like, okay you know how to do it now so off you go, and do more each year! (INT, 2009/02/12)

State and district mandates to annually increase the practice of coteaching without providing additional ESOL teachers and/or sufficient time and material resources exemplify the instrumental and unproblematic framing of coteaching. To expect ESOL coteachers to collaborate across grade levels and content areas with four or five different teachers every day without providing any substantive support neglects the reality that coteaching, like any
pedagogical practice, takes time to develop, evolve and refine. In addition to the obvious challenges this places on coteachers’ ability to plan and carry out effective lessons together, it can also negatively impact teachers’ attitudes and morale regarding teaching in general. Leila, the same teacher who received a bit of reprieve from the coteaching mandate in her first year as a full-time teacher was ultimately forced to increase her number of coteaching segments the following year. The deep sense of frustration less than a year later is clear in her quote below:

There’s only so many different teachers, grade levels, and subject areas you can work with in one day before you become absolutely frazzled and exhausted. And regarding creativity and partnership, that just doesn’t happen when you’re pushed to collab[orate] with more and more teachers. So, if you’re tired, which I always am now, or sick, which I tend to be because I’m tired and stressed out from trying to make this whole thing [coteaching] work, then, you know, it’s like there is no time to be creative, which makes me really sad because I need to be creative in my teaching—the kids need it. I think that my last teaching day would be a day where I just couldn’t be creative. (INT, 2009/01/26)

These excerpts demonstrate how the instrumental framing of coteaching negatively impacts opportunities for innovative and inspired teaching via collaboration. It is also clear through these examples, how such perspectives fail to consider the emotional and physical toll exacted when teachers are pushed to collaborate in excess. Next, I discuss how instrumental perspectives impact coteachers’ planning practices, as well as how they are instantiated and reproduced in planning and, consequently, in instruction.

**Coplanning**

Considering the collaborative nature of coteaching, common planning time between coteachers is critical to its success (Friend & Cook, 2007; York-Barr, Ghere, & Sommerness,
2006). As a result of emphases to implement coteaching as much as possible with finite resources, ESOL coteachers often have very little time to plan with their coteaching partners. This leads to coteachers employing a range of ad hoc approaches to make the best of a difficult teaching schedule and stay informed regarding curricular scope and sequence.

Planning on the fly

Planning-on-the-fly refers to those short conversations between coteachers that occur in the hallways, during teaching transitions, and sometimes right in the middle of a lesson. These moments address everything from worrying about absent students, discussing communications to parents, and planning what to do next and/or tomorrow. Eva and Leila, coteachers in McClure’s (in press) case study from a fourth-grade classroom, frequently engaged in planning on-the-fly. Below is an example that occurred during a mini-lesson on descriptive writing:

(Both teachers front and center at the whiteboard)
Eva (to Leila, after introducing the assignment to the class): Do you have anything you want to add?
Leila (to Eva): No. I got your email about the lesson, but didn’t really have time to get around to—
Eva (cutting off Leila): —So what next?

As students recognized the brief moment of disorganization and began to get “off task,” Eva cut this exchange short and took the lead in the lesson. On one hand, spontaneous planning and decision-making and the need for flexibility is representative of the performative nature of all teaching and the reality that classrooms are dynamic places. However, when this planning on-the-fly constitutes the majority of coteachers’ planning practices, it is indicative of a larger systemic issue regarding the types and levels of support coteachers need to attend to the language
and content learning needs of their students in effective and integrated ways. The lack of in-depth opportunities for Leila and Eva to co-plan together often led to planning practices that reproduced the instrumental and compartmentalized perspective of coteaching in critical ways. Short on-the-fly exchanges enabled the teachers to shift and make adjustments “in the moment” or as needed on a daily basis but inhibited their ability to fully develop well-articulated team-taught lessons, which was their stated goal. Instead, their coteaching practice was regularly characterized by parallel teaching that allowed them to teach to separate groups of students, a practice that required significantly less coordination and planning (see McClure, 2012, for a full description of the pair’s coteaching approaches).

**Planning compartmentalized roles**

Another example of how instrumental perspectives can impact coteachers’ planning and instructional work is evident in the types of tasks coteachers attend to in their planning sessions. Data from Leila and Eva’s classroom demonstrate that due to the lack of common planning time during the school day, they frequently used all of their weekly planning time together to simply map out who will do what and when in very broad terms. The focus was almost exclusively on such functional aspects of their teaching, and they were frequently addressed separately and individually (i.e. the ESOL teacher would consult the pacing guide and the calendar while the classroom teacher looked up the state standards). Leila, the ESOL teacher commented on the content of their planning sessions saying:

> We’re never really able to have reflective and thoughtful conversations. It’s always like, okay, we have to plan for this for tomorrow, and you can take this lesson and develop it and I will take the next day, and it’s like we also need someway to really talk about things together. That would really help me.
Leila added similar concerns:

> When we do meet, we usually do plan for the next week and say, you know, this would be a strong suit for you teach; why don’t you take this day, or I had an idea for this day, so I’ll teach this. Planning time is a huge, huge obstacle for getting to the point that we both want to be at. And, not, just not being able to sit down and figure out who does what, but what we can do together and what would work best as a teaching team.

> When they did have time to go beyond mapping out who would prepare and teach what when, they frequently used this extra time to comply with the school’s directive to upload their lesson plans onto the school’s central server. The teachers described this as a mindless, time-consuming task that no one in the administration ever looked at. They described receiving a “form letter” response via email stating “Your lessons have been checked,” every week when they uploaded the lessons. Not only did this frustrate them, it resulted in the teachers using what precious planning time they did have together to address what they perceived to be “disconnected busy tasks” as opposed to collaborating together to develop meaningful activities and strategies that attended to language and content concerns in their lessons. Yet, by complying with this directive and using their planning time to upload these forms on a weekly basis, the teachers themselves contributed to the appearance that they had sufficient time to plan their lessons together.

**Rejecting Instrumental Perspectives and Approaching Ecological Ones**

> The data presented above illustrate how instrumental framing of coteaching at the administrative and policy level directly impacts coteachers’ efforts to provide effective language and content instruction for ELLs. While the implications of such framing for teachers and learners are very real, it is important to recognize that these structures are not fixed; they can be
transformed as teachers and districts choose to respond in different and creative ways. While I argue for the need for more ecological perspectives at the policy and administrative level, I do not hold my breath either. I posit that there is tremendous opportunity in the space between state and district policy setting and in how schools, programs and teachers transact with the ways those policies are framed. Here I describe two examples that illustrate how coteachers rejected instrumental notions of coteaching and espoused more ecological perspectives instead. Further, I submit that had they been in an environment that supported their practice with resources and respected their time, these moments would have occurred more regularly in Eva’s and Leila’s coteaching.

In a focus group session near the end of the school year, I asked the teachers to read and respond to the state’s description of coteaching in the Georgia Department of Education ESOL Resource Guide (2008). While I have addressed this issue previously (McClure, 2012), further discussion is warranted as this excerpt brings into sharp relief the tensions between coteachers who see their work as integrated and connected to the entire ecology of the classroom and policies that reinforce disconnected notions of language and content learning and teaching. The teachers overwhelmingly responded to the following two lines in the description:

The ESOL teacher is responsible for language support, while the content teacher is responsible for delivery of academic content. When students break into groups, the ESOL teacher should work with ELLs, while the content teacher focuses on mainstream students. (pp. 17-18)

While the teachers agreed that they had distinct knowledge and experiences that allowed them to contribute to students’ learning in different ways, they rejected the notion that, even in group work, ESOL and grade-level teachers should work exclusively with ELLs and non-ELLs
respectively. They argued that this type of compartmentalization would completely undermine their efforts to present themselves as co-equals in the classroom and to build a cohesive learning community.

Eva’s comments suggest that the state’s policy placed priority on funding concerns over what she considered essential for building a strong coteaching partnership:

I don’t think it would work as well, but I understand why they do it; it’s the funding issue. But if you group the ESOL kids who are typically around the same level with each other they are not getting the benefit of working with the other learners who have better English. I also think it helps the kids view Leila as a full teacher if she is working with all the kids…There also might be some issues with ‘oh, are you dumb, why do you need another teacher?’ (INT, 2009/05/13)

Leila added the following comments that illustrate how she sees their work as being integrated:

There wouldn’t be as much coteaching that way. I mean, imagine. It would be more like me coming up with different activities that are primarily geared for language development, or just for ELLs. But we are doing language development mixed in with our content work and reading and writing. (INT, 2009/05/26)

Despite the overwhelming presence of instrumental perspectives in how the state and district conceptualized coteaching, both Leila and Eva identified a more holistic ecological approach as their goal. Regarding instruction, when asked individually to recall one of the most successful coteaching lessons from the year, both teachers identified the multicultural photopoetry unit. This was an extended unit that used photography, incorporated students’ home languages and cultures into their poetry, and also made strong connections with parents and the broader community (see McClure, 2012, for an extended description). Not surprisingly, this unit
occurred after that state’s high-stakes testing program was completed in late spring. Both the planning and the instruction during this unit represented a more integrated and ecological perspective. In an interview at the end of the year Eva shared the following about their instruction during the poetry unit:

With the poetry project we did a lot of mini lessons, and our roles were more interchangeable. We both worked on language development, on editing, and the poetry concepts also. Then we kind of switched and I helped do more of the revising and the writing and then Leila was helping with the photography because that is her forte. Maybe that’s not really ESOL, but it [photography] helped the kids come up with ideas that they wanted for their poetry; they were doing sketches of how they wanted it to look and doing the actual pictures... I think each of us was where we needed to be, but we’d also alternate roles very easily throughout the unit. I guess we both attended to ESOL concerns and the writing content, and it was extremely beneficial. (INT, 2009/05/13)

In planning the poetry unit, the teachers spent many hours after school collaborating most all aspects of the unit together. There was the requisite attention to uploading lesson plans to the school’s server, but these were addressed almost as an afterthought. As the teachers discussed ways to enhance the traditional poetry project, they attended to the work collaboratively and discussed their planning decisions in terms of promoting language and content. Not only did they collectively discuss language and content issues, which was something that they rarely had time to address in planning, they did so collaboratively. As a result, attention to concerns regarding language were addressed proactively in many cases, as opposed to on the spot in the classroom.

One of the activities they discussed for the unit involved taking a class nature walk to identify one object around which the class would compose a collaborative poem. As the warm-
up to this lesson, Eva suggested using the clip art feature of the interactive whiteboard to display a vibrant colorful image of a butterfly and ask students to offer descriptive sentences about the image. Leila countered that instead of jumping right into whole class discussion, maybe they should give partners two minutes to talk and write down each other’s suggestions. In her words, “this would give everyone at least a chance to come up with one or two responses.” She then added, “That would definitely help Miguel and Yessica be able to participate,” referring to two ELLs in the class that often struggled with oral participation.

Another example of this collaborative and integrated planning occurred as they were designing mini-lessons for teaching literary elements. Working on laptops at a table in Eva’s classroom, the teachers were creating lessons independently. Eva came up with the idea to use comic books as examples for teaching onomatopoeia, while Leila compiled a list of several children’s books and tongue twisters for teaching alliteration. This was their usual approach to planning—divide and conquer, but here they came back together and discussed their thinking with each other. After making her pitch to Leila, Eva asked, “Is there anything you think we need to add to this here?” Similarly, in response to Leila’s selection of some Dr. Seuss books, Eva suggested, “I think we need to reconsider some of these, mainly because of all the nonsense words. I’m not sure that’s such a good idea.”

Indeed these exchanges represent seemingly small and insignificant decisions in the context of the traditional one-teacher classroom. However, in the context of trying to coordinate pedagogy between two teachers with limited time for deep reflection on their individual and collaborative practice, these examples of checking-in and negotiating instructional decisions represent critical movement towards a more integrated and ecological understanding of coteaching.
A Word of Caution, and Hope

Hawkins (2004) described classrooms as dynamic ecological zones that are messy, constantly evolving, never static. This is fundamentally important when considering coteaching classrooms, as each teacher brings to the coteaching enterprise their own ecologies, the elements of their personal cultural identities as well as their professional knowledge and experiential backgrounds. When combined in the same physical space over time, these independent ecologies do not remain stagnant and bordered; no, they intermingle and influence one another, creating an entirely new cultural and pedagogical context, a new ecology. It is important to not pretend that taking an ecological perspective will inherently lead to positive or beneficial coteaching outcomes. Just as in the natural world, classroom ecologies are complex systems affected by many layers and zones that work to hold their ground in the face of change. A quick look to the literature (e.g., McClure & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010; Creese, 2005; Arkoudis, 2003) reminds us that coteaching across linguistic, racial, and professional differences, often leads to less than fruitful outcomes in terms of collaboration, partnership, and creativity in coteaching. These new spaces can result in strained professional relationships marked by racism, linguicism, and other forms of prejudice (McClure & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010), and also to normalizing ESOL as peripheral (Arkoudis, 2003; Creese, 2005). A critical element here is that instrumental perspectives take an unproblematic stance towards coteaching between ESOL and grade-level teachers, and assume that these teachers are “ready-made” to collaborate. When the process breaks down and conflict emerges, teachers and districts are unprepared to deal with the situation in ways that move the partnership, and teaching and learning, forward. This is no surprise, as the model does not expect coteaching to be problematic. Figure three addresses these complexities by emphasizing the recursive nature among critical reflection, dialogue and action.
An ecological perspective on the other hand, operates from the assumption that all classroom ecologies are constantly in a state of flux. This state of change only becomes heightened with the introduction of an additional teacher into the physical and pedagogical space, and thus an ecological perspective expects shifting understandings, change, and even conflict. The key difference here is that by beginning from a perspective that acknowledges the potential for tension and conflict enables schools and districts to prepare for effective ways to work through and respond to moments of challenge and conflict. Conceptualizing coteaching from an ecological perspective requires recognizing that the two distinct ecologies of language and content are intimately connected, each dependent on the success of the other. It does little good for language and content instruction to carry on in parallel fashion, infinitely disconnected from one another.

In closing I turn to an example from the natural world to make the case for an ecological model of coteaching ELLs. Taking the perspective that language and content represent two diverse but interrelated ecologies coming into contact with one another, the ecology of an estuary provides a rather fitting model for reconceptualizing coteaching from an ecological perspective. Estuaries are unique ecological zones where freshwater streams or rivers merge with the ocean. There are no clearly marked boundaries within estuaries that define where one zone ends and the next begins; rather there exists an open connection with the sea through which the seawater enters in response to the rhythm of the tides. From the moment the seawater enters the estuary, both the seawater and the estuary as an ecological system are changed. Simply put, an estuary is not simply a mixture of salt and fresh water; it is a dynamic multilayered system that shifts and changes in response to myriad interrelated factors.
Similarly coteaching cannot be considered from a simplistic instrumental perspective. Just as an estuary is not the simple result of mixing salt and fresh water, successfully coteaching ELLs does not result from bringing ESOL knowledge and expertise into the grade-level classroom. When these two elements come into contact with one another, as ESOL teachers enter grade-level classrooms, new and unique classroom ecologies are created, not simply a combination of the two constituent elements. An ecological model of coteaching recognizes the interrelated and interdependent relationships between language and content teaching and learning. It encourages coteachers to adopt a critical and relational perspective to constantly look beyond the local context to examine the influence of sociopolitical, cultural, and historical factors when working to define roles and boundaries within their partnership. Just as in an estuary, inherent in an ecological model of coteaching is a sense of fluidity that, like any healthy ecosystem, encourages movement across boundaries and recognizes the interrelated nature of the interacting agents. Prolonged isolation and homogeneity is rarely a healthy or productive approach in any context. Coupled with a critical awareness of the role of broader contexts, an ecological orientation to coteaching can bring heightened attention not only to the unique sets of knowledge, experience, and pedagogies coteachers bring, but also to how this physical and intellectual partnership creates a new space for learning, a new ecology. Finally, while this perspective is based on limited data from coteaching studies in the southeastern US, the experiences described herein resonate with many teachers, both ESOL and grade-level teachers. Certainly, the unique context in which coteaching occurs will influence the ways it is enacted and experienced by teachers and students. However, I submit that taking an ecological perspective positions coteachers for greater possibilities by validating their collaborative practice as complex, dynamic, and evolving.
References


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Figures

Figure 1. Instrumental model of coteaching

- ESOL Teacher
  - Language specialist
  - Modifications and scaffolding strategies
  - Cultural support

- Grade-level Teacher
  - Content specialist
  - Instructional sequence and curriculum objectives
  - Classroom management

- Access to core content curriculum for all students
- Enhanced language and content learning for ELLs
- Increased “time on task” for ELLs

Figure 2. Complex Realities of Coteaching

Cultural/Identity

- Native language
- Race & ethnicity
- Dominant or minority

Social Context

- Status, hierarchy, & power
- Mainstream vs. periphery

School Context

- Institutional support
- Mandate or choice
- Perspectives on ELLs

Personal

- Personalities
- Teaching styles
- Investment in coteaching

Coteaching
Figure 3. Critical Model of Coteaching

**Cultural/Identity**
- Native language
- Race & ethnicity
- Dominant or minority

**Social Context**
- Status, hierarchy, & power
- Mainstream vs. periphery

**School Context**
- Institutional support
- Mandate or choice
- Perspectives on ELLs

**Personal**
- Personalities
- Teaching styles/exp
- Investment in coteaching

Coteaching

Critical reflection

Critical reflection

Action

Dialogue

Cultural/Identity

School Context