

Feature Article

Priming Your Environment for Growth Through a Collaborative Model of Instructional Coaching

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Abstract

Teacher preparation is complex in nature. Students in K-12 education comprise of an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse population. Standards have significantly evolved with state and Common Core State Standards that now place a greater emphasis on academic discourse both in written and oral forms. To better prepare the next generation of teachers to address these shifts in expectations, we are examining the influence of instructional coaching at the university level. The work encompasses professional development on research-based ELL principles to support the changing populations of students in conjunction with coaching sessions to enhance coursework. The results of this study were statistically significant and have set the stage for our next steps in sustainable change at the university level.

Background

As educators, we feel strongly that crucial attention needs to be paid to the quality of public education that is provided for English Language Learners (ELLs) in schools. ESSA (2017) defines an English Language Learner (ELL) as an individual who, among other things has difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language that may be sufficient to deny him or her the ability to meet challenging state academic standards. Teachers have always had ELLs in their classrooms; however, they may not have been labeled as such or specifically supported. Approximately 10% of students in public schools are non-native English speakers, yet less than 1% are trained to work with ELLs specifically (Childs, 2013).

The needs of ELLs in the United States are

currently not being met (Gándara, 2010). Teacher preparation programs need to think in new and innovative ways to build knowledge and skills for pre-service teachers, so they can implement lessons that will support language acquisition and development of content knowledge.

Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College (MLFTC) is one of the largest teacher preparation programs in the country graduating approximately 600 teachers per year for certification. Of these 600 students, however, less than 1% of the teacher candidates graduate with a specialized language endorsement. MLFTC is situated in a state where ELLs have lower achievement outcomes than their peers, and this institution has dedicated itself to address the significant challenges these learners face. Schools in Arizona are home to a multitude of students

with different cultures, languages, and experiences. From 1994-2010, the percent of ELLs in the US grew by over 63% and has grown steadily since (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011). In Arizona, 87,607 students identified as ELL (OELAS, 2017). The 2013-2014 ELL demographics indicate that 79% of the state's ELLs are in grades K-5, while 13% are in grades 6-8 and 8% are in grades 9-12 (Arizona Department of Education, 2015).

ELLs often miss out on key opportunities to gain (1) content knowledge in core subjects, (2) the academic language skills required for learning in schools, (3) and higher level literacy skills that are important for individual academic successes (Moll, 2010). A federally funded team within MLFTC has focused their efforts on improving outcomes for diverse learners. This paper focuses on three key areas to help students in Arizona's schools: instructional coaching, faculty institutes, and problem-based enhanced language learning (PBELL).

1. *Instructional Coaching*: One-on-one collaboration in university classrooms and partner school classrooms to support faculty members and teacher candidates as they implement these principles.
2. *Faculty Institutes*: On-going, job-embedded professional development for MLFTC faculty on the key principles of effective English language instruction.
3. *Problem-Based Enhanced Language Learning (PBELL)*: an interactive teaching approach that provides 100% of students with access to 100% of the content.

Three Key Innovations

Instructional Coaching & Faculty Institute

Leveraging coaching practices with educators that intrinsically motivate, allow for input, and retain a sense of autonomy, while still maintaining a focus on student outcomes, can enhance the persistence necessary to meet the ever-increasing demand in our nation's schools. One way that

these concerns can be addressed is through instructional coaching using the Impact Cycle. This cycle was developed by Jim Knight and his associates at The Instructional Coaching Group in Kansas (Knight et al., 2015). Instructional coaching is a partnership where coaches work alongside teachers to ensure the incorporation of research-based instruction (Blanchard, 2011; Knight, 2007). A partnership approach to instructional coaching embodies four major components and the execution of a collaborative coaching conversation after each observation (coaching cycle): (1) content planning, (2) developing and using formative assessments, (3) delivering instruction, and (4) community building (Knight, 2007; Knight, 2015).

iTeachELLs

iTeachELLs modified the Impact Cycle of Coaching. Rather than focus on all four of components of the Impact Cycle over the course of a semester, the iTeachELLs instructional coaches concentrated their efforts on (1) content planning and (3) delivering instruction.

The iTeachELLs Instructional Coaching approach is comprised of three key steps: Identify, Learn, and Improve (Knight, 2015). Each step is outlined below with a brief description of how iTeachELLs utilized it with the faculty they worked alongside.

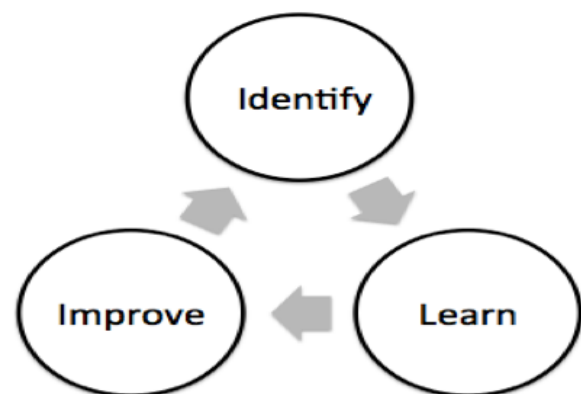


Figure 1. Impact Cycle of Coaching (Knight et al., 2015)

Identify. iTeachELLs began with the instructional

coach and the instructor working together to develop a “clear picture of the current instructional reality” (Knight et al., 2015, p.12). The conversation focused explicitly on the content of instruction rather than instructional pedagogy, a fact that contributed to the overall success of this project. In this initial conversation, the focus was on the instructor’s current course syllabi and whether or not it provided opportunities for teacher candidates to learn how to effectively address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Based on what was discussed, the instructional coach and the instructor then agreed upon a realistic target for infusion of new content.

Learn. Two main components define this step: (1) The instructional coach clearly explained the newly identified instructional content, and (2) The instructional coach modeled one way the instructor might implement the instructional content into his or her course. Knight (2015) and his colleagues offered multiple different methods of support including: modeling with students, modeling without students, co-teaching, visits to colleagues’ classrooms, and video observations. iTeachELLs facilitated this new learning through a series of professional development sessions entitled Faculty Institutes. Within each Faculty Institute, one or more research-based instructional strategies were discussed and modeled by an instructional coach, and times was given to instructors to reflect on an upcoming class to establish a “change they would like to see in student behavior, achievement, or participation,” and the actions that (s)he could take to create this change” (Knight et. al, 2015, p.12). For example, the first Faculty Institute focused on the explicit planning and teaching of discipline-specific discourse for culturally and linguistically diverse students. The iTeachELLs instructional coaches modeled a mini-lesson focused on the discourse of argumentation and shared a resource known as the Academic Language Function Toolkit (Kinsella, 2010). As recommended by Knight et al. (2015), iTeachELLs instructional coaches would also offer to model (with and without students) and co-teach the new strategy alongside the instructors. The

learn step includes implementation.

Improve. This step of the Impact Cycle allows the instructional coach and instructor to “modify the way they use the identified teaching strategy” towards the accomplishment of their previously identified goal (Knight et. al, 2015, p.18). These modifications are discussed and planned during a reflective conversation between the instructional coach and the instructor. The reflective conversation utilized a structured set of questions, on both ‘how the strategy was implemented’ and ‘how student achievement was impacted.’

Table 1

iTeachELLs Instructional Coaching & Faculty Institute outline

Step	Actions
1. Identify	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner to identify the need Select a strategy to address the need
2. Learn: Faculty Institute	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part 1: Coach clearly explains the identified strategy Part 2: Coach models how to implement the strategy (in classroom, out of classroom, co-teaching, visiting other classrooms, video)
3. Improve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor implementation of the strategy. (observe implementation, review student work & assessment data) Reflective conversation

The model outlined in Table 1 is different from more traditional coaching models in multiple ways: First, it is intentionally designed for use in a higher education setting. Second, a key element includes content planning, where educators learn new content and develop a plan for implementation. Third, implementation is followed up with a coaching conversation that allows educators to reflect on the benefits and challenges of the new learning and determine what future implementation will look like. Unlike the traditional

“reinforcement and refinement” model, the Impact Cycle of Coaching developed and utilized by iTeachELLs allows the instructor to reflect on their own practice and direct future implementation. The focus is less on instructional pedagogy and more on content learning that is designed to enhance the preparation of teacher candidates.

Problem-Based English Language Learning (PBELL)

iTeachELLs has developed a new instructional model that combines the elements of Problem-Based Learning with the key principles of English Language Learning methods. PBELL is a unique approach to instruction that starts with problem-based learning and enhances the student experience by explicitly incorporating and supporting specific language skills. Although space limits prevent depicting a full example of PBELL in this article we do offer a white paper that expands on this topic as well as sample lesson plans for teachers (ASU Mary Lou Felton Teachers College, 2018).

In PBELL experiences, a student utilizes language collaboratively in order to access prior knowledge, research new topics, brainstorm and discuss potential solutions, and present new findings to an audience. In a classroom using PBELL, all language is considered an asset in supporting rigorous learning opportunities (Bostick, Lund, & Saltmarsh, 2017). A PBELL lesson entails: (1) meaningful problem development, (2) language and content in tandem, (3) assessment of content and language, and (4) specific support and strategies. Utilizing the example above on discipline-specific discourse, iTeachELLs supports instructors as they identify the most appropriate discourse to plan for and model as they simultaneously work to expose their students to rigorous content. The Academic Language Function Toolkit (Kinsella, 2010) would be one example of a teacher support used to purposefully plan and teach the most appropriate discourse associated with the meaningful problem (grounded in content).

The iTeachELLs team recognizes the workload teachers have and challenges educators to start small and incorporate two basic components into their daily lessons. We feel if learning can be grounded in real-life and relevant experiences as well as recognizing that language is a tool and needs to be specifically taught and modeled in all learning experiences then we may begin to see positive change for these unique learners and all students with diverse learning needs.

Successes & Challenges

The iTeachELLs team has experienced some significant successes as well as encountered some challenges throughout its inception in 2015. The three shown below specifically stand out as related to the content discussed in this paper.

Table 2
iTeachELLs successes and challenges

Successes	Challenges
Ability to provide individual coaching to both campus faculty and mentor teachers at school sites	Creating a “culture of change” within a college and on public school campuses.
Specific lesson plan development to support teacher and students who are identified as ELLs.	Changing direction as new initiatives and college needs change
Building awareness and increasing conversation to improve the educational climate for diverse learners	Creating sustainability after project completion

Conclusion

Instructional coaching, as outlined in this paper, is sporadically implemented in the pk-12 educational setting and rarely utilized in higher education. A search was conducted by the iTeachELLs team, and one example of a coaching program situated in higher education found was at Harvard’s Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning. This center

partnered with faculty members to provide professional development and support for their teaching (Harvard University, 2017). Empirical research studies on coaching faculty in higher education were particularly limited. Mentoring in higher education was more common, but still limited (Chavez-Thibault, 2017; Knippelmeyer & Torraco, 2007). It is our opinion that if this model were applied more broadly across higher education settings it would have a positive effect on supporting some of our most critical instructors. Support for instructors in higher education beyond the initial years tends to diminish in many instructional environments. The Impact Cycle for coaching could enhance the practices of teacher preparation programs, providing much welcome support and inform our field's desperate need to focus on retaining talented educators by providing experienced teachers time to both develop others and be developed (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016).

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