

## Feature Article

# Instructional Coaching for Teachers of ELs in Inclusive Environments: Practical Insights for a Low-Incidence EL Setting

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## Abstract

*As instructional coaching is being implemented to help English learners access content in school districts across the U.S., the low-incidence EL setting requires its own consideration. This article discusses an urban school district's EL coaching initiative from the practitioner's perspective. It addresses enrollment of classroom teachers into the EL coaching program, specialized areas of an EL coach's expertise, and how this drives professional development for EL instructional coaches in the larger systemic context. ELL Awareness presentations are suggested as a practical way of building equity for ELs and positively impacting the culture of inclusion in school districts. Challenges of institutional integration of an EL instructional coaching platform are discussed. The article shines light on the realities of EL coaching in low-incidence EL inclusive environments and offers practical ways of its implementation, and represents a reflection on the experience of one ELL specialist-turned-EL-coach.*

**Key Words** *IC, ELL, ESL, instructional coaching, low-incidence EL environment, ELL data-driven decision making*

## Introduction

Instructional coaching has earned its place in the educational discourse and practice in the U.S. It is employed to help professional educators advance their practice and reach better learner outcomes. There is a growing body of research pointing to the effectiveness of instructional coaching as a means of professional development for teachers, underscoring its job relevance and the on-going and cyclical nature of the coaching relationship (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Knight, 2017; Knight, 2019; Russo, 2004). More and more well-experienced and even distinguished classroom teachers along with their novice

colleagues get to experience the thrilling power of having another expert educator in the classroom to brainstorm, collaborate, and find better working instructional strategies, establish more productive and engaging classroom routines, and create a more inclusive school environment – ultimately elating practicing educators’ positive impact power to a whole new level. Coaching is often described as the art of asking questions (Knight, 2017; Medrich & Charner, 2017; Pharrams, 2016). The following article presents the reader with an exercise in and a reflection of such art: the many questions lacing through the text guide the discussion and serve the purpose of influencing one’s thinking as a way to develop reader/author communication.

### **EL Coaching Introduction in a Low-Incidence EL School District**

When one Alaskan school district initiated its first instructional coaching program, it was only a matter of time for the district leadership to re-channel the work of its English learner (EL) specialists, aligning it with the ongoing institutional transformation. Their teaching assignments decreased, and ELL specialists were asked to coach mainstream colleagues in making their classes’ learning content better accessible to the district’s 400+ English learners. This urban school district serves over 13,000 students, about 30 percent of whom are on the lunch assistance program. A school district is generally considered low-incidence EL when the total percent of its English learners is less than 25% of all enrolled students (Consentino de Cohen et al., 2005), so this district with its EL population at around 3% of the student body was well within the low-incidence EL parameters.

Understandably, some ELL specialists took to this new line of work more enthusiastically, while others preferred to continue working mostly with students and did not step outside of their general ESL teaching mode. District leadership was able to identify the specialists who truly believed in the potential of EL instructional coaching and were willing to put energy into its implementation and advancement. District directors of federal programs strongly supported the ELL specialists who were genuinely interested in developing the new EL coaching initiative: these EL coaches had the opportunity to attend a three-day non-EL-specific instructional coaching conference early fall and were offered additional PD throughout the year that consisted of participation in monthly Title I coaching cohort professional learning sessions.

Needless to say, collegial conversations around the EL instructional coaching were rich, exciting, and meaningful, but when it came to practice, this EL instructional coach was left wondering how exactly to approach the task. One special consideration was not addressed in the EL instructional coach’s training and hardly had a presence in special literature: the district’s low-incidence EL setting. Coaching classroom teachers of English

learners in low-incidence EL environments looks different from that of high-incidence EL environments (Nuss, 2020a); however, most of the research has a high-incidence EL basis and reflects high-incidence ELL classroom realities (Nuss, 2019).

Unlike EL instructional coaching in high-incidence EL environments, where an EL instructional coach and the classroom teacher collaborate for the benefit of the entire student body or the significant EL part of the population, EL instructional coaching efforts in low-incidence EL environments are centered around a few individual students. This creates a situation when two educators, the classroom teacher and the EL coach, spend a significant amount of time and energy working out specific instructional strategies for the benefit of one or two students. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the collaborating classroom teacher and the EL instructional coach look for ways to maximize the impact of their efforts and tend to group students based on their academic English abilities outside of the ELL status to include native English speakers in need of additional scaffolding. But the effects in a low-incidence EL environment, where educators take significant work time to address the needs of just a few students, are far more reaching, and will be addressed in greater detail throughout the article.

### **Field-based Perspective of the EL Instructional Coach's Workflow and Areas of Expertise**

What *does* an EL instructional coach's work with a mainstream colleague start with? Is there anything an EL coach could or should do before meeting with school faculty?

This district's coaching platform was grounded in research on partnership instructional coaching, which maintains that an instructional coach would be wise to meet with the teacher before actually entering the classroom for initial observation (Knight, 2017). It is advised to establish a clear picture of current instructional reality, and if observation is chosen as a means, discuss what will be observed by the coach, with the emphasis placed on the coach observing student performance and interactions – not the teacher. In this EL coach's experience, when the initial positioning was based on the student's performance and academic and social needs rather than arbitrarily focusing on teacher's instructional practices, the conversation between the teacher and the EL instructional coach had a greater chance to remain practical, professional, and objective: What is in the best interests of the EL student? How do the student's needs inform instructional practices? What are the desirable outcomes? What might instruction look like to help facilitate those outcomes? What strengths does the student have that can be capitalized on? In each student's situation, the answers to these questions would be quite different.

Facilitating the general classroom teacher's use of English-language-specific data and proficiency with ELL student software-generated reports was an area that proved useful in EL coaching. The school district in our case uses a research-based testing system of determining its newcomers' English language proficiency (ELP) level, so it was the EL coach's decision to take on the responsibility to know exactly where each of the newcomer students was in his or her English language acquisition process, which involved extensive familiarity with pertinent software and its report-generating capabilities. The EL instructional coach had the data ready and was well-positioned to help a classroom colleague better evaluate each of the EL student's progress and learning goals. The instructional coach also made connections to specific activities the learner could and could not do by quite literally highlighting the areas of what the student could do now and what their next "can do" was, and was prepared to offer the instructional strategies to help address learning needs of these particular students.

Background information on students' cultural upbringing that goes beyond the general knowledge as well as tips on communicating with newcomer families were welcomed by teachers and helped the EL coach to gain initial acceptance and build rapport with classroom colleagues. In our case, the cultural details teachers found most helpful were:

- How much is education valued in the newcomer family's home community?
- How does the school day start and what does the formal school and class environment usually look like where the English learner comes from?
- How do the school size and communication with families compare?
- How much time per day did the student spend at school?
- What does the student-teacher relationship and communication look like in the student's former schooling experience?
- Might the student be misinterpreting current educational realities?

Answers to these questions may vary greatly, as differences in school systems of diverse cultures around the world may surprise even savvy educators. Thus, it is a good idea for an EL coach to include these kinds of questions in an EL coaching program introductory communication.

When defining the realities of an EL-specific instructional coach's work environment, the following main areas emerge: a) facilitation of adult learning, b) second language acquisition theory, tools, and best practices, and c) coaching as a mode of professional development. Each one of these functional arenas comes with its own set of strengths and latent weaknesses; many potential challenges can and should be prevented or addressed in the EL coaches' professional development. In fact, the importance of PD for EL

instructional coaches is hard to overestimate: the available research literature is abundant (see a comprehensive list of references in Pharrams, 2016 – non-EL-specific; as well as Nuss, 2020a – EL-specific) and clearly points to the fact that PD of the coaches should not be taken lightly by the districts embarking on the EL coaching journey, and PD opportunities should be addressed early on, especially when one considers the many models EL coaching can assume in various contexts (Borman & Feger, 2006; Knight, 2017; Saclarides & Lubienski, 2018).

### **More on Teacher Enrollment Practices: Balancing Intentions and Reality of EL Coaching Initiatives**

Initial EL coaching presentation delivery could take shape as a segment of a staff meeting, part of a professional learning community (PLC), or in-service. In other words, the time for promotion, explanation of the benefits, and teacher enrollment should be built into the workflow of the institution and not left to coaches' creative devices in hopes that teachers will just know to voluntarily sign up to work with a coach when they learn of an EL coaching opportunity. An EL instructional coach is sometimes put in the position of having to – for hours – scout the Internet looking for research and blog posts during and after school hours on how to better meet their job's requirements, or even just enter another teacher's classroom. What is the background of people who are hired to fill instructional coaching positions? Typically, teaching. This would mean that most of the instructional coaches are educators, not marketers, so either job descriptions need to change to openly acknowledge the promotion of services as part of this job, or district leadership should adjust its approach to program implementation and have a roadmap of teacher enrollment in place. Less marketing-savvy instructional coaches should not be considered less professional for not having developed a large following of mainstream colleagues eager to engage in collaboration.

The need of specialized PD sessions for teachers aimed at increasing their awareness of the instructional coach benefits and enrollment into a coaching program warrants special professional development for coaches, particularly on how to build their initial faculty presentations similar to the ones discussed later in the article. Such coach preparation can take place during coaching cohort meetings and requires time built into an EL instructional coach's work load.

By institutionalizing EL instructional coaching and explicitly supporting it through district-wide communication, district leaders eliminate the ambiguity when the coaches have to earn collegial support and strive to validate their worth making advances in the field on their own. A mismatch between stakeholders' intentions and their support practices is especially overwhelming in new coaching initiatives and weighs heavily on

newly hired coaches but is easily corrected when the leaders are well-connected with their workforce and continuously solicit and receive earnest feedback.

Here we find the discussion point to leadership in the EL instructional coaching, for it impacts closely related areas where the districts considering EL instructional coaching practices benefit from a clear understanding and reasoning for choosing their EL coaching model and defining the status of an EL instructional coach: When an EL specialist/ESL teacher is hired/promoted to serve by leading EL instructional coaching changes for the district's faculty, is this coach now essentially performing the functions of a teacher leader? Does the ESL specialist simply double up in his or her EL ins capacity, or does the position of an EL instructional coach come with a new level of demands? What is an EL instructional coach's standing de facto vs. de jure? Do the job's demands align with its benefits — including monetary compensation – and the coach's professional standing? Is there an incongruity in the district leadership intentions, delivery, and support of the EL coaching initiative? Are the professional growth opportunities and pathways considered and clearly communicated? Is there room for special considerations? These questions provide an initial guiding thought frame, as they are shaping a path for districts where EL instructional coaching is considered: the inquiry is stemming from practical experience and every district considering EL coaching will sooner or later find itself facing these questions.

### **Building Empathy for ELs with ELL Awareness Presentations**

In this district's case, special considerations were abundant. In addition to the approach often recommended by the research literature – sharing specific instructional strategies and their implementation in the classroom teachers' day-to-day practices, the district's EL instructional coach facilitated and delivered ELL Awareness interactive presentations for the teachers of the district's several elementary schools, shared the expert insider knowledge of the local immigrant cultures and demographics, introduced present-day trends in language acquisition research, conducted district's EL data analysis and interpretation for classroom teachers, and was instrumental in professional development sessions introducing specific instructional strategies, among other responsibilities.

A series of ELL Awareness presentations in elementary schools across the district was conducted in an effort to help build empathy toward its diverse language learners (Zacarian, 2011; Fine et al., 2020). The idea came from the fact that the EL coach was supposed to somehow build a supportive presence in several elementary schools, but realized early on that there were only so many hours in the day, and many EL students were not always receiving the social/emotional and content support they required (session content is not discussed here; more on building equity for ELs through ELL Awareness

presentations can be found in Nuss, 2020a). The coach approached school principals individually and offered to conduct some EL-specific PD, providing them with a general outline for the sessions and the idea behind it. All of the approached principals saw the proposal's potential to not only change things for the better for their newcomer learners, but also contribute to a more positive and inclusive school culture overall, and they were very supportive of the idea. Initiated by the EL instructional coach and included in faculty workflow, these PD sessions were short 30-35 minute highly engaging interactive sessions and took place during regular staff meetings.

The ELL Awareness sessions received overwhelmingly positive feedback from teachers who specifically commented on how moved they were by the conversation. A number of classroom teachers mentioned in their exit tickets that they had experience working with ELs in the past. The teachers went on to share that while at the time they thought they were treating these learners adequately and in a professional and caring manner, and they truly were doing their best to reach the ELs in their classrooms at the time, they now realize they could do more differentiation in the future and expressed intent to treat ELs with more consideration. Several teachers also wrote they would be more responsive to the needs of their newcomer students. Teachers found particularly useful the wider cultural context of the presentations. The ELL Awareness sessions, therefore, succeeded in facilitating an engaging adult learning experience that resulted in gaining additional empathy for the district's newcomer students with limited English proficiency and contributed to the overall supportive school climate district-wide.

The EL instructional coach who conducted these EL empathy building sessions was referred to by the faculty as not only knowledgeable language pedagogy professional, but also as observably proficient in public speaking. Public presentation mastery is built over the years and cannot be expected from a teacher, ELL specialist-turned-coach, without access to some very specialized professional development. An ESL/ELL specialist is first and foremost a teacher by education and training, while the role of an EL instructional coach clearly encompasses expertise in many additional areas — working with adult learners, public speaking, and coaching per se being some of the most prominent. These skills are in addition to the professional knowledge of second language teaching and learning. District leadership aspiring to institutionalize EL instructional coaching should be realistic when setting its expectations and prepare to either bring in qualified third-party help or invest in developing presentational and marketing capacities of its ELL specialists as well as the materials they could use to help their EL coaches build equity for EL learners. While drawing on local ESL specialists seems like a natural place to start a search for a qualified workforce to perform the role of an EL instructional coach, districts should consider the fact that not every ESL teacher is capable to work with adults, or even wants to do so.

## Conclusion

The practical insights in this article will further illuminate the two-fold nature of EL instructional coaching by emphasizing its low-incidence and high-incidence EL applications. Instructional coaching is one of the most effective, but also costly forms of PD, and districts employing it put a lot of thought into its systematic introduction (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Knight, 2017; Knight, 2019). Every district's needs are unique, so no one single EL coaching scenario fits all. This investigation offers practical perspectives of running such a program, and low-incidence EL districts may find them helpful and could adjust them based on local realities.

Practical advice herein is based on the low-incidence EL coaching program experience and establishes it essential for districts to a) explicitly communicate EL coaching program goals to faculty, b) have an EL coaching program advancement plan in place, c) address highly specialized PD for EL coaches and balance expectations and realities of EL coaching positions, and d) consider using EL coaching as a means to influence district's overall culture of inclusion, acceptance, and value of every learner. This investigation promotes a more robust discussion of EL instructional coaching as a fact of the modern educational landscape in the U.S. and encourages a deeper exploration of the low-incidence EL realities. Such practice-driven analysis is well-positioned to help shape and inform further theoretical investigations that would provide more practical solutions for the low-incidence EL school districts in their search for more sustainable ways of professional development for classroom teachers with English learners in an inclusive environment. ELL Awareness presentations discussed here offer one of the ways districts can build equity for their diverse language learners in low-incidence EL settings using an EL instructional coaching platform as a vehicle to deliver such specialized job-embedded PD for teachers.

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