STORIES OF K-12 ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER TEACHERS DEVELOPING PROFESSIONALLY THROUGH INFORMAL COLLABORATION WITHIN OCCUPATIONAL COMMUNITIES

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DEDICATION
For Jeremy Ingraham, Duke Ingraham, Wyatt Ingraham
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................................................ ii

TABLE OF CONTENTS ................................................................................................................ iv

LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................................ viii

LIST OF FIGURES ...................................................................................................................... ix

ABSTRACT ....................................................................................................................................... x

CHAPTER

1. INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................................................... 1

   Background

      Importance of the Study

      Assumptions and Field Observations

      Statement of the Problem

      Purpose and Rationale of the Study

      Research Question

      Delimitations

      Limitations of the Study

      Control for Quality

      Definition of Key Terms

      Summary

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE ........................................................................................................ 12

   Collaboration

   Collaboration Tools

   Frequency of Collaboration
ELL Assessment of Student Achievement

Summary

3. METHODOLOGY............................................................................................................. 20

Rationale for Using Qualitative Research

Assumptions and Field Observations

Purpose and Rationale of the Study

Understanding Collaboration of ELL Teachers in Occupational Communities

Research Setting and Participants

Gathering Information and Analyzing the Phenomenon

Data Collection

Document Collection

Interviews

Data Analysis

Control for Quality

Summary

4. FINDINGS............................................................................................................................. 32

Introduction

Research Questions

Interview Methods

Interview Creation

Interview Participants Demographics

Interview Setting

Data Collection
Participant Interviews

Interactive Question Formation Process

Document Collection

Data Analysis

Findings

Open Coding Theme Development

Theme 1: Informal Collaboration Methods

Theme 2: Informal Collaboration Issues

Theme 3: Informal Collaboration Motivation

Discussion

Summary

5. DISCUSSION ........................................................................................................... 57

Introduction

Overview of the Study

Summary of Findings

Making Meaning through Metaphors

Implications

Recommendations for Future Research

Concluding Thoughts

6. REFERENCES ........................................................................................................... 67

APPENDICES

A. Informed Consent Letter ......................................................................................... 75

B. Participant Consent Form ......................................................................................... 76
C. Interview Questions ........................................................................................................... 77

D. Interview Protocol .......................................................................................................... 78

E. Administrative Awareness Letter ..................................................................................... 79

F. E-mail Invitation ............................................................................................................... 80

G. Conference Site Administrator Letter of Awareness ....................................................... 81

VITA ....................................................................................................................................... 82
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ELL Participants Demographics</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Resulting Themes and Corresponding Significant Statements</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Resulting Themes and Corresponding Significant Statements</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Literature Review and Focus of the Study</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Concept Map</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Data Collection/Analysis Process</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
STORIES OF K-12 ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER TEACHERS DEVELOPING PROFESSIONALLY THROUGH INFORMAL COLLABORATION WITHIN OCCUPATIONAL COMMUNITIES

Nissa Ingraham
Dr. Philip Messner,
Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

English Language Learner (ELL) teachers are content-specific teachers who work with students who do not speak English. ELL teachers are taught how to teach the students to acquire the English language. ELL teachers work with all mainstream teachers to increase the chances of successful English proficiency in students within a timely manner. The purpose of this study was to provide insight on the informal collaboration that occurs among ELL teachers. Understanding how this unique population informally collaborates is important to administrators and ELL professional development initiators. Framed by the research setting, the problem, and purpose, the research question was: How do ELL teachers informally collaborate with their occupational communities?

This research was a phenomenological, qualitative study using interviews of ELL teachers, document collection, and literature reviews. The interviews were conducted with seven ELL teachers from a purposeful and snowball sampling within the predetermined geographical area. The documents were collected from public, state maintained internet sites. The data were then analyzed using open coding. The thematic data were then filtered through current and relevant literature reviews. Key findings of the study indicate common methods of informal collaboration, informal collaboration issues, and informal collaboration motivation. Meaning is
made via metaphorical discussions. Further areas of research are indicated to include novice versus veteran teacher’s informal collaboration efforts and quantitative research extension from the aforementioned themes.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

As of the year 2006, over 400 different native languages were spoken by students in United States school systems (Flannery, 2006). While some of these students could be found in large pockets of the geography, and the rural areas were once thought to be impervious to these influences, the world is ever changing. Rural areas, such as much of Missouri and Iowa, are now seeing an influx of students who speak a native language other than English (Webb, 2007). These students rely on the school districts to provide them with a capable and well-trained English Language Learner (ELL) instructor to help the students become proficient with the English language. This study set forth to provide additional insight into how ELL teachers informally collaborate. Through understanding how ELL teachers are informally collaborating, school leaders may better allocate resources to extend the learning needs of the ELL teachers so they may better serve the ELL student population.

In the world of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), ELL students must take standardized tests the same as their native-speaking counterparts. These standardized tests are then compiled and reported to the state to verify that the schools are providing cross curricula to help the students make annual yearly progress (AYP) according to the standards set up by the federal government. If a school does not make AYP, then it risks losing funding and being taken over by the state, losing local control (Flannery, 2006). For this reason, assisting all students, and especially ELL students, is of high importance to all districts.

One way to assist students is through the trickle-down effect of teacher professional development. Through professional development, teachers can be empowered to better serve students, allowing the students to become more successful (Little, 2007). Much educational
reform took place following the “Nation At Risk” report which highlighted many areas of deficit within our educational system (Lieberman, 1998). Following this narrative, educational reform became a big initiative and a big business (Lieberman, 1998). This helped the advent of professional development changing from the 1960s version of teachers attending an occasional school-wide workshop to teachers needing to embed learning in everyday activities (McLaughlin & Oberman, 1996). The more modern professional development form has been a teacher-driven known as learning communities.

Although many educators discuss professional development, there are actually many differing definitions (Friedman & Phillips, 2004; Caffarella & Zinn, 1999). In analyzing these various definitions, illumination of key and common threads prevailed: learning, development, and profession. By taking these commonalities and combining them, a common working definition of professional development may be formulated: professional development is the self-directed learning experiences that further develop a teacher’s knowledge about the teacher’s specified curricular profession (Friedman & Phillips, 2004; Caffarella & Zinn, 1999). This definition of professional development was used for the present study. As discussed previously, one of the common threads of professional development is knowledge creation or learning. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) refer to this as knowledge creation; as illustrated in their model of knowledge dissemination, collaboration is the sharing of knowledge from one person to another and then repeating the cycle. This is an important aspect of professional development, and is worthy of further and more detailed research in the high school subject-specific arena (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Grossman, 1996).

This chapter will provide a brief discussion about English language acquisition and the history of collaboration in education. Nonaka and Takeuchi’s (1995) knowledge spiral supports
collaboration researchers such as Little (2007) in their beliefs that collaboration in education promotes student achievement. A problem statement will be given, a purpose for the study will be illuminated, and the research questions which will guide the study will be stated. Limitations and key terms will be identified. Finally, a summary will be provided.

Background

School-wide professional development occurs in a school-wide format, where collaboration occurs as teaming (where teachers across curriculums collaborate to better the school as a whole), as training sessions of best educational practices, and many other formats. While collaboration within sub-specific curricular area groups is believed to happen as well (McLaughlin & Oberman, 1996), there is little known about each specific curricular area, such as ELL teachers, and the specific type of profession-specific informal collaboration that occurs (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005).

However, we know that ELL teachers have had to collaborate about best practices and the theories and methods of teaching ELL students through their certification coursework. As a component of the coursework, it is common among many states to take a Methods of Teaching ELL course (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2008). Moreover, there are many theories and approaches regarding second language acquisition (Hadley, 1993; Ellis, 1997; Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Many teachers who work with ELL students do not subscribe to only one theory, but instead use various approaches with the variety of students they have on their rosters (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Some of the subscribed theories include Grammar Translation Theory, the Natural Approach, and Total Physical Response (Ellis, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2002; Omaggio, 1993). Given that these theories and approaches are studied in the student’s initial coursework for certification, it is conceivable that the ELL teacher might not
review these theories or learn of newer more modern theories, even if they teach for a span of thirty years.

Importance of the Study

Professional development, while defined differently based on the group of professionals to whom it is referring, generally in the field of education in the United States of America refers to teachers continually learning what the best practices are in educating students (Belzer, 2003; Caffarella & Zinn, 1999; Friedman & Phillips, 2004; Nicholls, 2000). This can be facilitated in a school-wide fashion or on an individual basis (Hu, 2005). One component of professional development can be collaboration among teachers in similar fields (Hu, 2005). This professional development within the field has been shown to enhance student performance, which might include student competence and ability to succeed on standardized testing reported to the state (Belzer, 2003).

While professional development, and more specifically collaboration, has been widely studied within education, it has not been vastly studied in specific curricular areas (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005). One such area is ELL.

Assumptions and Field Observations

There were several conceptual underpinnings for this study. The primary conceptual underpinning was Nonaka’s (1994) idea of the spiral of learning. The secondary conceptual underpinning was Little (2007) and Hu’s (2005) idea of informal collaboration. The third conceptual underpinning was Manzo’s (2009) and Wang’s (2009) concepts of informal collaboration techniques. The fourth conceptual underpinning was Cummins’ (1984; 2009) idea of language acquisition.
Nonaka (1994) exemplified the idea of knowledge creation as the sharing of someone’s tacit, or innately understood, knowledge in an explicit way with another person, then that second person internalizing the newfound knowledge until it becomes tacit. Once that has happened, the second person may then be able to reteach their newfound knowledge to a third person in the form of an explicit explanation. This spiral is how knowledge is formed and is the basis for knowledge creation. Through this explanation, the tacit knowledge is made explicit; only with this action will true knowledge creation and sharing be able to occur. This is the foundation of the premise for this study, collaboration. Without knowledge creation or sharing, collaboration would not be possible.

As Little (2007) explained, collaboration in a teacher learning community is “teachers’ joint efforts to generate new knowledge of practice and their mutual support of each others’ professional growth” (p. 55). Thus, collaboration is grounded in the idea of knowledge creation and sharing. This idea was further refined by Hu (2005) in his delineation of collaboration into two categories: formal and informal. The idea is that formal collaboration is something that is forced on an occupational community (Steele, 2008), while informal collaboration is something that is sought out by the occupational community in a bottom-up format.

Hu’s (2005) idea thus led to collaboration techniques such as Manzo’s (2009) idea of collaborative websites and Wang’s (2009) idea of collaboration through friendships. In both of these articles, the idea was to provide professional educators with a tool they could use to collaborate with others in their subject specific area. One was through online mediums, and the other was through face-to-face contact.

Within the qualitative realm, and in order to reinforce the validity of the study, the Iowa Department of Education (2007) and the Missouri Department of Education (2009), as well
as the idea by notable ELL researcher, Cummins (1984; 2009) found ELL students progress through proficiency levels played an important factor in triangulation of data (Merriam, 1998). Cummins (1984; 2009), Echevarria, Short, and Powersk (2006), and Thomas and Collier (2002) delineated student success to coincide with their progress rate via the estimated time to traverse through the five level proficiency stages to be approximately seven years. This could then be broken down to approximately 1.4 years to traverse through the five proficiency levels, equaling student success.

Figure 1 Literature Review and Focus of the Study Interactions

Statement of the Problem

Although many researchers have researched collaboration within education, there still remained questions about how specific curricular area teachers collaborate, specifically ELL
teachers (Little, 2007). Understanding how ELL teachers collaborate will better enable school leaders and ELL leaders to facilitate best suited professional development possibilities. So the question was, how do ELL teachers informally collaborate?

**Purpose and Rationale of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to respond to the lack of information about informal teacher collaboration among content-specific teachers, and to better understand the phenomenon of informal ELL teacher collaboration within occupational communities (Merriam, 1998; Steele, 2008). Knowing this information will better enable school leaders to make decisions about what ELL teachers do to informally collaborate. This will also enable ELL teachers to direct their scarce time and resources towards activities that will help them in their work towards facilitating proficient students.

The study sought to inform ELL teachers, school leaders, and professional development coordinators as to current informal collaboration practices among ELL teachers in the Midwest. The benefit will be to the students who will have more highly-qualified ELL instructors to help them through their proficiency progression process.

**Research Question**

Given that this study was qualitative in nature, and sought to explore and understand a phenomenon, one central and overarching research question was established. To be derived from the literature review, the problem, and the purpose of the study was to be the grand tour research question: How do ELL teachers informally collaborate within their occupational communities?

**Delimitations**

Delimitations, an avenue of narrowing the scope of the research study, included the specific phenomenon of this study, the specific type of collaboration which was the focus for this
study, and the geographical region of the study. The specific phenomenon which was explored in the study was the informal collaboration of ELL teachers within their occupational communities. This assumed the idea that informal collaboration, as explained by Hu (2005), was not mandated by the administration. Further, it was refined by Steele’s (2008) definition of occupational communities as the people who work in a specific field or occupation. In this research, this included any ELL, content-specific teacher.

The geographic region was a delimitation of the research as well. This region included the five northwest-most counties in the state of Missouri, and the five counties south of them: Andrew, Atchison, Daviees, Gentry, Grundy, Harrison, Holt, Mercer, Nodaway, and Worth. It also included the five most southwesterly counties in Iowa and the five counties north of them: Adams, Clarke, Decatur, Freemont, Mills, Montgomery, Page, Ringold, Union, and Taylor counties. This geographical region included mostly rural school districts which have populations of ELL students, but are not large enough to include two or more full time high school ELL teachers.

Limitations of the Study

There were a few limitations, or potential areas of weakness, in this study (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 2003). One of these limitations was the position of the researcher (Merriam, 1998). I am a former ELL teacher. I am a current university instructor who coordinates a Master’s program in teaching future teachers how to teacher ELL populations. This could have possibly made it more difficult to gain the trust of the potential participants. Trust was important to have with participants, in order to allow for openness in disclosing how they collaborated without fear of retribution of any kind. Another consideration or possible limitation my position contributed to the research would be any biases that I may have brought to the research. As I am
a former ELL teacher, I had to be careful to explain any biases I had, and to take any tacit knowledge which I had about the field of study and make it explicit to the readers of the research (Nonaka, 1994).

This study was also limited by the number of ELL teachers who chose to participate. There were ten to fifteen districts in the region selected which would have qualified teachers to participate in this research study. These participants were be pooled and then selected to remain with high anonymity. High participation rate meant a significantly stronger study, than if only a few chose to participate.

Control for Quality

As qualitative research “presents… ethical dilemmas” (Merriam, 1998, p. 214), I took care to be ethical and trustworthy in all aspects of this research. In order to achieve trustworthiness and to be ethical I, as the researcher, first sought Internal Review Board (IRB) approval. Once IRB approval was granted, I then contacted the teachers from the school districts previously defined for inclusion in the study. I contacted the ELL teachers, and made arrangements to meet with the teachers to discuss the study. Next, I presented the participants with the IRB-approved consent form. The consent form illustrated the responsibilities of those being studied and of the researcher (Merriam, 1998). The consent form was signed and returned before any further interview questioning took place. Upon consent from the teachers to be a participant in the study, an awareness letter (Appendix E) was sent to the school district notifying the district that their ELL teacher was to be a part of the study.

During data analysis, external validity was maintained by utilizing “thick, rich description” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196) of the phenomenon and by using a multi-site design (using
more than one school to collect data to add to the diversity of the phenomenon). This was achieved by allowing for many schools to be selected in the twenty-county area.

Internal validity was achieved by utilizing member checking and by stating the researcher’s biases (Merriam, 1998). These biases include my own acceptance and utilization of collaboration within my own occupational community, which includes ELL professors.

Reliability was achieved by stating the researcher’s position, and by utilizing an audit trail (Merriam, 1998). I used “thick, rich description” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196) and interviews which were transcribed verbatim helping to create a trustworthy audit trail, allowing others to see my thought processes.

Definition of Key Terms

There were few terms which are used within the ELL arena, which required common, working definitions for this paper. These terms are explored in this section. The terms will be given, and then a working definition will be provided.

*English Language Learner.* Any student studying in a high school whose first language is one other than English.

*English Language Learner teacher.* A high school teacher whose primary position is working with English Language Learners to improve their fluency in the English language.

*Proficiency Levels.* Based on a 1-5 category, with 1 being a novice in the language and 5 being proficient.

*Professional Development.* The self-directed learning experiences that further develop a teacher’s knowledge about his or her specified curricular profession.

*ELL Occupational Communities.* All working ELL teachers who are certified or working towards certification.
**Collaboration.** Learning through sharing with other teachers.

a) *Formal collaboration.* Collaboration which is mandated by administration.

b) *Informal collaboration.* Collaboration which is not mandated by administration and is instead teacher initiated.

**Summary**

As stated earlier, the purpose of this research study is to illuminate the informal collaboration efforts of ELL teachers within their own occupational communities. This chapter was divided into ten sections. These sections were: a) introduction to the study, b) the background of ELL, c) the importance of the study, d) the conceptual underpinnings, e) the problem statement, f) the purpose of the study, g) the research question, h) the limitations of the study, and finally i) the definitions of key terms.

Chapter Two will further explain the historical perspective of professional development, discuss how collaboration is a piece of that greater body of knowledge, refine collaboration to formal and informal collaboration types, describe tools used in teacher occupational communities, and discuss the idea of student success in the realm of ELL education. Chapter Three will provide methodology used in this study. A description of the population sample, data collection, and data analysis procedures used in the study will be discussed. In Chapter Four, the results of the data analysis will be illuminated. Finally, in Chapter Five, the study in its entirety will be summarized, conclusions and implications will be presented, and recommendations for future study will be given.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of education has changed over time (Dobson, Dobson, & Kessinger, 1980; Hawley, 2007). “Today we have entered the information society” (Arcaro, 1995, p.18); communities of people include not only our small home towns, but the entire global community. As Arcaro details in his book about educational change, this new society includes our educational system. As an effort to react to such shifts, local districts implemented professional development. This study will explore one category of professional development, informal collaboration; the definition of informal collaboration; types of informal collaboration used by teachers; and how informal collaboration is used by a specific high school curricular area, ELL teachers.

Although many researchers have studied collaboration within education, there is a lack of research on collaboration within specific curricular areas (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005). One of these areas is high school ELL. Better understanding what type and with what frequency high school ELL teachers use collaboration tools and how that correlates to high school ELL student achievement, as determined by the ratio of student time studying ELL and their English proficiency level progression, can illuminate best practice of teacher collaboration for this curricular area. This can then serve as a foundation for a model of professional development within ELL education.

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to respond to the lack of information about informal high school teacher collaboration among content-specific teachers, and to better understand the phenomenon of informal high school ELL teacher collaboration within occupational communities (Merriam, 1998; Steele, 2008). This can then be reported to the ELL
education community so its members will better understand the phenomenon of informal collaboration among high school ELL teachers.

The literature review will be divided into four areas, representing the four areas of interest in this paper: definition of collaboration, collaboration tools used by teachers, effects of frequency of collaboration of teachers, and student achievement assessment in ELL. These areas provide the foundation for this study by looking at previous research that has been conducted regarding collaboration. Also, these areas of the literature review provide lenses through which one can look through in order to evaluate the current collaboration process among high school ELL teachers. These areas are the foundation to render a possible model for best practices of high school teacher collaboration within the specific ELL curricular area.

**Collaboration**

Much research has been done on collaboration, but it is still difficult to define, as illustrated by the multitude of varying definitions used by various researchers. Some of these include Yukl’s (2006) definition, which states collaboration “involves a joint effort to accomplish the same task or objective” (p. 168). Another researcher shares his idea of collaboration as the joining of people to a group of others who can challenge each others’ boundaries of thought process to induce learning via new thoughts being generated and then shared through conversations (Bruffee, 1999). A further definition posited by a preeminent collaboration researcher states that collaboration in a teacher learning community is “teachers’ joint efforts to generate new knowledge of practice and their mutual support of each others’ professional growth” (Little, 2007, p. 55).

In keeping with the idea of generating new knowledge, as expressed in many of the definitions, Nonaka (1994) explains his idea of knowledge creation. Mezirow (2000) bolsters
Nonaka’s idea of sharing knowledge to learn by providing the idea of social learning. Social learning encompasses the idea of learning through personal reflection on something recently learned, and then re-sharing the information with others (tacit to explicit knowledge creation equals learning). These ideas combine to embody the discrete ideas that Bruffe (1999), and Little (2007) expressed: learning through sharing information.

In an effort to establish a working definition of collaboration for this study, one further researcher was consulted. Hu (2005) not only defined collaboration, but segmented it into two subcategories: “contrived collegiality” (p. 663), or formal collaboration, and “collaborative culture” (p. 663), or informal collaboration. Taking all of these definitions and parameters into consideration, this study will be conducted under the following working definition of collaboration: the method in which two or more teachers in a specific occupational community (Steele, 2008) learn from each other working towards a common, professional goal.

Collaboration Tools

Now that collaboration has been defined, the question is, how do educators collaborate in general? As technology has developed, so have the possibilities for collaborating, and more specifically the tools by which to collaborate. Manzo (2009), Wang (2009), and Chen, Chen, and Tsai (2009) studied some of these collaboration tools in their broad studies of teacher collaboration. Some of the tools they isolated included chat rooms, blogs, and social networking communities. Additionally, Lieberman (1998) and McLaughlin and Oberman’s (1996) extensive studies of collaboration included the phone as a collaboration tool. The final tool of collaboration, although lacking in technological advancements, is face-to-face discussions.
Although all of these collaboration tools have been studied in broad and general educational settings, none of them have been studied in a narrowed scope of teacher occupational communities (Steele, 2008), such as high school ELL teachers.

**Frequency of Collaboration**

We know that collaboration in general among teachers is known to show positive student achievement, but more specifically, time spent collaborating has also shown an effect on student achievement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). As Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) point out in their article about teacher learning, “professional development lasting 14 or fewer hours [has shown] no effect on [teacher] learning. The largest effects were for programs offering 30-100 hours spread out over 6-12 months” (p. 49). However, this illustrates the duration of the collaboration, and in all instances the research was being done on formal collaboration within a school setting.

**ELL Assessment of Student Achievement**

*Law and ELL Assessments*

School districts are obligated to “take ‘appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students’ (Equal Educational Opportunity Act of 1974, Point F)” (Iowa Department of Education, 2004) and in doing so, such programs to help the students will be funded via a variety of sources. At the federal level, schools are given Title I and Title III monies in order to increase students’ reading skills, support migratory children’s education, and to assist in English language acquisition and achievement. In order to receive these monies, school districts must demonstrate that the money is being used to enhance these programs. A common measure, which is used in the states within this study, is scores on commercial language proficiency tests which are administered once a year to ELL students in
order to track their progress in the Title areas (Iowa Department of Education, 2004; Iowa Department of Education, 2007; Missouri Department of Education, 2009).

School districts are allowed to use any assessment that they feel best empowers them to measure the English acquisition of their students. However, most commercial tests use a scale system to rank the students’ abilities in using English, and the levels of proficiency are not always consistent (Francis & Rivera, 2007). This can be an impediment to districts receiving new students from other districts who do not use the same assessment instruments, and makes using language proficiency assessments as a dependent variable in a study difficult/invalid.

**TESOL Proficiency Levels**

Since March 2006, when Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL) released its organized five English proficiency levels, states have mimicked and adopted their own versions of the five proficiency levels. This allows for greater ease in understanding the level of comprehension for each student, with respect to their English acquisition, even if they move from district to district or state to state.

The states which are a part of this study, Missouri and Iowa, have adopted a five level proficiency scale (Iowa Department of Education, 2007; Missouri Department of Education, 2009). Neither uses the exact same terminology, but both mimic the same sentiment at each level. Missouri’s levels are: basic beginner, high beginner, low intermediate, high intermediate, and advance/proficient (Missouri Department of Education). Iowa’s levels are: prefunctional, beginning, intermediate, advanced, and full English proficient (Iowa Department of Education). These both correspond with the TESOL levels of: starting, emerging, developing, expanding, and bridging (TESOL, 2007).
Although state proficiency levels have been adopted, the validity in assessing these levels is not apparent unless the same instrument is used. Both Missouri and Iowa have mandated that districts use the same instrument to assess their students at least once a year. This allows for valid and reliable assessment of school districts’ performance in elevating students’ English understanding, acquisition, and proficiency. Missouri uses the Language Assessment Scales (LAS) as their instrument (Missouri Department of Education, 2009). Iowa uses the English Language Development Assessment as their tool (Iowa Department of Education, 2007).

*Language Acquisition and Duration*

Historically speaking, there are many methods with which to teach ELL students to speak English. Typically ELL teachers are eclectic in their selection process and choose to teach with components of multiple methods and approaches. These approaches and methods in their true and pure form prescribe how to work with the ELL students to learn or acquire the English language within all four domains of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Lightbown and Spada (1998) placed each of the theories and methodologies under three umbrella approaches: Behaviourism, Innatism, and Interactionist positions. Hadley (1993) and Ellis (2008) resonated this idea, but denotes the innatism as nativism.

The three approaches all highlight a differing component to language acquisition which is seen as predominantly important to the acquisition process and success. The behaviorist theory illuminates the idea that ELL students need stimuli from their environmental surroundings which are linguistically and socially appropriate in order for the ELL student to imitate or mimic (Lightbown & Spada, 1998). Through this mimicking and continual language practicing process, language acquisition takes place. Innatists believe that we are naturally predisposed to acquire language (Lightbown & Spada, 1998). Noam Chomsky is considered a premier investigator in
this field of study, denoting that every child can learn language much like every child can learn to walk; they are biologically predisposed to do so (Gentile & Miller, 2009). Interactionists believe that environment is key to language acquisition success. ELL students should have language custom fit to suit their needs, what they can comprehend and then adjusted a bit to allow them to grow linguistically. Through this continual interaction between native speakers who provide comprehensible input in the language, and the ELL student, language acquisition takes place (Lightbown & Spada, 1998).

As a method to assess if schools are adding value to students’ English acquisition, duration of English study can be used as a variable. Although there is some contingency on the specific amount of time it takes to acquire English (Cummins, 1984; Cummins, 2009; Echevarria, Short, & Powersk, 2006; Department of Education, 2006; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000; Iowa Department of Education, 2004; Iowa Department of Education, 2007; Thomas & Collier, 2002; Westernoff & Young, 2006), a variant of time has been assumed. Many prominent researchers say that it can take between five to nine years to acquire English (Echevaria, Short, & Powersk, 2006; Thomas & Collier, 2002). This can be affected by the type of English assistance program offered through the school, age of the student when entering the English community and the native language the student speaks (Thomas & Collier, 2002). Other researchers have determined similar lengths for language acquisition. Cummins (1984; 2009) determined that in order to learn English to the level of native speaking peers, students would take five to seven years. Similarly, Hakuta, Butler, and Witt (2000) found that it takes four to seven years for a student to acquire enough English skills to perform equally to the student’s peers. The state of Iowa, determined that to acquire language proficiency, it takes three to seven years (Iowa Department of Education, 2004; Iowa Department of Education, 2007). Similarly, the
Department of Education in Missouri (2006) states that it takes between three to ten years to acquire proficiency equal to that of the ELL student’s peers. It is noteworthy to mention the great discrepancy between the amount of time researchers have found it takes for a person to become proficient in a language, and the amount of time the states will fund a student’s ELL education.

Summary

Chapter Two provided a review of related literature. This literature review focused on four areas related to collaboration of ELL high school teachers. First, a working definition of collaboration was constructed. Second, various collaboration tools already used in education were illuminated. Third, the affects of frequency of collaboration were explored. Fourth, ELL student achievement indicators were discussed.

Chapter Three will provide details about the methodology to be used in this study. Chapter Three will include the purpose, research questions, and research procedures.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

As explored in Chapter Two, the literature review, as accountability has become greater over the last few decades, so have the numbers of many states’ ELL students. With their lack of proficiency being a hindrance to their success on the state tests, their schooling has become of higher importance to the states; thus, their teachers’ ability to help them through the language acquisition process has become essential.

This chapter will outline the methods of research used to study the informal collaboration among ELL teachers within their ELL teacher occupational communities. The chapter was organized in the following manner: first, the conceptual underpinnings on which the research was based will be highlighted. Second, the research setting will be illuminated. Third, the purpose of the study will be stated. Fourth, the statement of the problem will be given. Fifth, the research questions will be presented. Sixth, the design of the study will be discussed. Finally, the procedures and a chapter summary for the study will be given.

Rational for Using Qualitative Research

This qualitative research study was determined by reviewing the researcher’s state of mind, thus funneling the decision of the research design. The ontology of the researcher was relativism (Nguyen, 2007), stating that there is a reality, but it is constructed locally or by those existing in the reality. The epistemological stance of the researcher was objectivism (Crotty, 1998), illustrating that I embraced the idea that all objects hold a true meaning within them and studying the object in-depth will illuminate that meaning. The axiology is practical (Herr & Anderson, 2005), showing my interest is to understand the phenomenon of collaboration among ELL teachers. The theoretical perspective which guided me is constructivism, which embodies
the idea that participation of the subjects brings meaning and understanding to the study. The final decision which helped to shape my research design choices was the desire to report findings in a narrative format. All of these decisions helped to determine qualitative research would be the best form of research for this study.

Once I decided qualitative research was to be my method, I had to look at what type of qualitative research, of the three major types, I wanted to employ. I wanted to understand the phenomenon of how ELL teachers informally collaborate within their occupational communities by interviewing ELL teachers and then report back in narrative form the findings; thus, I will do a basic, phenomenological, qualitative research design (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 2007). It is not the intent of the study to establish grounded theory, or to investigate a bounded situation, or to do an ethnographic study (Merriam, 1998). It was my intent to “describe the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, p. 57). This was the rationale my selection of basic, phenomenological, qualitative research design.

Assumptions and Field Observations

There were several conceptual underpinnings for this study. The primary conceptual underpinning was Nonaka’s (1994) idea of the spiral of learning. The secondary conceptual underpinning was Little (2007) and Hu’s (2005) idea of informal collaboration. The third conceptual underpinning was Manzo’s (2009) and Wang’s (2009) concepts of informal collaboration techniques. The fourth conceptual underpinning was Cummins’ (1984; 2009) idea of language acquisition.

Nonaka’s (1994) idea of the learning spiral establishes a premise for how someone learns, taking tacit knowledge and making it explicit through reflection, either intrapersonal or interpersonal. Little’s (2007) idea of collaboration is a way of sharing knowledge among people
who share a common professional community and who desire to learn about how to better
develop their skills inherent within that profession can be seen. This allows for us to see how the
learning which Nonaka explains can improve not only one person, but rather transform an entire
professional community.

As collaboration can be done by many different methods and in many different venues, Hu (2005) helps to delineate and isolate two types of collaboration, so that it may more easily be studied and examined. Hu identifies the two types of collaboration as formal and informal. Formal collaboration within the profession of education is done by the administration developing a venue and isolating a topic for betterment of the teachers, top-down collaboration within a school. It is done formally in the school setting, or at a workshop or conference, with the desired intent to be overall school change toward bettering the overall performance of the student body. Informal collaboration is done by teachers in their professional subject specific communities via side-bar discussions about a topic of interest that has arisen in that subject-specific area, with the hope being that within the greater subject-specific professional community, someone might be able to impart knowledge about any facet of the profession that can assist the teacher in need.

Manzo (2009) and Wang (2009) help to further refine the idea of collaboration within education by illustrating some previously studied collaboration tools that teachers are utilizing. These include chat rooms, blogs, and social networking communities. This helps to further refine and establish a basis for the study of high school ELL teachers and how they collaborate.

Due to having worked with the ELL teaching profession for ten years it is important for me to state what my experiences with all of the concepts has been. I have informally collaborated with other ELL teachers on a regular basis. I have done this by means of face-to-face interactions, phone conversations, and via e-mail conversations. While I have recognized that
there were asynchronous internet platforms such as blogs and wikis available to me via various ELL internet sites, I have not utilized that technology.

**Purpose and Rationale of the Study**

The intent of this qualitative study was to better understand the phenomenon of informal teacher collaboration within the specific content area of ELL, responding to the knowledge gap concerning collaboration among ELL teachers. While there has been research about how mainstream teachers collaborate, little research has been conducted over content-specific teachers and how they collaborate within their occupational communities (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Steele, 2008). I explored informal collaboration among teachers in mainstream education via a literature review. In order to better understand my content-specific field and how we collaborate, I investigated ELL content-specific teachers and their informal collaboration techniques within their occupational communities.

**Understanding Collaboration of ELL Teachers in Occupational Communities**

During an in-depth look at the areas of ELL and from having discussed issues related to this with my current colleagues and students, I discovered a knowledge gap concerning how ELL teachers informally collaborate within their occupational communities.

**Research Setting and Participants**

Due to this being a phenomenological qualitative study, purposeful and snowball sampling were employed (Merriam, 1998) in order to select ELL content-specific teachers to be participants in the study. The research population included the five Missouri counties on the northwest Missouri-Iowa border, the five counties just south of those counties, the five Iowa counties on the southwest Iowa-Missouri border, and the five counties just north of those counties, to make up a total of 20 Midwest regional counties represented. In Iowa these counties
include: Adams, Clarke, Decatur, Freemont, Mills, Montgomery, Page, Ringold, and Taylor counties. In Missouri the counties are: Andrew, Atchison, Daviees, Gentry, Grundy, Harrison, Holt, Mercer, Nodaway, and Worth counties. Within this region, schools with fewer than two ELL teachers will be selected. Within this pool, and according to Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2010) and Iowa Department of Education (2010) websites, there are 17 teachers qualified to be in the pool of participants in the study.

Gathering Information and Analyzing the Phenomenon

Following IRB approval from the University of Missouri and Northwest Missouri State University, ELL teacher participants were selected by using the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education of Missouri and Iowa Department of Education websites, and by employing snowball sampling from the initial contacts. E-mail contacts with these teachers to request participation in the study were made (Appendix A), including permission forms sent. A phone interview or other synchronous or asynchronous Internet venues were used to discuss when and where the interviews were to take place. All of the oral communication was decided to be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for transcription of the conversation after participant permission was received (Merriam, 1998). Any non-verbal, written communication with the participants was archived by assimilating the communications into a CD-ROM. The data collected was coded, analyzed, and the findings and implications were reported in Chapters Four and Five. The following sections highlight more in-depth the aforementioned processes.

Data Collection

Document collection and interviews were conducted as a method to triangulate the data in this study (Merriam, 1998). In the following sections both of these elements will be explored in greater detail.
Document collection. As Merriam (1998) notes finding documents relevant to the study is one of the first steps in acquiring documents for data collection. Given that the researcher in this study was also a member of the community being researched, she had tacit knowledge about which regional, Internet-based, and highly-regarded ELL forums exist. Archival and public documents were collected from Internet applications of regionally-based ELL forums. These applications included the regional ELL forums of Missouri English Language Learners conference by way of Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDC), and Iowa Culture and Language Conference by way of Area Education Agency (AEA) websites. All of these forums are regionally-based, state operated Internet conference sites. The Missouri English Language Learners and the Iowa Culture and Language Conference organizations were publicized by the state education government entities, thus assumed to be highly regarded as official and knowledgeable. A letter of awareness will be sent to the site administrators listed on the websites as a courtesy (Appendix G).

The three aforementioned applications were be reviewed in order to derive what types of Internet collaboration tools were available to the teachers in the region. As Coghlan and Brannick (2005) explained, who collects the data, when they are collected, what are collected, and why they are collected were all reported in order to help achieve high trustworthiness of the study. Additionally, as a way of assessing the authenticity, the researcher examined how the data were originally constructed and with what purpose it was originally constructed (Merriam, 1998) in order to provide clarity in the original intent of the documents.

Additionally, during the interview process which is detailed in the following section, all documents that teachers referenced or were requested so that they could be analyzed. If the
teacher did not wish to provide the document, then the document was not analyzed, and only the teacher’s reference to the document was included in the analysis process.

*Interviews.* Once initial contact was made with a participant, a consent form (Appendix B) was issued to the participant to read and sign. If the participant returned the form electronically, as described on the consent form, return of the form denoted consent to participate. As a portion of the consent form, the participants were instructed to understand that the discussions were confidential, no names would reported in the dissertation, to the school districts, or to any individuals (I will provide a pseudonym for each participant), the rights and protections of the participants would be ensured, the right to withdraw from the study at any point was conveyed, and the right not to participate in the study was defined for each participant.

Upon completion of the consent form, contact was made with the participants either via a face-to-face meeting, telephone, or synchronous or asynchronous Internet methods. If the participant selected a method of discussion which was conducive to audio recording, the conversation was projected to be recorded with the participant’s permission. If the participant selected an asynchronous internet application which would be conducted in the form of written text, the text was projected to be catalogued in order to allow for member checking at the completion of the conversation. The face-to-face or telephone interview process was announced to be less than 30 minutes in order to allow enough length to convey information but to be short enough to not impede upon the teacher’s already busy schedule (Weis, 1994). The participants were asked the predetermined list of open-ended questions (Appendix C), which adhere to the textbook form of semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix D) (Creswell, 2003; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Merriam, 1998). The semi-structured format allowed for the participants to expound upon any information they thought pertinent to the discussion and research. As Seidman
(2006) explained, I asked open-ended, exploratory questions and then allowed for the participants to share their ideas; basically, I planned to “listen more, talk less” (p. 78). Once the participants were finished, I will asked follow up questions which provided for additional probing into answers that did not fully expound on the issue being covered.

Additionally, upon agreeing to become a participant and having completed the consent form, the participant’s school district was sent a letter of awareness (Appendix E) stating that the participant who works in the district is becoming a participant in the study. It was stated in the letter that the interview would not impede upon the participants work time and that the interview would not take place on school grounds.

Following the discussions with the participants, all of the conversations which took place in a written format were copied and archived. As a way to increase rigor in the study, the transcriptions of the interviews were be offered to the participants to check for accuracy; this process is known as member checking (Merriam, 1998).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an interactive process of continual back-and-forth process which began when data collection started, and continued as constant comparative method of analysis ensued (Creswell, 2003). As a method to ensure the cyclical method of data review, a concept map was drawn to illustrate the data analysis methods (Figure 6). This looping method was followed until data saturation occurred (Creswell).

Upon data collection ensuing, open coding methods assisted in the emergence of theme development from the participants’ responses and the information was mined from document collection (Creswell, 2003). Also, the constant comparative method was utilized to assist in the coding efforts. As the themes emerged, further research into the literature was needed, to aide in
explaining the findings. The initial literature review will be used to view the themes as well. A second literature review was conducted to help provide additional lenses with which to view the data; this review will be found in Chapter Four. The selection of more participants continued until “theoretical saturation takes place” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 292) and common themes emerged with great clarity. Upon saturation of the data collected and the information gleaned from literature review, a narrative explaining my understanding of how high school ELL teachers in the Midwest informally collaborate within their occupational communities was written using “thick, rich description” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196).

Control for Quality

As qualitative research “presents… ethical dilemmas” (Merriam, 1998, p. 214), I took care to “control for quality” (Pattern, 2009, p. 157) of the research and to be ethical and trustworthy in all aspects of this research, including gaining reliability and validity in the study. In order to achieve trustworthiness and to be ethical I, as the researcher, sought Internal Review Board (IRB) approval through my cooperating two universities prior to approaching any teacher about participation. Additionally, I realized that it is my job to maintain a balance to credible analysis and to only seek to answer the research question being posed. Once IRB approval was granted, I then contacted the ELL teachers identified in my sample and made arrangements to discuss the study and seek their participation in the study. Once the teachers denoted desire to participate in the study, I presented the participants with the IRB approved consent form. This consent form illustrated the responsibilities of those being studied and of the researcher (Merriam, 1998). This consent form was signed and returned before any further questioning took place. All paperwork was stored in my home in a locked file cabinet, or will be housed in my
office in a locked file cabinet, but only accessible to me, the researcher. The paperwork will be destroyed after the completion of the study and any resulting journal articles are published.

During the data analysis, external validity was maintained by utilizing “thick, rich description” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196) of the phenomenon and by using multi-site design (using more than one school to collect data to add to the diversity of the phenomenon). This was achieved by allowing for many teachers to be selected in the twenty county area comprising the sample.

Internal validity was achieved by utilizing member checking, or taking the transcripts of the conversations back to the participants for verification of correctness, and by stating the researcher’s biases (Merriam, 1998). These biases include my own acceptance and utilization of collaboration within my own occupational community, which includes ELL professors.

Reliability was achieved by stating the researcher’s position, and by utilizing an audit trail so that others can better understand how I reached my results (Merriam, 1998). I used “thick, rich description” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196) to describe how I have collected the data and achieved the categories, and how I have made decisions, which helped to create a trustworthy audit trail, allowing others to see my thought process.
Iterative Process:

Data screening

Category

Construction

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

ELL high school

Literature

Collaboration in Education

ELL policies and student achievement

Field

Developing Research

Interview Questions

Conduct Internet Document Exploration

Initial Analysis

Conduct Interviews

Initial Analysis: 2

Data transcription

Data Analysis:

Open Coding

Domain Analysis

Theme Development

Second Round Literature Review

Make Meaning

Iterative Process:

Data screening
Chapter Three described the methodology to be used in the study. An introduction to the study, as well as the problem, was provided. The purpose of the study was described. The population of participants was explained. The research design was described as a qualitative, interview-based research design. Data collection procedures and data analysis were described. Chapter Four will provide an overview of the study, data collection process, data analysis process, and findings.
FINDINGS

Introduction

Collaboration among teachers has been shown to have positive effects on students. Knowing this opens a window of opportunities to better study collaboration that is occurring among teachers, and more specifically within the teachers’ occupational communities. In order to facilitate and refine the study, I delineated between formal or mandated collaboration and informal collaboration (collaboration which is not mandated by administration) to help refine the study. Informal teacher collaboration has been studied within the wide realm of education, but has not been studied within many subject specific areas, including ELL (Little, 2007; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005). Due to this lack of research, the purpose of this study was to better understand how ELL teachers informally collaborated within their occupational communities. This chapter presents the findings of my study.

Research Questions

How do ELL teachers informally collaborate within their occupational communities?

This grand tour question was supported by a literature review which illuminated the lack of information about ELL teachers and how they informally collaborate. The interview questions which were developed were intentionally broad in order to better study the phenomenon (Seidman, 2006). This allowed the teachers the opportunity to discuss any avenue of their informal collaboration efforts. The first interview question was written to set the interviewee at ease (Seidman). The second interview question was a broad, open ended, study-related question. The two interview questions were:

a) Take me back to your first day of teaching ELL. Can you describe any experiences you remember?
b) Informal collaboration is collaboration which is not mandated by the administration of your school, but is done on your own with other ELL teachers. What types of informal collaboration do you do?

Interview Method

The interview method employed was a phenomenological qualitative study (Creswell, 2007) which utilized participant interviews comprised of working ELL teachers within a predetermined twenty-county area within the two states of Missouri and Iowa. Of the 13 possible ELL teachers, seven teachers agreed to be interviewed as participants of this study.

Interview Creation

Purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1998) was conducted by accessing the Department of Education websites for the two predetermined states included in the study to determine which schools within the predetermined twenty-county area had sufficient numbers of ELL students to mandate an ELL teacher. The Iowa Department of Education data were accessed from the 2009 school year. The data illuminated 15 schools which had ELL populations. The Missouri Department of Education data were accessed from the 2007 school year. This was the most recent compilation of ELL population data available. According to this data, five districts had ELL student populations. However, only one district had a population level sufficient for the state to mandate having an ELL teacher on staff.

After identifying the districts which were eligible to have ELL teachers on staff, the schools’ websites were accessed to see if the teachers’ emails were publicized. Of the 16 districts which had ELL populations which warranted an ELL teacher, seven districts listed the names of the ELL teachers and gave the teachers’ email contact information.
As I had worked as an ELL teacher within the twenty-county area of Missouri and Iowa, I had contact information for three of the teachers who were not listed online. This contact information consisted of email addresses and telephone numbers. Additionally, snowball sampling (Merriam, 1998) was utilized once contact with ELL teachers was made, allowing for additional potential participants.

Once this information was compiled, an invitation email was generated and sent to the potential participants. This email explained I was as a doctoral student and described the nature of the research (Appendix F). Using email, I invited the ELL teachers to be participants in the study. My email invitation then gave the potential participants my email address and telephone number in order for the teachers to respond if interested. Four ELL teachers responded to my initial invitation. Upon receipt of the interest emails, each participant was sent, via email, a copy of the informed consent letter and form. The potential participants were asked how they would like to proceed: by interviewing via face-to-face, telephone, or synchronous or asynchronous internet application method. Three of the potential participants chose to use the asynchronous internet application of email to conduct the interview. At this point, the potential participants were instructed to sign and return the consent forms before the interview process continued. All three of the three potential participants returned the signed consent forms.

Three subsequent invitations were disseminated to other potential participants: two via email and one via a phone call. These invitations garnered four more participants, resulting in a study with seven participants. Attracting participants for the study was a time consuming task, due to the apparent lack of desire to participate by the potential ELL teachers in the boundary area. This was a surprise to me, but upon sending the additional email invitations and calling some of the participants, I was able to secure four more participants.
Interview Participant Demographics

Twelve teachers in Missouri and Iowa were invited to be participants in this study; seven agreed and signed consent forms to participate. Five of the participants taught in K-12 situations, and two taught in 9-12 settings. Six taught in schools where the ELL populations were less than 50 students, and one teacher taught in a district with an ELL population greater than 50 students. Four teachers taught ELL for more than three years, and three teachers taught for three years or less (Table 1). Of the seven participants, four were female and three were male. For purposes of anonymity, participants are referred to using unisex pseudonyms. The masculine pronouns “he,” “him,” and “his” will refer to all participants.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Grade level</th>
<th># of ELL</th>
<th># Years Taught ELL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>&lt;50</td>
<td>&gt;3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>&lt;50</td>
<td>&gt;3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>&lt;50</td>
<td>&gt;3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>&lt;50</td>
<td>&lt;3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>&gt;50</td>
<td>&lt;3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>&lt;50</td>
<td>&lt;3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>&lt;50</td>
<td>&gt;3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alex is a K-12 ELL teacher who has been teaching ELL for more than three years. He has worked at the same school continually during those years. He works at numerous buildings within his district.
Ray is a K-12 ELL teacher who has taught for more than three years. He also teaches other mainstream content classes. He has worked at the same district for his tenure of teaching ELL. He has taught many different courses while with the district.

Pat is a K-12 ELL teacher who has been teaching ELL for more than three years, and has also worked as a mainstream teacher. He fulfills numerous other extra curricular duties in the district as well.

Sam is the sole K-12 ELL teacher in his district. Sam has been teaching for three years or less, and teaches other content classes as well.

Terry is an ELL teacher. He has taught ELL for three years or less. As well as teaching ELL, he teaches other content classes.

Lee is a 9-12 ELL teacher who has taught three years or less. Additionally, he teaches content classes.

Joe is a K-12 ELL teacher within his district. He has been teaching ELL for more than three years. As well as teaching within the community, he also leads a county diversity team.

**Interview Setting**

The participants chose to conduct all interviews via the asynchronous internet application of email. All participants chose this method because they could respond at their leisure. The choice of asynchronous application proved to be helpful to me as well, because I was allowed to have think-time before responding to the participants. This application allowed me to get reactions from one participant and review those responses, providing me the catalyst to ask the other participants similar questions. The end result was an interactive interview process (Seidman, 2006). If the participants had chosen face-to-face interviews, re-contacting and
connecting with the participants for follow-up interviews might have been difficult due to potential schedule conflicts and drive-time.

Data Collection

Compiling potential participant information took one week. The snowball sampling technique (Merriam, 1998) was used to augment the potential pool. Once the ELL teachers returned their consent forms, ensuring their participation was voluntary and anonymity maintained, an IRB-approved awareness courtesy letter was sent to each teacher’s school district. The interview process of exchanging multiple emails provided for thick, rich, description (Merriam). This open correspondence proved crucial to allowing for a full and richly detailed exchange of information and ideas. Due to my prior tenure of teaching K-12 ELL within the predetermined twenty-county area, I was able to discuss informal issues with the participants in order to allow the email exchanges to be both formal and to establish trust; light-hearted, informal email exchanges also were elicited (Seidman, 2006).

Documents from the internet were collected from state-sanctioned and electronically maintained ELL conferences (the Iowa Culture and Language Conference (ICLC) and the Missouri English Language Learners (MELL) conference. As a way to protect the anonymity of the participants, these conferences are referenced as “the state conferences” for the remainder of the study. Additionally, and in snowball sampling efforts, additional internet sites were accessed based on the participants’ mention of the sites, including the Iowa Department of Education, Area Education Agency (AEA) websites and the Missouri Regional Professional Development Center (RPDC) websites. Again, as a way of maintaining participant anonymity these government educational assistance entities will be referred to as “education agencies” for the remainder of the study.
Participant Interviews

The interview process took place over a four week period. Email exchanges ranged between the minimum of six exchanges to the maximum of thirteen exchanges. Given the chosen nature of the asynchronous internet application used for the interviews, a wide-ranging number of emails took place based on the interviewees’ willingness to interact and time constraints allowing for them to interact. Three of the participants were highly involved in the interaction process, and four of the participants only interacted minimally, resulting in not as thick and rich of a description of their informal collaboration experiences.

Interactive Question Formulation Process

After each participant correspondence, initial analysis of data provided an interactive method of data screening and category construction (Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 2006). Using this process allowed for continual reformulation of the next set of questions to be asked of the participants (Figure 1). This process facilitated the open coding technique of theme formation (Creswell, 2003). Interview transcripts were reviewed after each subsequent exchange between interviewer and interviewee, and continued until information and theme saturation prevailed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Merriam and Strauss and Corbin, “data collection continues until theoretical saturation takes place. This simply means… the researcher finds that no new data are being unearthed” (Strauss & Corbin, p. 292). During the third and subsequent interviews, I found information and thematic redundancy from the previous two interviews. Three basic themes and one overarching theme emerged during the first two interviews and were redundant in the third and subsequent interviews: informal collaboration methods, informal collaboration issues, and informal collaboration motivation. Frequency of informal collaboration was the overarching theme.
Document Collection

As Missouri and Iowa are both states represented in this research study, data from both state-sanctioned and electronically maintained ELL conferences (MELL and ICLC) were collected from their online sites. The data were mined for common themes within the participant interviews. Additionally, all sites mentioned by any participant during the interview process were also consulted. These included the AEA #12 website which maintains the ICLC, the Missouri English Language Learners conference site, and the teacher.net website.
Data Analysis

Creswell’s (2007) phenomenological method of analyzing participants’ transcripts was employed for the data analysis. This included mining through the conversations as they transpired, adjusting the questions as needed based on previous participant comments, mining the participant-mentioned internet sites, reading through the completed conversation transcripts for
an overall feeling of the conversations, identifying significant phrases from the conversations, and then identifying the emerging themes common to all participants’ responses. Finally, literature was consulted about each theme as it emerged to provide a richer examination of the themes. The resulting themes conveyed an in-depth look at the phenomenon of informal collaboration among ELL teachers.

Quality was controlled by ensuring external and internal validity of the study. This was done by using multiple qualitative research methods. In order to ensure respondent safeguards, I sought IRB approval, issued consent letters to all participants stating their rights as participants of the study, and collected informed consent forms from all participants prior to pursuing the interviews. In order to ensure validity, I utilized member-checking with all participants, triangulated data, used multi-site design, used adequate sample size, interviewed until saturation of data was achieved, and employed the use of thick rich description of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2003; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In order to ensure reliability I stated the researcher’s biases (Creswell, 2003).

Open Coding Theme Development

Of the three internet sites and seven asynchronous internet application interviews conducted with the seven participants, 144 significant statements were extracted using open coding. In order to emerge the themes, I began reviewing the participant interview transcripts and documents with a highlighter. I highlighted any phrases which seemed important. After reviewing the first transcript, I saw commonalities of ideas within the other subsequent transcripts. I highlighted those commonalities, but continued to look for other important chunks of language. During the initial read through, I highlighted the documents with one color of highlighter. During the subsequent times I read through the documents, I used various colored
highlighters to represent various common ideas which seemed to be redundant in the transcripts and documents. Through this process themes emerged. Table 2 illustrates the coding key with the resulting three basic themes, one overarching theme which was embedded within each principal theme, and examples of the significant statements which illuminated the themes.

It was interesting to note that some of the preconceived ideas about which I had assumed would be discussed, based on my field experience within ELL teaching, did not surface. One such idea was the issue of student achievement. I assumed student achievement would be a topic of saturation, but it was not used by many of the participants. Instead a similar idea did emerge: the issue of testing and accommodations. These were then chunked together into the informal collaboration issues theme.

Table 2 Resulting Themes and Corresponding Significant Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Significant Statements</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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Findings
Upon completion of the data analysis, I wrote the theme threads. Within the theme threads are two components: the information derived from the participants and documents, participant and document input and the information I reviewed from the secondary literature review.

Theme 1: Informal Collaboration Methods

A theme that resulted from participant interviews and document analysis was the methods with which ELL teachers informally collaborate. I discovered three common threads: ELL teachers informally collaborate by face-to-face, telephone, and asynchronous methods.

Participant and document input. All of the teachers identified multiple ways in which they informally collaborate (collaboration within their ELL occupational community which is not mandated by the administration), including both the venue where they collaborate and the method by which they collaborate. The most common answer resounded by all seven participants was by talking with other ELL teachers at conferences, classes, and workshops about ELL issues. These conferences, classes, and workshops are not opportunities mandated by the administration, but rather opportunities which the participants took part in so they would have an opportunity to meet with other ELL teachers. Alex expressed the feeling of being at a gathering with other ELL teachers by saying, “it was so nice to have similar people talk about similar issues with you.” Pat said that he “attended a SIOP (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol) convention” last spring and that he tries “to attend at least 1 or 2 conferences, workshops, or classes during the school year.”

At these conferences, classes, and workshops which Alex has attended, he talked face-to-face with the other attendees about the information garnered from the sessions. Joe repeated this idea by saying that he goes “to the [state conference] every year.” Additionally he
attends “all the ELL related workshops that the [state] education agency has to offer.” Again, Joe said he talked face-to-face with other attendees about the session content, as well as small talk about education in general. Alex, while not as frequently, does attest that he has attended the Mid-TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and the state conferences when he can. Alex did show lots of enthusiasm for all of the conferences, conventions, and classes available to him in his area, but simply said there is a lack of time for him to attend all of the conferences due to all of his duties he has to perform. Terry said that he did not have to attend the conferences, but did so in order to meet other teachers working in the ELL field. He also felt compelled to lead a session one year at the conference which he attended.

These conference, class, and workshop experiences illustrated one way that the ELL teacher participants attested that they informally collaborate within their occupational communities by talking face-to-face with other ELL teachers in attendance. Sam said that he attended ELL classes, where he “discussed [ELL] topics” with other ELL teachers. This proved to lessen the stress that he felt being a first year ELL teacher. Additionally, however, Pat said that he has talked face-to-face with a local ELL teacher, but only “when we can,” acknowledging that it is not on a regular basis. He (and Terry alike) does speculate that the one person who he has talked with is not a great help to him, due to the other teacher being a novice teacher himself, which does provide for a possible future area of research.

Assistance and communication with an ELL consultant at the education agency, an Iowa or Missouri state run agency which empowers ELL teachers with information about best practices, legal issues, assessments, and any other ELL assistance needed, seems to be a commonality among the participants as well. Three of the participants said that they rely on the consultant and the agency to alert them to the conferences/workshops/classes available to them
in their area and state. Three of the participants have all consulted the education agency talking on the phone and face-to-face with the ELL consultant. Joe said he talks with the consultant “when [he has] a problem or question.” He said that he does this three to four times during a school year. In fact, three of the participants acknowledged talking with the consultant either face-to-face or on the phone and consulting the education agency website for ELL collaboration opportunities.

When I analyzed the education agency websites, I found they provided electronic catalogs of the possible conferences/workshops/classes for the coming year, including the education agency workshops and the state conferences which five of the six participants mentioned attending during their interviews. Although Iowa’s education agency, the AEA, does provide information for the participants, it also maintains synchronous and asynchronous internet application platforms with which teachers may collaborate. These platforms are housed under the “Iowa AEA online” tab. Once on this page, a teacher must register for a user name to access the national synchronous and asynchronous collaboration platform. There are no Iowa or Missouri ELL-only chat boards or chat rooms available to the teachers which are viewable from the AEA or RPDC websites without first registering within the national platform.

Beyond the face-to-face and telephone communications, ELL teachers commonly use informal collaboration via asynchronous internet application of email when talking with other ELL teachers in the area. Pat, Terry, Lee, and Alex said that they have used email to informally collaborate with other ELL teachers who they have met through attending conferences/workshops/classes. Pat acknowledges that this type of email discussion has transpired for him only when he has “concerns” about an ELL issue, alluding to it not being a common occurrence. Alex said that his email conversations with other area ELL teachers are
usually prompted by needing information about testing, resulting in email correspondence only “a few times a year.” Lee acknowledged that he emails a fellow ELL teacher about “every three or four months or so.” Although it does not take place on a regular basis, face-to-face, telephone, and asynchronous email conversations do seem to be informal collaboration tools which were utilized by all seven of the ELL teacher participants.

One outlying response resulting from the participant interviews about how the teacher participants collaborate was the use of ELL teacher chat boards. Only one of the participants said that he used the online asynchronous internet application of chat boards in order to informally collaborate with other ELL teachers. Alex said that he uses the chat boards “daily! Sometimes more than once a day. It’s pretty addictive.” He does post on several different boards, noting that not all of them are strictly for ELL teachers. He noted that the straight ELL boards are not utilized as much, and given that he accesses the boards daily, he craves the continual feedback. For this reason, he uses multiple boards, not strictly the ELL boards. This has proven to be a great tool for informal collaboration for Alex, due to his feeling of being “an island” in his school, because he is the only ELL teacher in his district. The chat boards provide for him an outlet for further collaboration and information.

*Literature review input.* Collaboration can take place in many venues and through many methods of communication. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006) acknowledge that teacher collaborators should not limit themselves and their collaboration efforts to the rudimentary methods of face-to-face and telephone methods. Lewis and Sincan (2009) mimic this sentiment in their article about the use of internet applications as a means of collaborating. Both aforementioned texts promote collaboration between teachers through electronic means. This is what participants mentioned they do when discussing the use of the asynchronous internet
application of email. For example, Alex attested that he likes to utilize the asynchronous internet application of chat boards “daily… [because] they are addictive.” This is reinforced through the AEA’s apparent adoption of the asynchronous internet application of Den (the name given to the area education agency’s online asynchronous and synchronous internet application site manager) on their state level website, allowing access to synchronous and asynchronous internet applications which allow teachers to collaborate.

De Lay (2009) and Sheehy (2009) both describe various ways they encourage teachers to collaborate by using internet applications. Sheehy illustrates how teachers have taken informal collaboration to a new level by collaborating via the internet application of second life. This opens the network of teachers with whom to collaborate from the traditional intra or interschool collaboration to the entire world. Chen, Chen, and Tsai’s (2009) research serves to corroborate the effectiveness of these platforms to serve as a method for teachers to collaborate. Manzo (2009) serves to bolster the idea that more and more teachers are utilizing the synchronous and asynchronous internet applications as a means to collaborate.

Silverman and Clay (2010) illustrate how schools are looking to utilize various methods of teacher collaboration, including using online asynchronous collaboration (OAC). This has only been used within the world of mathematics education, but does set a foundation for other possible collaboration areas. Stevenson (2008) explored a similar type of technologically driven collaboration within the elementary education world. She looked at how often teachers chose to informally collaborate with teachers in their schools, utilizing technological devices. Stevenson does acknowledge the lack of information about how discipline specific teachers collaborate. Additionally, her research was focused on intraschool collaboration.

Theme 2: Informal Collaboration Issue.
An additional theme that resulted from participant interviews and document analysis was issues about which ELL teachers informally collaborate. I discovered two common threads: ELL teachers informally collaborate about ELL student testing and accommodation issues.

Participant and document input: Testing. When discussing the testing issue, two subordinate ideas emerged: which tests are the current approved tests to administer to students, and what testing may be needed for ELL students who are possible candidates for special education. Pat noted that the state-approved ELL test for the state is the English Language Development Assessment (ELDA) test. Pat mentioned that this is the current test which was approved at the time of the interview, but acknowledged that it has not been the only approved test within the past ten years; other tests such as the Language Assessment Scales (LAS) and Idea Proficiency Test (IPT) have been used as well. Alex acknowledged this change as well. Terry said that he went to the state conference because it “was helpful.” He talked with other ELL teachers and went to various sessions. When analyzing the session topics which are at the conference, of the ten topics mentioned, seven related to accommodations and testing for ELL students.

Four of the seven participants commented directly on informal collaboration efforts about testing. Ray said that he “keeps up with” state testing issues by collaborating with other ELL teachers. Alex mentioned the need to share ideas about testing during two different interview exchanges, saying that a “few times a year” he contacts another area ELL teacher about state testing. He discussed the regulations surrounding the testing and discussed the results derived from the tests. Pat mentioned talking with other ELL teachers about the ELL testing when attending workshops and talking with an area ELL teacher via email. Joe said that his exchanges with education ELL consultants have “usually” been about testing. He elaborated,
saying ELL testing issues which he has discussed were not limited to the ELL state mandated assessments; for him, discussions have also included the need for additional testing of students who he believes have “a learning disability issue.” He has talked with the area education consultant about evaluations to be done to allow the students to get special education services and other tests to allow ELL students to meet with a speech pathologist when the need has been apparent to him.

*Literature review input: Testing.* Members of the study commented that the issue of testing is a topic of great interest to them when they informally collaborate with other ELL teachers. The testing topic resonates in the abundance of literature about ELL testing (Allison, 1999; Bachman & Palmer, 2009; Brown, 2004; McNamara, 2000). Official state-mandated testing has changed over time. With the advent of new and better-equipped language proficiency tests to assess students’ language abilities, continually-revised versions of assessments are created (Brainard, 1978; North, 1993; Chalhoub-Deville, 2009). Four participants mentioned this as an issue which prompts them to collaborate with other ELL teachers, to better familiarize themselves with the current assessments.

Additionally, language acquisition is assessed according to the four domains of language: reading, writing, listening, and speaking, which illustrates the breadth of the assessment practices (Allison, 1999; Brown, 2004; Ur, 2000). The participants, and Joe in particular, illustrate how not only are standardized ELL assessments a concern for ELL teachers, but other assessments affect the ELL program as well. Joe identifies testing which can allow access into special education programs, commonly some sort of nonverbal intelligence tests such as the Pearson-published Test Of Nonverbal Intelligence (TONI), as an additional test which affects the ELL program (Fletcher & Navarrette, 2003; Test of Nonverbal Intelligence, 2010).
Although the already identified assessments do provide the ELL teachers great time-consuming focus, the ELL teacher must also work with mainstream teachers in the school to help them to modify the in-class tests. This type of work leads to the next topic, about which the participants noted collaborating informally with other ELL teachers within their occupational community.

**Participant and document input: Accommodations.** The high-stakes idea of accommodations for their ELL students was another informal collaboration topic. According to the Iowa ELL Handbook, mainstream teachers should provide all students, including ELL students, with content information (Iowa Department of Education, 2007). This allows the students to partake of the rich wealth of knowledge and vocabulary about the given subject matter which only the content teacher could have. Content teachers must provide accommodations for ELL students. However, typically the content teachers rely on the ELL teacher to disseminate ideas of how to make content modifications. These accommodations are another source of information about which the participants routinely mentioned collaborating. This is illustrated through the ICLC handouts documents available at the ICLC website (Iowa Culture & Language Conference, 2010). Within the handouts, which offers presentations delivered at the conference, 44 of the 51 presentations were about accommodations teachers can make for ELL students within the mainstream classroom. Additionally, Joe said that he “works a lot with the general education teachers modifying assignments;” however, he did not mention that he actually collaborates with other ELL teachers about this subject. He did, however, mention that he has attended two state conferences; when looking at the conference site online, many of the sessions are about pedagogical issues in working with ELL students.

When Alex was asked about what he discusses online on the chat boards and with fellow ELL teachers, the first items he mentioned were “accommodation ideas” and “venting
about classroom teachers who don’t exactly accommodate our kids.” This was again reinforced when he discussed working with his content teachers, in helping the teachers “come up with appropriate accommodations for their classrooms.” Pat illustrates how important the accommodations are in his collaboration by saying that he attended four classes within the last year about bridging the gap between ELL students and teachers. Sam expressed a tone of concern about such issues in his comments about collaborating with other ELL teachers at workshops. Most of the participants illustrated in their exchanges how important the idea of accommodations has been while they informally collaborate with other ELL teachers.

*Literature review input: Accommodations.* According to guides published by the Center for Applied Linguistics, the current expectation is that academic courses be modified to meet the needs of the ELL student (Jameson, 1998). Equally important, ELL teachers must work with content teachers to see that the modifications are made (Jameson, 1998; Grognet, Jameson, Franco, & Derrick-Mescua, 2000). Having an ELL student in a content class changes the personality of the class, which can prove difficult for some mainstream teachers (Vacca-Rizopoulous & Nicoletti, 2009; Garcia & Tyler, 2010). It can be at this point that the mainstream teacher consults or wants to team with the ELL teacher for assistance in making accommodations and modifications, which can include assistance in teaching content-specific material to be tested and offering additional language assistance (Willner, Rivera, & Acosta, 2009). These are the types of accommodations which Alex was referring to in his interview. Additionally, one can see how these accommodations may be difficult to make by both the mainstream teacher and the ELL teacher, thus resulting in the frustration which Alex also highlighted as a subject about which he collaborates.

**Theme 3: Informal Collaboration Motivation**
An additional theme that resulted from participant interviews and document analysis was the motivation for why ELL teachers informally collaborate. I discovered two common threads: ELL teachers informally collaborate because they are the only ELL teachers in their buildings and they feel that they should informally collaborate more but don’t due to time constraints.

*Participant and document input.* A third theme emerged from the interview process: motivation for collaboration. Alex epitomized the idea of why an ELL teacher informally collaborates when he said, “I am an island.” Sam also stated this idea when he said being able to collaborate with other ELL teachers at workshops took “what could have been a highly stressful situation” and made it benign. All but one of the ELL teacher participants involved in this study work in a school building where they are the sole ELL teacher. This means that if they want to discuss, learn about, or collaborate on ELL issues, they must reach out to teachers outside of their buildings to do so. The teachers all discussed how they collaborate and the topics about which they collaborate, illustrating that they want to continue to learn about how to best serve their students. This is why the teachers collaborate. Additionally, two of the participants mentioned that some of the conferences/workshop/classes are offered for professional development credit, which is needed within the state to renew the state teacher license.

Equally important to why teachers collaborate is why the teachers do not collaborate more frequently. Interestingly, four of the participants conveyed a feeling of inadequacy in their collaboration efforts, illustrated by Pat’s comment that “I don’t take the appropriate time, or the initiative to collaborate like I should.” This comment leads me to believe that he feels he should do more collaboration, but simply does not do it. However, it should be noted that during the interview exchanges, it was discovered that Pat is not only the sole ELL teacher in his building,
working with all of the content teachers, he is also a bus driver for the district and a head coach. Both of these activities are time consuming. Also, it should be noted that Alex said, “Since I travel between all four buildings in this district, sometimes I don’t get the [content teachers’] questions answered as quickly as they like.” This illustrates how Alex not only works in one building as the sole ELL teacher, but in all four buildings in the district. The travel time alone can be time-consuming. Joe shared in his interview exchange that he is not only the sole teacher in his building and district, but also serves as a coordinator for a county team which works with the ELL populations. This must be time consuming as well. As all seven participants work in rural districts where they are the main source of ELL information for their district, they spend much of their time working for and with their districts, where they do not have access to other ELL teachers with whom to readily and easily collaborate; this is why they don’t collaborate any more than they do.

*Literature review input.* Lack of time in a schedule is common among many teachers. Silva (2010) acknowledges this scheduling restriction in her review of the average teacher workday, offering that most schools do not offer teachers a schedule conducive to collaboration. Silva estimates a teacher’s work week is comprised of 52 hours of active work load. “Most of a teacher’s schedule is committed to direct classroom instruction, little time remains for teachers to review standards and curriculum, craft new lessons, assess results, share knowledge and planning ideas with colleagues, and consult with students and parents” (Silvia, p. 62). This can attribute to participants feeling of a lack of time to collaborate within their occupational communities, especially due to their communities’ geographical distances.

However, not all researchers agree with Silva (2010). Farbman (2010) estimates that elementary teachers only spend 73% of their contract time actively engaged in instruction, and
middle school teachers and secondary teachers only spend 63% of their time on active engagement with lessons. With that thought in mind, the ELL teachers only have roughly 25% of their time to take care of other issues, some of which include collaboration with their content teachers, construction of lesson plans, and collaboration within their occupational communities. The problem with this idea is that it does not take into account the fact that the participants are working within abnormal teaching situations. All of the participants are not only at one building, but many are overseeing programs in two or more buildings. This requires travel time to and from the buildings. Additionally, Pat is not only teaching for the district, but is also driving a bus and coaching. Joe is teaching for the district in multiple buildings, and is volunteering for the county to head up their team on diversity issues, which will affect the students within his school. Ray, Terry, and Tom all teach not only ELL students, but also mainstream students, meaning extra preparations for additional classes. All of these issues culminate to make informal collaboration within occupational communities difficult for the participants.

Discussion

Informal collaboration within the occupational community of ELL teachers is a phenomenon which can be described differently based on each individual’s past experiences. The participants in this study illustrated many ways in which they collaborate within their occupational community, including various venues and methods of collaboration. The venues included conferences, workshops, classes, and work. The methods included face-to-face, telephone, and asynchronous internet applications.

Additionally, exploration of the phenomenon through the participants’ experiences has resulted in the creation of two other themes. The first theme is the issues about which they informally collaborated, and the second is the motivation for the collaboration that occurred. In
determining the theme regarding the issues about which participants collaborated, the common threads were ELL testing and accommodations and modifications for their ELL students. In developing the theme about the motivation to collaborate, the commonality was exposed that the participants feel that they are alone and need to have access to information about testing and accommodations. An additional underlying motivation thread was exposed; the teachers feel they do not collaborate any more than they do because of lack of time. The development of this theme led to the discovery that the ELL teachers have the commonality of working beyond the average teacher work schedule, as further illustrated by the literature review.

As a way to culminate how the participants felt about informal collaboration, three of the participants were asked what metaphor would best represent their idea of informal collaboration. Three teachers supplied unique ideas. Joe described informal teacher collaboration within the ELL teacher occupational community as teamwork, because “it takes a couple of teachers to reach the goal.” Pat described his metaphor as “a colony of ants, because the members work together for the same goal (to help the students).” While these two metaphors were quite similar, and readily illustrated the participants’ thoughts that informal collaboration entails work and working together, Alex offered a different metaphor. Alex said that his metaphor changes depending on the time of school year. He says that informal collaboration within the occupational community at the beginning of the year is “like an amusement park because everyone knows what they want to do and are excited about it,” but by the end of the year it is “like a war zone;” everyone is trying to get covered what they need to cover, including assessments, modifications, and many other things.

These metaphors are representative of the participants’ informal collaboration experiences. Ray and Sam acknowledge they had collaborated via face-to-face means at
conferences, workshops, and classes. Pat, Lee, Terry, and Joe collaborated by face-to-face and email means, which are widely accepted and long-utilized formats. Alex, while collaborating using those methods, additionally collaborated on the multiple-participant and highly interactive asynchronous online chat boards. It is interesting to note that they all used similar methods to collaborate: discussing similar issues and responding to similar motivation to comprise the stories of ELL teachers developing professionally within their occupational communities.

Summary

Informal collaboration within the occupational community of ELL teachers was illustrated in Chapter Four through the examination of multiple asynchronous internet application interviews with seven ELL teacher participants. An examination of collected documents, coupled with a second literature review, was also presented. The common themes of informal collaboration methods, informal collaboration issues, and informal collaboration motivation, with the overarching theme of frequency of informal collaboration, emerged. Each of these themes was examined in detail and discussed in Chapter Four.

Chapter Five will provide a summary of the study, identification of limitations of the study, discussion about implications of the study, and recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction of Study

ELL teachers are content-specific teachers who work with students who do not speak English as their primary language. ELL teachers are taught in their degree training programs how
to teach the students to acquire the English language. ELL teachers work with all the mainstream teachers to increase the chances of successful English proficiency for students within a timely manner. The purpose of this study was to provide insight on the informal collaboration that occurs among ELL teachers. Understanding how this unique population informally collaborates is important to administrators and ELL professional development initiators.

Overview of the Study

This phenomenological, qualitative study used interviews of ELL teachers, document collection, and literature reviews to develop a picture of how ELL teachers informally collaborate. The interviews were conducted with seven ELL teachers from a purposeful, snowball sample within a predetermined geographical area. The documents were collected from the interviewees and public internet sites. The data were then analyzed using an open coding process. The thematic data were then filtered through current and relevant literature reviews.

Summary of Findings

Theme development and a secondary literature review produced several key findings worth highlighting before presenting the discussion.

- Due to their at-work time constraints, ELL teachers informally collaborate by using asynchronous internet applications such as email and blogs. Face-to-face and telephone conversations are used less frequently.

- Due to accountability mandates, ELL teachers informally collaborate about testing and accommodation issues needed for ELL students in the mainstream classroom.

- ELL teachers informally collaborate because they feel isolated, but at the same time need to remain current in their continually-changing ELL world.
ELL teachers feel that they should do more informal collaboration within their occupational communities, but do not seek out further opportunities due to time constraints.

These key findings highlighted in table 3 undergird the following discussion.

Table 3 Resulting Themes and Corresponding Significant Statements

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Making Meaning through Metaphors

Two open-ended research questions were written as a way of answering the grand tour research question: How do ELL teachers informally collaborate? The research questions were (1) Take me back to your first day of teaching ELL and describe any experiences you remember; and (2) Informal collaboration is collaboration which is not mandated by the administration of your school, but is done on your own with other ELL teachers. What types of informal collaboration do you do?
These questions were scribed to offer a platform from which the participants could discuss openly any aspects of their informal collaboration efforts. Subsequent probing questions followed to unearth more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The above-mentioned findings were discovered during the interview and document collection process, and the open coding, theme emergence, and data analysis process.

As a way to begin making meaning and to better understand how the participants felt about their informal collaboration experience, I asked them to create a metaphor for how they felt about their informal collaboration experiences. Three teachers supplied unique ideas. Joe described informal teacher collaboration within the ELL teacher occupational community as teamwork, because “it takes a couple of teachers to reach the goal.” Pat described his metaphor as “a colony of ants, because the members work together for the same goal (to help the students).” While these two metaphors were quite similar and readily illustrated the participants’ thoughts that informal collaboration entails work and working together, Alex offered a different metaphor. Alex said that his metaphor changes depending on the time of school year. He says that informal collaboration within the occupational community at the beginning of the year is “like an amusement park because everyone knows what they want to do and are excited about it,” but by the end of the year it is “like a war zone;” everyone is trying to get covered what they need to cover, including assessments, modifications, and many other things. These metaphors are representative of the participants’ informal collaboration experiences and offered a better understanding of how they felt about their experiences. Below, a further discussion of the themes and their relation to the ELL teacher world continues looking in-depth at each resulting coded theme by way of a similar metaphorical illustration of the phenomenon as described by all the participants.
ELL Teacher Collaboration 60

_Surviving Whitewater Rapids._

ELL teachers are whitewater rafters thrown overboard. They must select their methods to collaborate in similar ways as people who have just been thrown overboard in the whitewater rapids select their form of floatation: when the need arises, they look for the best method at hand and use it. ELL teachers use the most efficient methods of informal collaboration given the situations in which they find themselves. At times, this includes face-to-face informal collaboration. For example, when the teacher is at an ELL conference, workshop, or class, it is more prudent to turn to another ELL teacher and ask him questions and/or share ideas. The asynchronous internet application of email is selected when the ELL teacher is at school, where no other ELL teachers are geographically available to informally collaborate via face-to-face methods. In similar types of situations, telephone conversations can be used to informally collaborate. One ELL teacher participant said that he utilized the asynchronous internet application of chat boards with which to informally collaborate with other ELL teachers. This offered him immediate and substantial informal collaboration opportunities when he was trying to grasp best practices in ELL situations, without any other ELL teachers geographically viable to him. The ELL teacher participants seemed to crave the informal collaboration opportunities, but were forced to select their methods of collaboration due to their remote geographical status.

Furthermore, collaboration in general, within the vast and non-content-specific education world, has been widely studied and offers concurring references as to why the ELL teachers have chosen these forms of informal collaboration. Education collaboration researchers DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006) acknowledge that teacher collaborators should not limit themselves and their collaboration efforts to the rudimentary methods of face-to-face and telephone methods, but should collaborate through electronic means in order not to stifle
collaboration opportunities. This thereby bolsters the idea that the ELL teachers in the study are utilizing a current method of collaborating and not utilizing only the antiquated and rudimentary tools available to them. Alex attested that he likes to utilize the asynchronous internet application of chat boards “daily… [because] they are addictive.” Electronic collaboration researchers Chen, Chen, and Tsai (2009) have found the effectiveness of these platforms to serve as a method for teachers to collaborate. This research illustrates how teachers chose the use of electronic, asynchronous internet application to not only collaborate about class-related projects, but also used the platform to continue to collaborate about non-class related education issues as well. Manzo (2009) illustrates that more and more teachers are utilizing synchronous and asynchronous internet applications as means to collaborate by providing quantifiable data showing this phenomenon.

This additional review of literature illustrates how ELL participants are informally collaborating equally within the education world as a whole. However, by illustrating the methods which the content-specific and geographically isolated ELL teacher participants select their methods of informal collaboration, much like a whitewater rafter thrown overboard selects his form of floatation, it begs the question: do all content-specific and geographically isolated teachers informally collaborate by similar methods? As Little (2007) and Johnson, Berg, and Donaldson (2005) point out, not enough research has been conducted on content-specific teachers and their collaboration practices. This is a potential area for future research. Research about how each content-specific segment of teachers informally collaborate could benefit administration and professional development facilitators in selecting where to allocate resources, better enabling the content-specific teachers to develop professionally.

*Selecting Items During a Hurricane.*
ELL teachers can also be seen as hurricane victims forced to decide what they need the most. Issues which are of the utmost importance to sustaining student success were about what ELL teachers were choosing to informally collaborate. Important issues such as ELL proficiency testing and making accommodations for the ELL students in the mainstream classroom were two themes which were embedded in the participants’ interviews and in the documents analyzed. This resonated in the abundance of literature about ELL testing (Allison, 1999; Bachman & Palmer, 2009; Brown, 2004; McNamara, 2000) and about accommodations to be made for ELL students (Vacca-Rizopoulos & Nicoletti, 2009; Zigmond & Kloo, 2009; Willner, Rivera, & Acosta, 2009; Garcia & Tyler, 2010). This is due in part to the continual changes made to state-mandated ELL proficiency testing, and the ELL teachers’ need to stay current with the state expectations (Brainard, 1978; North, 1993; Chalhoub-Deville, 2009). Also, as the Center for Applied Linguistics (Jameson, 1998) maintained in their literature reviewed, mainstream teachers are expected to teach all of their students, including ELL students (Grognet, Jameson, Franco, & Derrick-Mescua, 2000; Jameson, 1998). Generally, the responsibility falls on the ELL teacher to provide assistance in making accommodations. For this reason, the participants said that there was frustration about how to best work with the mainstream teachers to meet the accommodation expectations.

Through the eyes of the ELL teacher participants, we have seen the issues about which they chose to collaborate, the issues of utmost importance to the success of their students, school, and self. Similar to the select few items which a person selects to protect during a hurricane, these items are valuable to the ELL teachers. This leads to the questions about other content-specific teachers: do they have issues which are highly important to their specific content about which they choose to informally collaborate? This information could be valuable to
education leaders so that they can help content-specific teachers to meet the needs of their students within that content area. Information and resources could then be allocated to meet the needs of the content-specific teacher needing to develop professionally in order to best help their students, schools, and selves.

*Living as an Island Castaway.*

ELL teachers are Robinson Crusoes, stranded on islands. Working in a school where there are fewer than two full time ELL teachers is like working on an island, stranded without other teachers to help with the workload or with whom to informally collaborate. This sentiment was expressed by Alex, who maintained he is “an island,” working as the sole ELL teacher in his building and district. This resonated through numerous participant interviews. This need to learn by reflecting and discussing issues (Mezirow, 2000) is illustrated by all of the participants craving opportunities to share knowledge. The participants have thus found many methods in which to informally collaborate, in order to make them feel less of a teacher stranded without assistance.

With this sentiment and desire to collaborate being illustrated, the participants maintained that they do not do enough collaboration. This feeling of a lack of informal collaboration was due to a lack of time. When a teacher is living as an island castaway, with no one to help with the workload, and then extra duties are layered on top, a feeling of inefficiency and frustration is bound to happen. Silva (2010) acknowledges a scheduling restriction in her review of the average teacher workday, stating that most schools do not offer teachers a schedule conducive to collaboration. Silva says, “Most of a teacher’s schedule is committed to direct classroom instruction, little time remains for teachers to review standards and curriculum, craft new lessons, assess results, share knowledge and planning ideas with colleagues, and consult
with students and parents” (Silva, p. 62). This illustration of time scarcity within education as a whole posits the following questions: do all content-specific teachers feel like they are living as island castaways? If this is a concern which is embedded not only among ELL teachers, but also through all content-specific teachers, is there something that can be done by educational leaders within these small districts to better provide an opportunity for the content-specific teachers to informally collaborate? Does this lack of time correlate with student success? Does this lack of time correlate with teacher attrition? All of these are concerns which should be further explored not only within ELL teachers, but also with content-specific teachers as well.

Implications

The findings of this study may ring true among ELL occupational communities, content-specific teachers, professional development coordinators, and school leaders. The findings of this study illustrate how ELL teachers utilize the tried and true face-to-face and telephone modes of collaborations, as well as electronic, asynchronous internet applications. The teachers are turning to the electronic modes of informal collaboration due to the multiple time constraint issues they are enduring. This knowledge of the preference to use electronic means and out of school venues of collaboration should be acknowledged by the school leaders. ELL teachers should be commended for their efforts of seeking out the needed knowledge in order to resolve critical issues.

School leaders and professional development coordinators should harness the knowledge about the informal collaborative issues important to ELL teachers. Having the insight into what information gap exists within a content-specific area is key to providing the most effective training opportunities possible. Through knowledge acquisition, teachers grow and better arm themselves to assist students to learn more expeditiously.
Further Research Opportunities

By conducting this phenomenological, qualitative research study, a limited perspective of how ELL teachers informally collaborate has been discovered. The teachers within the ELL world and the documents analyzed have given a window from which to observe some common practices within the ELL teacher community. This window into the limited world of seven participant ELL teachers opens the opportunity for further and a more in-depth study about ELL informal collaboration within the ELL teacher occupational community.

Years of Teaching

Within the study, most of the participants have taught ELL for two years to six years. This illustrates a perspective of inexperienced teachers. As many researchers have illuminated, experienced or veteran teachers (those who have taught for four or more years) have a different perspectives on teaching than do the novice or inexperienced teachers (those who have taught for three or fewer years) (Georgion, Staurinides, & Panaoura, 2002; LeMaistre & Pare, 2010; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007). This posits an area for further study: does the ELL teacher’s years of experience affect how they informally collaborate?

Quantitative Research

One area for future research could be to conduct a quantitative, generalizable study with a large number of participants which could enumerate and classify the common informal collaboration efforts are of many ELL teachers. Such research could use the findings from this study to construct a quantifiable instrument to inquire about informal collaboration efforts within the occupational community of ELL teachers.

By offering this platform from which to launch a large scale quantitative research project about common practice ELL informal collaboration, school administrators and professional
development coordinators would be able to understand the common practices of ELL teachers. This could provide these leaders a starting point for further collaboration and teacher development opportunities, or a simply a better insight into what efforts could and possibly should be transpiring with the ELL teachers with whom they are working.

Concluding Remarks

In the ever changing world of ELL education, teachers are reaching out to other ELL teachers within their occupational community in order to informally collaborate to survive and benefit from other’s wisdom. Much like our desire to survive the white rapids, a hurricane, or a deserted island, ELL teachers want to create the best world for their students, colleagues, schools, and themselves. Due to the high workload, and minimal availability of readily accessible and reliable informal collaboration outlets, the ELL teachers utilize the methods by which to informally collaborate which are viable to them based on the situation in which they find themselves. Further research should be done to widen the scope of understanding how multitudes of ELL teachers informally collaborate.

References


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Appendix A

Informed Consent Letter

Date

Dear Participant:

Thank you for participating in the study of English Language Learner informal collaboration. This study, “Stories Of K-12 English Language Learner Teachers Developing Professionally Through Informal Collaboration Within Occupational Communities” is being conducted as a research project in a doctoral program as part of the dissertation process and as research to be reported in peer edited journals. The study will be used to provide explicit knowledge to others about the informal collaboration among ELL teachers. The study may also provide a model of studying subject specific collaboration.

As a study participant, you will be asked to respond to questions related to collaboration. The time allowed for the completion of the interview questions is not expected to take longer than twenty minutes. Please read below to understand how your input will be used in the study and how your rights as a participant will be protected.

1. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from participation at any time, including the middle of the interview, or after it is completed. If you decide at a later time you do not wish your input to be included in the study, you may withdraw. Please do not hesitate to contact me at 660.562.1236, or by email, nissai@nwmissouri.edu. You may also contact the University of Missouri IRB at 573.882.9585 with any concerns.

2. Should you decide to participate, your identity, as well as your input, will remain anonymous. Your interview will be assigned a random pseudonym, and when referred to in the study, you will be identified as either a participant in the research study or by the pseudonym. If you are still interested in participating in this research project you will be required to sign a consent letter before the project begins.

Thank you,

Nissa Ingraham
Appendix B

Participant Consent Form

I, ________________________________, have read the guidelines on the proposed study and agree to participate in the qualitative study conducted by Nissa Ingraham. Furthermore, I understand that:

1. The Individual Interview data will only be used for the dissertation process and any related article publications.
2. My participation is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw at anytime during the study.
3. My identity will be protected throughout the process of the study and a pseudonym will be used when reporting findings.
4. I will be given the opportunity to review transcriptions.

Signed: ________________________________ Date: __________________
Appendix C

Participant Interview Questions

The questions below will guide the individual and focus group interviews:

1. Take me back to your first day of teaching ELL, describe any experiences you remember.

2. Informal collaboration is collaboration which is not mandated by the administration of your school, but is done on your own with other ELL teachers. What types of informal collaboration do you do?

Probes will be used as needed with care not to lead the participant.
Appendix D

Interview Protocol

I will read the statement below prior to beginning each interview.

“I am studying informal collaboration among high school English Language Learner (ELL) teachers as part of my doctoral studies. Informal collaboration is learning which you do with other ELL teachers, which is not mandated by your school administration. I have chosen your high school as one focus for my narrative qualitative study due to its geographic location and ELL population. The purpose of my study is to provide insight on the informal collaboration that occurs among high school ELL teachers. The conversation you are about to participate in is the major component of my study. I seek to discover how knowledge is generated and shared. How are you learning individually and in conjunction with others? My study is a collection of your collaborative stories. The information gathered will fill an information gap concerning ELL teacher collaboration. I will limit the time for this dialogue to 30 minutes. Please sign the notice of consent form which confirms your participation is voluntary. Then we can begin our conversation. I thank you in advance for your participation.”
Dear Administrator,

I am a doctoral student at the University of Missouri and am concluding my studies with work on my dissertation. This letter of awareness is to inform you know that I may be contacting one or more teachers in your district to request their participation in my study. This study, “Stories Of K-12 English Language Learner Teachers Developing Professionally Through Informal Collaboration Within Occupational Communities” will be used to provide explicit knowledge about the informal collaboration among ELL teachers. The study may also provide a model of studying subject specific collaboration.

As a study participant, your teachers will be asked to respond to questions related to collaboration. The time allowed for the completion of the interview questions is not expected to take longer than twenty minutes. The interview will be conducted by means of a face-to-face interview, telephone interview, or an interview by way of synchronous or asynchronous internet applications.

If you have questions or concerns please feel free to contact me. My phone number is: 660-541-2333. You may also contact me via e-mail at nissai@nwmissouri.edu.

Sincerely,

Nissa Ingraham
Appendix F

Email Invitation

My name is Nissa Ingraham and I am a doctoral student at the University of Missouri and an instructor of English Language Learners at Northwest Missouri State University. In order to complete my doctorate, I am working on a research project about how English Language Learner teachers collaborate.

As you work in one of the counties which I have chosen to be included in my research, I would love to have the opportunity to get some feedback from you about how you collaborate (even if you don’t feel you do much collaboration, your input can be equally valuable). If you are interested in talking with me, I can either send you the questions via email, set a time to talk with you on Skype, meet with you, call you, or use any other “discussion” method you wish.

Please let me know if you would be willing to be a part of my research, and thank you for your time!

Nissa Ingraham
Appendix G

Conference Site Administrator Awareness Letter

Date

Dear ELL Conference Site Administrator,

I am a doctoral student at the University of Missouri and am concluding my studies with work on my dissertation. This letter of awareness is to inform you know that I may be contacting your conference website for use in my study. This study, “Stories Of K-12 English Language Learner Teachers Developing Professionally Through Informal Collaboration Within Occupational Communities” will be used to provide knowledge about the informal collaboration among ELL teachers.

As a study document, your website may be reviewed to help build a picture related to questions relevant to ELL teacher informal collaboration. Only publically available documents will be used.

If you have questions or concerns please feel free to contact me. My phone number is: 660-541-2333. You may also contact me via e-mail at nissai@nwmissouri.edu.

Sincerely,

Nissa Ingraham
Vita

Nissa Fay (Bartlett) Ingraham was born in a small rural town in northwestern Missouri to working class, technically trained parents who both passed away before she was able to complete her long standing desire of attaining a terminal degree. The completion of this Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from University of Missouri, Columbia helps to complete her journey of personal enlightenment and family goals. Nissa attended Clinton County R-III public school in Plattsburg, MO and received her BSEd. in Spanish and French education in July, 1997 from University of Central Missouri. She completed her MA. in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) from the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, IA in August, 2005. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Northwest Missouri State University. She is married to fellow school teacher Jeremy Ingraham and has two sons: Duke and Wyatt Ingraham.