

# Cross-Cultural Collaboration: Working Together to Achieve Shared Goals

*Collaboration is an interactive process that engages two or more participants who work together to achieve outcomes they could not accomplish independently.*

— Salmons and Wilson (2009, xxxiv)

*Collaboration involves people coming together to work on a problem or opportunity together. . . . When people collaborate, they organize into social-intellectual systems for sharing goals, energies, and knowledge.*

— Beyerlein (2009, xxix)

**O**pportunities for collaboration in English language teaching (ELT) contexts have now returned to (or possibly exceeded) pre-pandemic levels. As opportunities for face-to-face teaching, in-person conference attendance, travel, professional exchanges, digital collaboration, and formal institutional and organizational partnerships have gained traction, ELT professionals have the chance, once again, to engage in numerous types of collaboration. In ELT settings, the focus of collaborative efforts (whether face-to-face, digital, or hybrid) can center on teaching and team teaching; materials development; assessment-measure improvements; research or action research; and course, curriculum, and program revitalization, to name just a sampling of the domains that benefit from collaboration.

Cross-cultural collaboration—one form of collaboration that takes place in a range of ELT settings in face-to-face, virtual, and hybrid modalities—occurs when ELT professionals partner with one or more other professionals who have distinct backgrounds to achieve shared goals. In cross-cultural collaborative contexts, partners may be individuals who are from distinct cultural, ethnic, and/or linguistic backgrounds. Sometimes these individuals share the same first language and/or the same nationality, but they self-identify with different cultural

and/or linguistic groups within their country. In other cross-cultural contexts, collaborators may be from different nations, with different first languages. Typically, cross-cultural collaboration involves individuals who have different life and educational experiences, different socializations, and/or different ways of making sense of and interacting with each other and the world in which they live (see Hiller 2023).

In this article, we begin by presenting a case study of our own cross-cultural partnership.

Our collaborative efforts, which took place in both face-to-face and virtual modalities, centered on a joint ELT research project and related activities. In our case-study presentation, we describe the circumstances that led to our collaboration; we also provide a snapshot of the emphases of our joint research, the research-related activities that we engaged in, and the results of our efforts. We then turn to the lessons that we learned from our collaboration, lessons that we have framed as “tips” for successful collaborative efforts.

We believe that our tips have direct implications for collaboration with a range of ELT emphases, including efforts centered on teaching and team teaching, assessment, curriculum development, and new course design. We feel that *English Teaching Forum* readers will be able to reframe our tips, with some adaptation, to enhance their own collaborative efforts for the benefit of their professional development, their students’ learning, and their school curricula, and for the advancement of the broader field of language teaching. In a separate section, we comment on possible barriers to collaboration that could be pertinent across a range of contexts. We close by endorsing collaboration, in its various forms, and outline the many benefits that accrue for individuals, collaborative teams, and the profession.

### **CROSS-CULTURAL COLLABORATION: A CASE STUDY**

The authors of this article, both ELT professionals, have been collaborating for more than six years (at the time of writing this article). Our relationship can be characterized as cross-cultural because of our different national backgrounds (Vietnamese and American); first languages (Vietnamese and English); educational experiences (in Vietnam, Australia, and New Zealand for Nguyễn; in the United States and Italy for Stoller); professional experiences (in Vietnam for Nguyễn; in the United States and more than 30 countries for Stoller); and political ideologies. Our collaboration began in

the spring of 2018, when Stoller went to Nguyễn’s university (University of Foreign Language Studies [UFLS], University of Da Nang, Vietnam) as a Fulbright scholar with a one-semester joint teaching and research award.

Despite being in different university departments (Nguyễn is an instructor in the UFLS English Department, and Stoller was a Fulbright scholar in the UFLS Foreign Language Teacher Education Department), we met each other within the first few weeks of Stoller’s six-month stay in Vietnam. Our relationship actually began when the Fulbright Program in Hanoi asked Stoller to gift Nguyễn, who was known to Fulbright Program personnel, a Fulbright calendar. It is amazing to think that our relationship began with a calendar; you never know what the springboard for a fruitful relationship might be! That request led to a meal for the handover of the calendar. During our relaxing meal, we introduced ourselves and, in the process, shared aspects of our cultural and professional backgrounds. Not only did we enjoy a memorable culinary experience, but we also delved into a deep discussion that highlighted our mutual appreciation for research as a means to better understand the profession that we are committed to. We learned early on that we had no trouble engaging in stimulating, respectful conversations, listening to one another’s ideas, and sharing interests in Vietnamese university English majors’ reading abilities. Building on our shared interests (and our positive feelings about one another), we met numerous times to enjoy Vietnamese coffee and fine-tune the focus of a joint research project.

In due course, we decided upon a study centered on Vietnamese university English majors’ text-medium (print and digital) and text-language (Vietnamese and English) reading habits. Over a five-month period of regular face-to-face meetings and email correspondence, we came to an agreement on research questions to guide our study; developed, piloted, and fine-tuned an online data-collection survey; and obtained

permissions from a representative sampling of public universities across Vietnam to conduct our study with English majors at those universities. Data were collected from a total of 836 students at 17 participating universities in the southern, central, and northern parts of Vietnam. After Stoller left Vietnam and returned to the United States, the cross-cultural collaboration continued virtually. We compiled and analyzed data, interpreted findings, and drafted and then finalized an article reporting the results of our research (Stoller and Nguyễn 2020). Our research activities and resulting publication provide an initial snapshot of Vietnamese university English majors' reading habits.

From the same data, we collaborated on writing proposals for two poster presentations, both of which were accepted, one at a conference in the United States (Stoller and Nguyễn 2019a) and one at a conference in Vietnam (Stoller and Nguyễn 2019b). We also collaborated on a conference paper, presented in Vietnam by Nguyễn (Nguyễn and Stoller 2019), that focused on the digital-reading challenges faced by English majors in Vietnamese universities. As an extension of that conference presentation, we jointly wrote an article focused on our survey-research methodology and its value in

exploring the digital-reading challenges faced by university-level Vietnamese English majors (Nguyễn and Stoller 2020).

We are certain that we could not have achieved these varied, but related, accomplishments on our own. Our successes were inextricably linked to our shared goals, commitment to our overarching project and to each other, and willingness to put in the hard work and hours required (rather than either of us taking on a subordinate role). Equally important, in fact, were our diverse perspectives, different experiences, distinct areas of expertise within ELT, and widely divergent understandings of the Vietnamese educational landscape.

Upon reflection, we have come to realize that we accomplished a tremendous amount in our multi-year period of cross-cultural collaboration, the bulk of it virtually and thousands of kilometers apart from each other. To better understand the nature of our collaboration, we reflected on questions such as these: What made our collaborative efforts so successful? What cross-cultural challenges did we experience, and how did we overcome them? What would we do the same or differently if we had the opportunity to start our partnership from scratch, knowing

Types of Collaboration	Foci of Collaboration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration resulting from a formal agreement between two or more institutions/organizations</li> <li>• Cross-cultural collaboration</li> <li>• Interdisciplinary collaboration (e.g., Horn, Stoller, and Robinson 2008)</li> <li>• Language teacher<sup>1</sup>–subject-area teacher collaboration (e.g., Kibler et al. 2022)</li> <li>• Peer teacher collaboration (e.g., Mora-Ruano, Heine, and Gebhardt 2019)</li> <li>• Teacher–Ministry of Education collaboration (e.g., Nguyen 2018)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment</li> <li>• Course development/revitalization</li> <li>• Curriculum renewal</li> <li>• Materials design</li> <li>• Professional development</li> <li>• Program development/revitalization</li> <li>• Research/action research</li> <li>• Standards</li> <li>• Teaching</li> <li>• Team teaching</li> </ul>
<sup>1</sup> ESL, EFL, EAP, ESP, English language development (ELD) teachers	

**Table 1. Types and foci of collaboration: A representative sampling**

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what we know now about cross-cultural collaboration, specifically, and collaboration, more generally?

In the section that follows, we share reflections on our working relationship. We have translated our insights into tips for *Forum* readers so that they too can collaborate successfully, regardless of the type of partnership that they engage in or the focus of their partnership (see Table 1).

### **TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION**

Prior to presenting our tips for successful collaboration, we should note that before we began our partnership in earnest, we had not established any “ground rules” (i.e., basic rules to guide us in working together to accomplish our goals). Only in retrospect have we discovered which of our actions and attitudes strengthened our personal and professional cross-cultural relationship and contributed to our collaborative successes. Here we “translate” those particularly salient actions and attitudes—which stem directly from our own personal experiences with cross-cultural collaboration—into tips for *Forum* readers who have opportunities to engage in cross-cultural and other forms of collaboration. When particularly illustrative, we incorporate concrete examples of our actions and attitudes that we believe contributed to our achievements. (In the Appendix, we reexamine the same tips from the perspective of practicing language teachers who are collaborating with one or more other teachers on practical teaching matters.)

We start with the importance of *trust* and *respect* in a cross-cultural collaborative effort because these attributes are essential to every good relationship.

#### **Tip 1: Cultivate a relationship of trust and respect.** *To do so,*

- be honest in all that you do. Explain *why* you agree. Explain *why* you disagree. If you disagree, propose an alternative to the issue being considered. Be prepared to discuss alternatives respectfully and come to a resolution together.

*We engaged in frank discussions throughout our project. One topic of particular importance comes to mind. Because we had quite different experiences with “piloting” (of—for example—instructional materials, assessment instruments, and surveys), we spent time debating the merits of piloting; its importance in a project such as ours; the time-intensive nature of piloting when done well; and the approaches that we would adopt.*

*Ultimately, we jointly decided to make use of three distinct groups of pilots to gather feedback on our data-collection survey before sharing it with the participants in our study. Our pilots included (1) four Vietnamese English lecturers and six first-year Vietnamese English majors at our university in Vietnam, and (2) two U.S.-based graduate students in Applied Linguistics (one Vietnamese-born PhD student who had studied and taught English in Vietnam, and one Korean-born PhD student with EFL and ESL teaching experience). After much discussion, we decided to solicit entirely different forms of feedback from each group,*

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*which proved to be a wise decision. (See Stoller and Nguyễn [2020] for details about our piloting decisions.) Throughout our discussions, we succeeded in being good listeners and respectful of divergent perspectives.*

- acknowledge your partner's contributions, large and small, concrete and abstract.
- be transparent in your actions (e.g., explain steps that you have taken when working independently from one another on your joint project).
- approach challenges from a proactive perspective rather than a reactive one.

*One of the challenges that we experienced—while working virtually during the data-analysis stages of our research—centered on the fact that we were working in different time zones, across the international date line. We did not bemoan the fact that we were sometimes off sync, nor did we perceive this as a hindrance to our working relationship. Rather, we recognized it as a predictable occurrence in our circumstances and learned to accept this inevitability. Sometimes, we were amused when we received emails wishing each other “good night,” when it was, in fact, morning in our time zone.*

**Tip 2: Assume similarities and differences.**  
*To do so,*

- be open to your partner's curiosity about cultural and attitudinal similarities and differences; as you discover differences (in, for example, working styles, perspectives, attitudes, interpretations, and how you address one another), celebrate them. Those differences can lead to valuable insights.

*In our case, as one example, we had an honest discussion about how we were going to address one another in face-to-face encounters and in written communication. Although Stoller was used to (and comfortable with) having collaborators call her by her first name, when Nguyễn explained why she felt more comfortable calling her Dr. Stoller, we agreed amicably upon how to address one another. As another example, we—as women—shared our perspectives (similar and different) about marriage, the role of women in the workplace, and societal attitudes toward and expectations of women in education, at home, in the community, and during holidays.*

**Tip 3: Get to know each other both personally and professionally.** *To do so,*

- share personal stories as a means to get to know one another on a personal level.

*We began almost every single face-to-face meeting with some informal, friendly conversation. We enjoyed learning about each other's families, traditions, values, and travels. We also talked about major holidays and events taking place in Vietnam (e.g., International Women's Day, Tết New Year celebrations, Hùng Kings' Temple Festival, Reunification Day, and corresponding at-home and community traditions).*

- engage in academic conversations not just about your shared project but also about other professional interests.

*In our case, we compared the classes that we were teaching as well as instructional strategies we used to fully engage our students. We learned from each other about the ways that classroom dynamics and teacher—student interactions in our own countries were very different. We also talked about our nonteaching university*

responsibilities in Vietnam and compared them to how those responsibilities would play out at a U.S. university.

- exchange points of view openly and respectfully. Such conversations will help colleagues get to know each other better, professionally and personally.

*As part of our collaboration, we exchanged points of view at almost every stage of our joint project. Early on, we discussed what we perceived to be the best ways to build a large participant pool, how to solicit permissions and from whom, and who would write the first draft of certain survey items. Later in our research project, we compared our interpretations of data-collection results and discussed the best ways to present our results to a professional audience.*

**Tip 4: Discover and build upon each other's talents and strengths.** To do so,

- be observant, as your collaborative efforts take shape, to identify each other's talents and strengths.

*While working on our joint project, we sought answers to questions such as these to identify our individual talents and strengths:*

- o *Who has personal contacts with prospective participating institutions and/or participants?*
- o *Who has experience creating online surveys?*
- o *Who is more skilled at creating Excel files for compiling data?*
- o *Who is more comfortable with configuring and reconfiguring data to facilitate analyses?*
- o *Who is more knowledgeable about creating tables and figures that conform to the expectations of our targeted journal?*
- o *Who has easier access to the professional literature for a literature review?*
- o *Who is more familiar with the style guide (e.g., APA) that is going to be used to write for publication?*

- dedicate time to talking about what types of contributions each of you believes that you can make to the project. Equally important is a conversation about what aspects of the joint effort you may feel a tad uncomfortable with.

*Throughout our collaboration, we identified the various types of contributions required to accomplish our goals. Early on, we compared our in-country professional networks to decide who would be in a better position to make initial contacts with English departments (whose students might participate in our study) at Vietnamese universities. In certain cases, we dedicated time to deciding which language (Vietnamese or English) would be more beneficial to use for those initial contacts. When we decided to make initial contact in Vietnamese, we knew that Stoller would not be prepared to do so. Later, we discussed who felt more comfortable running and interpreting parametric statistics. At one point, we jointly decided to consult one of Stoller's U.S. colleagues who had expertise in statistics. That informal consultation proved to be exceedingly helpful.*

**Tip 5: Educate one another by sharing cultural knowledge, areas of expertise, and professional experiences as ways to contribute to each other's professional growth.** To do so,

- share cultural knowledge that may influence your project and/or your working relationship.

*In our case, as an example, we shared quite distinct perspectives with respect to obtaining research permissions through Institutional Review Board (IRB) processes. We also debated the value of including a survey item that asked Vietnamese English-major respondents to give us permission to use their anonymous responses in our analyses, even though we had been granted permission to do so at the institutional level. After deciding to include a request for permissions in our survey (as researchers would do in the United States), we discussed at length how such an item should be worded (in English), given how unfamiliar Vietnamese university students are with such requests.*



- share pertinent information, stemming from your own areas of expertise, that has a direct bearing on your joint project.

*As part of our partnership, Stoller shared insights about print and digital L2 reading, reading for academic purposes, and reading for pleasure.*

*Nguyễn shared valuable knowledge about Vietnamese learners' study habits, familiarity with and use of digital resources for university studies, and experiences as research participants.*

- share insights gained from professional experiences that may have a direct influence on your joint project.

*We found it useful to share insights stemming from our varied experiences with, for instance, (1) creating surveys, disseminating surveys, and encouraging participant responses; (2) designing graphics for the display of statistics in publications and posters; and (3) engaging in the lengthy publication process, including responding to feedback from editors and anonymous reviewers. We also compared what we knew about the different "audiences" that we would encounter during our collaboration (e.g., Vietnamese university students and their varied experiences with anonymous surveys; reviewers of ELT conference paper and poster proposals; ELT conference attendees; ELT journal editors). We shared our experiences with the hopes that a better understanding of each type of encounter would (1) enhance the effectiveness of our research; (2) improve our interactions with participating universities and other stakeholders; and (3) assist us in writing our conference proposals and abstracts, creating conference posters, drafting manuscripts to be submitted for publication, and communicating with journal editors and anonymous reviewers.*

**Tip 6: Give each other the time needed to think and then contribute one's own ideas and interpretations thoughtfully.** To do so,

- be willing to explore a new topic or issue in one meeting and then continue the conversation in a future meeting as a way to give your partner the chance to think things through.

*We were careful not to rush to any decisions. We gave ourselves the time needed to revisit topics, questions, and possible solutions after some time for individual consideration.*

*We moved forward in the various stages of our project only after we reached a mutually agreed-upon plan.*

- be open to slowing down your progress and modifying a previously established timeline.

*Over the course of our collaboration, we reconsidered and negotiated project schedules and timelines. We did this not only to minimize stress but also to be able to reasonably respond to the demands that we were facing from other parts of our busy personal and professional lives. We focused on creating conditions for quality work, not rushed work.*

**Tip 7: Accept from the very start that "life can get in the way."** To do so,

- support each other during busy and stressful times.

*In our case, we made accommodations in our project timeline for a pregnancy (Nguyễn's), a death in the family, deadlines for other projects, and workplace obligations. We focused on being flexible and willing to compromise. There were times when we willingly took on each other's responsibilities, while issues were being resolved, to keep the project moving forward.*

- be empathetic.

*One of the golden rules of empathy is to treat others as you would like to be treated yourself. When unanticipated requests were made of us (by, for instance, a workplace supervisor), we imagined what that request might entail (that is, we put ourselves in the shoes of our collaborator) and thoughtfully expressed our understanding of each other's circumstances. More specifically, when Nguyễn was asked to work on other university projects, we agreed to slow down the progress of our joint project so that Nguyễn could handle her new assignments responsibly. Even when our attention was shifted to other responsibilities, we kept in touch to give each other support.*

**Tip 8: Invest in the collaborative partnership by means of frequent and clear communication.** *To do so,*

- communicate often, in whatever ways work well for you (e.g., email, text messages, Zoom, WhatsApp).
- do not allow physical distance to deter you from updating each other on personal and professional matters of importance.
- express your care and support for one another.
- do not forget to say thank you, using whatever language(s) you are communicating in.

Tips 9 and 10 center on logistical matters.

**Tip 9: Remember that “variety is the spice of life.” Thus, add variety to meetings if time and location permit.** *To do so,*

- plan meetings around meals, when feasible.

*As mentioned earlier, our collaborative relationship began over a meal. That first meeting took place in a relaxed atmosphere at a Vietnamese restaurant where Nguyễn introduced Stoller to delicious Vietnamese cuisine. As we shared the meal and learned about each other’s cultures, we found ourselves effortlessly diving into discussions about our experiences and interests. As a result of our relaxing and warm exchanges at the table, we realized the potential of bonding over meals and fostering a cross-cultural relationship. Essentially, we learned that small talk over shared meals can serve as a gateway to deeper connections and a myriad of shared insights that enhance collaboration.*

- schedule meetings in different places and/or in different modalities (e.g., in person, on Zoom, over the phone).

*This approach was particularly effective for us and served to introduce Stoller to interesting Vietnamese locales, neighborhoods, beverages, foods, and workspaces. We enjoyed meeting in places where we could have, for example, iced lemongrass tea, sweet tofu soup, and Vietnamese*

*sweets. We also enjoyed visiting popular Vietnamese coffee shops, cafes, and nearby food courts.*

**Tip 10: Agree jointly upon ways to organize materials.** *To do so,*

- label computer files so that you can keep track of drafts as they move back and forth between collaborators, across time zones (and the international date line, when applicable). It is important to feel confident that you are always working with the most current version of your joint work.
- consider using the assistance of technology (e.g., Dropbox and Google Drive) to make sure that files are always accessible to collaborators.

## BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION

Our presentation of tips for successful collaboration would be incomplete if we did not mention possible barriers to success. We did not focus on barriers in our previous discussion because, from our perspective, those mentioned here did not play a role in our own cross-cultural collaborative efforts. Yet we introduce them here because they could surface in other collaborative relationships; in such circumstances, collaborators will have to work hard to overcome them. Such barriers include the negative impact of stereotypes (e.g., about team members and/or prospective participants in a research study); lack of clarity (e.g., about roles, responsibilities, and timelines); one or more team members’ resistance to change; one collaborator’s sense of superiority; issues that center on confidentiality, miscommunication, and disproportionate workloads; and too much “I” and not enough “we” (see <https://emergenetics.com/blog/12-warning-signs-of-poor-collaboration/>).

An obvious barrier to collaboration occurs when no effort to collaborate is made or when offers to collaborate are thwarted.



Some types of projects simply cannot be undertaken satisfactorily without the participation of different stakeholders who have divergent perspectives on a shared area of concern. For example, in some instructional settings (e.g., in tertiary institutions that endorse English-medium instruction in all subject areas), student learning cannot be fully supported when English for academic purposes (EAP) instructors and subject-area instructors do not collaborate to meet students' varying language- and content-learning needs (see Alhassan, Bora, and Abdalla 2022).

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we examined the notion of collaboration from the perspective of a cross-cultural partnership between the two authors. We identified particular attitudes and actions that led to our successful partnership. The lessons that we learned from our years-long collaboration are presented as a set of tips that other ELT professionals can adapt to their particular circumstances. It is our belief that the tips can be easily modified by ELT professionals who are involved in research-based cross-cultural collaboration (like ours) or who are involved in other forms of collaboration, including (1) teacher–teacher collaboration centered on teaching-related endeavors (e.g., team teaching, materials development, curriculum renewal, test development); (2) interdisciplinary collaboration; (3) collaboration resulting from formal institutional or organizational partnerships; and (4) the collaboration needed for effective professional-learning communities (DuFour et al. 2021). Many benefits accrue from collaboration in its various forms, including:

- the team-building that results from meaningful interactions;
- enhanced professional development;
- a joint sense of ownership;
- enriched personal experiences;

- broadened personal and professional perspectives, which lead to more tolerance and understanding;
- new colleagues and a broader professional network;
- improved relations between and among institutions and organizations;
- better-quality language programs;
- improved teaching and student learning; and
- contributions that advance the field of ELT, which would not be possible without some form of collaboration.

As part of our discussion in this article, we highlighted our own cross-cultural collaborative efforts by spotlighting actions and attitudes that we believe coalesced into a successful partnership that has now lasted numerous years (and that we imagine will continue well into the future). In our case, technology helped minimize the physical distance between us. Our experience has shown that collaboration can take place even when thousands of kilometers separate team members. Our experience has also demonstrated that the keys to successful collaboration are inextricably linked to trust, commitment, and understanding. We hope that the tips for successful collaboration presented here will assist other ELT professionals to nurture collaborative relationships of their own, whether or not they are cross-cultural and whether team members are working far apart from one another or in the same school setting.

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# APPENDIX

## **Tips for Successful Collaboration: From the Perspective of Teachers Collaborating on Teaching-Related Matters**

Here we examine tips for successful collaboration, introduced earlier in the article, from the perspective of practicing teachers who are collaborating with one or more teachers on practical teaching concerns (rather than on research or action research). For each tip, we illustrate its relevance to teacher–teacher collaboration and the good working relationships needed to accomplish team goals. In our discussion, we introduce a sampling of plausible teacher–teacher collaborative projects to bring tips to life. We assume that each tip can be adapted easily for collaborative efforts with different foci.

### **Tip 1: Cultivate a relationship of trust and respect.**

Cultivating a relationship of trust and respect is central to successful collaboration. Imagine a collaborative effort between/among teachers that involves updating a language-program exit or achievement test. The current test is used to assess what students have learned and whether they are ready to move to the next instructional level, are prepared to exit the language program, or need to repeat the course. The teacher–teacher collaborative effort to update the high-stakes test is motivated by recognized dissatisfaction with the current test among stakeholders (including students, parents, teachers, and administrators).

In projects like this one, collaborating teachers need to cultivate a relationship of trust and respect. To do so, teachers should be honest in all stages of their efforts. In preliminary discussions of test revisions, for instance, collaborating teachers should engage in frank discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of the current test. These discussions can be guided by asking questions such as:

Which parts of the current test:

- provide helpful information?
- are inadequate because, for example, they do not distinguish between strong and weak students?
- are no longer aligned with the current textbook, curriculum, and/or course goals?

Honest discussions about sensitive topics like these, with an open-mindedness to alternative interpretations, lead to fruitful collaborative relationships. Collaborating teachers should openly identify what they agree and disagree on. When disagreements surface, teachers should be prepared to present alternatives respectfully and work toward agreed-upon interpretations or decisions.

Equally important for a project of this nature is being truthful about the extent of one's experience with and/or expertise in test development. Partners do not need to have the same knowledge base for a successful partnership.

## **Tip 2: Assume similarities and differences.**

It is inevitable that collaborating teachers will notice similarities and differences, which may stem from cultural, educational, generational, attitudinal, and/or teaching backgrounds. Differences in any of these areas could influence working styles, perspectives, and interpretations. Effective working relationships develop when team members become aware of both similarities and differences; the latter, in fact, should be viewed as valuable because they can lead to important insights.

Imagine a team of teachers collaborating on a proposal for an e-conversation partner program for intermediate-proficiency students. Everyone on the team agrees that students need more practice speaking in English. But team members have different amounts of experience with and attitudes toward technology. An older team member believes that conversation partner programs should be face-to-face. Younger members think e-exchanges are a great idea; in fact, they think students' experiences with social media can be redirected to practice speaking in English. One team member questions the value of pairing two nonnative speakers for conversational exchange. Each team member's perspectives have some merit. Team members benefit from discovering their similarities and differences and using that knowledge to enhance collaborative efforts.

## **Tip 3: Get to know each other both personally and professionally.**

This tip seems universally relevant for teacher–teacher collaboration, regardless of the focus of teachers' efforts. It is sometimes the case that teachers who do not know each other well or at all—because they are recent hires, are teaching at different locations, or are teaching different hours and rarely see each other—are assigned by the department head to work on a project together. Collaborating teachers in such circumstances, as busy as they typically are, need to spend time getting to know each other by sharing personal stories and elaborating upon professional interests.

Consider teachers assigned to develop a content-based elective centered on the theme of plastic garbage. This team of teachers could share (1) personal concerns about plastic waste, (2) personal experiences that have involved raising consciousness about the topic with family and friends, and (3) professional experiences developing content-based courses. Such information sharing is useful for developing good working relationships and a joint commitment to the project.

## **Tip 4: Discover and build upon each other's talents and strengths.**

It makes total sense that collaborating teachers should build upon each other's talents and strengths in relation to their joint project. It is worth their time to discuss what types of contributions each member believes they can make to the collaborative effort. Equally important is identifying aspects of the project that some members may feel uncomfortable with.

Imagine a teacher–teacher collaborative project centered on the development of supplemental instructional materials to improve advanced language students' academic literacy preparedness. Early in the collaborative effort, the team can discuss their perceptions of academic literacy

preparedness and consider questions to identify each team member's talents and strengths. Such questions might include the following:

- Who has had experience teaching reading at advanced proficiency levels? At other levels?
- Who has previously designed supplemental materials for other teachers' use?
- Who is comfortable enough with technology to create attractive supplemental materials?
- Who feels prepared to keep team members on task?
- Who would be willing to organize the piloting of materials in different classrooms?

**Tip 5: Educate one another by sharing cultural knowledge, areas of expertise, and professional experiences as ways to contribute to each other's professional growth.**

This tip emphasizes the importance of ongoing professional development. Teachers experience professional growth when, for example, participating in workshops and attending webinars. When engaged in a collaborative effort, teachers learn from one another by sharing knowledge, expertise, and experiences. The actual focus of the collaborative effort is not as important as making a point of sharing insights and expertise that have a direct bearing on the joint project. In this way, participating teachers experience valuable professional growth.

**Tip 6: Give each other the time needed to think and then contribute ideas and interpretations thoughtfully.**

Few collaborative efforts are successful if the required steps are rushed. Collaborative projects are strengthened when all team members have time to contribute their individual perspectives, interpretations, and ideas. Reaching this point typically requires teacher–teacher teams to factor into their timelines individual “thinking time,” whatever the focus of their collaboration. The goal of every collaborative project should be quality work, not hurried work.

**Tip 7: Accept from the very start that “life can get in the way.”**

Teachers know, from experience, that disruptions to normal routines can and do occur. Collaborating teachers may need to assume some of the responsibilities of peers when life gets in the way (e.g., a peer becomes sick, has a family emergency, or is assigned to serve on an additional committee). During stressful times, collaborating teachers should support one another.

**Tip 8: Invest in the collaborative partnership by means of frequent and clear communication.**

It should come as no surprise that frequent and clear written and spoken communication (in-person and electronic) contributes to successful teacher–teacher collaboration. Consider two teachers who are trying to decide if they should plan a presentation for their colleagues on (1) a successful classroom activity that they created and piloted in their classes or (2) an interesting webinar that both of them attended. Initially, the pair needs to decide which

topic would be most valued by their peers. Then, through frequent and clear communication, they could plan the contents of their presentation (considering time constraints and target audience), create effective PowerPoint slides, and practice their presentation after deciding who will take the lead on which part. This collaborative effort, like others, will benefit from frequent and clear communication.

**Tip 9: Remember that “variety is the spice of life.” Thus, add variety to meetings if time and location permit.**

This tip applies to all forms of collaboration. “Variety” need not refer only to the time and location of group meetings. When teacher–teacher collaborators take turns bringing snacks, officiating, and serving as notetakers, they add variety to their meetings. The team could also vary the modality of meetings (in-person, virtual, or hybrid).

**Tip 10: Agree jointly upon ways to organize materials.**

Teacher–teacher collaboration benefits from explicit attention to the organization of materials collected and/or created. To facilitate easy retrieval of materials, collaborators should agree upon how to share (1) early drafts and associated materials among themselves (e.g., in Dropbox folders, labeled by lesson and date of draft) and (2) finalized materials with end-users (e.g., other teachers, students, administrators).