



# Teacher collaboration in Adult Language Schools in Catalonia: Teachers' perceptions and beliefs

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Para mis padres,  
*for always being my inspiration*

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## **Abstract**

This paper conducts a study that explores the beliefs and perceptions on collaboration that the languages teachers that work at Adult Language Schools (EOI) in Catalonia may have. The research is focused on a specific school in a working-class neighborhood near Barcelona, in Baix Llobregat region. The main aims are: on the one hand, to know teachers' opinions regarding their collaboration with peers; and, on the other hand, to get to know how they think this kind of collaboration impacts their results and their students' results, both positively and negatively. In order to do so, different research questions are proposed on the paper. Moreover, different literature on teacher collaboration, teacher cognition and teachers' thoughts on collaboration was reviewed in order to know more about the issue. And, finally, the specific data to answer these questions were collected at the school through the internship period of the Master's Degree in Secondary Education using two channels, which were questionnaires and personal interviews with some of the teachers.

**Keywords:** collaboration, languages teachers, benefits and drawbacks, perceptions and beliefs, Adult Language School (EOI)

## **Resum**

Aquest projecte explora les creences i percepcions sobre la col·laboració que poden tenir els professors de llengües que treballen a les escoles oficials d'idiomes (EOI) a Catalunya. La recerca se centra en una escola específica que es troba en un barri treballador prop de Barcelona, a la comarca del Baix Llobregat. Els objectius principals d'aquesta recerca són: d'una banda, aconseguir conèixer les opinions que tenen els professors sobre la seva col·laboració amb els seus companys; i, de l'altra, saber com pensen que aquest tipus de col·laboració influeix els propis resultats i els dels seus alumnes (positivament o negativa). Per a dur a terme aquest estudi i per tal de conèixer més sobre el tema, es plantegen diferents preguntes de recerca i, més a més, es presenten alguns articles sobre col·laboració entre professors, cognició i percepcions dels professors sobre el treball conjunt. Finalment, la informació específica per a respondre les preguntes va ser recollida durant el període de pràctiques a l'escola del Màster en Formació del Professorat de Secundària, a través de dos canals: uns qüestionaris i una entrevista personal amb alguns dels professors de l'escola.

**Paraules clau:** col·laboració, professors de llengües, avantatges i inconvenients, percepcions i creences, Escola Oficial d'Idiomes (EOI)

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## 1. Introduction

Much research has been carried out about teachers' perceptions over the years. In the present study, teachers' perspectives on teacher collaboration will be discussed. In order to do so, data coming from an Adult Language School in a working class neighborhood near Barcelona, in Baix Llobregat region, will be examined. From this point forward, this language school will be referred to as *EOI Llobregat*, which is a pseudonym used to protect the privacy of the school and the teachers, or simply *EOI*<sup>1</sup>, Catalan acronym for *Adult (Public) Language School*.

To be hired in this kind of school, teachers need to accomplish the same requirements as secondary school teachers (a Degree and a specialized Master's Degree oriented to teaching), but the students are older than the ones attending secondary schools, as they have to be over 14 to study in these schools (or over 16 if they want to attend a course of the language that is their first foreign language at their secondary school). This is the reason why the perceptions of these specific teachers are so interesting, as they might be very different from the ones of those teaching in primary and secondary schools.

The relevance of this research is related to the impact that teachers' feelings, beliefs and perceptions of their collaboration may have when it comes to the learning process of their students and also their own professional growth. During the internship period at this school, there were many opportunities of acknowledging how teachers of different languages work together and share contents and strategies in order to make their best and improve their teaching methods to find more inclusive and dynamic ways of learning for their students.

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<sup>1</sup> EOI stands for *Escola Oficial d'Idiomes*

Education at EOIs is not compulsory, and it is something that has to be taken into account because it can influence how students react to the lessons and the grade of engagement they can reach; compulsory education tends to make students uncomfortable because they are not studying what they really want to. On the other hand, it cannot be forgotten that, even if EOIs provide students with voluntary language courses, some of them are actually “forced” to do them, particularly the English ones, as they may need a specific English level for their job or to be promoted.

When it comes to teachers’ perceptions, it is also important to bear in mind how personal relationships among peers can influence their professional lives; humans are all social beings and personal relations cannot be taken for granted. Teachers have their opinions on their own personal relations with their peers and it is interesting to inquire into their beliefs and perceptions regarding this issue.

Therefore, the broader objective of this project is to discuss teachers’ perceptions and beliefs on how collaboration affects (positively and negatively) their work at the school. And, more specifically, to find a way to reveal whether EOI teachers like or dislike collaboration, to what extent and how they think it can influence their own results and also their students’.

## 2. State of the art

After contextualizing this research, different dimensions of teacher collaboration will be addressed in order to achieve the main goal of the paper: to know more about teachers’ thoughts on teacher collaboration at EOI Llobregat. In this chapter, three differentiated content blocks will be dealt with: firstly, an overall vision of teacher collaboration; secondly, teachers’ perceptions and beliefs; and, finally, discuss the particular case that was mentioned before and which has been the main inspiration for this research.

## 2.1. Teacher collaboration

Teacher collaboration is the broader dimension of the topic that will be addressed, which is *teachers' perceptions and beliefs on their collaboration with peers*. It is remarkable that many studies have been carried out on this issue, since it has always been a matter of interest for those who wanted to know more about how teachers work together and how it affects other fields of their jobs. But, first, it would be a nice idea to start defining what teacher collaboration is and how it can influence students and teachers.

Teacher collaboration comprehends different practices, from working together at the same school and sharing materials or strategies to teaching in the same class (co-teaching). Furthermore, according to Schleifer et al. (2017) "*Collaboration* includes a broad category of practices, often used in conjunction with other school improvement efforts. It is not one specific intervention whose effects can be neatly isolated". This indicates that some features of teachers' work are usually forgotten, because collaboration is an important part of their careers but is hardly ever mentioned. Additionally, the workload that collaboration entails is not commonly addressed, as it is believed that collaboration is limited to working at the school. Teachers who collaborate need to agree on how they want to develop their lessons and strategies, and also on how they will assess their students. Schleifer et al. (2017) emphasize that collaboration is not an isolated practice that can be individually used, because it depends on the teachers and the school as much as they depend on collaboration itself: they are interconnected. However, different perspectives on teacher collaboration can be found:

On the one hand, it is believed that collaboration helps teachers, their students and the system (in general) to get an improved version of the learning process (Little, 1987) as students have more opportunities for learning and teachers can polish their

methods. When teachers work together, they can help each other understand better their students' learning processes. Moreover, it is important that students see this way of collaborative working in official institutions such as the school (even if it is not compulsory education), because they know that they will learn about some social standards that they will need them for their personal and professional lives. From a Vygotskian perspective, there is always a socio-cultural influence in everything that humans learn, particularly in languages. In this sense, seeing how teachers work together to achieve the goal of providing a more inclusive way of teaching can also help students copy teachers' behaviors and boost their collaborative work in class as students. In addition, although a case study by Vangrieken et al. (2015) has revealed that the most important and relevant benefits of teacher collaboration can be found at teacher level (reduction of anxiety levels while teaching, more motivation, increase of the communication levels, and so on), students also showed a better understanding of the contents they were provided with by the teachers who had collaborated. In fact, this shows the impact that teacher collaboration may have on students.

On the other hand, it is also to remember that collaboration is not always a successful practice (Clement & Van den Berghe, 2000). Once again, the ones that receive the highest impact are the teachers, not the students. The main problem that may arrive when teachers work together is that they might become too competitive when they collaborate and that situation may lead to conflicts, such as trying to trample other teachers in order to get the attention of superiors (the principal or the education inspector, for example) or even being unable to deal with the workload that collaboration may entail (Clement & Van den Berghe, 2000). As well as that, teacher collaboration can be extremely time-consuming and it depends on the school schedule and the teacher council itself. Schools with fewer teachers may have more opportunities

for sharing and working collaboratively, but it can also trigger the differences among those ones who are not friends and prefer not to work together.

## 2.2. Teachers' cognition

Before addressing the topic of teachers' opinions on their collaboration, it is necessary to discuss language teachers' cognition further. To do so, the focus will be put on an interview in which Marilisa Birello (PhD UAB) asks Simon Borg (a TESOL Professor at the University of Leeds) different questions about teacher cognition.

According to Borg (as interviewed in Birello, 2012), this approach to teachers perspectives and beliefs has been very fruitful and meaningful. Many years ago, researchers had their focus on teachers behaviors in order to copy and standardize the practices that reportedly worked, but they finally realized that it was a rough view. Therefore, it was stated that teachers have their own thoughts and ways of acting and this is what shapes teachers' beliefs and practices.

There are two types of beliefs: core and peripheral beliefs. The first ones are firmer, and the second ones are less stable. Tensions may happen between these two kinds of beliefs. These beliefs can affect the way teachers behave and work, and they have to be taken into account when analyzing their practices. This way of examining teachers' beliefs has not been really exploited (Borg in Birello, 2012), but it will be very important for the analysis of the results of this research because it will help understand teachers' beliefs.

## 2.3. What are teachers' perceptions and beliefs of teacher collaboration?

Different aspects of teacher collaboration have been analyzed, from the most general one to the most specific one. In this section, a case study carried out by Tichenor & Tichenor (2019) will be discussed at some length. This research is based on the perceptions of teacher collaboration that teachers in two elementary schools in the

US had, and it has been an inspiration and the basis of this present study, as mentioned before.

In their study, Tichenor & Tichenor (2019) state that teachers do not work on their own, as this is not an isolated job. Based on that, they carry out a research about elementary school teachers to know more about their beliefs and perspectives. The method is very clear: teachers from two different schools are asked about their opinion on their collaboration with their peers, always related to the professional field. The first school had 600 K-5 students and, the second one, 900. There were three types of questions: first, 26 closed-ended questions to know the frequency of their participation in collaborative work during the academic year. The possible answers were “daily”, “weekly”, “monthly”, “rarely” and “never” and they ranged from professional dialogue to planning activities together; second, 26 closed-ended questions to ask how beneficial teachers perceived those same activities. The possible answers were “very beneficial”, “somewhat beneficial”, “a little beneficial” and “not at all beneficial”. ; and last, four open-ended questions related to the benefits and drawbacks of teacher collaboration. These questions were: “What do you think is the most important benefit of teacher collaboration?”, “What do you think is the biggest barrier to teacher collaboration?”, “What collaborative activities would you want to increase?” and “What suggestions do you have that would improve teacher collaboration?” (Tichenor & Tichenor, 2019).

After the first two sets of questions, the mismatch between what teachers thought and what they actually did was analyzed and led to some conclusions. 14 of the 26 collaborative activities proposed showed an over 50% mismatch, being “take part in professional development that benefits your teaching” the activity with the greatest gap, as 97.2% of the teachers perceived it as very or somewhat beneficial but only 2.8% of them reported participating daily or weekly in it. According to the results, one of the

most relevant conclusions is that even if some collaborative activities are thought to be significantly useful for teachers, they rarely have the opportunity to perform them, whose reasons are also developed in the open-ended questions (Tichenor & Tichenor, 2019).

As regards their answers to the four open-ended questions, they were also really interesting in order to understand what was not working and why the mismatch was so meaningful in some activities. Teachers argued that collaboration helps them share their points of view and learn from each other, but also mentioned that the main obstacle to collaborative work is the fact of not having enough time to implement this kind of activities. In addition, they commented that they would like to practice other activities more regularly, such as sharing different strategies for planning their lessons and peer observation. As for the suggestions, many of them added that they would appreciate having the opportunity and more space to work together (Tichenor & Tichenor, 2019).

Be that as it may, the study concluded that “Teachers overwhelmingly responded that lack of time was the single largest barrier to greater teacher collaboration . . . However, simply providing more time in the school for collaboration is not enough” (Tichenor & Tichenor, 2019: 59-60) even though the authors admit that this research has the major limitation of the short amount of teachers who participated in it.

#### 2.4. Research questions

The research questions are presented in this section. The ones showed in the case study by Tichenor & Tichenor (2019) have been an inspiration for the ones in this research, but they have been adapted to the EOI context. First, the main research question (RQ1) can be found. And, after, four more specific research questions (RQ1.1 and RQ1.2 and two more definite questions that follow from the last one, RQ1.2.1 and RQ1.2.2). These are the questions that drive this particular case study:

RQ1: What are EOI teachers' perceptions and beliefs about teacher collaboration?

RQ1.1: In which areas<sup>2</sup> do teachers think that this kind of collaboration is more necessary and how often do they consider this should be implemented?

RQ1.2: According to EOI teachers' perceptions and beliefs, what are the major benefits and drawbacks of collaboration?

RQ1.2.1: What do EOI teachers think in relation to the possible reinforcement of professional relationships among colleagues?

RQ1.2.2: How do EOI teachers think their collaboration affects students' learning?

### 3. Research methodology and method

#### 3.1. Participants

This school is a particular one, as it is very small: there are just ten teachers, so it means that the questionnaire was sent to all the teachers that work at this school. This was a positive thing, because managing to personally talk with all of them before sending the survey was easy and that favored the fact that they all agreed to participate in the study by answering the 30 closed-ended questions in Appendix 1, as they felt comfortable with the method. There were two French teachers teaching from A1 to B2, two German teachers teaching from A1 to B2 and four English teachers teaching from A1 to C1, including some members of the school management team (program administrator, school clerk and coordinator). 75% of the teachers were female (six of them) and the rest (two of them, 25%) were male teachers.

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, the concept of *areas* will include different fields, such as *assessment, school methodology, activities, materials, tasks...*

### 3.2. Instruments

As mentioned before, this paper replicates the case study research by Tichenor & Tichenor (2019), which has been adapted to the EOI needs and peculiarities. This study included 56 questions that were adapted for this research and were finally shrunk, resulting in 36 questions.

The questionnaire was sent (via WHATSAPP) to the ten teachers and eight of them answered. This questionnaire (Google Forms) can be found in Appendix 1.

Fifteen closed-ended questions were used to know how often teachers performed some specific collaborative activities at the school; they had to choose from 1 to 5 (meaning “Never”- “Daily”, this will be explained in section 4.1). After that, they were asked fifteen more closed-ended questions about how beneficial they thought the collaborative activities addressed before were; again, they had to choose from 1 to 5 but, in this case, meaning “Very beneficial”- “Not at all beneficial”, this will be explained in section 4.2. Lastly, a personal interview with some of them was held in order to know more about their perceptions and beliefs.

The questionnaire was peer reviewed (by a student-teacher who did his internship at the same school) before sending the link to the teachers. In addition, the original questionnaire was written in English, but it was translated into Catalan for all the teachers to understand and be able to precisely answer to the questions, as some of them do not speak a word of English (because they teach other languages) but they all speak Catalan, even if some of them come from other countries, such as Argentina and Brazil or other regions of Spain, like the Basque Country.

Furthermore, five of them agreed to do a personal interview in order to talk more about their collaboration at the school, but just three of them were finally interviewed due to their availability and their schedules (the questions asked in this structured

interview can be found in Appendix 2). These questions were focused on different aspects of their teaching collaboration, such as their opinion on collaboration itself, the advantages and disadvantages that they considered collaboration brings, the areas in which they think collaboration is more useful and why, their relation with other teachers and how it affects collaboration and coexistence or the relation between teacher collaboration and students' outcomes.

### 3.3. Ethical issues

All the teachers that participated in this research did it on their own accord. Each teacher was asked individually before sending the questionnaire to all of them. In addition, the principal of the school allowed the use of this instrument and she was the one in charge of sending the link to the rest of the teachers.

The real name of the school has been hidden (EOI Llobregat) and the name of the teachers are not going to be shared in this study. Instead, the ones that participated in the personal interview will be addressed as Teacher 1 (T1), Teacher 2 (T2) and Teacher 3 (T3). They all were informed that both the questionnaire and the interview were anonymous.

### 3.4. Data collected

The data for this research were collected during three weeks of the second internship period at EOI Llobregat (Barcelona) in April 2021. Two different methods were used in order to gather the information needed to answer the research questions: first, the questionnaire and, second, the personal interview in which some teachers expanded on their perspectives of collaboration. A third source of information has been used, even if it is not about official questions and answers, but it has been very revealing. It is the informal conversations carried out during the internship period, as teachers were eager to talk about their former experience and their careers. Some of

them commented on their years of working at EOI and other schools (such as high schools, private schools and so on) and some of them just enlarged on their work at EOIs, but absolutely all of them wanted to talk about it.

**Table 1.** Data collected at EOI Llobregat.

DATA SET	TYPE OF DATA	INSTRUMENT	PARTICIPANTS	Total number of questions or words
Data set A	Quantitative	Questionnaire (Google Forms)	8 teachers	30 closed-ended questions
Data set B	Conversational (Qualitative)	Structured individual interviews	3 teachers	Two YES/NO questions + four referential questions. Approximately 1,500 words
Data set C	Ethnographic data	Notes on informal conversations during the internship period	10 teachers	Approximately 500 words

#### 4. Results of the data collection

In this section, the results given by all the data collected will be objectively presented in order to show what can be found in the different dimensions of this study: frequency of collaboration, teachers' perceptions and beliefs on the benefits (or drawbacks) of collaboration and the mismatch between the two of them.

##### 4.1. Questionnaire: frequency of collaboration

**Table 2.** Teacher responses in relation to frequency. Adapted from a case study by Tichenor & Tichenor (2019).

How often did you participate in each collaborative activity during the past academic year?	Percent of teachers who responded <i>“Daily, Weekly or</i>	Percent of teachers who responded <i>“Rarely or</i>

	<i>Often</i>	<i>Never</i>
<i>Discuss and secure new ideas and useful teaching tips from colleagues</i>	100	0
<i>Design tools for assessing student progress</i>	100	0
<i>Analyze your teaching practices and outcomes</i>	87.5	12.5
<i>Exchange teaching materials with colleagues</i>	87.5	12.5
<i>Discuss and plan how to help students achieve at higher levels</i>	87.5	12.5
<i>Examine and discuss student work</i>	87.5	12.5
<i>Engage in dialogue/professional conversations with your colleagues on how to improve your teaching</i>	75	25
<i>Participate in joint decision making on grade-level issues</i>	75	25
<i>Engage in discussion about the learning development of specific students</i>	62.5	37.5
<i>Discuss professional literature with other teachers (books, journals, articles, etc.)</i>	62.5	37.5
<i>Work with teachers on extracurricular activity planning</i>	62.5	37.5
<i>Observe other teachers' classes and provide feedback</i>	62.5	37.5
<i>Develop curriculum or some part of the curriculum</i>	50	50
<i>Teach jointly as a team in the same class (co-teaching)</i>	25	75
<i>Engage in collaborative research on a topic of interest to you professionally</i>	25	75

Teachers were asked how often they were engaged in different collaborative activities during the academic year. They had to choose in a range from 1 to 5, in which 1 was “never”; 2, “rarely or hardly ever”; 3, “often”; 4, “weekly”; and 5, “daily”. The table above (table 2) illustrates their responses to this question.

As showed in table 2, 100% of the respondents said that they daily, weekly or often engaged in activities like *Discuss and secure new ideas and useful teaching tips*

*from colleagues and Design tools for assessing student progress.* It is necessary to remark the importance of the frequency with which they perform these activities, because teachers at other schools do not usually have the opportunity that EOI Llobregat teachers have to enroll in this kind of collaborative work. It is true that this is not a high school, but some teachers have commented on the fact that other EOIs do not work as EOI Llobregat, so it is not only a matter of type of schools. In addition, it is to mention that EOI Llobregat teachers have added that they do not have scheduled lessons on Fridays, as other EOIs, but what makes them different is that they tend to go to the school from 10 to 15 and work there instead of working from home. They have also announced that this practice promotes collaborative working and bonding, as they make the most of their time there and usually share some strategies and new resources for teaching and assessing their students' progress, particularly when they teach the same language.

In general, most teachers (70%) agreed that they had the chance to collaborate daily, weekly or often, but there are also some activities that could not be frequently performed. 50% or less of the teachers regularly participated in three of the activities: *Develop curriculum or some part of the curriculum* (50%), *Teach jointly as a team in the same class (co-teaching)* (25%) and *Engage in collaborative research on a topic of interest to you professionally* (25%). Of these fifteen activities, the ones with the smallest percentage of regular participation were *Teach jointly as a team in the same class (co-teaching)* and *Engage in collaborative research on a topic of interest to you professionally*. Teachers in these language schools do not usually coteach as much as in secondary schools since students explicitly go to the EOI just to learn languages and there is no chance to teach other subjects, such as Science or History in English.

#### 4.2. Questionnaire: perceived benefits or drawbacks

**Table 3.** Teacher responses in relation to the effectiveness of collaborative activities. Adapted from a case study by Tichenor & Tichenor (2019).

How beneficial is this collaborative activity?	Percent of teachers who responded <i>“Very Beneficial Quite Beneficial or Beneficial”</i>	Percent of teachers who responded <i>“A Little or Not At All Beneficial”</i>
<i>Discuss and secure new ideas and useful teaching tips from colleagues</i>	100	0
<i>Design tools for assessing student progress</i>	100	0
<i>Analyze your teaching practices and outcomes</i>	100	0
<i>Discuss and plan how to help students achieve at higher levels</i>	100	0
<i>Engage in dialogue/professional conversations with your colleagues on how to improve your teaching</i>	100	0
<i>Participate in joint decision making on grade-level issues</i>	100	0
<i>Discuss professional literature with other teachers (books, journals, articles, etc.)</i>	100	0
<i>Develop curriculum or some part of the curriculum</i>	100	0
<i>Teach jointly as a team in the same class (co-teaching)</i>	100	0
<i>Examine and discuss student work</i>	100	0
<i>Exchange teaching materials with colleagues</i>	87.5	12.5
<i>Engage in discussion about the learning development of specific students</i>	87.5	12.5
<i>Work with teachers on extracurricular activity planning</i>	87.5	12.5
<i>Observe other teachers' classes and provide feedback</i>	87.5	12.5
<i>Engage in collaborative research on a topic of interest to you professionally</i>	87.5	12.5

In the same questionnaire, teachers were asked about how beneficial or detrimental they thought these different collaborative activities were. They had to choose in a range from 1 to 5, in which 1 was “not at all beneficial”; 2, “a little

beneficial”; 3, “beneficial”; 4, “quite beneficial”; and 5, “very beneficial”. The table above (table 3) illustrates their responses to this question.

Teachers perceived 66.67% (ten out of fifteen) of the activities as very beneficial, quite beneficial or beneficial. Also, the other five activities were considered beneficial by 87% of the teachers (seven out of eight teachers) and a little beneficial or not at all beneficial by one of them (12.5%). In general, most teachers considered that all the activities had benefits for them.

This dimension of this part of the questionnaire is more conclusive than the former one, as it is evident that teachers’ perceptions on how they consider these collaborative activities go beyond what they really practice. It is not necessary for them to perform the activities in order to know that they might be beneficial for their work and to obtain good outcomes, and there is a fact that cannot be forgotten: teachers were asked about how often they collaborated during this academic year, but they might have used these activities before, at some point of their careers. Most of them have been working for more than five years; some of them have experienced working in secondary public and private schools too and know the differences first-hand (information retrieved from informal conversations at the school during the internship period)

#### 4.3. Mismatch

In order to find out about the gap between what they consider beneficial and what they actually practice, the mismatch between these two categories of questions will be shown in table 4.

**Table 4.** Mismatch between teachers’ perceived benefit and teachers’ frequency of participation. Adapted from a case study by Tichenor & Tichenor (2019).

	Percent of teachers who responded <i>“Very Beneficial Quite Beneficial or Beneficial”</i>	Percent of teachers who responded <i>“Daily, Weekly or Often”</i>	Mismatch: regularly participated - considered beneficial
<i>Teach jointly as a team in the same class (co-teaching)</i>	100	25	75
<i>Engage in collaborative research on a topic of interest to you professionally</i>	87.5	25	62.5
<i>Develop curriculum or some part of the curriculum</i>	100	50	50
<i>Discuss professional literature with other teachers (books, journals, articles, etc.)</i>	100	62.5	37.5
<i>Engage in dialogue/professional conversations with your colleagues on how to improve your teaching</i>	100	75	25
<i>Participate in joint decision making on grade-level issues</i>	100	75	25
<i>Engage in discussion about the learning development of specific students</i>	87.5	62.5	25
<i>Work with teachers on extracurricular activity planning</i>	87.5	62.5	25
<i>Observe other teachers' classes and provide feedback</i>	87.5	62.5	25
<i>Analyze your teaching practices and outcomes</i>	100	87.5	12.5
<i>Discuss and plan how to help students achieve at higher levels</i>	100	87.5	12.5
<i>Examine and discuss student work</i>	100	87.5	12.5
<i>Discuss and secure new ideas and useful teaching tips from colleagues</i>	100	100	0
<i>Design tools for assessing student progress</i>	100	100	0
<i>Exchange teaching materials with colleagues</i>	87.5	87.5	0

In general, most categories did not show a relevant mismatch, in comparison to what happened in the study by Tichenor & Tichenor (2019). In fact, three of them illustrated no mismatch (*Discuss and secure new ideas and useful teaching tips from colleagues*, *Design tools for assessing student progress* and *Exchange teaching*

*materials with colleagues)* and nine more showed less than 50% mismatch, between 12.5% and 37.5%. Only three of them had a  $\geq 50\%$  result: *Develop curriculum or some part of the curriculum* (50%), *Engage in collaborative research on a topic of interest to you professionally* (62.5%) and *Teach jointly as a team in the same class (co-teaching)* (75%).

Notwithstanding, the range of the mismatches is not as remarkable as in the original study, given that EOI Llobregat teachers have more space for working and collaborating than other schools.

#### 4.4. Structured interviews: conversational data

The last question in this form was *Would you like to do a personal interview in order to talk more about teacher collaboration?* Five teachers out of eight (62.5%) answered that they were keen to do the interview, and three of them (33.5%) were finally interviewed one week after answering the questionnaire, due to their availability. As mentioned before, they will be referred to as T1, T2 and T3 from this point forward.

The questions of this interview were carefully prepared after analyzing the results of the questionnaire for them to be suitable to respond the research questions. The interview was not recorded; the answers that the teachers gave to these questions are not literally reproduced in this section, but their main messages are.

Teachers were asked two yes/ no questions:

- a) *Do you think that the personal relationship among teachers affects (positively or negatively) their professional relationship and the development of school tasks and teacher collaboration?*

All teachers answered “yes, definitely” to this question. They all agreed that having a good personal relationship with your peers is essential to achieve an

appropriate working environment. One of them (T3) added that a relaxed working environment is also the foundations of good teacher collaboration.

*b) Do you think this kind of collaboration helps students learn more or not really?*

Two of the three teachers (T2 and T3) answered “yes” and just one said “it depends” (T1). This last teacher added that collaborating with teachers who teach the same levels is better, but certainly considers collaboration as a good strategy. T2 mentioned that having a good relationship with other teachers and collaborating with them makes everything easier for teachers to follow their students’ development and to adapt teachers’ materials and strategies to the students and their needs.

After that, there were four other questions in which they could expand:

*c) In which areas do you think it is more important to be coordinated and work together? Why?*

T1: Assessment, tasks and strategies.

T2: Assessment, tasks, general methodology of the school, language methodology and integration of the materials.

T3: Assessment, tasks and general methodology of the school.

All teachers mentioned assessment and tasks. It is also related to the school methodology, as the educational project of this school is task-based. T2 and T3 mentioned the school methodology as something that turns essential for collaboration. T2 mentioned the language methodology and the integration of the materials, as she thinks that getting to work with peers that teach the same language can help teachers engage more professionally and achieve new goals related to the integration of materials, which she considers very important for the cohesion of the lessons.

*d) What do you think should be changed in this school regarding collaborations?*

*Do you think every teacher is involved with the school?*

T1: There should be time and space during the week (like in high schools) to work together. There is no real opportunity and this can affect bonding and personal relations. Everyone is involved with the school but maybe not too much with the other teachers.

T2: There should be more collaboration within the departments (languages). There is some kind of *artificial collaboration*, because the school educational project explicitly says that teachers need to collaborate but they do not really happen to do it and the working environment is not as enriching as it should. The school management team should learn when to separate their administrative tasks from their teaching work and organize everything in a different way. There is a hierarchy that creates a difficult relationship among teachers.

T3: Nothing. This school is perfect when it comes to collaboration. Everyone is involved with the school just as much as they can and want to.

T1 and T2 agree that some things have to be changed at the school and that the lack of time to do collaborative activities is key. T2 insists on the role of the school management team, which seems to be too detached from the rest of the staff. On the other hand, T3 thinks that the method of the school is perfect and would change nothing about it.

*e) This school only has ten teachers. Do you think this is a conditioning factor (is it positive or negative?) What are the consequences of this?*

T1: When schools are smaller, personal relations are better, but here there is only one teacher per level and that makes it a bit more difficult and triggers a feeling of

loneliness. Perhaps it is because of the pandemic, but this academic year has been very boring and dull concerning personal relationships with peers.

T2: Teacher collaboration is usually easier when schools are smaller, but it is not the case of this school because tensions are always on the rise. This academic year has been marked by loneliness and the fear of the virus.

T3: It may be really enriching, but having fewer colleagues means that once you have a problem with one of them, you just have other eight people to be comfortable with. When the school is bigger, you have more opportunities to be friends with peers because you have more options to choose from. Loneliness has been a reality this year.

All teachers agreed that collaboration in smaller schools could be very enriching. T1 said that, even though the school is small, it is also difficult to make friends because there is just one teacher per level. T2 insisted on the importance of the working environment. T3, however, concluded that smaller schools may be difficult to handle because the fewer peers you have, the fewer opportunities you have to feel comfortable and connect with someone. They all mentioned a feeling of loneliness that they have experienced this academic year, which may have been created or intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic.

*f) Could you name some advantages and disadvantages of teacher collaboration?*

T1: Advantages→ We gain new strategies and materials. It can foster personal relations. If a peer presents something that you have already done as something great, you feel awarded and think that what you have been doing is something that others would like to put into practice, so it feels good.

Disadvantages→ If teachers that collaborate have personal problems, it can be very stressful. In addition, the biggest barrier to teacher collaboration is the lack of time

to work together; teachers are always running out of time. It is also difficult to work with peers that teach different levels

T2: Advantages→ You can learn new ideas and strategies. It can foster self-confidence and self-esteem because you feel your peers' support; that feeling of not being alone to face the difficulties is great.

Disadvantages → It can trigger personal problems.

T3: Advantages→ If everyone wants to participate, everything works better: behaviors, strategies, assessment, tools... But the point is that they need to be engaged with collaboration and really mean to do it because it will never fully work if they do not.

Disadvantages→ Collaboration can trigger personal problems. Some teachers do not feel comfortable with sharing their work and they may end up tired of working and even with psychological problems. People always forget about the school management team, but it is also a huge workload for them to assure that teacher collaboration works.

In the end, they mentioned different dimensions of teacher collaboration, such as the benefits (for teachers and students) and drawbacks, most of them focused on the problems that personal relationships among teachers may create. Finally, they all agreed that collaboration has always had more benefits than drawbacks, even if these disadvantages can affect the way they work or their own outcomes as teachers.

## 5. Discussion

As regards teacher collaboration as a general concept, it is evidenced that, as Schleifer et al. (2017) mentioned, it is not just one isolated category, but it includes a large amount of different practices that need to work together in order to acquire an improved version of teaching. The findings have shown that this improved teaching

process can help not only teachers, but also their students have better results and more opportunities for learning, as Little (1987) had already stated. This is because collaboration gives teachers the opportunity to share and compare materials, resources and strategies whose main aim is to achieve a more comprehensible way of teaching; if they work together and accomplish this objective, students will benefit from a type of teaching that is basically focused on their understanding. In spite of the impact that teacher collaboration may have on students, it is evident that the most relevant effects are found at teacher level, as stated by Vangrieken et al. (2015). Teachers in this research have mentioned that collaboration usually helps them feel accompanied and that reduces their stress and anxiety, as their self-confidence is boosted.

However, as seen before, it is to remember that collaboration may have a dark side because it is not always a successful practice, as mentioned by Clement & Van den Berghe (2000). This is mostly due to the personal relations among teachers: it is hard to work with peers who do not want to share their work or just feel uncomfortable with working with the others because they feel more secure working on their own. In addition, other personal problems can arise if teachers feel forced to work with others and this situation can slow down and hamper the process of collaboration instead of making everything easier for teachers. Collaboration needs to be voluntary to be successful.

As showed in the analysis, teachers have very concrete and personal perceptions and beliefs on their collaboration with peers. The answers in the second part of the questionnaire are more homogeneous, as most of them agree that the collaborative activities were beneficial. However, in relation to their individual experience (part 1 of the questionnaire and personal interviews), the answers are unlike. This is related to the fact that, as Borg (as interviewed in Birello, 2012) mentioned, teachers have two

types of beliefs: core beliefs (firmer) and peripheral beliefs (less stable). Core beliefs show that their perspectives and expectations about teacher collaboration are, in general, positive and mostly enriching; on the other hand, peripheral beliefs are those ones that make teachers realize that, when it comes to their own experience, it is necessary to take more factors into account and bear in mind the negative side that collaboration may have.

In the concrete case of this school, the results show teachers' perceptions and beliefs can differ depending on many factors, such as the characteristics of the school and its students or even the country. In the case study research by Tichenor & Tichenor (2019), teachers from an elementary school in the US answered the questions used in this present research (and some more) but their answers were not in the same line as the ones that have been presented in this paper.

As far as the frequency of doing these activities is concerned, it is noteworthy that teachers argued that they really have opportunities to perform them, although they are still not as many as they would like to have. This school is peculiar because, as seen before, teachers usually work at the school on Fridays while teachers from other schools work from home, but it should be more room for them to collaborate during those hours. However, there is an activity that they do not really use: coteaching. Perhaps it is because it is just a language school and there are no other subjects, but they could also start new projects that included coteaching the same language; it would be a great opportunity to give students more personalized and specific feedback.

In respect of teachers' perceptions on how beneficial these activities are, it is remarkable that most teachers considered that all the activities had benefits for them. The gap between what they perceived as beneficial and what they actually practice is

not significant, so it is clear that teachers at this school veritably have the opportunity to collaborate.

During the internship period, most of these activities were put into practice by the teachers, both in their lessons and in the staff meetings that usually took place on Fridays. This year has been conditioned by Covid-19, so some of the meetings were online in order to follow the health recommendations. Despite that, all teachers participated in the meetings and also worked together via Zoom. This says a lot about this school and its teachers, because they are engaged with their work and know how the benefits of collaboration.

Conclusively, having analyzed what happens with teachers at this school, how they work together and knowing their perceptions and beliefs about their collaboration with peers makes it easier to understand how their lessons actually function. The educational project of the school is task-based and all teachers stick to it and try to use it as their main guide, which is something that helps them engage in collaboration and encourages them to share strategies and methods. In addition, EOI Llobregat is a unique school and it is also widely known in the region, even by teachers who have never taught there, as they know each other from working at other schools and so on. Inclusive and innovative task-based education is the essence of the school.

## 6. Conclusions

In this research, different points of view on teacher collaboration have been presented. However different, most of them go in the same direction. The answers that the teachers gave to the questions on Google Forms have been revealing for the study of their perceptions. As mentioned before, there are two main differences between this school and the ones in which the original study was carried out: the students attending courses at EOI Llobregat are (mostly) adults and it is not compulsory education, and it

can also affect how teachers see their students and their work in general. This is the reason why the results of this questionnaire differ from the answers to questions in the original study.

In this specific case, it is to highlight that EOI Llobregat is a very *young* and innovative school (it was founded in 2011), so most teachers agreed that many beneficial activities for collaboration are often developed and promoted, as we can see in the results of the first part of the questionnaire, in which teachers had to indicate how often they performed the collaborative activities mentioned and analyzed in sections 4 and 5.

When it comes to this study, five were the research questions that were used from the very beginning to know more about the issue and all of them have been successfully answered.

First of all, the general research question, which referred to teachers' overall perceptions and beliefs about their collaboration with peers. Teachers responded that they found that collaboration is mostly beneficial, but it is also to highlight that some drawbacks related to personal relations and problems were mentioned by them. Despite that, teachers concluded that collaborating with colleagues has more benefits than drawbacks.

The next question to answer was more specific and it followed from the former one; it focused on the areas in which teachers think collaboration is more necessary and how often they consider collaboration should be used. All teachers mentioned “assessment”, and two out of three acknowledged “school methodology” as something essential. This provides confirmatory evidence that working together in order to achieve general methods of assessing and having the school methodology in mind seem to be crucial for a successful collaboration. And this is because this school has a task-based

program, in which tasks are the basis of the lessons. Moreover, teachers also cited “integration of materials”, “tasks” and “language methodology”. The fact that tasks are the foundations of the classes means that materials and skills have to be integrated for the lessons and units to be coherent and cohesive. Language methodology is also important because teachers of the same language can support each other and find common strategies more easily than teachers of different languages.

The third question followed from RQ1, too, and it focused on teachers' opinions on benefits and drawbacks of collaboration. When it comes to the benefits, the main conclusions are that it may foster personal relations, self-confidence and self-esteem. Teachers also argued that when they work together, there can be good outcomes for them and for their students, as they can compare and learn from other teachers' activities and methods. Collaboration makes teachers feel they are part of something bigger and it is very rewarding. On the other hand, the main drawbacks mentioned were that it can be really exhausting and it is sometimes a huge workload. Some teachers do not want to share their methods and feel uncomfortable with working with others. In addition, it can trigger personal problems and being in a small school intensifies that feeling.

Two more specific questions followed from RQ1.2. The first one contemplated if EOI teachers think collaboration can reinforce professional relations among colleagues. In this case, the conclusions were in the same line: there is always a good part, but also a negative one. On the one hand, teachers agreed that it can work amazingly and contribute to obtaining great outcomes because teachers can reinforce their relationship and support each other. Also, working with teachers of the same levels is easier and it can be very enriching (although it is not the case of this school because it is very small and there is not more than one teacher per level), but one can find a friend

in a teacher of other language, too. On the other hand, collaboration can end with teachers' relationships if they do not happen to be compatible and some teachers may feel uncomfortable with working with others, so collaboration needs to be a voluntary practice to be successful. Moreover, it is necessary to bear in mind that, when the relationship between the school management teams and the rest of the teachers becomes indifferent, mechanical and based on hierarchies, collaboration does not work as it should; this team is also formed by teachers and behaviors should be as normal and relaxed as possible. There cannot be a strongly marked hierarchy when it comes to the different roles.

The last question also followed from RQ1.2 and it considered if teachers thought collaboration affects their students' learning. In general, teacher collaboration is believed to be beneficial for students. Teachers collaborate and share assessing tools, materials, videos, strategies, and so on. All of this can be helpful for students to learn more and better. According to these teachers, collaboration among teachers is mostly (or always) good for students.

As a final consideration for this research, it is to say that collaboration is mostly beneficial for teachers and students, as teachers also learn while teaching and collaborating with others. The findings in this research have helped conclude that teachers need to feel comfortable in order to successfully collaborate. This would be a main recommendation for teachers and the schools, as the management teams could work on that.

This study has a major limitation, as it is an exploratory study with eight participants from one single EOI and its results cannot be generalized. However, the main objective of the study was to serve as an instrument for self-development as teachers. In this sense, it has helped observe the lessons and the relations among

teachers in a systematic way; it has been revealing, because collaboration and the work behind it sound now more familiar to me. This research could also be useful for other teachers and schools but, for future research on EOI teachers' perceptions and beliefs, a bigger sample formed by more teachers that work at different EOIs could be used in order to obtain a more significant sample.

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## 8. Appendices

### 8.1. Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Apartat 1: 15 preguntes. AMB QUINA FREQÜÈNCIA participeu en cada activitat col·laborativa durant aquest any acadèmic?

1. Mantenir converses professionals amb els vostres companys sobre com millorar els vostres ensenyaments i decidir la selecció de recursos instructius materials.

Mai o gairebé mai      1 2 3 4 5      Diàriament o setmanalment

2. Prendre decisions conjunes sobre qüestions de nivell de qualificació.

Mai o gairebé mai      1 2 3 4 5      Diàriament o setmanalment

3. Debatre sobre el desenvolupament de l'aprenentatge d'estudiants específics.

Mai o gairebé mai      1 2 3 4 5      Diàriament o setmanalment

4. Analitzar les vostres pràctiques i resultats docents.

Mai o gairebé mai      1 2 3 4 5      Diàriament o setmanalment

5. Intercanviar materials d'ensenyament amb els companys

Mai o gairebé mai      1 2 3 4 5      Diàriament o setmanalment

6. Examinar i parlar del treball dels estudiants

Mai o gairebé mai      1 2 3 4 5      Diàriament o setmanalment

7. Discutir i planificar com ajudar els estudiants a assolir nivells superiors.

Mai o gairebé mai      1 2 3 4 5      Diàriament o setmanalment

8. Utilitzar les noves idees i consells d'ensenyament útils dels companys

Mai o gairebé mai      1 2 3 4 5      Diàriament o setmanalment

9. Dissenyar i compartir eines per a avaluar el progrés dels alumnes.

Mai o gairebé mai      1 2 3 4 5      Diàriament o setmanalment

10. Llegir i desenvolupar el currículum (o alguna part del currículum) amb els professors que imparteixen la mateixa llengua.

Mai o gairebé mai      1 2 3 4 5      Diàriament o setmanalment

11. Co-teaching (més d'un professor a l'aula)

Mai o gairebé mai      1 2 3 4 5      Diàriament o setmanalment

12. Parlar de la literatura professional amb altres professors (llibres, diaris, articles, etc.)

Mai o gairebé mai      1 2 3 4 5      Diàriament o setmanalment

13. Treballar amb els altres professors en la planificació d'activitats extracurriculars

Mai o gairebé mai      1 2 3 4 5      Diàriament o setmanalment

14. Fer una recerca col·laborativa sobre un tema d'interès professional amb un (o més) company(s)

Mai o gairebé mai      1 2 3 4 5      Diàriament o setmanalment

15. Observar les classes d'altres professors i proporcionar-los feedback.

Mai o gairebé mai      1 2 3 4 5      Diàriament o setmanalment

Apartat 2: 15 preguntes. COM DE BENEFICIOSES CREUS que són aquestes activitats de col·laboració tant per als professors com per als alumnes?

1. Analitzar les vostres pràctiques i resultats docents.

Gens beneficiós      1 2 3 4 5      Notablement beneficiós

2. Debatre i utilitzar les noves idees i consells d'ensenyament útils dels companys.

Gens beneficiós 1 2 3 4 5 Notablement beneficiós

3. Examinar i discutir la feina dels estudiants.

Gens beneficiós 1 2 3 4 5 Notablement beneficiós

4. Discutir i planificar com ajudar els estudiants a assolir nivells superiors.

Gens beneficiós 1 2 3 4 5 Notablement beneficiós

5. Intercanviar materials d'ensenyament amb els companys.

Gens beneficiós 1 2 3 4 5 Notablement beneficiós

6. Debatre sobre el desenvolupament de l'aprenentatge d'estudiants específics.

Gens beneficiós 1 2 3 4 5 Notablement beneficiós

7. Prendre decisions conjuntes sobre qüestions de nivell de qualificació.

Gens beneficiós 1 2 3 4 5 Notablement beneficiós

8. Mantenir converses professionals amb els vostres companys sobre com millorar els vostres ensenyaments i decidir la selecció de recursos instructius materials.

Gens beneficiós 1 2 3 4 5 Notablement beneficiós

9. Dissenyar i compartir eines per a avaluar el progrés dels alumnes.

Gens beneficiós 1 2 3 4 5 Notablement beneficiós

10. Observar les classes d'altres professors i proporcionar-los feedback.

Gens beneficiós 1 2 3 4 5 Notablement beneficiós

11. Parlar de la literatura professional amb altres professors (llibres, diaris, articles, etc.).

Gens beneficiós 1 2 3 4 5 Notablement beneficiós

12. Llegir i desenvolupar el currículum (o alguna par del currículum) amb els professors que imparteixen la mateixa llengua.

Gens beneficiós 1 2 3 4 5 Notablement beneficiós

13. Treballar amb els altres professors en la planificació d'activitats extracurriculars.

Gens beneficiós 1 2 3 4 5 Notablement beneficiós

14. Fer una recerca col·laborativa sobre un tema d'interès professional amb un (o més) company(s).

Gens beneficiós 1 2 3 4 5 Notablement beneficiós

15. Coteaching.

Gens beneficiós 1 2 3 4 5 Notablement beneficiós

\*\*\*Voldries fer l'entrevista personal per parlar-ne més? Sí / No

## 8.2. Appendix 2: Personal interview (questions)

### Preguntes curtes

1. Creus que la relació personal entre els professors afecta la relació professional i el desenvolupament de les tasques de l'escola (o la col·laboració)?
2. Creus que aquest tipus de col·laboració afavoreix que els alumnes aprenguin més o no pas?

### Preguntes llargues

3. En quines àrees creus que és més important estar coordinats i treballar plegats? Per què?
4. Què creus que se hauria de canviar a l'escola pel que fa a la col·laboració? Creus que tothom hi està implicat?
5. Aquesta escola és molt petita (10 professors). Creus que això condiciona la relació (positivament o negativa)? Com influeix això?
6. Avantatges i desavantatges de la col·laboració.