

2016

Co-Teaching as a Method to Benefit English Language Learners

Zulema Naegele

University of Portland, naegele@up.edu

Nicole Ralston

University of Portland, ralston@up.edu

Rebecca Smith

University of Portland, smithre@up.edu

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Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Naegele, Zulema; Ralston, Nicole; and Smith, Rebecca, "Co-Teaching as a Method to Benefit English Language Learners" (2016). *Education Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 37.

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HICE Proceedings Submission

Submission ID # 514

Title: Co-Teaching as a Method to Benefit English Language Learners

Author:

Zulema Naegele, M.Ed.
Doctoral Fellow, School of Education
University of Portland
5000 N. Willamette Blvd.
Portland, OR 97203
naegele@up.edu

Abstract:

This literature review investigated co-teaching methods that may benefit English Language Learners (ELLs). Studies indicate that co-teaching strategies utilized in the content classroom have a positive impact on both ELL students and teachers. Research demonstrates positive learning gains for students in an inclusive setting for all learners. This paper will focus on employing research-based teaching strategies for implementing, such as, the one teach, one assist method, parallel teaching, and collaboratively developing lessons.

Co-Teaching as a Method to Benefit English Language Learners

English Language Learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing preK-12 student group in the United States, growing 64% from 1994 to 2010 (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011). As of 2010, out of nearly 50 million students in the U.S., 5.2 million (10%) were identified as ELL students. There is an increased need to assist the growing ELL population in today's classrooms, as data show that the academic needs are not being met. For instance, on statewide assessments across the country, the percentage of ELL students who achieve proficiency is 20 to 30 percentage points lower than among their non-ELL peers (Abedi & Dietel, 2004; Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011). ELL students have the challenge of learning grade-level content and a new language all at the same time. Traditionally, the two tasks are separated; but Echevarria, Short, and Powers (2006) found that combining the two has assisted students in learning English without losing subject area content, so one potential method to help students is co-teaching. The purpose of this research is to investigate co-teaching methods that may benefit ELL students.

Co-teaching is defined as “two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse blended group of students in a single physical space” (Cook & Friend, 1995, p. 14). Co-teaching appeared in the literature in the early 1990s as a way to better address the needs of special education students. There are several different models of co-teaching that were developed by St. Cloud University researchers focusing on the student teaching experience (St. Cloud State University, 2014). The seven strategies or models described below can be used in a variety of classroom situations to assist students of diverse learning backgrounds better.

1. **One Teach, One Observe:** One teacher has primary instructional responsibility while the other gathers specific observational information on students or the (instructing) teacher.

2. **One Teach, One Assist:** One teacher has primary instructional responsibility while the other assists students with their work, monitors behaviors, or corrects assignments.
3. **Station Teaching:** The co-teaching pair divides the instructional content into parts; each teacher instructs one of the groups, and groups then rotate or spend a designated amount of time at each station.
4. **Parallel Teaching:** Each teacher instructs half the students. The two teachers are addressing the same instructional material and presenting the material using the same teaching strategies.
5. **Supplemental Teaching:** Allows one teacher to work with students at their expected grade level, while the other teacher works with those students who need the information and/or materials re-taught, extended, or remediated.
6. **Alternative or Differentiated Teaching:** Each teacher provides two different approaches to teaching the same information. The learning outcome is the same for all students; however, the avenue for getting there is different.
7. **Team Teaching:** Incorporates well planned, team taught lessons, exhibiting an invisible flow of instruction with no prescribed division of authority. Both teachers are actively involved in the lesson.

Co-teaching is an ongoing process that forces teachers to communicate more intimately with each other and with their students. Different co-teaching methods can require different levels of planning (Cook, 2004).

Benefits of Co-Teaching

Several researchers have demonstrated the benefits of co-teaching for students. In a study conducted by Almon and Feng (2012) in an urban elementary school, co-teaching in the

fourth grade classroom had a more positive effect than solo teaching, as measured by student math achievement. The study analyzed the performance of two fourth grade classrooms, one with co-teaching instruction and the other with solo teaching instruction. Students increased their time on task engagement during co-taught lessons versus solo-taught lessons. In addition, St. Cloud University (2014) highlights several examples of the positive effects co-teaching has on students. For instance, these include: a reduction in the student/teacher ratio, an increase in instructional options for all students, an increase in diversity of instructional styles, and greater student engagement and student participation levels. Further, co-teaching models also appear to exhibit success when conducted with student teachers (Merk, Waggoner, & Carroll, 2013).

Much research has demonstrated that co-teaching benefits students. For instance, research done by Walsh (2012) shows that co-teaching can be considered a high-leverage strategy capable of accelerating achievement to close the achievement gaps in reading and mathematics. The study emphasizes that students demonstrate more growth and increased academic performance when teachers are well trained in implementing co-teaching methods and well supported by the school administration.

As schools prepare to implement a co-teaching model and make selections for successful strategies, it would be helpful to know which co-teaching strategies work better than others in an inclusive classroom. However, sufficient research has not been conducted on the specific use and most effective co-teaching methods. It appears that the lack of data is due to the fact that co-teaching is not conducive to large-scale, standardized research (Hanover Research Report, 2012). Also, there is too much variance in the definitions of co-teaching and typically classes are not similar enough to provide meaningful comparative data. However, one study highlighted in the Hanover Research Report (2012) stated that a team of teachers faced with specific behavioral

challenges alternately used parallel teaching, alternative teaching, station teaching, and team teaching. The co-teaching team has to decide when to utilize each strategy. Methods may be implemented independently or in combination, however the most prevalent form of co-teaching in schools is One Teach, One Assist.

Co-Teaching to Benefit ELL Students

Only recently has the notion of co-teaching to benefit English Language Learner (ELL) students become more prominent, with early research demonstrating positive learning gains for students. Honigsfeld and Dove (2008) conclude that co-teaching with an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher a) becomes an effective support for inclusive practices to accommodate the needs of diverse ELL students; b) helps all students meet national, state, and local standards; and c) establishes a vehicle for creative collaboration between ESL and mainstream teachers.

A collaborative approach has worked for St. Paul Public Schools in their work with immigrant populations including Somali, Hmong, and Latinos. Their instructional methods have narrowed the academic achievement gap (Pardini, 2006). For example, Pardini shares how an ELL teacher in St. Paul teaches alongside the mainstream teacher, working with ELL students during a fractions lesson. During the lesson, the ELL teacher uses the One Teach, One Assist method to ensure the correct use of the word “whole” vs. “hole” by reinforcing the fractions concept and giving language support. In this example, ELL teachers work with one or two grade levels in two to five classrooms a day. St. Paul Public Schools can serve as a model for other schools implementing co-teaching in the ELL classroom.

There are many benefits to using a co-teaching model with ELL students. Co-taught lessons are inclusive and offer more support for diverse ELL students. Students are able to stay

in the content classroom and not be “pulled out” for remedial ELL programming. ELL students are also able to interact more with their English-speaking peers.

Research shows that collaborative teaching can provide more support for students. For example, a three-year study in an urban elementary school supports the idea of implementing more collaborative teaching in the classroom with heterogeneous groups of students (York-Barr, Ghore, & Sommers, 2007). The collaboration models utilized were slightly different by grade level for first and second grade. In first grade, the 90-minute literacy block allowed for the teachers to parallel teach a jointly developed lesson and to switch groups every other day. Later during the block, another ESL teacher arrived, and the special education teacher joined to facilitate four guided readings groups.

In second grade, teachers assigned different models of instruction each day, consisting of whole class instruction, reading level groups, and partnered reading with higher and lower proficiency paired readers. Teachers made decisions on model selection depending on what the lesson called for each day.

At the end of year 1 of the study, teachers had positive responses about the fostered professional support they felt because of the collaboration and combined classroom instruction. Some of the responses included: more flexible and creative use of instructional time, greater shared ownership of students and student learning, increased reflection on individual and collective teaching practices, increased collective expertise resulting in greater effectiveness with a variety of students, decreased teacher isolation and feeling valued by colleagues, and having more energy and greater enjoyment from teaching (York-Barr, Ghore, & Sommers, 2007).

At the end of year 2 the positive responses about the experience continued. Overall, teachers were supportive of co-teaching and appreciated the growth they saw in the students. Even though the advantages of co-teaching outweighed the disadvantages, there were still some challenges during the process. Teachers stated that they did not appreciate the loss of instructional decision-making autonomy, role shifts and confusion about how to share instructional time (i.e., who leads, who follows, how to co-teach), feelings of insecurity because teaching became public, and differing philosophies (i.e., the term often used to describe differences between teachers related to orientations or beliefs about instruction and professional practice) (York-Barr, Ghere & Sommerness, 2007).

Ultimately, the co-teaching experience was a successful endeavor for the teachers involved. Five key factors attributed to the success. First, teachers were interested in a more inclusive approach to educating ELL students. Second, there was administrative support with the addition of extra staff resources and more time allotted for collaborative planning. Third, more individualized student attention is possible by using the collaborative instructional models. Co-teaching allows for much needed small group instruction (York-Barr, Ghere, & Sommerness, 2007). Teachers emphasized that much of the student learning transpired when teachers taught side-by-side. Fourth, collaborative planning is considered the most essential element for program success. Administrators adjusted schedules for teachers to have simultaneous planning time within classroom teams. Fifth, the teachers appreciated the flexibility to create multiple and varied instructional models as a classroom team. These factors illustrate the benefits of using co-teaching models of instruction, especially in a classroom with ELL students.

Hendrickson (2011) found that 72% of teachers felt their co-teaching experience had been successful that year. Similar results are true in the York-Barr, Ghere and Sommerness

(2007) study. At the end of Year 1 the outcomes were viewed to be very positive for teachers and students. At the end of Year 2 one teacher boasted, “I can’t believe that team teaching was something I was kind of fighting. Now...I am willing to fight to keep it together.” All teachers preferred the co-teaching model to the previously used ESL pull-out model (Pappamihiel, 2012).

Additionally, the study (York-Barr, Ghere & Sommerness, 2007) highlighted how students also benefited greatly from the use of collaborative teaching models. Student changes included: viewing all adults as their teachers, learning from different teaching styles, feeling more included and less scared, experiencing a sense of community and more friendships between ELL and non-ELL students, being more engaged in instructional and social situations, improved behavior, and increased student achievement in both reading and math as indicated by classroom assessments and standardized tests. Research therefore suggests clear benefits for both teachers and students when collaborative teaching models are implemented in classrooms.

Recommendations for Implementing a Co-Teaching Model

York-Barr, Ghere and Sommerness (2007), make various suggestions to administrators and schools interested in implementing a model for co-teaching in the ELL classroom. Below are strategies to consider:

1. Provide professional and contextual knowledge that supports instructional collaboration;
2. Strategically allocate instructional personnel;
3. Take a whole-school inventory of instructional resources;
4. Assign specific instructional personnel to teams that support specific groups of students;
5. Create a schedule to maximize instructional support at high-needs times;
6. Provide ongoing opportunities for collaborative learning and development;
7. Build in regular time for collaboration;

8. Actively support co-teaching;
9. Embed ongoing student assessment;
10. Intentionally design flexible student groups;
11. Commit to individual and team development.

Further, teachers should implement more than one co-teaching model even in the same lesson (Hendrickson, 2011). If focused on the students' needs, co-teaching may look different every day. It is also suggested that teachers co-plan at least 45 minutes per week. This can be done by meeting after-school to plan, having a substitute teacher take the class for two hours per month, or schedule planning time appropriately to allow the ESL teacher time with the mainstream teachers. One of the most important factors of a successful co-teaching model is that team members have a significant amount of time to build positive working relationships (Merk, Waggoner, & Carroll, 2013).

Other recommendations suggest more staff input in the co-teaching pairing. One way to do this is by having teachers fill out surveys as to with whom they would like to co-teach (Hendrickson, 2011). Teachers also stated that they would like to have more co-teaching training at different times of the school year. They would also like to see more modeling of good co-teaching.

Conclusion

Murawski (2005) states that for true co-teaching to occur, both professionals must “co-plan, co-instruct, and co-assess a diverse group of students in the same general education classroom” (p. 10). In order for this to happen, co-teachers must use best practice strategies before, during, and after co-teaching. Ultimately, planning time surfaces as the most important part of the puzzle for successful co-teaching. Sometimes little time is needed for co-teachers to

plan together. For a veteran teacher team, only about 10 minutes per week to plan may be sufficient (Dieker, 2001). Co-teaching may seem scary and overwhelming at first to develop and implement, but in the end co-teachers and students confirm that the collaborative teaching method is more successful than the traditional “pull out” method for meeting the needs of ELL students.

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