

Implementing Co-Teaching in Undergraduate EFL/ESL Classes: Challenges, Implications, and Practicality

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Abstract

Co-Teaching is defined as the shared delivery of instruction (Spencer, 2005). It is not a new notion in the field of education and has been designed and employed extensively for decades by educators and teachers of special education, where a combination of special education and regular education expertise is required to ensure that learners with disabilities receive appropriate education services. However, the concept of co-teaching in ESL/EFL contexts, particularly in undergraduate classes is rather a new notion, and has not received adequate attention from experts or researchers in the field. Most of the available EFL/ESL literature on the topic sees co-teaching as an approach to train teachers, helping them to adapt to the mixed education environments required in English speaking countries, where many immigrant second language learners need integrated instruction. In addition, EFL/ESL teachers and educators still hesitate to apply any of the various available models of co-teaching, because empirical evidence on their pedagogical efficacy and/or practicality in EFL/ESL contexts is extremely limited, as compared to the amount of research available on other topics. On the other hand, most of the literature on the topic is mainly theoretical, and lacks substantial evidence on the applicability of co-teaching in EFL/ESL contexts. The feasibility and practicality of implementing co-teaching within the sphere of foreign and second language education have yet to be investigated. The present paper aims to portray how a tailored version of the interactive team-teaching -tried by the researcher in undergraduate classes for four years - can be extremely conducive to learning in EFL/ESL classes, making teaching an enjoyable experience for learners and instructors.

1. An Overview

Co-teaching was developed in education a few decades ago, originally employed in some American schools to enable students with disabilities to attend mainstream classes, and ensuring more equality of educational opportunity. One important reason for this inclusion was the simple fact that almost 80% of all students receiving special education services actually had no intellectual disabilities (Friend, 2014). It was also based on a collaboration between families and educators to improve both instruction and student performance. A number of laws were enacted, or existing ones amended to ensure that No Child was Left Behind (NCLB Act of 2001), (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004).

Successive models were gradually developed under the umbrella of co-teaching, to facilitate the cooperation of special education and general education teachers (Friend & Cook, 1996). These models were tried out, with great investment of time and energy, but with little attention paid to what co-teaching entailed. This resulted in much confusion, especially in schools with mandated co-teaching; to the extent that it motivated some professionals to seek to define what co-teaching WAS NOT. They warned administrators to avoid forcing teachers onto unfamiliar territory.

Nevertheless, co-teaching has developed rapidly over the years and has become part of "inclusive practices", (Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend, 1989). Many experts have emphasised the merits of co-teaching. "A Guide to Co-Teaching", Villa, et. al. (2004) devotes a whole chapter to the advantages of co-teaching, maintaining that co-teaching "... allows for more immediate and accurate diagnoses of student needs, and more active student participation in a variety of learning situations".

The emergence of collaborative teaching and learning within the field of language education, however, probably goes back to the late 70s and early 80s, when an increase in the population of ESL learners with limited English proficiency created a huge challenge for mainstream teachers. Since then, it has gradually gained momentum in the field of foreign/second language instruction, and has been re-evaluated as an instructional model which can be used in different educational contexts.

At higher education levels, co-teaching is recommended in teacher training programmes (Kloo & Zigmond, 2008), however, trainee teachers only acquire a superficial understanding of what it is, because the professors themselves lack adequate, practical experience with co-teaching (Green & Issacs, 1999). The use of co-teaching in higher education is still in its early stages, and those who see co-teaching as an optional teaching method are faced with numerous questions. These questions

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mostly relate to how to apply co-teaching instruction in practice. Honigsfeld & Dove (2010) comprehensively address these questions in their first book on co-teaching. The present paper is the result of an attempt to enter this new arena, applying co-teaching in an undergraduate writing course for students studying either English Translation, or English Literature.

2. Method

The idea of teaching together first occurred to me some years ago, when I, with a group of other instructors, was employed at Islamic Azad University. We started teaching course material - in English - to undergraduate students studying either English Translation or English Literature. We were a group of young instructors with no, or limited teaching experience. During the first few semesters, an experienced colleague/professor was assigned as the coordinator to carry out briefing sessions for each field of material we were planning to teach. A general outline of the course was usually introduced by the coordinator of each subject, and the instructors teaching the same subject areas were tasked to cover the same material, design final exams together, exchange ideas about the lesson plans, and methodology, etc. It was a brilliant idea and helped us all in many different ways. Some years later, a colleague agreed to co-teach an essay writing class with me, so we started co-teaching on our own initiative.

2.1 Participants and Course Description

Participants in this study were undergraduate male and female students studying either English Translation, or English Literature. The age of the participants generally ranged from 19 to 28. Students usually selected the classes they wished to attend based on their own personal preferences, and the available class times. Therefore, the number of female and male students in the classes was never the same. Undergraduate EFL students in Iran have to pass four mandatory writing courses: Grammar and Writing I and II, which offer a review of English grammar; Advanced Writing, during which students become familiar with techniques of composing paragraphs, various patterns of paragraph development, paragraph types, inductive and deductive reasoning, different types of supports, etc.; and Essay Writing, the final quarter of the package, which prepares students for writing different types of essays. The main focus of the Essay Writing course is on argumentative essays. The course is comprised of fifteen 90-minute sessions, with one session each week. In each session, students are given a topic on which they have to write an argumentative essay. In every session, 5 or 6 students read their papers in the class, receive comments from peers, as well as the instructor, and their papers are finally evaluated and rated by the instructor.

2.2 Process

During this study, a tailored version of team-teaching model was employed, and instruction was carried out by both instructors during. Care was taken to convey to the students that the instructors had equal roles, with neither being placed above the other. The instructors contributed to the sessions in a flexible way, each intervening whenever they felt they had something more to add. The whole project initially started with detailed co-planning of each and every session. Also, instruction was not interrupted if one instructor was for any reason unable to participate. On these occasions, one instructor carried on teaching, while the other just observed, or took notes.

During the first session of each semester, the participants of the co-taught classes were informed about the planned methodical framework of the classes. This brief introduction to co-teaching was designed to give students a general understanding of what they would experience with two instructors in the class. As an additional measure, each of the co-instructors had to independently cover the same material in another essay writing class, giving students the opportunity to choose whether they wished to attend the co-taught class, or the regular one, and they were allowed to withdraw from the co-taught classes at any point during the semester. Almost all the students who had registered for the co-taught classes chose to stay. Sometimes this was because of the course's timing, often it was because students were curious to see how two instructors would fit into a single physical/ instructional setting.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

The present paper aims to provide a preliminary overview of EFL learners' perceptions of their achievements in a co-taught class. Given the small scale of this study, the abbreviated version of the grounded theory was employed to gain a holistic evaluation of employing team-teaching at undergraduate level (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The main data collection technique used was a comprehensive participant survey, which gathered responses to five open-ended questions, put to

students in the final sessions of each 15-week semester. This was the qualitative data source. The data collected from the survey were analysed following the processes of coding and constant comparative analysis

4. Results

The findings showed that the participants perceived co-teaching as highly effective in enhancing their learning in general, and their writing skills in particular. The active learning environment encouraged increased class attendance, leading to better performances, and higher grades. During the study, participants reported their increasing enthusiasm for learning, and improved self-confidence. They felt they received more time and attention from the co-instructors, which was extremely rewarding. They also believed the co-instructors worked harder in their co-taught classes. The egalitarian atmosphere of the co-taught classes facilitated a growing rapport and trust with the participants.

The findings presented in this paper are a partial representation of the data collected during a four-year application of co-teaching. The findings are not particularly clear-cut and therefore remain open to question. More thorough investigation would be needed in order to reach a more solid analysis, and appreciation.

5. Conclusion

Change is a constant in the field of language teaching, whether a first, second, or foreign language is being taught. As instructors, practitioners, and researchers, we are constantly searching for better methods and more effective teaching techniques, to ensure high quality instruction. The challenge of our time is to assess and develop techniques, responding to the immediate needs of particular instructional contexts. Team-teaching can bring many overarching benefits if it is well-structured, and supported by ongoing professional development, and a supportive administration. Co-teaching implies that success in learning and teaching involves sharing, and caring. Lessons are deliberately structured in a way which helps learners realize that collaboration is more conducive to learning than mere competition and rivalry, and that they can learn even more when they work together. In our experience, a clear understanding of expectations, goals, and priorities is necessary before embarking on co-teaching. Comprehensive, well-orchestrated brainstorming and planning will, in our view, also make all the difference to its success.

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