
PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TO CO-TEACHING

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The purpose of this paper is to investigate pre-service English teachers' attitudes to co-teaching as a professional development tool and a collaboration method. Two instructors co-taught an undergraduate English Language Teaching Methodology course to gain experience and to model this method for pre-service English teachers. 60 students of Ternopil Volodymyr Hnatiuk National Pedagogical University, Department of Foreign Languages, participated in the study for one semester. Research instruments used in the study are students' reflective journals, focus groups discussions, and a survey. The students wrote regular entries in reflective journals after each session, participated in focus groups discussions, and filled out a survey at the end of the semester. It was hypothesised that co-teaching would engage learners and enhance their learning, help pre-service teachers to develop professionally, and serve as a model of effective instructional technique for their future teaching assignment. Results indicate the effectiveness of co-teaching in achieving these tasks. We also conclude that co-teaching in pre-service teacher education is an invaluable tool in developing teachers' and students' reflective skills and collaborative practices. The findings of the study can be applied in the design and implementation of educational programmes for pre-service foreign languages teachers.

Keywords: co-teaching; English Language Teaching Methodology; pre-service English teachers; learning tool; collaboration method; reflective journal; professional development tool.

Introduction

Ukrainian higher education is striving to promote innovative teaching and learning tools to enhance learning and professional development of students. A nexus between education, research, and innovation is among the primary goals of Ukrainian universities according to the Law on Higher Education adopted in 2014 (Hladchenko, 2016, p. 382). Innovation is not solely technological in nature, as the human element remains the most crucial and sensitive aspect of any educational advances (Serdyukov, 2017). Thus, the principal focus of educators' innovative work should be on learners and teachers, and on increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of all pedagogic efforts. The key to a prosperous, innovative society, in Serdiukov's opinion, is an educational system that breeds critical thinking, autonomy, self-efficacy, creativity, responsibility, and a culture that supports innovative education (p. 8).

Co-teaching is an educational innovation, which relies first and foremost on a human element. It is defined as two or more individuals coming together in a collaborative relationship to share work in order to achieve what could not have been done as well alone (Wenzlaff et al., 2002). Roth and Tobin (2002) describe co-teaching as teaching at one another's elbow and sharing responsibility for instruction. In research literature, co-teaching is seen as an effective instructional technique capitalising on the knowledge and expertise of two or more teachers in the same classroom in order to increase student learning (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2008; Roth & Tobin, 2004). At the university level, co-teaching is often discussed and recommended in educational programmes as a way to utilise the professional understandings of two teachers (Crow & Smith, 2003; Shibley, 2006; Scantlebury, Gallo-Fox & Wassell, 2008; Dee, 2012; Jenkins & Crawford, 2016), develop instructional practices for special education (Smith, Frey & Tollefson, 2003; Scruggs, Mastropieri & McDuffi, 2007; Kloo & Zigmond, 2008; Stang & Lyons, 2008; Drescher, 2017), and foster collaboration of English learners (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2014; Park, 2014); enhance teacher preparation programmes (Dugan & Letterman, 2008; Graziano & Navarrete, 2012). However, university teachers do not often model this teaching approach for their students; many of them have little or no experience engaging in the technique (Friend, 2008; Lee & Cho, 2015; Altstaeder, Smith & Fogarty, 2016; Castañeda-Londoño, 2017). Such a lack of experience with co-teaching causes a disagreement between educators' beliefs about its positive impact and their personal instructional practices which result in beginning teachers entering a

classroom with only a conceptual understanding of what it means to co-teach (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2012; Heo & Mann, 2015). As a result, pre-service teachers often miss the deeper implications co-teaching holds for student learning (Wang, 2010).

In this study, we look at implementation of a co-teaching model in an English Language Teaching Methodology course for pre-service teachers in order to improve students' learning and professional skills, model the instructional practice for pre-service English teachers, and develop their collaborative skills. The course itself is based on a learner-centred approach with considerable effort being made to develop students' reflective skills. Co-teaching as a collaborative practice has been chosen for this course primarily to allow the development of reflective skills and practices.

Modelling collaboration in the English Language Teaching Methodology classroom is necessary for students' success in the workplace, since they will pursue careers that require them to work in teams. To be an effective team member, one must be able to engage in dialogue, to learn from colleagues, and to help deal with challenges in a group. Our assumption is that witnessing collaboration between teachers, the students will find co-teaching valuable. The concern that there would be a threat to teachers' autonomy is overruled by assumed positive impacts on both the teachers and the students. Research suggests that co-teaching is mutually rewarding for both teachers and allows them to build a relationship of trust that encourages constructive feedback (Crow and Smith, 2003; Castañeda-Londoño, 2017).

Co-teaching in higher education has great potential for faculty and students. Pre-service English teachers benefit from first hand experience with co-teaching, both personally, as it allows them to grow and develop, and professionally, as this instructional technique focuses on student learning and utilisation of dual sets of knowledge and experiences.

However, in addition to existing research, there is a need for studies reflecting students' attitudes towards co-teaching as a collaborative tool and their willingness to use it while teaching themselves. This case study seeks to add to the body of literature on co-teaching by exploring the ways students' experience develops.

The research aims to answering the following questions:

- 1) What is the potential for co-teaching as a learning and professional development tool for pre-service English teachers?
- 2) What is the attitude of pre-service English teachers towards this method of collaboration?

The aim of this paper is to investigate co-teaching as a learning and professional development tool and a method of collaboration. The research tasks are to identify the potential of co-teaching, to explore the attitude of pre-service English teachers to co-teaching, and to provide recommendations for implementing co-teaching in teacher education programmes.

Method

This study was conducted during the 2019-2020 academic year with the aim to estimate the potential of co-teaching as a learning and professional development tool for pre-service English teachers and their attitudes toward this collaborative method. The research methods are critical analysis of the literature, data collection and analysis involving students' reflective journals, focus group discussions, and a survey.

Participants

60 Foreign Languages Department students of Ternopil Volodymyr Hnatiuk National Pedagogical University participated voluntarily in the research. The students were in the second year of the teacher education programme and in the first year of their participation in the New Generation School Teacher project under the auspices of British Council and Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. English Language Teaching Methodology was their first experience of a co-taught course. In a pair of teachers, one had previous co-teaching and team-teaching experience and one had not co-taught before.

Data collection

The data sources included students' reflective journals, focus group discussions, and a survey. The reflective journals allowed for documentation of the benefits and problems of co-teaching. These journals included students' notes containing ideas from sessions, reflection in action and reflection on action entries after each class. At the end of the semester reflective journals were collected by teachers as part of an assessment portfolio and analysed by researchers.

The students' focus group discussions provided insight into how the co-teaching model was being received. The initial focus group discussion took place at the beginning of the course to serve as a baseline for students' perceptions of the course, teachers, and the co-teaching model. In two groups led by researchers students discussed open-ended questions:

- What does co-teaching mean?

- How is it different from solo teaching?
- What are your expectations of a co-taught class?

In the middle of the semester, the following three open-ended questions were discussed in two groups during class:

- What is your opinion of co-teaching in this course?
- How would you describe your experiences with co-teaching in this class?
- Why do you think this class is being taught with a co-teaching style?

At the end of the semester a survey by Bacharach, Heck, and Dahlberg. (2008) was administered with the aim to gather thoughts about the experience holistically. The survey contained three parts. In the first part the students were asked to rate their level of agreement on how much individual factors of co-teaching impacted their learning on a 4-point Likert scale (4 – strongly agree, 3 – agree, 2 – neither agree nor disagree 1– disagree). The factors offered for rating were as follows: (1) teachers have two different knowledge bases on course content; (2) hearing two different perspectives from teachers; (3) the diversity of experiences teachers have; (4) experiencing two distinct teaching styles; (5) having teachers cooperate with one another; (6) increased availability of teachers; (7) more variety in activities; (8) lower student / teacher ratio.

In the second part the students applied the same scale to rate four indicators of effective co-teaching: (1) teachers show respect for one another; (2) transitions between teachers are well-coordinated; (3) teachers clearly and explicitly describe co-teaching strategies they model; (4) instructional time has been shared equitably.

The third part of the survey contained three questions summarising students' attitudes to co-teaching:

- Should other teacher preparation courses be co-taught?
- Would you be interested in co-teaching some day?
- Did you learn more in a co-taught class than you would have in a class that was not co-taught?

Answers to these questions could be chosen from yes/no options. There was also a space provided for the student's own answer. Such questions probed students to express their attitude towards the applicability of a co-teaching model in their classrooms in the future. The goal of the survey was to be open enough to allow students to reflect on what they were thinking and experiencing. The students were provided class time to complete the survey and all 60 students responded.

Results

Results of this study support our assumptions about high potential of co-teaching as a vehicle for effective learning and a professional development tool.

The results from Part I of the survey rating the agreement of participants on the factors which influenced their learning are shown in Figure 1.

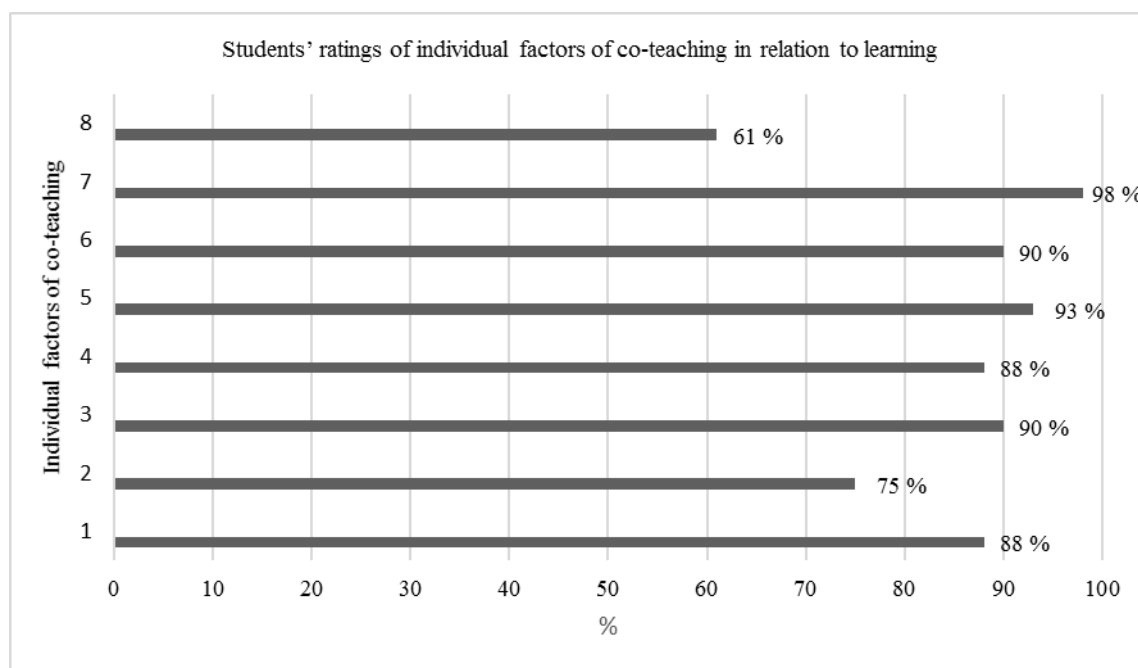


Figure 1. Students' ratings of individual factors of co-teaching in relation to learning

Two factors: (7) *Having teachers cooperate with each other* and (5) *More variety in activities* were rated the highest, which led us to conclude that students considered those factors to have the biggest impact on their learning. These results are generally consistent with findings by Bacharach, Heck, and Dahlberg (2008). The fact that the first factor, *teachers have two different knowledge bases on course content* has not been rated as highly as in the study by Bacharach, Heck, and Dahlberg can be explained by similarity of knowledge base both teachers had: they graduated the same university and planned and prepared classes together, discussing in detail procedure and materials used.

The results from Part II of the survey rating effective co-teaching indicators (Villa, Thousand & Nevin, 2004) are shown in Figure 2.

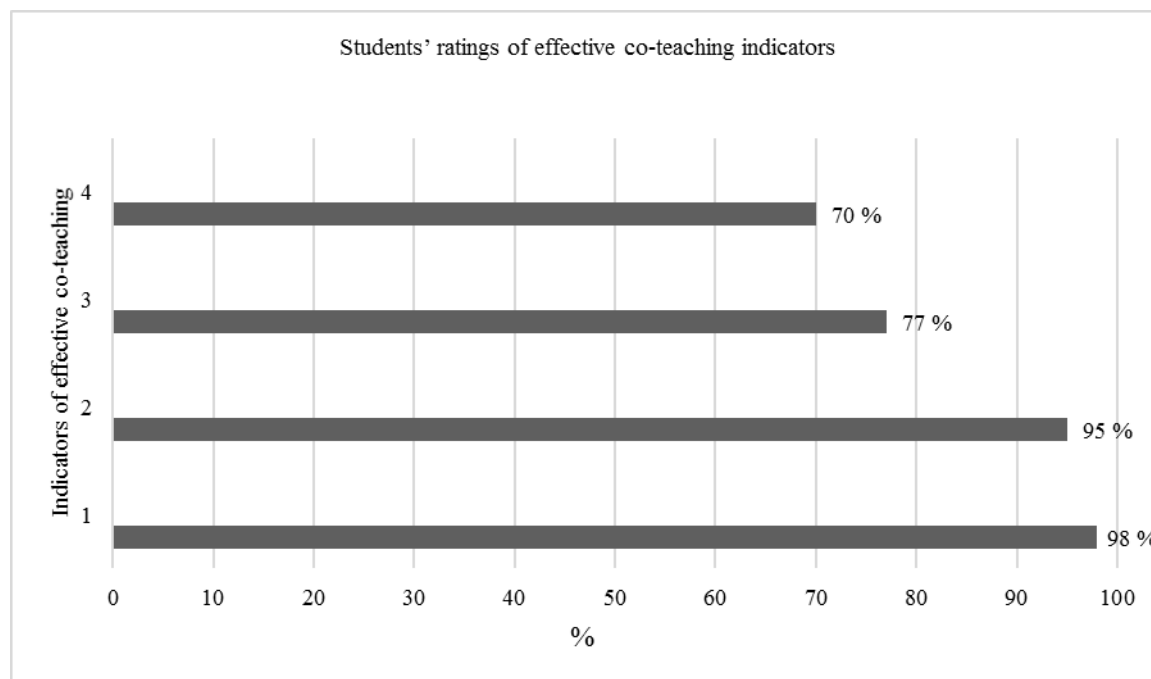


Figure 2. Students' ratings of effective co-teaching indicators

Ratings show that a majority of students believe the indicators of effective co-teaching such as (1) *Teachers show respect for one another* (98%) and (2) *Teachers clearly and explicitly describe co-teaching strategies they model* (95%) were often demonstrated by teachers.

62% of students answered in affirmative regarding the first question in Part III of the survey about feasibility of co-teaching for other teacher preparation courses. 86% of students indicated their interest in co-teaching in the future. 84% of students agree they are learning more in a co-taught class than in a class with one teacher. These findings are in line with the conclusion by Barachona (2017) stating that collaborative practices could be a path for developing and deepening the prospective reflexive practices of pre-service teachers.

Discussion

Overall, results from this study show that students gave positive feedback about their experiences learning from two teachers. Many students appreciated this collaborative practice as an incentive for better learning in class:

I have learnt more in this class because our teachers worked hard to make the [course] content engaging.

Students' responses indicated that they would use this instructional technique as a model for their future professional activity:

This is how I would like to teach English at school.

They also recognised the combined knowledge and experience of teachers as an advantage of co-teaching:

It seems like we learnt twice as much with two teachers.

In view of these findings recommendations can be given to faculty to take special care to plan sessions together and to share instructional time equitably both while planning sessions and while teaching.

Co-teaching has the potential to change praxis at all levels of education (Roth & Tobin, 2004; Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2008; Dugan & Letterman, 2008). Exceptional teaching and learning must be modelled and implemented in every educational setting, including the tertiary level (Villa, Thousand & Nevin, 2004; Waters & Burcroff, 2007). Co-teaching has the ability to serve as continual professional development (Roth & Tobin, 2004; Ferguson & Wilson, 2011) and to increase teacher morale (Jamal & Baba, 2001; Lester & Evans, 2009). Combined, these components increase student learning (Roth & Tobin, 2004; Kloo & Zigmond, 2008; Boland, Alkhalifa & Al-Mutairi, 2019).

According to faculty, planning and teaching together helped them to develop professionally. Both teachers mentioned acquisition of new professional knowledge and skills, broadening the scope of their teaching strategies, sharing observations and teaching experience while planning together and during sessions. These findings correspond to findings by Bacharach, Heck, and Dahlberg (2008) about co-teaching in teacher education as “a promising practice fostering collaborative skills, increasing student participation, and improving classroom instruction and professional growth for all participants” (p. 16).

There are methodological limitations inherent to the study. The small number of cases analysed makes the generalisation of findings unfeasible, although the goal of this study was to contribute to a small body of literature. However, for the time and teaching assignment constraints, it would be advisable to extend the duration of research from one semester to a full academic year. The body of literature presenting collaborative-teaching studies in teacher education programmes being relatively narrow, this case study provides a valuable contribution to expanding the research despite its limitations.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the experience of co-teaching and to model the practice for pre-service teachers. The findings suggest that co-teaching is effective as a learning and professional development tool and a method of collaboration to be adopted by pre-service English teachers. Student learning increases when teachers apply pedagogical innovation. Co-teaching in pre-service teacher education is an invaluable tool in developing teachers' and students' reflective skills and collaborative practices. However, in order to fully benefit from co-teaching while studying at the university, pre-service teachers need a model of this technique.

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