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Group Teaching Strategy; a new model for teaching young kids in an EFL setting

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Abstract:

A number of researches in recent years have made an attempt to integrate new strategies into the field of language teaching in order to improve the outcomes. One of the potentially useful developments which have been introduced to the field is co-teaching. Yet the effect of using this strategy has not been extensively examined, particularly in some areas of SLA such as children's classes. As young kids possess special characteristics such as creativity and joyfulness, the teaching environment should fulfill a number of requirements to help them flourish. Drawing on different models of co-teaching, this article tries to introduce a new co-teaching model for young children in an EFL setting. After delineating the Group Teaching strategy, it further discusses the potential benefits of this new model of collaborative teaching in a young children's class.

Keywords: Co-teaching, SLA children classes, EFL, teaching strategy, collaborative teaching

1. Introduction

Although language teaching methodology had indulged many researchers over years, the focus of attention has shifted to wider scopes including factors that influence the learning environment and the learners. In particular, classroom techniques and strategies have become the spotlight in recent years. Foreign language classroom has been considered a different and demanding area of instruction. Particularly, teaching English to children in a foreign language environment has been one of the most challenging tasks. This is the area where creativity abounds and it requires more innovative approaches to keep up with the growing creativity among younger kids. Not enough research has delved into finding new techniques and strategies so far. Language classes for children should be full of fun, games, physical action and drama. This necessitates the integration of new techniques and teaching models that can change the strict milieu of a class into a more dramatic and game-bound setting. Besides, the unique nature of children's classes, the EFL environment has its specific requirements and limitations. This article makes an attempt to examine the background and possibility of adopting new teaching models into children's language classes.

1.1. Co-teaching and its origin

Collaborative teaching has its roots in special education and is defined as an instructional delivery approach in which a classroom teacher and a special education teacher or another professional share responsibility for planning, delivering and evaluating instruction for a group of students (Cook and Friend 1995). Gately and Gately (2001) have delineated co-teaching in special education as the collaboration between general and special education teachers for all teaching responsibilities of all the students. This collaboration could be between a main teacher and an assistant specialized in a particular field such as math or reading. Cook and Friend (1995) define the our key components of co-teaching as

1. Who are teaching?
2. What action is expected?
3. To whom the instruction is delivered?
4. Where does co-teaching occur?

A number of terms such as team teaching, collaborative teaching and cooperative teaching have been seen in the literature all referring to co-teaching strategy. Li (2008) believes all the terms have been used similarly to refer to two or more teachers contributing to the same group of assigned students. While each term might emphasize a different aspect of the new strategy, co-teaching seems to be a common term among the researchers. What has been differently conceptualized and as a result differently implemented is the type of relationship between the two teachers in one class, known as models of co-teaching.

1.2. Co-teaching Models

In one of the earliest classifications which have been adopted in later studies, five teaching models were identified by Friend, Reising, and Cook (1993); One-teaching-one assisting where one lead teacher does the presentation of the content and the other assists the students; Station teaching where each teacher repeats a part of the content to a small group of students moving in stations; Parallel teaching where each teacher instructs a different content to a group of students; Alternative teaching where one teacher teaches to the larger group and the other works on a smaller group; Team teaching where both teachers share the responsibility of teaching to the whole class. Cook and Friend (1995) later added another models called one-teaching, one observing and delineated their 6 approaches to co-teaching, discussing the advantages and disadvantages of each. What all model share is assigning the responsibility of teaching to one class to two or more teachers who do not necessary have equal roles or functions in the classroom. Other versions of co-teaching models suggested by some researchers are more or less the same with different terminology. One case is the five models suggested by Haynes (2007) who investigates collaboration between a mainstream teacher and a push-in ESL teacher. Her approaches include Teach and write, parallel teaching, alternative teaching, team teaching and lead and support.

1.3. Merits and Pitfalls

A number of studies have explored the benefits of co-teaching strategy. Dieker and Murawaski (2003) claim that co-teaching environment can provide more effective environment and better input than what a single teacher can accomplish. Other studies have tried to examine the effectiveness of co-teaching model on students' achievement; however, many lack quantitative data. Out of 89 studies reviewed by Murawski and Swanson (2001), only 6 provided sufficient quantitative information. Their analysis was based on 6 co-teaching experiments in the field of special education. Although co-teaching seemed to be moderately effective, the experiments so far did not show significant difference between co-teaching and regular single controlled classes. Yet, they call for further research to substantiate co-teaching as an effective service delivery option for students with disabilities. Friend (2008) states that many studies on co-teaching have just gathered data about teachers, administrators, parents and students perception of co-teaching while the outcomes of studies experimenting with students show mixed and unclear results depending on the working relationship between teachers. Discussing the challenges in co-teaching and the solutions, Friend (2008) concludes that co-teaching has tremendous potential as a strategy for improving the achievement of the learners. She further stipulates that implementing the strategy is not as easy as it seems. In a more recent article, Abdallah (2009) reviews and discusses positive attitudes toward co-teaching and states that co-teaching can be beneficial if the right model is used. She further stipulates that co-teaching lowers teacher student ratio and exposes the students to different teaching methods. Yet a number of concerns have been raised over the correct adoption of the innovative model. Several studies have tried to address the possible pitfalls and solution to effective implementation of the approach. Many studies have emphasized the importance of instructional planning between co-teachers before they start any class. (Cook and Friend 1995; Dieker 2001; Gately and Gately 2001). Others consider planning the instruction and planning time to have a great role in co-teaching classes in addition to the creativity (Honigsfeld and Dove 2008) which is the inevitable part of co-teaching strategy. Lacking adequate planning time is one of the issues affecting the quality and success of co-teaching practice regardless of the environment in which it is used. Friend (2008) enumerates the challenges facing co-teaching practice including arranging planning time, building positive working relationships, clarifying roles and responsibilities and ensuring administrative support. The nature of cooperation between teachers in the classroom is another key element in successful implementation of co-teaching. Reviewing team teaching practice between native and non-native English teachers in Japanese secondary EFL schools, Tajino and Tajino (2000) discussed different patterns of communication to improve the effectiveness of team teaching strategy. They propose the notion of team learning and various patterns to achieve better results.

Maintaining a positive relationship between co-teachers and trying to compromise in case of conflicting ideas has been another major problem reported in interviews with co-teachers participating in the model. (Tajino 2002)

1.4. Transfer of co-teaching into other fields of education

Despite the unclear superiority of this model over traditional classrooms, some researchers in other areas of education who assume the potential merits of the approach have adopted it. Honigsfeld and Dove (2008) propose that it is time for creative collaboration among teachers for the sake of students. They further claim that teachers will welcome the opportunity to collaborate once they have tried it. Like any other new innovation co-teaching, though emerging from the field of special education, has been adopted to other areas of education. Murphy, Beggs and Carlisle (2003) investigated co-teaching of primary school science classes by science specialist student teachers and main primary teachers. They found positive effects on students' enjoyment in science classes. The successful integration of co-teaching in a wide range of areas has expanded its use to areas of English language teaching. Bahamonde and Friend (1999) were the first ones to study this method in bilingual teaching and Greany (2004) explored it in intensive foreign language programs. More language specific studies were launched to examine co-teaching approaches in ESFL and EFL environments. The collaboration between a mainstream teacher and an ESL teacher for serving the learners of English as a second Language has been investigated in a number of studies (Zehr 2006, Honigsfeld and Dove 2010, Hendrickson 2011). A similar interest has risen in the field of teaching English to EFL students where cooperation between a native and a non-native English teacher seems to create a more effective learning environment. (Shimaoka, T. and K. Yashiro 1990, Tajino and Tajino 2000, Li 2008) Most of these studies have considered co-teaching beneficial in terms of motivation for communication in the target language, cross cultural understanding, and student participation (Tajino 2002). In a later empirical study, Honigsfeld and Dove (2010) explore the issue by illustrating how a collaborative model can be used in an ESL classroom where a mainstream teacher and an ESL teacher work together. They made suggestions for building relationship among co-teacher such as slow, careful planning, sustained support and training and having realistic expectations. Few studies have investigated implementing co-teaching model in EFL children classrooms. Aliakbari and Mansoorinejad (2010) examined the implementation of co-teaching model for improving EFL learners' grammatical proficiency. They compared the achievement of first graders in 2 classes in a junior high school in Iran. These students were taught English grammar using different models. The treatment group was co-taught by 2 teachers and the control group received normal instruction by a single teacher. They did not find any significant difference and therefore they stipulate that co-teaching model does not seem to bring better result in the particular environment explored. They believe the presence of two teachers created baffling environment. They further emphasize the need for planning teaching tasks and consensus on each teacher's role in the classroom.

1.5. English in young children EFL classes

Perhaps one of the untouched areas in EFL setting is teaching young children. Studies on methodology in young children classes have been scarce due to the fact that young children have unique features and qualities which make their classes different from older children and adolescents. The booming interest to learn English among young kids in EFL environments like Iran requires greater in-depth studies in the field (Rahmanian, Haghshenas, Keshavarz, Narmany 2012). Two general concepts about children learning processes come from prominent psychologist Piaget and Vygotsky. While the former emphasizes that Children are active learners and thinkers and thus, they learn through their individual actions and expectation (Piaget 1970), the latter speculates that children learn through social interaction (Vygotsky 1962), which means that children construct knowledge through interaction with other people. Cameron (2001) states that the child is an active learner in the world full of objects in Piaget's views where as in Vygotsky's opinion, the child is an active learner in a world full of other people. Though different in nature, both views support children's engagement in action and plays whether they are interacting with objects, people or fanciful characters. Khanj (1996) proposes that teachers need to consider how different games will benefit students. Researchers in the field have emphasized the use of songs, stories, rhymes and games (Vernon 20, Cameron 2001, shin 2002). Some further highlight the need for variety, which can be really motivating. Young learners should have fun and engage in enjoyable activities such as songs, chants, finger plays and storytelling (Shin 2002) Games add variation to a lesson and increase motivation by providing a pleasurable incentive to use the target language. A major problem in children's classroom is attention span. Children are less able to give selective and

prolonged attention to learning tasks. Children are more enthusiastic and lively but they lose their interest and motivation more quickly. (Cameron 2001). According to Shin (2006), very young language learners i.e. kids under age of 7 are very different from older children. These kids acquire through hearing and experiencing lots of English, learn things through playing, learn unconsciously and incidentally, love playing with language sounds, imitating, making funny noises. Superfine (2002) lists the following features of favorable teaching situation for children; small learning groups, suitable teaching aids, appropriate methodology and appropriately trained and prepared teachers. The teaching task becomes more complicated and demanding when teaching English in a foreign language environment. L2 learning environment is different from L1 in that language is decontextualized and artificial. Furthermore, learners are not motivated (Shin 2006). Hence teaching English to very young children in an EFL setting is demanding and difficult both due to the unique nature of these children and their decontextualized learning environments. Nunan (2011) questions the appropriateness of current practices in teaching English to children and calls for considering factors such as curriculum models and methodology in teaching English to children. Hence, we believe some improvement can be achieved if a new model can be proposed which is in congruence with the nature of the children and EFL specific requirements.

2. Discussion

2.1. Adopting co-teaching into young children's classes

The current study attempts to explore the possibility of adopting co-teaching model into young children's English classes in an EFL environment. As discussed earlier, different models of co-teaching have been introduced and explored in the field of special education. Yet, it is worth noting that while not all co-teaching models are applicable to a particular setting (Ali Akbari and MansooriNejad 2010). Adopting the right teaching model can pave the way for successful co-teaching relationships. Besides the model, teachers' roles, features of students, and objectives of the course play a major role. To achieve this goal, we believe that a new model should be proposed which can match the requirements of kids' language classes. Drawing on previous research on the models of co-teaching, we suggest that a further distinction should be made regarding the role of the teachers in the classroom. As the strategy originated in special education, the collaboration formed between the main teacher and a specialist. Their roles are clearly different as their fields of expertise are not the same. The same thing is true when the model was transferred into ESL classrooms. The mainstream teacher and the ESL teacher had somewhat different responsibilities to fulfill. Even the collaboration between a native and non-native teacher of English is complementary as their roles are different. Here we prefer to call this form of collaboration complementary co-teaching. In contrast our model of co-teaching is collaboration between three teachers who have similar fields and levels of expertise. Their roles are not different despite the fact that one may lead the class like the first model of Friend, Reising, and Cook (1993). The main reason for them working together is for the sake of a better presentation of the lesson contents. To be more specific, collaboration between 3 teachers can create fun and variety in children's classes. This form of co-teaching can be called associated co-teaching. This cooperation between lead teacher and assistant teacher who assume equal responsibilities in the classroom has been called team teaching by some researchers (Tajino and Tajino 2000). Yet, our form of co-teaching is neither cooperation between interdisciplinary teachers nor collaboration between native and non-native teachers. Of course, the terminology is not the goal. Rather we are trying to implicate that the kind of model which can be used in children's classes should differ from most previous models in that the objectives of group teaching approach is different from that of co-teaching models.

2.2. Group Teaching Strategy

As discussed earlier, there are some influential factors to consider: the correct teaching model, teachers' roles, features of students, and objectives of the course. Co-teaching model for children's classes should be different from other co-teaching approaches because of 3 specific features: unique nature of young children, decontextualized EFL setting and game-like environment of the classes. Regarding the model and in order to deal with the problem of conflicting responsibilities, the associated model is proposed where one teacher has the lead and the other two teachers assist him in performing the tasks and games. The lead teaching position can be given to the more experienced teacher but more fun can be created if the lead role switches from time to time or in different sessions.

This problem can be solved through sufficient planning as already proposed by other researchers. Hence 2 models of Group Teaching can be proposed:

1. Fixed lead role: 1 lead teacher + 2 assistants (the assistants can be student teachers or more novice ones)
2. Rotational lead role: The lead role is assigned to one of the teachers based on planning and it is changed from session to session or task to task.

Both of these models can have their own strong and interesting points. In the first one everyone knows his or her roles better and everyone has a definite role throughout the term. However, in the second one, teachers get less tired and teaching is shared between all the three interchangeably. Besides, children will feel more excited as new lead roles are introduced for each session or each activity. Group Teaching Model is based on three teachers taking the control of the class and collaborating the teaching process. As one is standing in front of the class, and two others are sitting among the students and playing the role of student to give them more sense of playfulness, have a better control of the young children, and assure the accuracy and precision of learning among them as well as share the energy and burden of teaching among themselves. The strong points of this model of teaching are that all parts comply with the unique nature of the children. All the teachers are wearing colorful, alphabetically painted, animal-drawn and funny clothes which have their own benefits. Teachers help to change the strict milieu of the class into a game house and make them not feel tired and give them a sense of joy.

There are some simple rules to perform this method. There is a need for toys based on the parts of the books, which are being taught. For instance, if in a lesson, there is a picture of either a ball or a train, there should be toys in order for the teachers to be able to role-play, as it is the indispensable part of the teaching process. As repetition is a major technique used when teaching kids, it is vital for the other teachers to repeat alongside with the students. This will make all students engage in the learning process. Besides, the presence of the other two teachers among students will create joy and energy. Then once the teaching is done, teachers gather in front of the class, and it is time for playing with the learned words, animals, and colors. Teachers play a kind of role-play. Then some of the children are called up in front of the class to join the games. It should not take too long to get the child into the actual environment of the word use; perhaps a couple of minutes would suffice for them to feel ready. Games help the children in three varied ways: 1. Make them interested in what they are learning 2. Make them learn the word in the actual environment 3. It is compatible with the child's natural traits of loving games and learning the best through games as well as enhancing their creativity.

2.3. Advantages of this strategy

1. The first teacher does not need to be in charge of all teaching aspects like attracting every one's attention, getting every individual's cooperation and correcting every single child. As there might be more than 20 students in a class, s/he can just focus on teaching the content through the help of the other two teachers. This kind of class management will dramatically increase the quality of teaching.
2. The teachers' presence among the children will urge all the children to cooperate, and since they are so close to them, they will be vigilantly watching for pronunciation mistakes and will help them if they have difficulty in pronouncing or writing the words.
3. There is a great amusement going on in the class which complies with the child's nature. The children will not feel bored as the class is teeming with games and energy. So, apparently, all obstructs will be gone which will lead to higher quality and better efficiency.
4. Simultaneous repetition and movement of two other teachers with children will not only de-stress the class and boost up their morale, interest, attentions and cooperation, but also dramatically enhance precision and accuracy.
5. Last but not the least, this method shares the features of dramatic method (Rahmanian, Haghshenas,2012) of teaching to children due to the fact that most of the class is based on the child's engagement in playing the drama and roles.

3. Conclusion

Group Teaching Strategy provides a better ground for implementing a more effective teaching which comprises all the necessary requirements based on the children's unique nature and traits. It brings more fun to the classroom and it helps execution of play and drama which are the lifeblood of a child's class. Moreover, a more energetic teaching, a better supervision and easier correction of children can be achieved through this model which can lead to a more effective teaching. In general, the presence and cooperation of three teachers facilitates the presentation and execution of the games and creation of joy and fun among young children. That is the main purpose for incorporating Group Teaching Strategy. It should be noted that the Group Teaching Model is proposed as a theoretical Model which can be beneficially used in young children classes. Yet the outcomes should be experimentally examined in different teaching environments. In order to achieve better results, the following limitations should be addressed in designing and implementing an experiment. First, having three teachers taking the helm of teaching process, a rather more spacious class will be needed. Second, it will be rather costly for an institute to afford a group of three teachers for each class, so more children can be enrolled in one class to make it cost effective. Third, the harmony and preparation of all three teachers is rather hard to achieve. Therefore, more time should be devoted to co-planning to get them into the same wavelength. Last but not the least, the current books taught in institutes may not fit the situational needs of Iranian children at ages of 3-6, i.e. the content of books are viewed not to be complying with the environmental encountering of a child (Rahmanian et al 2012) so group teaching demands its own instructional book which should be carefully designed.

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