Co-teaching As a Possibility for Differentiated Instruction

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Background

In recent years, some progressive schools in Hong Kong and in some Asian countries have taken a flexible approach to timetabling and class structuring, aiming at creating more space for teachers and students. One curriculum initiative is the integration of co-teaching and split class teaching in a subject. A common practice is 'grazing' (Vaughn et al , 1997): that is when two teachers are present in the classroom, one stands at the front of the room providing explanation or instruction, and one 'drifts' around assisting students or checking to see if they are paying attention or following the lesson. However, as all the steps of the lesson can be managed equally well by one teacher, co-teaching is reduced to whole-class teaching being shared between two teachers, resulting in a duplication of effort and a waste of human resources. In view of some misunderstandings seen in the conduct of co-teaching in some language teaching classrooms, I try to review the principles of co-teaching and discuss how they can be practised in schools to the realization of differentiated instruction in English language teaching.

What is Co-teaching?

According to Bauwens et al (1989), co-teaching is understood as the simultaneous presence of the general education and special education workers, who jointly teach academically and behaviourally heterogeneous groups of students in educationally integrated settings. Now, co-teaching is a teaching approach adopted in a wide range of classrooms. 'Leave no child behind' remains the leading principle of co-teaching from the past decade. So, the first aim of co-teaching is to cater for learner diversity in class.

Another aim of co-teaching is to enhance the quality of teaching. Added teaching power should be directed at providing positive synergy to enhance student learning. Co-teaching can be understood as co-planning and co-teaching realised in a differentiated package of instruction as below:

- Teachers in a co-teaching pair/team plan a scheme of work, which is aimed at the average student.
- Teachers then introduce changes to the plan in response to the different needs, abilities, interests, learning styles etc. of students.
- Teachers choose a mode of co-teaching to implement on the basis of their own expertise.

It should be remembered that co-teaching is meant to serve a differentiated curriculum/ kind of instruction and, therefore, planning should start from the perspective of the learner rather than from what the teacher can offer at the start of the planning stage. The steps of co-planning and co-teaching should not be reversed.

What Are Some Modes of Co-teaching?

Co-teaching can take many patterns. Which three of the following scenarios do you think are typical co-teaching designs that cater for the different needs and interests of students?

1. Both teachers work with their own groups in a class and they teach, re-teach, supplement and instruct their own students until the two groups are ready to rejoin later for some core tasks.
2. Both teachers divide the content and skills to be taught. Students rotate through 'stations' managed by the teachers. Eventually all students participate in all 'stations.' This is more suitable for classrooms with 'learning centres- e.g. storytelling corner, writing corner.'
3. One provides core content, one provides supplementary instruction to the less able students or to the remedial class.
4. Split the instructional tasks, with each teacher taking responsibility for specific groups of students, e.g. for variation of tasks.

5. Both jointly plan instruction, each delivers it to half of the class.

Co-teaching partners should not simply divide the work between each other and just teach their own part of the lesson(s) as in mode 5. Neither should teachers be reduced to a minor role as an assistant, as in mode 3, simply explaining the content again to some students. Mode 3 can be a reasonable co-teaching design if it is modified in this way : One teacher presents material, one presents strategies; one takes turns leading discussion, one demonstrates concepts/strategies. The assignment of duties depends on the special knowledge and skills of different teachers. They should make sure that their roles are complementary, not supplementary. Their particular expertise can be a deciding factor for co-teaching when variation of core tasks is required to cater to different levels of student ability and interest. Thus, mode 4 is an appropriate pattern of co-teaching in this case. I will discuss the other modes in the next section.

Conditions and Resources Necessary in Schools

For one plus one (1 +1) to become two plus (2+, 3+,…), and not just two (2) when practising co-teaching (i.e. co-planning cum co-teaching), schools need to provide the necessary supporting conditions. Supportive measures should be in place to create space for teachers. It is necessary to schedule co-teaching and separate time slots for co-teaching staff to carry out other instructional activities. For example, a secondary school allows three co-teaching lessons per week for some secondary classes. With such a provision, there are three lessons open for two English language teachers to plan and implement co-teaching. An instructional unit may be devised as follows: The class is split into two teams based on students' interests and needs in a story performing task. Both teams work on a story of their choice, practise skills and rehearse in separate venues but at the same time for a week under the support of two teachers. Then they merge later to have core story performing activity - with the two teachers as adjudicators and a large number of students as audience for the two teams of performers. This sort of co-teaching is an example of mode 1.

The same story-performing task may take mode 2 of co-teaching patterns, if one teacher has drama training background and another is good at story writing. Half of the class may then spend time with one teacher at the drama skills station and then shift to the story writing station to get the help of another teacher to analyse the story characters. In this way, both teachers can make best use of their own special skills with a small group and students will get sufficient attention at each work station. These two examples illustrate the diversity and flexibility which can be realised in holistic curriculum planning to enhance teaching and learning.

Professional Development

Co-teaching collaboration is sometimes described an "arranged marriage" (Finley, 2005). An imposed pairing-up for co-teaching will lock teachers into a superficial approach to shared planning and teaching if they are not well-informed about the concepts and techniques of the new teaching approach. School management can arrange more professional development programmes for teachers, and organise inter-school sharing and interflow of experiences on similar topics.

Final Remarks

In many classrooms, co-teaching partnerships have been characterised by collaboration between content subject teachers and special educators in monitoring duties within the classroom. When the world is getting smaller, and collaborative teaching culture is more common in schools, co-teaching is likely to become more important in a wider range of teaching contexts. I hope to see that one plus one results in three, four and five, and the students learn better from the strategic planning and flexible implementation of co-teaching.

Reference

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