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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN A CO-TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

There is an increasing need in different areas of the academic world to join efforts for particular endeavors. In this scenario, collaboration emerges as a strategy that educators and students can make use of to achieve the goals they have set their mind to during a term or academic cycle. Within the spectrum of possibilities, co-teaching appears as a strategy which allows teacher's educators to take care of the different dimensions which are part of student-teachers' educations. The dimension tackled in this qualitative action research project include didactic, pedagogical, metacognitive, and professional development areas, among others. Particularly, the purpose of this paper is to unveil the potential benefits that a group of first semester student teachers from ÚNICA university might assign to the co-teaching process in terms of its contribution to their professional development as prospective teachers. To that end, a set of reflections and interview answers were collected, coded, categorized, and analyzed. It was found that co-teaching provided co-educators with the possibility to assort strategies and resources, which in turn, has a positive incidence in the learning process. Also, it was evidenced that co-teaching favours collaborative work with all it implies in the co-planning, co-teaching as well co-assessing moments.

Introduction

The cornerstone of this study is to observe and analyze the operation of co-teaching dynamics in the EFL context and more specifically in the education of foreign language student-teachers. The study resorts to the analysis of narratives and interviews to students-teachers and educators in Institución Educativa Colombo Americana (ÚNICA). The aim of such instruments is to pinpoint the participant's views on co-teaching after its implementation. Aspects like co-evaluation, co-teaching, and student-teachers' education emerged to inquire the validity of this didactic approach.

Co-teaching has widely been explored in the field of general education practices around the world and defined as a collaborative method of instruction (Murawski & Hughes, 2009) in which multiple decisions and accountability for students' learning are shared (Shumway et al; 2011). Besides the prolific amount of literature devoted to describe co-teaching antecedents, the lack of implementations focused on this technique in the Colombian context is rather surprising. A thorough exploration about this matter in the country revealed that scarce literature has approached co-teaching in the country, one example of this attempt is *English for Opportunities and Competitiveness* (EFOC), program from the Ministry of Colombian Education which aim was to hire 63 Native English speakers to provide students with cultural background and communicative experiences, unfortunately this co-teaching experience lacked the principles of collegiality exposed by Shumway et al (2011).

Similarly, this study found scattered monographies on co-teaching implementation in special and basic education, as it is the case of Duque in 2010, whose thesis pursues the characterization and impact of teachers' roles as they are involved in a team-teaching experience with pre-school pupils in an EFL context in Medellin. In the same manner Pueyo and Ramírez (2020) carried a qualitative and descriptive study with 8th and 9th graders to implement co-teaching in a public school in the Colombian capital. The last remarkable study about co-teaching corresponds to Lopez (2020). In her role as a student-teacher, she attempted to

lead several lessons with pre-school teachers by implementing a *one-teach-one assist* modality of collaborative teaching.

The ventures on co-teaching in Colombia show that the studies made so far have appropriateness in the special and lower education, but few if none, have explored this approach with higher education, and much less with upper-education, not to say with student-teachers who, by being exposed to the technique may include it in their future professional practices. Thus, the gap between international and national literature reveals a need to deepen towards an understanding of the potential of this strategy in ELT and University level classes. The fact that this study was carried out in a student-teachers' education context provides preliminary insights about the potential of co-teaching as a widespread practice among future teachers. Equitably important is the reflection of co-teaching attempts done in Colombia in the EFL field, as well as the impact it has on student- teachers' communication and future pedagogical skills.

Due to the aforementioned descriptions, this study finds relevance to develop a new thread of academic thought in which co-teaching makes itself a room in prospective teachers' context. This undertaking offers an innovative view from the perspective of pedagogical and professional development scopes. Teacher-to-be students experience and evaluate co-teaching in the study and open a possibility for future elaborations on the field.

Theoretical Perspectives

Defining co-teaching

Broadly speaking, since the 1990's the act of co-teaching has been linked to several labels that may be perceived slightly as different but embody most of its principles: team teaching, collaborative teaching, and cooperative teaching (Friend, 2008a). The literature about this concept indicates that it has been defined in harmony with the purpose, population, and setting where it has been implemented. In Cook and Friend's perspective (2004) for instance, co-teaching presupposes that two or more educators or teaching staff be hired to share instructional duties

for a particular group of students, mainly in a classroom or workspace, with specific aims and embodying collaborative ownership, joint resources, and collective accountability. Most definitions of co-teaching refer to an action which is performed by at least two teachers, sharing the same teaching space, and sharing responsibilities. For Escobar Urnemeta (2021), the venue or space as well as responsibilities should be aimed to “provide their students with higher quality teaching attention” (p. 38).

Student Teachers’ Professional Development

The relevance of the present study relies on the eventual impact it has in the development of beliefs and perceptions that ELT student- teachers have on the co-teaching experience as an innovative approach at ÚNICA University.

After developing the state-of-the-art session in this proposal, we found little, if any, literature about co-teaching practices in higher education in Colombia. This seemingly unprecedented practice that ÚNICA tries to implement within its bilingual education program, deserves a deeper observation. The motivation to explore and implement the co-teaching model relies on the need to expose student- teachers to innovative and meaningful practices in which they perform simultaneously the roles of learners and pre-service instructors, needless to mention that the COVID conjuncture led both teachers and pupils to reflect upon the roles and practices demanded from them to be relevant and updated in the education context. Thus, the opportunity to experience this initiative with colleagues-to-be in the area of ELT implied the presence of a variable to consider, which is the definition of identities and roles for the student- teachers’ projection as professionals.

Methodology

As suggested by Strauss and Corbin(2002), we followed the open coding steps to analyze narratives and interviews. To that end, we assigned a label to different phenomena identified in meaningful portions of the texts. Having done so allowed

us to categorize headings which pointed to similar information. This open coding process entailed a detailed and precise register of data to break them down and reduce them to their most significant elements, based on our interpretation.

Characterization of Participants

The participants of the study were 12 student-teachers in the first semester of the Licenciatura en Bilinguismo at ÚNICA University in Bogotá. Their ages varied from 17 to 42, and they enrolled in the university from different geographic and socio-economic backgrounds. This guaranteed a varied sample of products regarding views and beliefs on teaching. The characterization of the entry profile made by the university revealed that all of them shared a basic level of English language command. Interestingly, a character strength test made by the academic enrollment office found out that a high percentage of them treasured the following values: love for learning, equity, and honesty. The results of this test were part of the SEL model the UNICA has been implementing for two years.

Analysis

The brief reflections and answers provided by student-teachers revealed their interest to use co-teachings as a pedagogical option in their future teaching experiences. On the one hand, they valued the possibility that this technique offers to speed up the learning process of student, and on the other hand, they recognized that co-teaching might facilitate the workload co-teachers share and allow them to provide a wider variety of strategies for their students:

I would like make co-teaching with a partner in the future because it's faster or easier, because the roles are divided, the work is divided too, and I think that... is easier for the students because... they learn more with different... strategies or... (Interview, participant # 2).

Because you work... You work better with a friend. The students learn more, they... they feel that have more help (Interview, participant # 5).

I have learned the importance of teamwork and the good thing is that the two teachers use what we learned in the previous class, teacher (Interview, participant # 6).

Okay, teacher. Teacher, because... you and James mention different aspects that... are very important for my... learning process... (Interview, participant # 8).

The truth is that I never had a co-teaching class, but in my opinion is the best way to learn and I want to do the same in a future as a teacher because it is the best learning method for students, they learn faster (Second reflection, participant # 1).

I really didn't know what was co-teaching, but now I love learning with this strategy, ÚNICA students have an advantage. I like having two supports in my English class and as future teachers we have the best strategies for our students (Second reflection, participant # 2).

The method of co-teaching is a privilege, since we can explore in many ways and different strategies, and thus express knowledge as future teachers, and to set out to achieve all our teaching goals (Second reflection, participant #7).

In the future when I am a teacher, I want my students to differentiate my unique classes in which different methodologies that make learning effective are applied (Second reflection, participant # 12).

...and it will also contribute to our future life as teachers because we will know how to bring a better teaching to our group of students (Third reflection, participant # 1).

I hope to continue understanding co-teaching since I would like to be able to apply it at some point in my career as a teacher; I also want to keep in mind each of the strategies and tools used in the classroom (Third reflection, participant # 3).

Thanks to Every one of the teachers for doing a good co-teaching and showing us how to teach in different ways (Third reflection, participant # 5).

The aforementioned fragments show that prospective teachers acknowledge how innovative and practical co-teaching could be to expose students to a larger repertoire of didactic strategies and techniques. Similarly,

student-teachers identify the possibility collaborative teaching brings in for co-educators to attend to different needs and different learning styles in the same classroom. This is perceived by them as potential benefit of co-teaching in terms of their professional development because it shows, from a theoretical-practical perspective, how to boost the foreign language learning process in their students.

Particularly, in the attempt to favor different learning styles, co-teaching, according to student-teachers views, endows the co-teachers the possibility to customize the teaching-learning process in a welcoming environment. This is true if we consider that having two teachers facilitates the access students have to multiple resources, tools, and teaching styles. Needless to mention, in not so large classes, as the one this project was held in, co-teaching is advantageous since the one-to-one attention ratio increases, which makes students feel taken care of and supported:

In the middle of the classes I have learned different pedagogical tools that can be very useful in the future so that my students can learn in a didactic way, starting from the point that all people are different and probably I will find students who have not had interaction with English and for them this language is a totally unknown world, so I must use tools that do not make the language seem difficult and can be useful for students by promoting a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom (Second reflection, participant # 10).

In the future when I am a teacher I want my students to differentiate my unique classes in which different methodologies that make learning effective are applied (Second reflection, participant # 12).

With help from teachers and peers you can make great progress, in addition to teaching you can be a counselor to contribute and ensure that students feel good to complete their cycles and start others is very rewarding (Third reflection, participant # 8).

Moreover, student teachers praise the chance co-teaching gives co-educators to reach agreements and consensus, as well as stay on the same line of thought when it comes to planning and implementing strategies, which ultimately might secure achieving teaching goals in a faster and more effective fashion. Their

appreciation also depicts the importance of teamwork in their professional development as collegial-oriented work entails easiness or comfort for each of the co-teachers in terms of complementing teaching styles, exchanging didactic insights, and exploiting the individual talents each teacher has:

Seeing so many teaching possibilities is great and I know I will put them into practice. It is hard, but with effort and dedication of both teachers, you can achieve things and see that there is a person who wants to go down your same path, it is great to be able to help students and contribute collaboratively in the best way to their improving (Second reflection, participant # 8).

With this work I learned that you can work as a team and see that everything can work if you have a proper order and if you have everything planned with your co-worker, and it is very good to see how the two teachers can take these bases and show us that if we plan well and we understand each other, it can be achieved (Third reflection, participant # 4).

I have learned to have a better perception of what it is to work in a team, that it is important to reach a working agreement and to reach a final point (Third narrative, participant # 6).

Conclusion

From this experience we have learnt that to the eyes of prospective teachers, co-teaching might function as a great option to accelerate learning processes in their future students. Learning could be sped up particularly by the richness and wide variety of didactic strategies, activities, and resources the implementation of co-teaching implies. Such richness of choices also entails a customization of learning styles and learning needs, allowing more personalized focus on each student that is reflected in an increase of the one-to-one attention range.

Furthermore, co-teaching was praised by student-teachers as a facilitating technique in terms of the workload that the co-educators share. By way of example, when two teachers join a co-teaching experience, there should be a balanced of efforts, duties, and responsibilities upon planning, instructing, and assessing. Once that balance is achieved, we can talk about the concept of

collegial work that also leads to sharing didactic perspectives and complementing each other's talents.

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