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Challenges and Triumphs of Co-Teaching in the World Language Classroom

Katrina M. Reinhardt

University of Indianapolis

Rose Q. Egan

Cathedral High School

Abstract

This article examines the challenges and benefits that exist for co-teaching between K-12 and university partners and discusses the implications of the findings for designing, delivering, and collaborating on world language curriculum. The researcher team consisted of one university instructor and one high school level instructor who worked together to co-plan and co-teach a third-year high school Spanish unit. The researchers completed a series of reflective journals on the co-planning and co-teaching experience as part of a case study for an action research project. The journals were analyzed to identify common themes during the experience. Key findings included (1) challenges with regards to time, scheduling, and finding an instructional balance between teachers (2) benefits of connecting with colleagues at other levels, increased opportunities for authentic oral communication, and reduced student-teacher ratios. The researchers also found increased awareness of technological tools, thoughtfulness when planning, and new activities and assessments to use in the classroom through the co-teaching experience. Finally, co-teachers reported the co-teaching experience to be a valuable professional development opportunity.

Introduction

Put a group of teachers together in a room and what do they do? Talk. Teachers like to talk, to collaborate, bounce ideas off one another, brainstorm with each other, share their successes and to lament their challenges. Teachers are social creatures, but if you consider the typical teacher day, it includes very little time for collaboration and true common planning. Even when time is dedicated to Professional Learning Communities (PLC) or Communities of Practice (COP) or whatever it may be called from district to district, many teachers spend that time getting caught up on the day-to-day administration of their jobs.

Teachers often feel like islands. Once the door closes to the classroom for the allotted amount of class time, the learning environment typically includes only one teacher to the number of students present that day. But what could happen if the learning environment included another teacher: an extra set of eyes, hands and ears; another example of what the target language sounds like; another perspective on vocabulary and grammar explanation; another creative brain to plan lessons? Enter the co-teacher.

ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages), along with the NEA (National Education Association) and the ADFL (Association of Departments of Foreign Languages), recommends that the student to teacher ratio in a second language classroom should not exceed 15:1 (ACTFL, 2010). Take a peek into the average American second language classroom, and you will find less than ideal circumstances. In a 2009 *New York Times* article comparing class sizes around the world, it was noted that the average secondary classroom in the United States was about 24 students (Rampall, 2009).

This action research project explored a co-taught classroom with 22 students: almost 50% more than the recommended amount by ACTFL. With the addition of the co-teacher, an 11:1 student to teacher ratio was achieved. In addition to the benefits of a small student-teacher ratio, the co-teachers were able to dedicate time to co-planning, co-teaching, and professional development, connecting at least two islands of a much larger archipelago of second language teachers.

Literature Review

Co-teaching is not a new concept in the field of education, reaching back to as early as 1973 (Heck, 2010, p. 6). Therefore, the definitions and interpretations of co-teaching are many. Villa, Thousand, & Nevin (2008) emphasize shared responsibility in their definition: “Co-teaching is two or more people sharing responsibility for teaching some or all of the students assigned to a classroom. It involves the distribution of responsibilities among people for planning, instruction, and evaluation for a classroom of students” (p.5).

Co-teaching originated as a method to better serve special education students in inclusion classrooms (Cook & Friend, 1995). Special educators teamed with general classroom teachers to develop strategies and deliver instruction in which all students could succeed. Literature on co-teaching between general educators

and special educators shows positive academic gains for students with disabilities (Magiera & Zigmond, 2005; Murawski and Hughes, 2009).

The success of the co-teaching model led teacher preparation programs across the United States to adopt a similar model for pre-service teachers. In many teacher preparation programs, pre-service teachers now team with classroom teachers to use a co-teaching model for their student teaching experiences. From 2004-2009, St. Cloud State University (SCSU) in Minnesota collected data on their teacher preparation program and co-taught students in first through sixth grade. Researchers compared standardized test scores of the elementary students enrolled in co-taught classrooms to their peers in traditional classrooms. Researchers found statistical significance in academic achievement in reading scores of co-taught students compared to their peers in traditional classrooms for all four academic years in the study. For the math scores, statistical significance in academic achievement was noted in two of the four years (Heck, 2010). With the data confirming co-teaching improves student achievement scores, SCSU has emerged as a leader in training university professors and classroom teachers how to implement co-teaching programs.

One now finds examples of co-teaching at many educational levels, including university. One type of partnership includes a university pre-service teacher education candidate and K-12 teacher for teacher preparation coursework at the university level, as described by the SCSU co-teaching model (Heck, 2010). In such settings, pre-service teachers co-teach with general classroom teachers during their student teaching internship. Research shows that this type of partnership yields pre-service teachers who are more efficient in their practice (Larson, 2008), as well as confident (Pancsofar & Petroff, 2013). Co-teaching at the university level also extends to university faculty pairs in which two professors may co-teach an interdisciplinary course (Ferguson & Wilson, 2011; Letterman & Dugan, 2004). This model is popular in honors courses and humanities, where instructors from the college of arts and sciences team up to deliver courses on literature and music, or history and art, etc.

In other instances, university faculty design field courses where they teach with field or community partners. Rutherford, Walsh, and Rook (2011) describe a type of curriculum delivery focused on co-learning, which they define as an “environment where university faculty and students learn side-by-side with agency staff and clients” (p.482).

What is missing from the literature is research on the benefits and challenges of co-teaching between a university and K-12 partner, both in the field of education and second language acquisition. In addition, rarely does the literature reflect any findings on co-teaching between two educators of the same content area (non-interdisciplinary) other than that of a student teacher/mentor teacher relationship.

Research Questions

This project begins to address what university faculty and K-12 teachers partnerships in the same academic field might look like. Using the co-teaching definition of Villa, Thousand, & Nevin (2008) that focuses on shared responsibility

for planning, instruction, and evaluation for a classroom of students, this project analyzes the experience and perceptions of a university and K-12 co-teacher in the same academic field. The project is divided into two research areas, co-planning and co-teaching. The project was designed to address the following research questions for each of the two research areas.

Co-Planning

- RQ1. How would you describe the lesson planning process when working with a co-teacher as compared to planning alone.
- RQ2. What modifications could be made so that co-teaching planning would work better for future lessons?
- RQ3. Describe today's challenges regarding lesson planning with a co-teacher.
- RQ4. Describe today's triumphs regarding lesson planning with a co-teacher.

Co-Teaching

- RQ5. What challenges exist for co-teaching between k-12 and university partners?
- RQ6. What benefits exist for co-teaching between k-12 and university partners?
- RQ7. How does this inform our practice when designing and delivering curriculum?

Methodology

A research team of two co-teachers conducted the action research project. Action research is defined as “a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action” (Sagor, 2000). The purpose of the action research project was to improve understanding of co-teaching as an instructional method and reflect upon how it might impact teaching practices. For the purpose of the action research project, the researchers employed a case study of a Spanish course at the high school level to gather data to address the research questions. The case study method was selected due to its value in allowing researchers to gain deeper understanding of an issue. Case studies are often used by researchers to examine real-life situations, issues, and problems and can strengthen the knowledge of what is already known about an event or phenomena through analysis of a particular event, circumstance, or situation. Case studies have been used across many disciplines, particularly by social scientists, as a method that uses qualitative research to examine real-life situations and “provide the basis for the application of ideas and extension of methods” (Soy, 1997). Specifically, this project used the case study method to examine how various users (high school and university faculty) perceive co-teaching strategies in the Spanish classroom and the implications these perceptions have on curriculum planning, course delivery, and professional development. This case study made use of several journal questions to gather a well-rounded view of co-teaching in the Spanish classroom.

Participants and setting

For this project the team of co-teachers consisted of one university instructor and one high school level instructor who worked together to co-plan and co-teach

a third-year high school Spanish unit. The university instructor taught at a small, Midwestern, private liberal arts college while the high school instructor taught at a mid-sized, private, Midwestern high school. The co-planning sessions occurred at various locations including a coffee shop, the high school, and the university. The co-teaching sessions were delivered in the high school classroom.

Project Design & Details

The project was designed and implemented in six stages:

Stage 1. Co-teachers met to choose week, topic, class, and academic level for the project, as well as co-plan. Lessons were to include formative/summative assessments and best practices for the discipline. Co-teachers were to use the St. Cloud Co-teaching Methods (adapted from Cook & Friend, 1995). See Table 1: Co-Teaching Strategies.

Table 1: Co-Teaching Strategies*

Strategy	Description
One Teach, One Observe	One teacher has primary instructional responsibility while the other gathers specific observational information on students or the (instructing) teacher. The key to this strategy is to have a focus for the observation
One Teach, One Assist	One teacher has primary instructional responsibility while the other teacher assists students with their work, monitors behaviors, or corrects
Station Teaching	The co-teaching pair divides the instructional content into parts and the students into groups. Groups spend a designated amount of time at each station. Often an independent station will be used.
Parallel Teaching	Each teacher instructs half of the students. The two teachers are addressing the same instructional material and present the lesson using the same teaching strategy. The greatest benefit is the reduction of student to teacher ratio.
Supplemental Teaching	This strategy allows one teacher to work with students at their expected grade level, while the co-teacher works with those students who need the information and/or materials extended or remediated.
Alternative/Differentiated Teaching	Alternative teaching strategies provide two different approaches to teaching the same information. The learning outcome is the same for all students, however the instructional methodology is different.
Team Teaching	Well planned, team-taught lessons, exhibit an invisible flow of instruction with no prescribed division of authority. Using a team teaching strategy, both teachers are actively involved in the lesson. From a student's perspective, there is no clearly defined leader, as both teachers share the instruction, are free to interject information, and available to assist students and answer questions.

* St. Cloud State University. (2011). Co-Teaching in Student Teaching. *Teacher Quality Enhancement Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/TERI/Co-Teaching/Foundations/Resources/SCSU-Facts-Sheet.pdf>

During Stage 1 of the project, co-teachers met to co-plan the lessons. Co-teachers elected to teach a three-week unit in a third-year high school Spanish course. The unit revolved around careers vocabulary in the target language, with a grammar focus on the subjunctive tense. Due to the schedule of the co-teachers as well as the way the unit would progress from start to finish, it was determined that the first three days of the unit would be co-taught. The middle week of the unit was devoted to student workshop time and would not necessitate a co-teacher. The last three days of the unit before the final assessment would also be co-taught. Each lesson consisted of a 45-minute class period and used a co-teaching strategy (listed above in Table 1: Co-Teaching Strategies).

Stage 2. Co-teachers kept a personal reflective journal of what they see as strengths and challenges of co-planning between university and K-12 partners.

The co-teachers agreed to answer the prompts on the Co-Planning Journal (see Appendix A) in order to gather data on RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4.

Stage 3. Co-teachers taught a series of lessons together during one unit of the class.

Co-teachers delivered the planned unit, including 6 co-taught lessons over a series of three weeks. See Table 2: Unit Plan for lesson details.

Table 2: Unit Plan

Day	Strategy	Activity	Description
Day 1	Team Teaching	Warm Up	Conjugations of verb <i>ser</i> using worksheet (Note: Daily warm-ups were selected to review verb conjugations in all tenses taught up to this point)
		Activity #1	Presentation of Nurse infographic Padlet for students to post observations **
		Activity #2	Introduction of non-cognate career vocabulary using circumlocution (modeling)
Day 2	Station Teaching	Warm Up	Conjugations of the verb <i>tener</i> using flubaroo/ Google Form
		Activity #1	Co-teachers developed four stations (1) Small group discussion on infographic questions with co-teacher (2) Online career test in target language with writing prompts (3) Circumlocution vocabulary activity and writing definitions in small groups (4) Grammar lesson on subjunctive. Students to rotate through stations. Complete two stations on day two and two stations on day three.

Day 3	Station Teaching	Warm Up	Conjugations of the verb <i>estar</i> using a Kahoot review game
		Activity #1	Students complete the two stations remaining stations from day two
Middle Week	n/a	Workshop	Workshop time for students to research and create their own career infographics
Day 4	Alternative/ Differentiated Teaching	Warm Up	Conjugations of the verb <i>dar</i> with an answer key to identify common mistakes
		Activity #1	Students grouped into two groups based on ability. Each co-teacher delivers lesson on impersonal expressions to her group.
		Activity #2	Co-teachers model a career fair assessment conversation
Day 5	Team Teaching	Warm Up	Conjugations of the verb <i>ir</i>
		Activity #1	Students participate in the career fair oral assessments using the infographics that they designed during the middle week. Co-teachers team teach/lead the assessment and evaluate students using determined rubrics.
Day 6	Team Teaching	Warm Up	Conjugations of the <i>ver</i>
		Activity #1	Continued from Day 5. Students participate in the career fair oral assessments using the infographics that they designed during the middle week. Co-teachers team teach/lead the assessment and evaluate students using determined rubrics.

** This activity became homework due to 2-hour delay (inclement weather) schedule

Stage 4. Co-teachers will co-evaluate projects and student learning that occurs during the co-taught unit.

The co-teachers co-evaluated the end of unit projects using different evaluation tools each day.

Stage 5. Co-teachers keep a personal reflective journal daily of what they see as strengths and challenges during the co-teaching sessions.

The co-teachers agreed to answer the prompts on the Lesson Delivery Journal (see Appendix B) in order to gather data on RQ5, RQ6, and RQ7.

Stage 6. Co-teachers met to analyze results from journals on co-planning and co-teaching.

Co-teachers met to analyze their co-planning and co-teaching journal for common themes. Journals were analyzed using a constant comparative method in order to find patterns within the narratives (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Data Collection

The Co-teachers provided two data sets for the project. The first data set consisted of a series of co-planning journals (see Appendix A). The co-planning journal contained a series of open-ended prompts for participants to use during reflection on lesson planning during the co-teaching experience. The second data set is similar to the first, but focused on the lesson delivery experience. The second data set collected information from a lesson delivery journal (see Appendix B), which contained a series of open-ended prompts for teachers to use during lesson delivery during the co-teaching experience.

Results & Discussion

The results of the planning and lesson delivery journal analyses are organized below according to each research question.

Co-Planning

RQ1. How would you describe the lesson planning process when working with a co-teacher as compared to planning alone?

Journals revealed that co-teaching was more time consuming than individual lesson planning for classes. Co-teachers noted that although the process took more time it was not a negative characteristic of the co-planning experience. Both teachers found value in having an additional teacher with whom to collaborate and brainstorm

creative strategies, and troubleshoot common problems encountered in the modern language classroom. Both teachers thought that they produced a better quality unit after having time to plan and think through each teaching strategy and activity with a partner. In addition, the co-teachers found co-planning to be a more social activity and not as isolating as teaching alone can sometimes be. Although their discussions would occasionally diverge from the lesson topic, most discussion still revolved around teaching strategies and new methods of teaching modern language.

RQ2. What modifications could be made so that co-teaching planning would work better for future lessons?

The university co-teacher struggled with unfamiliarity of the students, making it harder to plan and differentiate for their unique learning needs. One modification for this would be to select a unit to plan at the beginning of the year, so both the assigned classroom teacher and the co-teacher have equal knowledge of the students and their abilities. The co-teachers also planned their lesson a month in

advance (due to calendars and timing), and it may have been more effective to plan closer to the date of lesson delivery.

RQ3. Briefly describe today's challenges regarding lesson planning with a co-teacher.

As mentioned in RQ2, one major challenge for the university professor was unfamiliarity with the students. In addition, co-planning was a struggle for the university co-teacher as she was unfamiliar with the sequence of the curriculum and the previous content covered in the course. The journals showed that time commitment was a challenge. Finding time to meet when both teachers had different workdays, work hours, and work locations made it challenging.

RQ4. Briefly describe today's triumphs regarding lesson planning with a co-teacher.

Both co-teachers expressed that they found the co-planning experience to be more dynamic and enjoyable than individual planning. The opportunity to converse with another professional in their field left them feeling excited about their chosen profession and gave them renewed energy for teaching. In addition, co-teachers were able to grow professionally from planning with each other, learning of new ideas, strategies, and technologies to incorporate in their respective classroom. Finally, as noted above, both co-teachers agreed that the unit they planned together was a stronger lesson sequence than if they had planned alone.

Co-Teaching

RQ5. What challenges exist for co-teaching between k-12 and university partners?

The journals on co-teaching revealed several challenges during the experience. Two initial challenges were finding a balance of instructional time between the two co-teachers and finding a rhythm between the two teachers' instructional styles. Both teachers noted that as the experience continued, they were better able to find that "back and forth flow" between the two of them. As the pair logged more co-taught classes together, they were better able to balance instructional time and flow between who was leading the activities as well. This is not surprising, as many new experiences in the teaching field (new curriculum, new position, new colleague, new course) may require an adjustment period. Although it took the co-teachers a few class sessions to find their instructional flow, they found the rewards worth the initial challenges.

Additional challenges came from items outside the co-teacher's control, such as weather and scheduling. Teaching in the Midwest in the winter runs the risk of having snow/weather delays that then require adjusting the daily teaching schedule. Such weather and adjustments made it difficult for the co-teacher to arrive in time for the right class period and return to her campus in time to teach her regularly scheduled classes. Scheduling co-teaching units at the beginning or end of the school year can minimize these challenges, when weather is typically less of a scheduling issue.

RQ6. What benefits exist for co-teaching between K-12 and university partners?

As with the challenges for co-teaching, there were several benefits. First, when the co-teachers used the Alternative/ Differentiated Teaching strategy, they were able to divide the class into two smaller teaching groups. This led to a lower student-to-teacher ratio and provided more individual attention on the students. In addition, students could be grouped by ability and instruction could be more appropriately designed and paced to meet their current learning levels and abilities.

Co-teachers found that by having an additional teacher they were able to provide more opportunities for students to speak and/or ask questions, thus increasing language production during the class period. An additional teacher in the classroom created more opportunities for students to interact with a teacher, participate in the target language, and listen to live conversations between two proficient speakers. Co-teachers found that the experience also increased time of task and produced better behavior from the students. These results were not surprising, as having an extra adult in the classroom can help with issues of classroom management.

The university co-teacher also noted that she felt more connected to the K-12 field through this experience. She came away from this experience with a better understanding of how the field had changed since she moved from K-12 to university teaching 5 years earlier. Specifically, she noted the role of technology in the classrooms (as the K-12 classroom was a 1-to-1 iPad classroom). Typically university teachers in the College of Arts and Sciences have not taught their discipline at the high school level, or have been out of the k-12 field for several years, so participating in such an experience can bring new awareness to their discipline.

RQ7. How does this inform our practice when designing and delivering curriculum?

By working with a peer in a co-teaching experience, the co-teachers made several discoveries on how their practice was altered. Both co-teachers mentioned a more deliberate and thoughtful planning experience when working with a peer. What might have been a rushed, “what am I going to do tomorrow?” planning experience was converted into scheduled, prioritized planning session. Instead of defaulting to using the lesson plan from last year or last semester, co-teachers were able to take a deeper look at their plans, recall the positive and negatives of the lesson, and search for creative solutions as well as discuss new methods with a partner. The co-teacher focused on altering the lessons to involve more student interaction with the language and production opportunities. Overall, this collaboration led to what the teachers thought was a stronger, more thoughtful unit.

The co-teachers also noticed that co-teaching influenced their planning and grading of assessments. During one of the activities, both co-teachers graded the students using the same rubric, and then compared scores. Co-teachers were able to see if they had reached interrater reliability, which led to confirming and affirming that the teacher was assessing the students fairly and consistently with the

rubric. In addition, co-teachers were able to brainstorm new ways of assessment and providing students with feedback for oral activities.

Both co-teachers found that they were “better together” and increased their awareness of not only their own practice, but of what was happening in their field at other levels, K-12 or university. The co-teachers felt like the experience was productive professional development time, where they were able to actually plan for a class, while at the same time reflect on their teaching and collaborating on ways to improve instruction. Instead of leaving a professional development presentation with ideas only, they were able to use the time to actually create better units and lessons.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Recommendations

The results from the journals on the co-teaching experience led the co-teachers to believe that co-teaching may be a great professional development tool to engage teachers. Collaborating with peers can provide teachers with new ideas and help keep the passion alive for the profession. The co-teaching experience did call for extra time, but the extra time created multiple professional benefits including 1) time for reflection on personal practice, 2) exposure to new ideas, strategies, technologies and assessments, 3) stronger units with more opportunities for student language production, 4) increased opportunities to model live, authentic communication between proficient speakers, 5) confirmation of assessment reliability and 6) additional feedback for students on their work/abilities. These benefits outnumber the challenges that came with the project, which were 1) balance/flow in the classroom, and 2) scheduling.

The results of this project are limited due to the small number of participants. This project looked at a singular team of two teachers. Future co-teaching projects should strive to include more co-teaching teams to see if findings among multiple teaching pairs would be similar to the findings presented here. In addition to the journals, researchers may want to conduct a formal survey on the co-teaching teams with both Likert scale and open-ended questions to measure teacher perceptions and satisfaction during the experience. Also, while the co-teachers collected informal feedback from the students during this project, future projects should conduct a formal survey of the students using both Likert scale and open-ended questions to measure students' perceptions of the co-teaching experience. Future projects should also consider having a control class with one teacher and a project class that is co-taught. Assessment scores could then be compared between the control class and the co-taught class to see if student assessment scores increase through participation in a co-taught classroom. Finally, researchers may want to look more specifically at the challenges and benefits of one or all of the individual co-teaching strategies (listed in Table 1).

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Appendix A: Co-Teaching Planning Journal

Please use the following questions to frame your journal writing on the co-teaching planning experience. You will complete a journal entry for each session you meet with your co-teacher to plan.

Planning Date: _____

Planning Topic: _____

1. How would you describe the lesson planning process when working with a co-teacher as compared to planning alone?
2. What modifications could be made so that co-teaching planning would work better for future lessons?
3. Briefly describe today's challenges regarding lesson planning with a co-teacher.
4. Briefly describe today's triumphs regarding lesson planning with a co-teacher.

Appendix B: Co-Teaching Lesson Journal

Guiding Questions for this Study:

- What challenges exist for co-teaching between k-12 and university partners?
- What benefits exist for co-teaching between k-12 and university partners?
- How does this inform our practice when designing and delivering curriculum?

Please use the following questions to frame your journal writing on the co-teaching planning experience. You will complete a journal entry for each session you meet with your co-teacher to plan.

Lesson Date: _____

Lesson Topic: _____

Lesson Objective: _____

1. How do you think having a co-teacher during today's lesson impacted/did not impact your students? (their comprehension/engagement/participation/behavior/interest/time on task/critical thinking, etc.)
2. What effect did co-teaching have on the four communication skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) of the students during the lesson, if any?
3. What effect did co-teaching have on the three communicative modes (interpersonal, interpretive and presentational) of the students during the lesson, in any?
4. Were there any results/situations in class that surprised you (specific to co-teaching or student behavior/outcomes)?
5. How was your lesson delivery different when working with a co-teacher?

6. What modifications could be made so that co-teaching would work better for future lessons?
7. Briefly describe today's challenges regarding co-teaching this lesson.
8. Briefly describe today's triumphs regarding co-teaching this lesson.