Challenges of Implementing Station Teaching Between ELL Teachers and General Education Teachers and Its Implication on Classroom Practice

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Abstract

This article describes the practice, shortcomings and strengths of station teaching with English Language Learners (ELLs) in two elementary schools in Wendell (pseudonym) in the United States. This study aims to provide suggestions and recommendations for language teachers interested in implementing station teaching in their classrooms. This article is divided into three parts. First, the literature review focuses on definitions of station teaching and its benefits for both learners and teachers. Second, the observations of station teaching in two elementary schools are described and the following questions are answered: How was station teaching implemented in these two schools? How many stations were established? What learning areas (reading, writing, phonics, word instruction) were focused on in the station teaching? Who was involved in the station teaching? What problems occurred during its implementation? The third part relates the findings to the broader research questions and the literature on the subject of station teaching.

Literature Review

This literature review focuses on definitions of station teaching, its benefits for learners and teachers, and advice for ELL and general education teachers in carrying out station teaching. Station teaching is a type of co-teaching. Co-teaching is defined as two or more teachers delivering instruction to a diverse group of students in a single classroom environment (Murawski, 2005; Rea & Connell, 2005; Walsh & Jones, 2004; Keefe, Moore, & Duff, 2004). In station teaching, each teacher is responsible for planning and delivering instruction but their teaching content differs. The students rotate between stations where they work on certain assignments or receive instruction from the teachers. The teacher repeats the lesson for each group of students as
they come through their station. The content taught to each group is the same but the method of instruction may vary based upon the needs of each group (Cook, 2004; Friend, 2008; Murawski, 2005).

How should ELL and general education teachers collaborate and implement station teaching? Ideally, the teachers should be trained in co-teaching (DelliCarpini, 2009). O’Loughlin (2003) suggests that ELL teachers could provide support to ELLs in the classroom through the design of cooperative activities, cooperative groups, or station teaching. General education and ELL teachers should co-develop a lesson plan that is responsive to English language learners through incorporation of explicit goals for ESL development into curriculum and assessment planning processes, the negotiation of a shared understanding of their roles and responsibilities, and the establishment of systematic mechanisms for monitoring, evaluating, and giving feedback (Davison, 2006; Dieckmann, 2004).

**Methods**

Purposeful sampling and convenience sampling are used in this study because the researcher wishes to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merrian, 1998). The researcher did an internship in a school district office in Wendell in the Fall of the 2009 academic year. The two schools were collaborating schools where ELL and general education teachers collaborated through the use of co-teaching models.

In this study, observational field notes provide the major research data. Observation is the most natural way of collecting data, as it allows researchers to gain an understanding of observed behaviors (Bartels, 2005; Richards & Morse, 2007). The researcher observed the ELL teachers’ classroom practice as well as their co-planning and debriefing meetings with the instructional coach. The researcher later analyzed the data after organizing it into more abstract units of information or themes (Creswell, 2009; Hatch 2006; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

**The Current Situation of Station Teaching in the Two Schools**

Table 1 reveals the differences and similarities in the station teaching in the two schools in terms of grade level, language focuses, and types of stations. There are two classes in Roger School: one for first graders and the other for third and fourth graders. The class at
Donald School was for second graders. The language focuses in these three classes were reading and word instruction.

Table 1. *Comparisons and Contrasts in Station Teaching*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Stations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>3rd and 4th</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>1. guided reading: general education teacher with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. independent reading and reading journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3. worksheet assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4. guided reading: ELL teacher with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Reading, Word Work</td>
<td>1. guided reading: ELL teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. read to self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3. read to another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4. computer/listen to story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5. phonics and word recognition: general education teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6. word work (vocabulary work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Reading, Word Work</td>
<td>1. word making: ELL teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. listening center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3. computer center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4. independent worksheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5. sight word recognition: parent volunteer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ELL and general education teachers met once a week for co-planning and for reflection on the co-teaching from that week. At Roger School the ELL teacher worked with general education teachers. In both classes, ELL teachers did the guided reading with ELLs. For the reading instruction, books categorized by proficiency levels determined by the district were used in the stations. The teachers first
focused on one reading strategy for a few weeks and then moved on to another strategy while the old strategy was reinforced. Both new and old reading strategies were emphasized in stations. While the general education teacher in the class of fourth and fifth graders led one group for guided reading, the general education teacher in the class of first graders focused upon phonics and word recognition. At Donald School one ELL teacher, one parent volunteer, and one general education teacher worked together at the same time in a single class. Students rotated to different stations for twenty minutes at a time while the teachers remained at the same station. The general education teachers would give a signal to the students when it was time for a station rotation.

Based on the researcher’s observation of the classroom practice and debriefing meetings between the teachers and instructional coach, the ELL and general education teachers faced three major issues: accountability, grouping, and monitoring. First, in terms of accountability, the teachers clearly explained the tasks for each station and set out their expectation that the students should take responsibility for their own learning. However, some students sometimes were lazy and not on task. Some boys would spend the first five minutes just choosing a book in the “independent reading” or “reading to someone” station and did not totally concentrate on reading at all. They did not take responsibility for their own learning as the teachers had expected of them. Second, grouping of the students was a big issue, too. Some students were put in the same group, but they refused to read to one another. Some boys had arguments with other group members in the station, too. Third, both the ELL and general education teachers were working with students in different stations, so it was very difficult for them to monitor students’ performance in the stations they were not at.

**Discussion and Implications**

ELL teachers and general education teachers in two collaborating elementary schools in Wendell implemented station teaching for reading and vocabulary instruction. Issues that arose included unclear teachers’ roles and responsibilities, students’ learning accountability and outcomes, grouping, and monitoring. In this section, based on the observation of station teaching in these three classrooms, the discussions and implications focus on parents’ involvement, roles and responsibilities, station designs, and assessments.
Parents’ Involvement in Station Teaching

In Donald School, one parent volunteer was engaged in the station teaching. He worked with two low-proficiency level students on identifying sight words. He showed one word card to the students and they had to say the word out loud. The one who said it received the card as a winning point. Once one student said the word correctly the parent would move on to the next word without letting the other student participate and use the word. The parent did not use the chance to teach the other student how to pronounce the word or to use decoding strategies to pronounce it, so the other student just sat there and watched his partner playing the word card game. That student did not have the chance to learn how to pronounce the word or practice his decoding skills, so he could not identify the sight words as required.

Many people accept the “native speaker fallacy” and believe that as long as you can speak English, you can teach English (Phillipson, 1992). However, English ability does not equal teaching ability. That parent could speak English, but he did not have any teaching competence. He had proficiency in the target language in terms of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, but he knew neither how to create instructional opportunities adapting to learners nor how to use effective communication techniques to foster active inquiry, collaboration, and supportive interaction in the classroom. As described above, the parent assistant had some problems in his teaching method. He should have taken the opportunity to review the pronunciation, the meaning, and usage of the words. It is clear that in order to effectively implement station teaching in English instruction, ELL and general education teachers should be trained in co-teaching (DelliCarpini, 2009). Moreover, parent volunteers also need to be trained first before they are invited to help in station teaching. The instruction or training should focus on the content to be covered in classes and some instructional and assessment strategies. Therefore, the ELL teachers, general education teachers, and parents involved in the co-teaching should have a shared understanding of the explicit goals of curriculum and assessment planning as well as systematic mechanisms for monitoring, evaluating, and giving feedback (Davison, 2006; Dieckmann, 2004).

Teachers’ Roles and Responsibilities

ELL teachers and general education teachers co-taught in these three classrooms. The ELL teacher worked at one station and the
general education teacher worked at another station. However, the division of roles and responsibilities between them was unclear. In the beginning of the implementation of the station teaching, the class was a little bit in chaos. Students in independent projects or working with pairs would talk too loudly or were not on task. The ELL teachers and general teachers were too busy working with their own students at their stations without paying sufficient attention to the rest of class. Students who had technical problems with tapes or computers yelled out. Each teacher was waiting for each other to give the signal for students to move on to the next station. The researcher and the instructional coach reported what they had observed to the teachers at the co-planning and debriefing meetings and told them that unclear teachers’ roles and responsibilities resulted in students’ being off-task or not sure about what they should do next. The teachers reflected that they did not know who should be in charge of classroom management in general. Later however, they did get together and redefine their roles and responsibilities.

Roles and responsibilities should be clearly understood and communicated from the beginning (Benoit, 2001; Davison, 2006; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2009). Both teachers should interchange the roles of “leader/supporter” throughout the lesson to ensure equality and responsibility (Benoit, 2001). Teachers in such situations should be careful to communicate with each other daily regarding progress and problems in order to avoid duplication of effort and ensure they stay "on the same page.” Having a co-teaching handbook is ideal, because co-teachers or those who get involved in the station teaching will have explicit procedures to follow, and a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

Station Choices

Different stations were designed in these three classrooms so as to provide students with different needs and learning strategies. Teachers can set up the room so that small groups of students rotate through stations using varied modalities to learn key concepts (Gregory, 2007; Kryza, Duncan & Stephens, 2010). Four to five stations can be designed including a technology station, a station for independent reading, a station for a challenging task, and one or two stations for remedial instruction.

Computers provide ready access to written, audio, and visual materials relevant to the language and culture being studied (Kern,
Computers and tapes are great supplementary teaching materials, because students have the chance to listen to reading materials or learn from the web sites. Learners can listen to the CDs provided by the textbook publishers to review the lessons or do the interactive exercises on the computer. In addition, a lot of on-line interactive web sites can be used in the technology station. The following sites are useful for younger learners:

Starfall.com: http://www.starfall.com/

Children’s storybook online: http://www.magickeys.com/books/

However, problems with computers and tapes sometimes occurred in these classes and students would ask the teachers for help. The teachers then had to leave their own students behind in order to fix the technological problems. In the technology station, teachers or student helpers should check the computers and tapes in the stations before the station teaching begins.

In the independent reading station, teachers can select the picture or level books based on the specific topics that are being covered in the class' instruction. For example, a beginning level book such as Eric Carl’s From Head to Toe, an intermediate level book such as Simms Taback’s There Was An Old Lady Who Swallowed A Fly, or a more advanced book such as Taro Gomi’s My Friends, can be put in the independent reading station when the topic currently being covered in the class is “animals.”

One of the strengths of the station teaching in these three classrooms was provision of remedial instruction whereby the ELL teachers worked with students with low proficiency levels. Such remedial education could provide additional instruction and support for students with lower proficiency levels.

Assessments and Check-Up

There was a major problem in the implementation of station teaching in these three classrooms. Students sometimes were not on task, particularly in the independent reading or writing stations. Both ELL and general education teachers were busy working with students at their own stations. When the allocated time was up, the students moved on to the next stations. Teachers did not know how students did in those other stations however. In debriefing meetings and co-planning
meetings with general and ELL teachers, an ELL coach suggested that the general education teacher of the first grade should have the performance checklist. Before each rotation, the teacher asked students to self-evaluate their performance on 1-2-3 criteria: one finger up for getting to the station on time, the second finger up for completing the task, and the third finger up for lining up quietly. By doing so, students began to take responsibility for their own learning.

Teachers should check students’ performance at each station by using checklists or exit cards. A performance checklist or rubric should be provided for students to self-evaluate themselves and empower them to take accountability for their own learning and to develop a sense of ownership and control over their personal learning progress (Chapman & King, 2008; Gregory, 2007; Kryza et al, 2010). Teachers can use such a checklist to evaluate their students’ performance in the station teaching, too. The following is a checklist example from Gregory (2007).

Table 2. Center Checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work Habits</th>
<th>Not Yet</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Most of the Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stays on Task</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gets Work Done on Time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses Materials Appropriately</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completes Tasks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follows Rules at the Station</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses Time Wisely</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Gregory, 2007, p. 143)

Conclusion

Collaboration between general education and ELL teachers or ELL teachers with content-based teachers is encouraged for effective classroom practice for ELLs (Davison, 2006; DelliCarpini, 2009; Dove & Honigsfeld, 2010; Li & Protacio, 2010). Co-teaching increases teacher responsiveness, knowledge, and opportunities to use research-based interventions as well as their capacity to problem solve and individualize learning, and increase empowerment of their co-teaching partners (Villa et al, 2009). In this article, station teaching for reading and word instruction was implemented by ELL teachers and general
education teachers in two collaborating elementary schools in Wendell. However, station teaching implementation led to the various issues discussed above.

The fact that the station teaching observational data collected in this study covers only three classrooms in two elementary schools in Wendell indicates that this is a limitation of this study. The findings cannot be generalized to all ELL classrooms. Nevertheless, as a modest strength to be pointed out, the instructional coach’s feedback and observations on station teaching and teachers’ reflections on their own classroom practice supplemented my classroom observations. This article focuses on the implementation of station teaching by general education and ELL teachers and the challenges and problems they faced. It also provides suggestions for language teachers who are interested in implementing station teaching in their classrooms. Zehr (2006) found that team teaching between ELL teachers and general education teachers closed the language gaps of secondary ELLs in St. Paul through teaching them English beyond simple conversational skills and using ‘academic English’. A future study should focus on the influence of station teaching on ELLs’ achievement. That type of inquiry could answer the following research question, “How and to what extent does station teaching influence students’ learning outcomes particularly in reading comprehension and word recognition in standardized tests?” The answers to these questions can hopefully shed additional light on this issue.

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References


