

Stuck in the Middle with You: Co-teaching for Multilingual Learners in Middle School



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ABSTRACT: United States (U.S.) policy requires publicly funded schools to design language instruction education programs (LIEP) that facilitate both language acquisition and academic achievement for multilingual learners (MLs) (U.S. DOE, 2016). Yet the fastest growing subgroup of MLs in middle schools are ‘long-term English learners’ (LTEL), who are often described as “stuck” at intermediate levels of English proficiency (WestEd, 2016). Current policies tinged by racio-linguistic ideologies and LIEP plagued by deficit views of MLs, may contribute to the problem (Castro, 2022).

This research provides evidence to support co-teaching for both new-to-English MLs and LTELs in grades 6-8. Co-teaching with fidelity, which included co-teaching for at least four lessons or two 90-minute blocks each week, along with weekly face-to-face co-planning with classroom teachers, resulted in MLs growing significantly more in English proficiency than those working with the same English Learner (EL) teachers in other kinds of English-instructed LIEPs such as pull-out or push-in.

Keywords: Multilingual Learners (ML), co-planning, co-teaching, English proficiency, middle school

Objective

United States (U.S.) public schools are required to identify K-12 multilingual learners (MLs) enrolling in their schools for the first time and then to design language instruction education programs (LIEP) that result in students making adequate annual progress for both language acquisition and academic achievement (U.S. DOE, 2016). Yet the fastest growing subgroup of MLs in middle schools are ‘long-term English learners’ (LTEL), who are often described as “stuck” at intermediate levels of English proficiency (WestEd, 2016).

This research focused on the first of these requirements, namely, to study how MLs in grades 6-8, with various starting English proficiency levels, grew in English proficiency when enrolled in co-teaching (COTEL) as compared to similar MLs enrolled in other kinds of English Instructed programs (NO COTEL). As Takanishi & Menestrel (2017) noted in *Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures* more research is needed to address gaps in knowledge, including, “Investigation of alternative instructional strategies for ELs and their relative effectiveness with respect to English language development . . . taking into consideration specific learner subgroups (e.g., ELs with low versus ELs with relatively high proficiency in English)” (p. 483, para. 3).

This study used a pretest-posttest research design to identify the relative effectiveness of alternative language instruction education programs (LIEPs) in an urban charter school and four middle schools in the same suburban school district for MLs of various starting proficiency levels.

Theoretical framework

2.1. Sociocultural theory meets translanguaging

Sociocultural language learning theory conceptualizes language acquisition as a developmental process. Language learning happens as learners interact linguistically with a more knowledgeable or skillful person purposefully assisting within real-life, authentic contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Co-teaching for multilingual learners (MLs) sets up a framework whereby key concepts of sociocultural theory, including appropriation, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), and scaffolding, may occur more efficiently (Barnard & Campbell, 2005).

While well-meaning educators often advocate for struggling MLs to receive ‘extra’ services, this can stigmatize students (Flores & Lewis, 2022; Thompson, 2015). Additionally, when MLs are segregated for content instruction, they may not get many unforced, natural opportunities to communicate with others about the content (Honigfeld & Dove, 2015). As Turkan, et al. observe,

When the learner is denied the equal opportunity to participate in the discourses of academic disciplines, it becomes an issue of equity. Thus, to provide access, it is important that teachers devise various pedagogical approaches or practices that provide ELLs with the opportunity to use and participate in the ways the community of the discipline thinks, talks, and writes (2014, p. 21).

In contrast to participating in segregated, English Learner only classes, MLs who stay in the mainstream classroom with differentiated language supports through co-teaching have multiplied opportunities to interact with English-only, English-proficient, as well as multilingual peers and teachers (WestEd, 2016; U.S. DOE, 2016). Within an ‘expanded’ zone of proximal development (ZPD), situated in rigorous, heterogeneous classrooms, MLs can demonstrate what they know, and potentially learn more from others (Chase et al., 2009). As van Lier observed, every individual benefits from interacting with other individuals of varying abilities (van Lier, 1996).

When MLs receive scaffolded instruction from two expert teachers, one expert in English language acquisition, and one expert in content knowledge acquisition, students have twice the opportunity to learn from more capable others. But interacting with skillful others isn’t the only story told in a co-taught classroom. When MLs interact with “equal” ability multilingual and English-only speaking peers, students can benefit by using all their languages to make meaningful connections between their languages and the content (Flores & Garcia, 2014).

Likewise, MLs of varying proficiency in English can benefit from teaching what they know to someone who is less proficient in English, or the content being studied (Chase et al., 2009). Multilingual, content and language enriched environments, where each student’s linguistic strengths are noticed and incorporated into rigorous instruction, take the best advantage of this expanded zone of development. See Figure A1 below, which depicts van Lier’s expanded notion of the ZPD (2004, p. 158).

The term *translanguaging* can be traced to ‘Trawsieithu’– a Welsh term used in the 1980s to describe Welsh speakers alternating between English and Welsh by reading in one language and writing in another or by listening in one language and speaking or writing in another (Lewis et al., 2012). Some believe that English must be the only language used during instruction in schools where MLs speak multiple, widely diverse languages (Faulkner-Bond et al., 2012). Others, however, have been prodding since the 1990s for repositioning ELs’ multiple languages as integral in English instructed classrooms, noting that,

The use of the native language appears so compelling that it emerges even when policies and assumptions mitigate against it. Teachers who are monolingual English speakers or who do not speak the languages of all their students can incorporate students’ native languages into instruction in many ways to serve a variety of educationally desirable functions (Lucas & Katz, 1994, Abstract section).

Others have also suggested ways monolingual teachers can incorporate strategies conducive to translanguaging and, in so doing, contribute to a more culturally and linguistically proficient classroom experience for all students (Cummins, 2019; Flores, 2019; García et al., 2016b; Goodman & Tastanbek, 2020; Tkachenko et al., 2021). In recent years, including students' languages in the classroom has become even more important (Park, et al., 2018). As Barwell (2015) notes,

What, then, has changed? ... Labels based on nationality, language, ethnicity, race, religion and so on, no longer necessarily apply uniformly or constantly to identifiable communities or in particular locations. ... Vertovec (2007), whose research is focused particularly on migration, referred to this apparently new situation as 'superdiversity' (p. 193).

2.2. Building teacher expertise, school capacity, and asset-focused instruction

Middle school teachers of English learners (EL teachers) simply cannot teach all the language MLs need to succeed in content classrooms by themselves, in an isolated classroom. In addition, EL teachers often face an uphill battle to not leave MLs to flounder in mainstream classrooms without support. Many MLs in the middle school grades have been in language instruction education programs (LIEPs) for most of their schooling in the U.S. (Olsen, 2015). They typically have intermediate levels of English proficiency and spend much of their school day in mainstream classrooms where English is the language of instruction (August et al., 2009). Yet classroom teachers of MLs are frequently unprepared to support them (Olsen, 2015; WestEd, 2016). As Lucas & Villegas note, "The language of school is fundamentally different from conversational language, and different academic genres are characterized by different linguistic features" (2013, p. 105). However, when collaborating teachers share and apply their expertise throughout the instructional cycle and work together to integrate language and content learning, all students can benefit (Dove & Honigsfeld, 2017; August et al., 2009).

Methods

This study used a pretest-posttest research design to identify the relative effectiveness of alternative instructional programs for MLs in grades 6-8. To avoid pandemic effects, growth in English proficiency was calculated using overall scale scores on WIDA's ACCESS test from 2018 (pretest) and 2019 (posttest). Scale scores on ACCESS are reported as a number between 100 (lowest) and 600 (highest) (WIDA, 2020).

The content of the co-taught classes varied from school to school, but included grade level English Language Arts, Math, and Science. There were not enough students in each content area to do a reliable analysis of academic achievement. For this reason, the study focused only on growth in English proficiency as measured by the same English proficiency test for all MLs in the study. The raw growth score for each participant was calculated by subtracting the 2018 scale score from the 2019 scale score: ACCESS 2019 - ACCESS 2018 = RAW GROWTH.

Because MLs did not have the same chance of participating and were not randomly assigned to co-taught classes, it was important to select a statistical test that could control for pretest differences (Allen, 2017). An Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was employed to isolate the effects of co-teaching and other LIEPs on growth in English proficiency among MLs. The pretest scale score, representing the beginning proficiency level of each student, was the covariate. The ANCOVA statistical test held the covariate constant, increasing the analysis's power to identify true differences in growth between groups. This covariate adjusted the mean growth score for everyone in each group to statistically control for pretest differences (Allen, 2017; Field, 2016; Laerd Statistics, 2018).

Data sources

Two Midwestern school districts collaborated with the researcher to identify a total of 182 eligible participants in grades 6-8. Participants were MLs from one urban charter school and four middle schools from the same suburban school district. Eligible participants had to have both a pretest and a posttest ACCESS test score (CAL, 2020) and be enrolled in their assigned LIEP for at least the first semester of the 2018-2019 school year. All eligible MLs (MLs) were included. There was one English learner (EL) teacher for the urban charter school and one for each of the four suburban middle schools. The EL teacher in each school provided instruction for all MLs, both those in co-taught classes and those in pull-out, push-in, or consult only. Each EL teacher identified the MLs as receiving co-teaching when they co-taught a minimum of four lessons (or two 90-minute blocks) per week and when they were able to co-plan with classroom teachers weekly.

Participants were divided approximately in half, based on their pretest scores. Eighty-nine MLs with lower starting scale scores were placed in the emerging-developing (EMR-DEV) pretest group. Of these students, 40 EMR-DEV participants were enrolled in a co-teaching for MLs language instruction education program (COTEL), and 49 EMR-DEV participants were enrolled in other kinds of LIEPs (NO COTEL). Ninety-three higher proficiency MLs were placed in the developing-expanding (DEV-EXP) pretest group, with 49 in COTEL and 44 in NO COTEL. Note that group names and assignments apply only to participants in the study and should not be equated with ACCESS 2018 cut-off scores or proficiency levels. They were placed in these groups to have approximately equal numbers of students in each group for statistical comparison. See Table A1 below.

Results

The adjusted mean growth scores for lower and higher proficiency students were significantly higher in co-taught classrooms (COTEL) than those enrolled in other language instruction education programs (NO COTEL). Lower proficiency MLs in NO COTEL grew by less than four scale score points. In comparison, those in COTEL grew by about 16 scale score points after adjusting for pre-test differences, a statistically significant difference. Likewise, higher proficiency MLs in COTEL grew approximately 15 scale score points, while those in NO COTEL grew around six scale score points. In Figure A2 below, the numbers on the y-axis represent the adjusted mean growth in scale score points.

Significance of the study

Multilingual English Learners in middle school face many challenges, including being stigmatized by deficit views, labels, and placement into ML-only classes designed to “fix” them. Based on these findings, the researcher proposes that by reorganizing the middle school schedule to enable co-teaching, schools in the middle can go beyond inclusion to celebrate the cultural and linguistic assets MLs bring to U.S. classrooms.

However, fidelity to “co-teaching” is essential. This study defined co-teaching for MLs with the following characteristics:

- MLs were clustered into heterogeneous content classrooms with at least equal numbers of English-proficient students.
- Co-teachers delivered a minimum of four co-taught lessons per week (or two 90-minute blocks)
- Co-teachers co-planned at least weekly for a minimum of 30 minutes during the school day.
- Co-planned lessons were co-instructed with both teachers in the classroom at the same time.

One limitation of this study was the variability in intensity (i.e., number of lessons per week) for MLs who were not in co-taught classes. In comparison, others with higher proficiency received push-in support twice weekly or only consultation with the classroom teacher. Attempts to distinguish between these options resulted in groups too small to reliably analyze statistically. A second limitation is that the content area chosen for co-teaching varied by EL teacher and grade level. Once again, low numbers in each content area made it impossible to analyze these groups separately.

The intensity of instruction (4-5 days per week) and weekly co-planning likely contributed to MLs' superior growth in English in the co-taught classroom. A benefit of co-taught classes is that they often include higher-proficiency MLs who might otherwise receive less or no time with the EL teacher, the language development expert. Co-planning, unique to MLs enrolled in co-taught classes, was critical. Reducing the number of partnerships by clustering MLs at each grade level made it feasible for co-teachers to co-plan regularly.

Partnering with teachers to co-design co-instructed lessons takes advantage of an expanded view of the ZPD (van Lier, 1996). Nimble flexibility is inherent in the learning environment when two teachers are present, multiplying opportunities for 'shift' and creating 'third spaces' to better accommodate and challenge MLs in their dual tasks as students of language and content (Flores & Garcia, 2014).

EL teacher shortages, apparent before the pandemic (Mitchell, 2018), can make it difficult to implement co-teaching with fidelity, and increasing the number of EL teachers may seem too difficult or cost prohibitive. However, middle schools enrolling MLs cannot risk falling into a 'compliance' point of view, doing only what is minimally required. Perceiving MLs in the deficit, or as a problem to be fixed, rather than as exceptional students with much to offer peers in an academic setting, is a formula for failure (Olsen, 2015; WIDA, 2020).

Instead, schools in the middle can utilize co-teaching and avoid reverting to what are known to be less effective program options for MLs (Lindsey et al., 2020; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Most importantly, co-teaching with fidelity can result in a strong sense of belonging for all students (Garcia & Wei, 2013).

The Author

Debra Cole graduated from the University of Missouri-St. Louis with a Ph.D. in 2022. Her dissertation focused on the effectiveness of Co-teaching for Multilingual Learners. She is currently conducting translational research with two charter schools in St. Louis City. She is also a Specialist with the US State Department's English Language Program. She holds certifications in School Administration, Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Middle School ELA, German, Spanish, and ESL. She has over 35 years of experience in language education having provided professional development, directed a two-way immersion program, and taught German, Spanish, and ESL in Illinois and Missouri.

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Appendix

Figures and Tables

Figure A1. An Adapted Figure of the Expanded Zone of Proximal Development as Imagined by van Lier (2004, p.158), Building on Vgotsky's Sociocultural Language Learning Theory

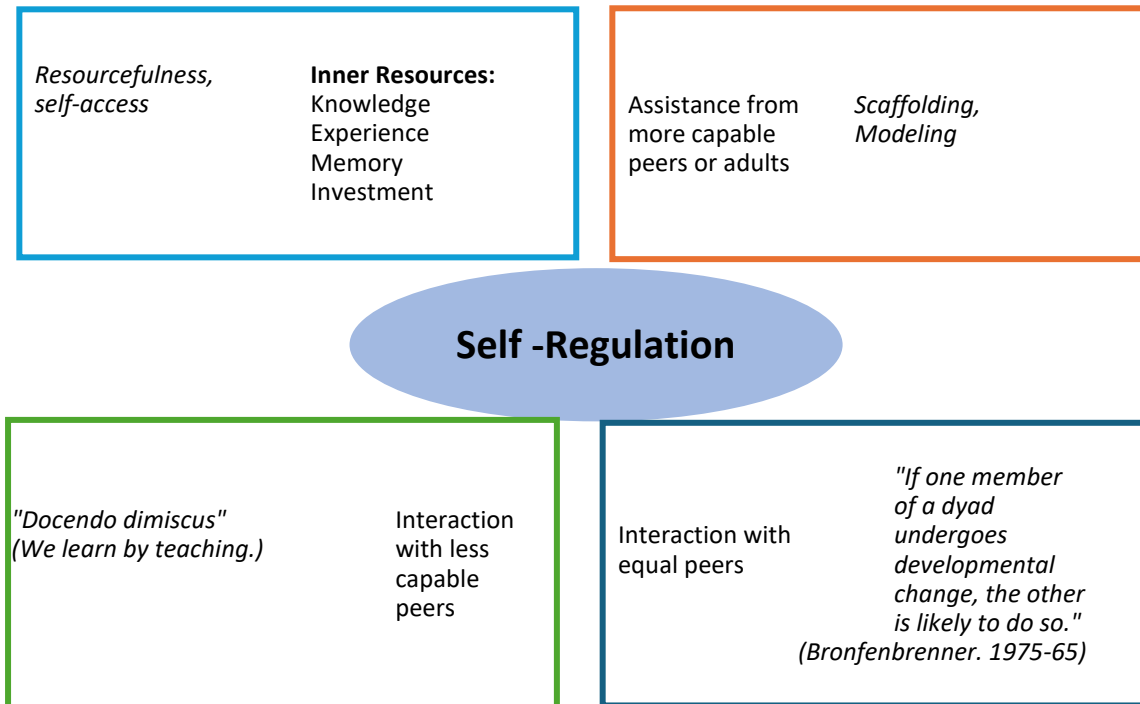
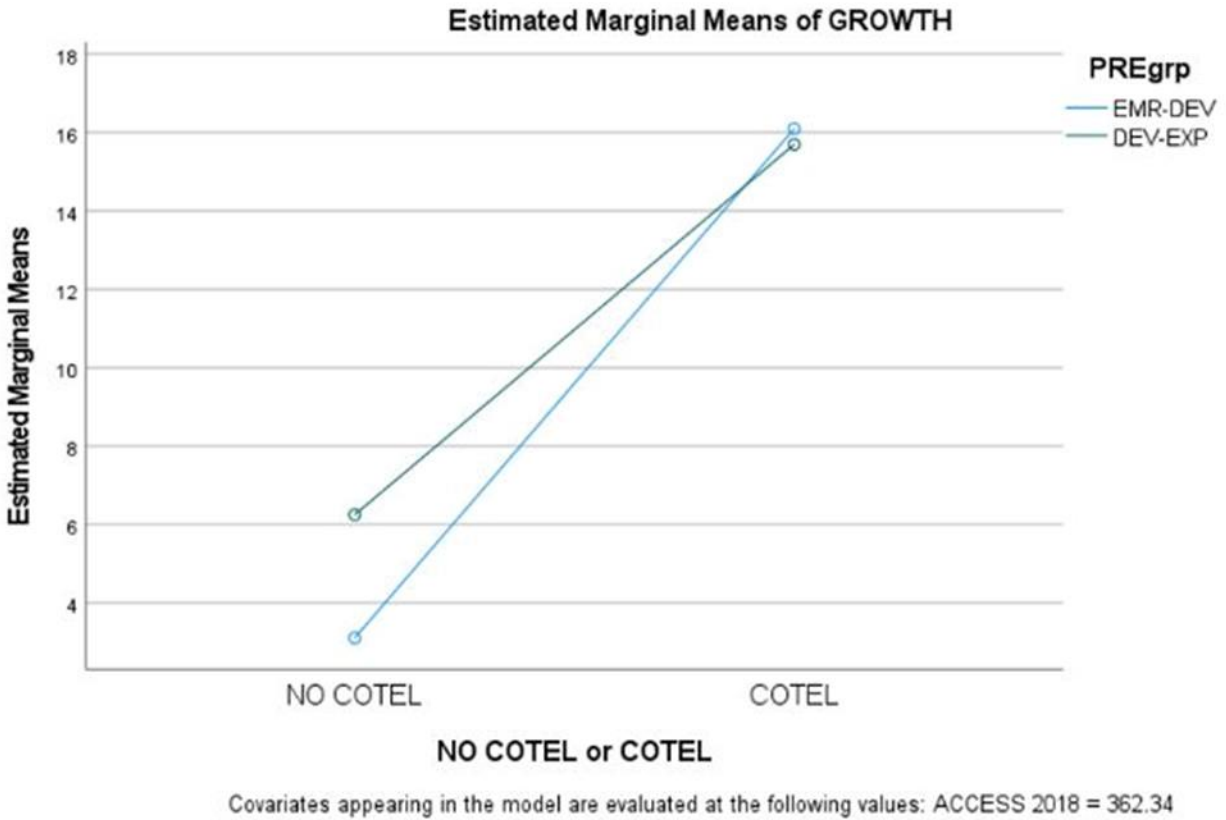


Figure A2. Grade 6th - 8th Plotlines for Each Starting Proficiency Level Group in NO COTEL or COTEL



Note: Lower and higher proficiency MLs in COTEL grew about the same amount after adjusting for the starting proficiency level, overall scale score.

Table A1. Middle School MLs in each Starting Proficiency Level Group in NO COTEL or COTEL

Total	PREgrp	Total	NO COTEL	COTEL
N = 182	EMR - DEV	89	49	40
	OSS 271 - 367			
	DEV - EXP	93	44	49
	OSS 368 - 394			

Note: MLs in NO COTEL received a wide variety of services from the same EL teacher as those in COTEL.