

The Co-Sat Class: Strategies for Teaching Combined Levels of Developmental English

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This article presents strategies for teaching a co-sat class, a class wherein students who place into two different levels of developmental English are taught concurrently in one classroom with one instructor. The article describes organizing the course on a framework of shared topics, includes a model for managing classroom activities, and gives practical suggestions for attending to the affective domain of students in a combined class.

Introduction

To meet the needs and abilities of students who place into developmental English at DeVry University, the developmental English program was expanded from one course to two: Developmental Writing and Reading and Intermediate English, herein referred to as Level One and Level Two, respectively. Some sections of Level One and Level Two are offered as separate classes while other sections are offered with the two levels combined in one class, thereby accommodating more students without increasing the number of faculty.

A review of the literature on the topic of teaching combined classes leads primarily to two areas: (a) the subject of multi-grade classes in grammar school (Russell, Rowe, & Hill, 1998), and (b) the subject of the multi-level ESL course (Shank & Terrill, 1995). The research on these particular subjects covers a wide spectrum of issues, as can be imagined, though not closely analogous to the subject of this article. Teaching two separate levels of developmental English concurrently is a topic that seems to be absent in the literature, perhaps because the practice is unusual.

The purpose of this article is to share strategies for teaching a developmental English class that is a co-sat class—two courses combined, meeting in the same classroom concurrently with one instructor. When I, as a sole instructor, piloted the first co-sat developmental English class at the DeVry Addison Campus, I focused

on three objectives: (a) to plan the content and prepare schedules for each level in which weekly units mesh course-specific objectives with shared topics; (b) to develop a basic and flexible plan for managing classroom activities; and (c) to structure activities with special consideration of the affective domain. The remainder of this article describes the original strategies that I used in the pilot class and have continued to use in successive terms, along with the inclusion of an update regarding the textbook.

Planning the Content

An integrated approach to reading and writing is basic to each of the two pre-standard English courses, Level One and Level Two. Although each course has separate, level-appropriate objectives within its curriculum, both levels share central topics. The scope of topics includes reading as a process, writing as a process, the reading-writing connection, strategies for building vocabulary, understanding stated and implied main ideas, essay-writing skills, and critical reading. This common ground provides the framework for structuring content in the co-sat class.

The materials are critical to the implementation of a topic-coordinated class that meets the objectives for two levels of instruction. It was not until sometime after the pilot class that a colleague and I were able to select materials for a custom textbook (College Reading and Writing, 2007, Pearson Custom Publishing) that is being used system-wide at DeVry University. It is a single textbook with two parts: Part I for Level One and Part II for Level Two. With full consideration for teaching the co-sat sections of developmental English, we arranged the chapters in each half of the book to correspond to one another. Thus, the first chapter in Part I and the first chapter in Part II focus on metacognitive reading strategies. The second chapter in Part I and the second chapter in Part II address the writing process. Each “side” of the book has corresponding chapters throughout, with the content in Part II at a higher academic level than Part I.

Having the topics line up, whether in a custom textbook or with other selected materials, is instrumental in effectively delivering the co-sat class. This type of framework, guided by the curricula and supported by the reading materials, enables the instructor to teach common topics to both levels while providing different text

and different writing assignments according to each course's objectives and level of difficulty. For example, when I teach the unit on summarizing, the students read a chapter in the textbook (in Part 1 or Part 2, according to their level) on the topic of the reading-writing connection. Discussion, activities, and assignments are all developed from this common base.

Table 1. The Co-Sat Class: Alignment of Shared Topics and Activities in a Given Week

Topics and Readings for Level One and Level Two		
<p>Students read the level-specific chapters on the reading-writing connection and level-specific essays/articles. Topics covered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active Reading • The Reading-Writing Connection • Idea Maps • Summary Writing • Source Documentation 		
<p>Combined Groups for Whole-Class Activities that Address the Shared Topics for the Week</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss the process of how to write a summary. • Discuss a previously assigned short reading. • Use an Idea Map to list the main topics and primary details of the reading. • Practice paraphrasing the main topics and primary details, with each small group assigned a section of the reading. • Model the process of combining each group's paraphrases to create a summary of the reading. 		
Separate Activities and Assignments	Level One	Level Two
As a group with the instructor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss a level-specific essay or article. • Create an Idea Map to discover and record the main topics and primary details in the level-specific essay or article. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss a level-specific essay or article.
Individually and with instructor assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft a summary of the level-specific essay or article. • Revise the summary. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create an Idea Map to discover and record the main topics and primary details in the level-specific essay or article. • Draft a formal summary of the level-specific essay or article. • Revise the formal summary.

Additional Assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write a Reaction Journal on one of the week's essays/articles. • Complete Vocabulary Log entries of "new" words from the week's readings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write a Reaction Journal on one of the week's essays/articles. • Complete Vocabulary Log entries of "new" words from the week's readings.
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Managing Classroom Activities

As a natural outgrowth of the concept of aligning the content according to shared topics, I developed a viable plan for managing the classroom of combined levels of developmental English students. The plan centers on organizing classroom activities based on a structure of grouping students for whole-group, small-group, and independent learning, with the goal of establishing an active environment with a familiar rhythm. Shank and Terrill (1995) recommend similar grouping strategies for effectively teaching in the multi-level adult ESL classroom, involving students in activities as a whole group, in small groups, and with partners, in order to meet the needs of students at their various levels. Whether teaching to multi-levels or two-levels, grouping strategies can be instrumental in the efficient use of class time for learning.

The coordination plan that I devised for the co-sat class includes blocks of time for covering shared topics with the whole class, time for discussing level-specific material with separate groups, and time for students to work independently each day that we meet, which at the Addison Campus is typically for three hours and fifty minutes, twice a week. For example, in a given week when the shared topic is the reading-writing connection, I manage the flow of the class by beginning with a whole-class segment. I lead a discussion on paraphrasing and summarizing, I model the skills, and then the students practice applying the strategies to related activities. Within this time frame, students in Level One and Level Two work together in small groups or with partners to practice summarizing parts of a short reading. The whole group then reconvenes to share their work and participate in further discussion.

In the second and third segments of the class, I alternate between Level One and Level Two as the separate groups work on their respective tasks and assignments related to summarizing. In the fourth segment, I meet again with Level One to check progress

and answer questions. In the last segment, I work with individual students as needed. This variety of interactions in the co-sat classroom creates a dynamic environment.

Table 2 illustrates this plan for coordinating the groupings and activities. It can be easily modified to suit various purposes and time constraints. (Note: To facilitate the variety of activities, the co-sat classes are held in teaching labs with computers.)

Table 2. Coordination Plan for a Co-Sat Class

Segment 1: Combined Levels

- Shared time on shared topics with Level One and Level Two combined; this may include explanations, modeling, discussion, small-group or partnered activities.

Segment 2: Separate Groups

- Instructor engages with Level One for discussion, explanations, etc.
- Students in Level Two work in sub-groups, with partners, or individually.

Segment 3: Separate Groups

- Instructor engages with Level Two for discussion, explanations, etc.
- Students in Level One work in sub-groups, with partners, or independently.

Segment 4: Separate Groups

- Instructor re-engages with Level One to monitor progress and answer questions.
- Students in Level Two continue working.

Segment 5: Individual Attention

- Instructor works with individual students as needed.

It is important to note that in the whole-class segment and in the separate-group segments, students frequently work in sub-groups and with partners. In the whole-class segment, students work in groupings that include mixed levels. Shank and Terrill (1995) discuss grouping students across levels in the multilevel ESL classroom. They explain that heterogeneous groupings are beneficial to students involved in activities where different skills are complementary; whereas, other activities are suited for homogeneous groupings—when the tasks can be accomplished successfully by students with similar skill abilities. Grouping students across levels has a further potential implication in the co-sat classroom because while students in Level One who earn a B or C advance to Level Two, the students in Level One who earn an A are not required to take Level Two. They, in fact, leapfrog over Level Two and advance directly to English 112/Composition, just as students in Level Two who successfully complete their course with a grade of A, B,

or C also progress to English 112/Composition. Even though the A students in Level One bypass Level Two, those who have been in a co-sat section of developmental English have had some exposure to the Level Two course and the opportunity to share learning experiences with students in Level Two before progressing to English 112/Composition, a required course for all students at DeVry University.

Attending the Affective Domain

Liff (2003) addresses the importance of social and emotional learning at the post-secondary level: “In higher education, the affective domain has been recognized as a component of the learning process, at least in theory, especially for the underprepared or at-risk student” (p. 29). In the co-sat developmental English classroom, there is an extra challenge related to the affect in that there is the potential for students in Level One to feel less competent than students in Level Two, and for students in Level Two to feel held back by students in Level One. Thoughtful planning and proactive measures can help to create an environment where all students feel that their participation is valued. A primary effort in that regard is the frequent heterogeneous grouping of students. Each weekly unit, as delineated in Table 2 and discussed earlier, involves plans for students to actively participate in large group, small group/partnered, and individual activities. These grouped activities encourage cooperative harmony while diminishing the line that might otherwise separate the two levels.

Other measures can also build cohesiveness. I began using the following techniques in the pilot class and continue to use them in each co-sat section. I begin the first class meeting as follows:

1. I use the same color of paper for the two syllabi to avoid “blue bird, red bird” stigmata.
2. As I introduce the course to the whole class, I cover the identical elements in the two syllabi and leave the different elements (course objectives, evaluation of work, and progression to the next level of English) for a later time when the students are not in the large group.

3. Having one textbook to preview, though not essential, also helps to convey the impression of a “regular” class.
4. The ice-breaker on the first day requires students to write general information on an index card (name, major, interests, etc.) and exchange cards with someone sitting nearby (who may or may not be in the same level). After becoming acquainted, each partner introduces the other. After each introduction, we all recite the student’s name with the goal of learning all of the first names by the end of the activity, setting the tone and planting seeds for cross-level alliances.
5. All of the activities in the first class meeting involve the whole class.

Attending to the affective domain is important throughout the term with the objective of unifying the class. Liff (2003) has found that “by including interactions, responses, and lesson-design and management strategies that are sensitive to and inclusive of objectives in the social and emotional domains, faculty can make a significant and meaningful difference in the overall college experience of their students” (p. 29).

At the end of each term, all students at DeVry University are encouraged to evaluate each of their courses by completing a standard online form and submitting it anonymously. It is noteworthy that in the past three years during which I have taught ten co-sat sections of developmental English, not one student has typed in a comment—positive or negative—regarding the fact that the class was co-sat. This seems to indicate that when the students reflected on the course, the co-sat nature of the delivery was a non-issue. Perhaps this positive result can be attributed to the attention given to the affective domain.

Conclusion

The developmental English program at DeVry University has continued to evolve, always with the steadfast goal of preparing our students for academic success. Offering two levels of developmental English has increased our ability to meet the needs of our students, even when practical matters necessitate combining the

two levels.

The strategies that I use and that have been presented in this article focus on three components for successfully delivering a combined developmental English class: organizing the course on a framework of shared topics, establishing a model for effectively managing classroom activities, and attending the affective domain by fostering alliances within and between the two levels of students.

Love and Love note (1996) that in higher education, “a growing literature base reinforces the fact that cognitive... social, and emotional processes are inextricably linked” (p. 2). Thus, learning is enhanced when activities are designed to include social interactions that strengthen the connections among students and with the instructor. Intrinsic to the strategies for teaching in the co-sat developmental English classroom is the goal of providing opportunities for positive cooperative learning experiences that knit the fabric of a cohesive class as a community of co-sat learners.

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