



# “Fortunately, I found a home here that allows me personal expression”: Co-teaching in the bilingual Hebrew-Arabic-speaking preschool in Israel

Mila Schwarz<sup>a, \*</sup>, Naomi Gorgatt<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Research and Evaluation Authority, Oranim Academic College of Education, Kiryat Tivon, 36006, Israel

<sup>b</sup> The Center for Educational Technology, 16 Klausner St. P.O.B 39513, Tel Aviv, 61394, Israel



## HIGHLIGHTS

- The process of teaming was characterized by the co-teachers' significant agency.
- This study highlights the importance of backup behavior, as a teamwork skill.
- The observed teaming process provides a model for bilingual educators.

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## ABSTRACT

In this study, we asked how co-teachers in a bilingual preschool overcome challenges in the relationship-building stage, rethink their language education ideology, and coordinate language instruction strategies, and acknowledge their cultural and professional background. The participants in the study were two teachers: one Hebrew-speaking and one Arabic-speaking in Israel. During one academic year, we conducted observations and interviews with teachers. Findings showed that the teaming process was built on the teachers' openness to the different professional and cultural experience, readiness to rethink the initial language education ideology and to modify language strategies. The co-teachers' teaming was characterized by agentic behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

Recent sociolinguistic research on bilingualism in different learning spaces has shifted its analytical lens from a focus on languages as discrete and bounded units to the study of language as social practice and teachers as social agents. This shift of focus has foregrounded the connection between language ideologies and practices with the purpose of illuminating how teachers understand and interpret their own language-teaching activity (e.g., García, 2009). In most cases of a dual language bilingual education program, two teachers are engaged in a co-teaching process, with each teacher responsible primarily for the instruction of his or her

designated language. In this study, we examined the co-teachers' team-building process, which emerged during overcoming challenges in the initial relationship-building stage, rethinking the co-teachers' language education ideology, planning and coordinating their language instruction strategies, and mutual acknowledgment of their cultural and professional background. Our focus was on a unique case of a bilingual Hebrew–Arabic-speaking preschool in Israel. This case shows how the co-teachers' efforts in team-building are directed to model the possibility of coexistence between the two ethnic groups in Israel to young children. Within a wider international context of the co-teaching phenomenon, the observed teaming process as well as the teachers' reflections on their co-experience, offer a model of team-building for bilingual educators who are working in different sociolinguistic contexts and together construct an applicable knowledge of community of practice.

Before addressing the present study, we will present a brief

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [milasch@bgu.ac.il](mailto:milasch@bgu.ac.il) (M. Schwarz), [NaomiG@cet.ac.il](mailto:NaomiG@cet.ac.il) (N. Gorgatt).

overview of the target bilingual education model. Moreover, the literature review will briefly address a role of teachers' modeling within *Vygotsky's (1978)* socio-cultural theory followed by a theory on typical characteristics of co-teaching as a phenomenon and its stages as a process. Next, we will highlight the main areas of concern for this study: the co-teachers' agency, language ideologies, and practices in language classrooms in general, and in the context of preschool bilingual education in particular.

### 1.1. *The two-way language model for bilingual education*

Bilingual education can take different forms (*Baker, 2011*). We based our study on the dual language form, which was defined as a two-way language model for bilingual education. The aim of this model is to increase intergroup communicative competence and cultural awareness. It is used in bilingual programs in the United States for English speakers and speakers of other minority languages (e.g., Spanish) and in Israel for speakers of Arabic and Hebrew. In this type of language program, the purpose is to reach a language balance; in the 50:50 model, the majority and minority languages are used for equal amounts of time throughout the day. The number of minority-language-speaking children (e.g., Spanish, Arabic) and majority-language-speaking children (e.g., English, Hebrew) is usually balanced (*Baker, 2011*). In reality, however, the children's and even the teachers' tendency to overuse the majority language often turns the latter into "the common denominator" due to its superior status (*Baker, 2007*, p. 138). *Baker (2011)* addressed this phenomenon in the context of the two-way Spanish–English language program, where young Spanish as a first language (L1) users had to switch to English to work cooperatively with young L1 English-users in the same class, resulting in the marginalization of Spanish in the classroom. *Hickey (2001)* observed a similar situation in an Irish immersion context, where young L1 Irish-users were surrounded by peers, who spoke the majority language, English, which had higher status in the social context. In the bilingual Hebrew–Arabic-speaking preschool in the present study, the discrepancy in the second language (L2) use between the majority (Hebrew) and minority (Arabic) speakers resulted in the majority-language children making slow progress in the minority language. This outcome was attributed to the Hebrew-speaking children's relatively low motivation to use L2 (Arabic) since they were understood in Hebrew by the Arabic-model teacher.

Language distribution is implemented in three main ways: by time block, by subject area, and by teacher. Another option is to combine these approaches. In the bilingual Hebrew–Arabic-speaking preschool in the present study, each teacher in the team plays the role of a designated language model and is responsible for the instruction of that language. Time is not allocated for each individual language and content instruction is not distributed by language. Drawing on *Vygotsky's (1978)* socio-cultural theory of learning and instruction, the aim of this co-teaching model is to model coexistence between the two ethnic groups in Israel to young children.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. *Teachers as model of behavioral patterns*

*Vygotsky (1978)* viewed the child as first doing things in a social context, helped in various ways by other people and language, and gradually shifting away from reliance on others to independent thinking and action. This approach to children's mental development highlights the critical role of teachers in shaping the most favorable conditions for enhancing and regulating their

development. *Vygotsky's* socio-cultural theory has been transformed and adapted to different educational contexts, including the L2 learning and instruction classroom (*Lantolf & Thorne, 2006*).

*Vygotsky's* theory assists in describing a teacher not only as a source of knowledge but also as a model of children's linguistic behavior as well as a mediator of this behavior. Indeed, studies of the L2 classroom found that the teacher plays a critical role as a model of language use and/or language acquisition (e.g., *Palviainen et al., 2016*). Regarding the co-teaching phenomenon, in this study we search to examine how co-teachers who are coming from different socio-cultural, linguistic and professional backgrounds model the young Arabs and Jews bicultural and bilingual patterns of behavior by team-building on mutual respect and support.

### 2.2. *Co-teaching as a phenomenon*

Co-teaching plainly brings two or more teachers together to offer more to the children they teach (e.g., *Dafouz & Hibler, 2013; Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010*). As a process, co-teaching was defined as a professional marriage since both teachers are assumed to participate actively in the classroom instruction, share responsibility for all their students, and jointly plan and evaluate the teaching process (e.g., *Friend, 2008; Sileo, 2011*). Each teacher's contribution might fluctuate from activity to activity, but together, the teachers create a learning situation that cannot be produced by a solo teacher. This situation generates teaming as one of the fundamental co-teaching approaches (*Friend, 2008*).

### 2.3. *Co-teaching stages and research contexts*

Even though co-teaching helps to reinforce classroom instruction and furthers the progress of children with diverse needs, it is an artificially created situation and has been defined as challenging and highly demanding (e.g., *Carless, 2006; Friend, 2008; Sileo, 2011*). Teachers apparently need to undergo some co-teaching stages to facilitate their mutual understanding and communication. *Sileo (2011)* defined the following three stages (*Sileo, 2011*, pp. 33–36): The first stage involves initial relationship building before beginning the co-teaching. In this stage, teachers familiarize themselves with each other's previous professional knowledge and individual and cultural backgrounds as well as discussing how they feel about their shared teaching task. *Sileo (2011)* stressed that, in many cases, co-teachers are carelessly placed together and therefore, completely miss out on the developmental stages that are as critical in this relationship as in a conventional marriage. An absence of the initial developmental stage in the team-building might lead to misunderstanding and even to the end of the collaboration. The second stage involves curriculum planning and decision-making on instructional content as a crucial stage, particularly in cases of team-teaching. This is relevant in the context of our study in the target bilingual Hebrew–Arabic-speaking preschool. Both teachers deliver instruction simultaneously by elaborating and complementing each other during the instruction time and avoid directly translating each other. A lack of synchronization in instruction design might negatively affect both teachers and students. The last stage involves ongoing problem solving and might overlap with the planning stage. During the ongoing relationship, the co-teachers are supposed to discuss their disagreements openly. The preschool teachers in the present study had to undergo a process of reconsidering their language educational ideologies and language practices.

Co-teaching by a classroom teacher and a remedial specialist was widely examined regarding the inclusion of students with special needs in general education classrooms (e.g., *Friend, 2008;*

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