Original Paper

Education Equity in College English Stratified Teaching

Xiaohui Li[1*]

[1] Sichuan University of Media and Communications, Sichuan, China

[*] E-mail: 752067018@qq.com

Abstract

This article presents the findings of an empirical study that evaluated the effect of stratified teaching on the achievement of education equity in college English teaching. The study employed a mixed method of observation, interview and questionnaire survey to explore the inner connection between stratification and equity in the context of education. Results from quantitative analysis showed that students' academic achievements were strongly impacted by the application of stratified teaching. Data elicited from classroom observation and interviews lead to the same conclusion: In classes where stratified instruction were systematically employed, students gained better learning progress and perception of education equity. The findings also suggest that the quality of teaching had a corresponding effect on students' academic achievements and understanding of education equity. This study highlights the importance of applying stratified education systematically and offers some useful recommendations for promoting equity, optimizing quality and improving educational effectiveness.

Keywords

college English, stratified teaching, education equity, academic achievement, educational effectiveness

1. Introduction

The outline of the National Medium-and-long Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) points out that improved quality instruction is the core of higher education development. According to the Guide to College English Teaching (2020), college English courses need to be rationally designed according to national standards for the teaching quality of undergraduate programs to serve the school's institutional goals, the faculty's talent training goals and the needs of students' personalized development. Therefore, college students are supposed to gain benefit from quality college English and be well prepared for the challenges and opportunities in the new era of globalization. To provide high-quality English language instruction, Sichuan University of Media and Communications (SCUMC) initiated an institutional-wide educational reform of the conventional

teaching approach through stratified teaching in 2018. More than 1600 first-year students registered for college English course were assigned to classes A, B, and C according to their different English language proficiency levels.

2. Statement of the Problem

This work is an effort to evaluate the impact of the 2018 teaching reform, observing how the complementation of college English stratified teaching led to improvement in students' learning engagement and academic achievement. The goal of this study is to explore the nexus between the application of stratified teaching practice and the actualization of education equity. The study addresses the following questions: (i) Do students find stratified teaching to be more satisfying than traditional classroom instruction? (ii) Can students achieve better academic results with stratified teaching? (iii) Does stratified instruction indicate enhanced educational equity? (iv) Which kind of differentiated instruction is better for raising students' academic achievement? This study is enlightened by the multiple intelligences theory and the framework of equity and quality, the two dimensions of educational effectiveness.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Stratified Teaching

3.1.1 Definition of Stratified Teaching

As suggested by Misra, J., stratified teaching, known alternatively as differentiated or tiered teaching, is an educational model where students are taught in groups or "strata" based on their unique needs and skills (Brayboy, Castagno, & Maughan, 2007). Stratified teaching is an approach that matches the complexity of the learning task to the student's ability level. According to the American Educational Research Association (AERA), it is an effective devise to optimize learning potential. As the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) suggests, stratified teaching entails placing learners in ability-based groups and offering tailored assistance and instruction to each group according to its particular requirements. By taking into account the various learning preferences, interests, and backgrounds of students, stratified teaching seeks to deliver more individualized and efficient training. Thus, it has long been believed to be one of the best teaching strategies for assisting teachers to achieve education equity.

3.1.2 Features of Stratified Teaching

Stratified college English teaching is an educational approach that involves grouping students based on their English language proficiency and providing differentiated instruction to meet their individual needs and maximize their language learning potentials. As an frequently resorted teaching practice in foreign language acquisition field, stratified teaching embodies some unique characteristics:

Individualization of Learning: In stratified English language education, instructors make attempts to adjusts curriculum to the unique requirements and skills of different groups of students, which ensures

that all students may successfully acquire the language with challenging yet manageable learning content and materials. Teachers can provide assignments and activities that are suitable for each group of students by applying stratified teaching, which places students into different learning groups according to their degrees of English proficiency. By using this method, it is secured that learners would not be overwhelmed or bored by too easy or too complicated tasks in college English learning.

Clear Learning Objectives: Creating specific, attainable learning objective for every group is a key component of stratified teaching. Clear and achievable learning goals not only assist teachers in making plans for instructions, it aids students with a better understanding of their development and identifying the areas for further improvement as well.

Interactive and Collaborative Learning: Students are encouraged to learn collaboratively and interactively in stratified classrooms. Peer tutoring, group discussion, and projects based on teamwork are some examples of how to improve interaction and encourage language practice within communities in English language learning situations.

Adaptive Teaching Methods: Based on the requirements and development of each student group, teachers modify their techniques and methods of instruction. One way to address the diverse needs of groups is to apply diversified education, in which teachers use various resources and instruction methods for students from various backgrounds.

Frequent Assessment and Feedback: Stratified teaching places a strong emphasis on regular evaluation to track students' development and give prompt feedback. This enables teachers to spot areas in which students need more help or challenge and modify their instruction accordingly.

In general, the goals of stratified teaching in English education are to personalize the learning process. By establishing specific learning goals, encouraging interactive and collaborative learning, using flexible teaching strategies and offering regular assessments and feedback, an efficient and engaging learning environment for college English learning is constructed. Thus students with different language proficiency levels are better equipped with learning motivations and high-quality learning experience. (Misra, 1997)

3.1.3 The Status Quo of Stratified Teaching

In the early 20th century, education officials in the United States believed that stratification, grouping pupils based on ability and prior academic performance was essential to teaching new students from a variety of backgrounds. Almost all primary and middle schools in the United Kingdom in the 1950s separated children into aptitude-based levels. Students in the same class who have comparable learning aptitudes share the same resources and learning materials with each other. The introduction and influence of the "Optimization of Teaching" theory and the Theory of Mastery Learning led to the widespread adoption of stratified teaching in many countries in the mid-to-late 20th century. During this time, a number of global stratified teaching theories and models also arose, such as Bloom's Mastery Learning and Keller's individualized teaching system. (Shearer & Karanian, 2017)

Owing to the disparities in students' needs and the standards for education, stratified teaching did not

179

arise in China until the 1980s, when quality education was introduced. With the general growth of stratified education since the mid-1990s, eastern Chinese provinces and cities, as well as those in the central and western regions, have started to take part in experimental study on the subject. Stratified teaching has become the norm in contemporary education due to the rapid growth of the economy and the size of educational institutions. (Peng, 2019) Schools in different provinces and cities have studied and implemented stratified education, with some instances being effective and others not, among which a number of noteworthy experiences and techniques related to the implementation of stratified English education have been condensed.

3.2 Education Equity

3.2.1 Definition of Education Equity

The need to combine the terms equity and quality in educational system was recognized by several nations in 1990, when the term "equity" was used in educational context for the first time. Since 2004, a great number of additional nations have joined this quest. The conceptualization of the term equity confirms the fact that the principles of quality and equity are inseparable. It is based on two tenets: equal access to high-quality education for all citizens and the collaborative efforts of the education community as a whole to support the diversity of students. The concept of equity is closely related to social well-being, and it is highlighted that there cannot be equity in the presence of mediocrity and laziness. Education equity necessitates an emphasis on individualized development and providing students with a broad range of educational experiences and opportunity to explore and maximize their talents and potentials. Teachers and schools are frequently expected to assume the responsibility of providing extra help to those students who lag behind in learning through stratified teaching if disparities are caused by differences in students' intrinsic skills, individual characteristics, motivation and effort, or learning methodologies. (Sun, 2009).

3.2.2 The Difference between Equality and Equity

It is crucial to understand that equality and equity are two separate concepts. Equality means that every person has access to the same opportunities and resources. This long-term goal of a just society is that all children should have equal access to opportunities and resources, regardless of their gender, socioeconomic status, or place of origin. The mission of equality will not be completed until all child groups have equal access to education, economic opportunity, and achievement. Conversely, equity refers to a system in which shared goods are reallocated to establish schools and systems that are more likely to be more equal. (Sun, 2009) The goal of this teaching shows itself in an egalitarian society where more resources are given to students with special needs to enable them to succeed both academically and socially. According to this vision, the pursuit of education equity necessitates an unequal distribution of resources, with the hope of a long-term equity encouraging all students to fully develop their social, intellectual, emotional, and personal capacities. It is strongly argued that students should receive a quality education adapted to their needs, thus making equity and quality the two sides of the same coin. (Guo, Huang, & Zhang, 2019)

3.3 The Nexus between Stratified Teaching and Education Equity

In the past decades, educators and scholars throughout the world have been sparing no efforts to seek for effective teaching mechanisms and practices that promote education equity. (Zhu, 2020) In China, stratified teaching has been adopted extensively by educational institutions, particularly in the area of language instruction and acquisition. (Xu & Zhang, 2015) However, debate regarding proper forms and the effectiveness of this teaching practice has emerged. Two opposing viewpoints stood out from the literature study results. When some scholars assert that stratified instruction embodies real educational justice by offering extra help and specific attention to those who struggle with language learning, others counter that it will negatively impact the confidence and psychological well-being of students with low language proficiency. According to Xu and Zhang, there is no doubt that educational inequality will rise in schools where stratified teaching is the norm and certain students are placed in classrooms with less qualified instructors or limited educational resources. (Rose, 2015) Thus, the implementation of stratified instruction actually comes at the price of student preference for education. It is unjust and has been accused as a form of elitism. (Young, 2013)

4. Method and Material

To thoroughly examine the impact of using stratified teaching approaches on the realization of educational equity, empirical researches with multi-modal approach are required. Due to the complex and profound relationship between education equality and stratified teaching, this study employed a comprehensive approach with a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Surveys, interviews, and observations are employed to fully investigate the effects of stratified college English instruction. By using a triangular strategy, the study's validity and reliability are ensured, enabling further investigations on the relationship between stratified teaching and education equity.

4.1 Process of Data Analysis

This section covers the procedures and tools used in data analysis and provides illustrative examples that are pertinent. It also demonstrates how the case study highlights important discoveries. Survey-derived quantitative data is statistically evaluated to identify trends and relationships. Readers are able to recognize characteristics and extrapolated insights into a larger group through this statistical interpretation. Thematic coding was applied to qualitative information gathered from observations and interviews. The transcripts were methodically classified according to common topics. The steps involved in data analysis are explained here.

4.1.1 Transcription and Coding

The qualitative data collected from the observations and interviews were transcribed for further analysis. Subsequently, the transcripts underwent coding, which entails designating descriptive or interpretive categories to distinct portions of the content. A systematic coding approach was utilized to identify themes, patterns, and concepts from the data.

4.1.2 Quantitative Analysis

The "Feedback Survey of college English Stratified Teaching" with 20 closed questions and 1 open question was the questionnaire that was posted on the Questionnaire Star applet. A total of 502 valid responses were gathered. Basic student data, satisfaction with instruction, self-efficacy, challenge of the teaching materials, assessment techniques, peer pressure, comment on stratification are the key topics covered by the questions. Statistical analysis was used to evaluate the quantitative data collected from surveys by Questionnaire Star applet. To find links and trends in the data, statistical software tools like Jamovi 2.3.12 were utilized.

5. Conclusions, Recommendations and Limitations

5.1 Results and Discussion

After gathering primary data, the researchers used the theme analysis method to tabulate and evaluate it. As a result, case study excerpts can be found in the following sections. Through interviews with students in C-level classes, it was revealed that college English stratified teaching practice significantly influences students' perception of education equity. Almost every student interviewed expressed their satisfaction about the effect of the stratified teaching. The most frequently referred words and expressions are "differentiation", "achievable learning objectives", "improved self-efficacy", and "a sense of achievement". For example, one student described the learning process in details when he was assigned to C-level class and the progress that he has made within the framework of stratified teaching practice. In this instance, the well-grounded stratification practice contribute both to the enhanced self-confidence and the improved academic performances of those students with limited English proficiency. Thereby, it reflects the positive impact of the proper implementation of stratified teaching on students' satisfaction and perception of education equity.

The acceptability of stratified instruction by college English students is further demonstrated by an analysis of the data collected by the survey. For instance, 90.84% of the total population preferred stratified teaching to traditional college English teaching approach. A one year learning experience with stratification in college English education has strengthened their belief in the rationality and effectiveness of stratified teaching. They have a stronger belief in the rationality and efficacy of stratified teaching after a one-year-long learning experience in college English education. A noteworthy enhancement in learning motivation and confidence was reported by 78.68% of the participants. In the meantime, verified improvements in academic performance and college English learning outcomes were reported by almost two thirds of the targeted students. The statistics evaluation results confirm the findings from classroom observation and interviews with target students. These results offer verifiable proof of how stratified instruction affects education equity. Furthermore, the validity and reliability of this study is strengthened by the cross-comparison of qualitative and quantitative facts.

In summary, the results of statistical analysis shows the significance of integrating stratification into college English instruction. Data elicited from students in C-level classes illustrate some favorable

features of stratified teaching in support of education equity under the parameters of equal opportunities, equal access to higher education, regardless of gender or social-cultural background.

Personalized Learning and Greater Engagement: students value the individualized teaching that stratified instruction offers. It enables individuals go at their own speed, which is very helpful for learners who might have trouble understanding certain ideas or need extra time to digest new information. When the subject is delivered in a way that is both challenging and relevant to them, students are more likely to be engaged. A range of tasks and activities that address various learning preferences and styles can be implemented through stratified teaching.

Reduction in Anxiety and Increased Confidence: Fear of falling behind or not being able to keep up with peers can be a major source of concern for a lot of students taking classes at the C level. This is lessened by stratified teaching, which makes sure that every student's needs are satisfied regardless of their start points. Students gain confidence when they are able to work at a level that suits their ability. When students experience growth at a speed that works for them, it can greatly increase their motivation and sense of self-esteem.

Better Understanding and Sense of Achievement: Teachers who apply stratified teaching approach tend to break down difficult ideas into smaller, more digestible chunks, which helps students, particularly those who are less proficient in English, grasp learning materials. As a result, students are more likely to feel a sense of accomplishment in learning a new topic, which has the potential to be a strong motivator and foster continuous affection for learning.

Supportive Environment: In a stratified teaching class, students in C-level classes ask questions and get assistance in a friendly, encouraging environment where learning is tiered. Thus, a more open-minded attitude and the appetite for taking chances in learning may be triggered by teaching stratification.

5.2 Recommendations

Findings from this study also address the question how equity should be incorporated into the education system. In this sense, acting under the principles of equity involves developing education policies that favor compensatory education, inclusive education, and equitable education at the macro-political level. However, it is more about the instructions in each classroom at a micro-practical level. Instructors must take concrete and revolutionary measures to meet various students' learning requirements resulting from their unique backgrounds. Hence, an enhanced learning experience and improved academic achievement can be expected. Here are some suggestions for further enhancement of college English stratified teaching.

Clear Communication: Clear communication with students regarding the stratified teaching approach is crucial to remove misunderstanding about the purpose of the strategy. This involves explaining the idea behind it, how it works, and what results can be expected. The question of whether stratified instruction helps elitist promote educational inequality would be appropriately addressed in this way.

Feedback Mechanisms and Flexibility: Setting up a strong feedback system can assist students in recognizing their areas of strength and weakness. Constant and constructive criticism can be really

183

beneficial for them to proceed with their learning journey. Owning to the inherent flexibility of stratified teaching, it is crucial for educators to have an open mind and modify the strategies in response to student feedback and evolving needs.

Encouragement of Self-Directed Learning and Peer Support: One of the most effective strategies is to empower students to take charge of their education. This may entail setting objectives for oneself, tracking progress and reflecting on their learning. Encouraging peer support can be beneficial in a stratified teaching environment. Within each learning community, learners with the same language proficiency will encourage and help each other when they feel less confident in learning. They can learn from each other, share learning experience and resources with each other and those who are more advanced can help those who are struggling in English learning.

Resource Integration: An efficient stratified teaching calls for a careful observation about the situation including a variety of aspects being taken into consideration. The standards of stratification needs to be clearly and reasonably set and the adjustment of initial and dynamic stratification standards should be ensured. Educational institutions should make plans to distribute teachers and teaching materials carefully according to the characteristics of target students groups and teachers to achieve individualized teaching, personalized guidance, and maximize the promotion of educational equity. Additionally, integrating online resources into the routine of college English stratified teaching would enhance students' learning experience. More materials, interactive learning experiences, and customized learning pathways can be obtained from it.

Professional Development for Teachers: Stratified teaching can be implemented more successfully if teachers receive adequate training in differentiated education. Teaching college English learners in C-level classes requires a combination of patience, adaptability, and a deep understanding of both the language and the students' backgrounds. By becoming proficient in these crucial teaching techniques, educators can foster an inclusive and productive learning environment where students feel empowered to overcome their language barriers and achieve academic success. These practices include recognizing student accomplishments, involving students in the decision-making process, and working cooperatively with peers and other educational professionals. Consequently, it is generally agreed upon that one of the most important factors in promoting stratified teaching and educational equity is continued professional growth and collaboration among teachers.

5.3 Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The contribution of this research consists of providing an empirical research employing a mixed research method that combines qualitative and quantitative data in college English stratified teaching as well as exploring an effective to enhance education equity among learner with various academic backgrounds. This endeavor will enable students with different language proficiency levels, especially those with limited proficiency in English to reach for their full potentials. Meanwhile, limitation of this research is also worthy of note: Target demographic of this investigation was narrowly defined to include only a portion of Sichuan University of Media and Communications students. In order to assess

the results' generalizability, future research endeavors ought to aim to diversify the sample by enlisting students from varying age groups, professional backgrounds, and educational backgrounds. As for future lines of research, it is proposed to develop a research plan with a bigger chronological span which could lead to even more substantial research findings in terms of educational effectiveness and equity.

Reference

Brayboy, B. M. J., Castagno, A. E., & Maughan, E. (2007). Chapter 6 equality and justice for all? Examining race in education scholarship. *Review of research in education*, *31*(1), 159-194.

Guo, L., Huang, J., & Zhang, Y. (2019). Education development in China: Education return, quality, and equity. *Sustainability*, *11*(13), 3750. https://doi.org/10.3390/su11133750

Misra, J. (1997). Teaching stratification: Stimulating interest and critical thinking through research projects. *Teaching Sociology*, 278-291. https://doi.org/10.2307/1319296

Peng, H.Y. (2019). *An empirical study of the Stratified teaching method in junior high school English reading teaching* (Doctoral dissertation). Hunan Normal University. https://cdmd.cnki.com.cn/Article/CDMD10542-1019672901.htm

Rose, P. (2015). Three lessons for educational quality in post-2015 goals and targets: Clarity, measurability and equity. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *40*, 289-296. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2014.11.006

Shearer, C. B., & Karanian, J. M. (2017). The neuroscience of intelligence: Empirical support for the theory of multiple intelligences?. *Trends in neuroscience and education*, *6*, 211-223. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tine.2017.02.002

Sun, X. (2009). *Empirical research on Stratified teaching of junior middle school Mathematics.* (Doctoral dissertation). Yunnan Normal University. http://cdmd.cnki.com.cn/Article/CDMD10681-2010073315

Xu, S., & Zhang, L. (2015). The Death of educational equity: Stratiform class teaching. *Journal of Northwest University for Nationalities: Philosophy and Social Sciences*, *4*, 184-188. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2013.764505

Young, M. (2013). Overcoming the crisis in curriculum theory: A knowledge-based approach. *Journal of curriculum studies*, *45*(2), 101-118.

Zhu, G. (2020). Educate Your Heart before Your Mind: The Counter-Narratives of One African American Female Teacher's Asset-, Equity- and Justice-Oriented Pedagogy in One Urban School. Urb. *Educ*, 1-29. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920902244