

Team teaching in a BA in ELT course, and in general

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Introduction

Consider this scenario: You are a tenured university professor, and you are expecting a large group of trainees next semester in a BA in ELT course on observation. You designed this course and have been teaching it for many years. In a planning meeting, the director of the BA mentions a new professor who needs more teaching hours to fulfill her part-time position. You know the professor because she was your student in the Cambridge University In-Service Course of English Language Teaching (ICELT) where you observed her teaching, and you also directed her thesis in the MA in Applied Linguistics (ELT) at your university. A lightbulb pops in your head and you suggest that she could team teach the observation class with you. You also argue that it would be training for the new professor for when you retire (not long now). The director approves this experimental arrangement and, essentially for administrative reasons, you will be team teaching. The wheels are rolling. Enter Amanda.

Now consider this scenario: You are a professor new to a university BA in ELT program. With a part-time position, you have five classes to teach, all new for you. The director of the Language Department tells you she wants you to team teach one class with a tenured professor, who was your professor both in ICELT, where she observed you teaching, and later in the MA in Applied Linguistics (ELT), where she was your MA thesis director. You know her both as your teacher and as someone with a lot of experience teaching in the BA. The idea of now team teaching as colleagues is a little daunting, but it may relieve some of your workload and alleviate your feeling of being overwhelmed. As you begin the new semester, your team teaching partner, Martha, suggests keeping a journal about this experiment.

That is how we came to team teach a class. In this article, we will relate the experiences of two teachers working together for a semester as team teachers in a BA in ELT course at a large public university in central Mexico. It is not often the case that one can team teach in Mexican universities, but we were given this opportunity and decided to conduct this experiment as professionally as we could.

Defining ‘team teaching’

The term ‘team teaching’ has been defined in different ways, and in situations ranging from special education teachers working with regular classroom teachers to interdisciplinary teams on a faculty organizing a range of seminars (Anderson & Speck, 1998). For our experiment, we started from Richards and Farrell’s (2005) characterization of team teaching as “a process in which two or more teachers share the responsibility for teaching a class”, and took that all the way to the idea that “shared responsibility for classroom actions is considered particularly important for the delivery of high-quality instruction by teacher teams” (Krammer et al., 2018). The goal of our experiment was to focus on collaboration and shared responsibility in all aspects of the course, from planning and design, to implementation and evaluation.

As our experience revealed, for that to work well, mutual trust and respect are extremely important, or even essential. Our experience also revealed the effects team teaching can have on teacher development and development of other educational professionals.

Collaboration: 1 + 1 > 2

Teaching of any kind calls for collaboration between teachers and students. Team teaching also requires effective collaboration between teachers in the whole process of teaching a class: without it, there can be conflict, contradiction, and trouble for the teachers and the students. The collaboration should extend from the overall course philosophy, through setting goals and objectives, planning the course and individual lessons, and actual teaching, to assessment and evaluation.

As Richards and Farrell (2005) note, “The shared planning, decision making, teaching, and review that result [from effective collaboration] serve as a powerful medium of collaborative learning.” As our semester progressed, the potential for such collaboration to result in something greater than what each individual teacher brought to the table became more and more apparent. Amanda wrote the following in her journal: “Ideally, the sum of what each teacher brings to the class is additive, which benefits the students” (Week 6, AKW Journal). Fortunately, our experience generally followed this formula, where the sum of our ideas created a greater whole, as another of Amanda’s entries exemplified:

Collaborative planning for our LP this week was a nice give and take. I had ideas based on two readings on peer observation and critical friends, and MM had ideas about how to present, and then we were able to collaborate on how to put it together... We can build off of each other’s strengths. (Week 5, AKW Journal)

For such collaboration to function well, however, a strong foundation built by both teachers is essential.

Anderson and Speck (1998) point out that “compatible team teachers work together harmoniously by embracing a similar philosophy and vision for the class”. Whether such compatibility comes from pre-existing personal beliefs or communication during advanced planning (with the latter perhaps modifying some of the former and facilitating the embrace of a similar philosophy and vision), our experience revealed compatibility to be important to the success of collaboration and our classes. For effective collaboration to take place we both had to participate frankly and negotiate during our planning meetings.

We talked over the LP before class, and I felt we moved back and forth easily during class. We both knew the overall plan, and therefore could both jump in, in what seemed a seamless, fluid way. It helps that we have a similar approach to teaching. (Week 3, AKW Journal)

With a shared philosophy and an agreement on the goals and objectives, the value of such collaboration in the classroom can be seen as a benefit to the students.

At the start of the project, we mapped out the entire semester, agreeing on what we wanted to do in a general sense. Then, we met to plan each individual class once a week. This advance planning and mutual agreement allowed us to work collaboratively. When things click between the teachers, as they did in our experience, it can all appear effortless. Amanda reflected on what was for us a high moment of team teaching and described what happened in a class:

...it was “team teaching” at its best, truly, today. While I led a discussion about the article, MM wrote students’ responses on the board, allowing me to concentrate on trying to elicit ideas from the students and clarify when something wasn’t clear. (Week 4, AKW Journal)

This kind of collaboration allows teachers to aid and support each other in class, and it can result in a state of *flow* (Csikszentmihályi, 1990) where teachers work effortlessly together with a mutual goal in mind. It also enables them to do together what a single teacher cannot do alone, complementing each other. In the above example, it included leading a student discussion, clarifying points referring to ideas on the board as well as the article (Amanda), and listening carefully to students, paraphrasing their ideas on the board with the article in mind, stepping in with an observation at times (Martha).

The benefit of team teaching specifically for the students extends beyond such value-added teaching in the classroom, and the course and lesson planning before it, to assessment and evaluation. One “strength of team teaching is that it can improve evaluation/feedback of students’ performance” (Anderson & Speck, 1998). Our experience is reflected in Amanda’s following journal entry.

We collaborated on grading the presentations. MM provided a rubric and we were close in our evaluations, one higher at times than the other, but the averages were results we both seemed satisfied with. (Week 7, AKW Journal)

Evaluation and grading by team teachers requires them to collaborate in the process, sharing and discussing perceptions and views in order to reach more reliable, negotiated grades and feedback. This is obviously better for students than more subjective evaluation and grading by a single teacher, but it requires a greater time commitment from the teachers. Our experience confirms this:

We can divide the work, but we also need to ensure that the grading is consistent for the students. The challenge is how to do that. If we both grade all of the students’ work, instead of reducing the work, it effectively doubles it. (Week 16, AKW Journal)

So, while the use of two pairs of eyes and two brains in evaluation and grading usually improves reliability and consistency significantly, it can often be difficult or almost impossible time-wise. We suggest that team teachers do as much grading as they can together, so long as they have the time to do it carefully, and always consult each other when in doubt. We found that working together on grading made us both more confident in our judgement, and it probably improved our judgement when grading alone.

Trust is key

Our experience showed that collaborating on everything from planning to evaluation is only part of the equation. We have already mentioned the importance of compatibility, which may grow between the teachers from not much, apparently, at first to a lot after some time working together. Another essential ingredient for effective collaboration in team teaching is trust. That requires respect between the teachers, which is built on confidence in the ability and reliability of the other and acceptance of the differences of the other, and a willingness to share responsibility for the class and take responsibility for one’s share. Many authors have emphasized this need for “mutual respect” (Anderson & Speck, 1998), “equal participation” (Heath, Carlson, & Kurtz, 1987), and “the sharing of responsibility for the class” (Krammer et al., 2018) in order for team teaching to be successful. Amanda wrote this:

Benefits of team teaching should be shared responsibility, shared workload, mutual trust, and a sharing of different perspectives. All of this should ultimately benefit the students. The key is a sense of shared trust. Without that, the rest is impossible to attain. (Week 15, AKW Journal)

The word *share* appears a number of times here. It refers to the idea of dividing the work of the two teachers in a way that relies on and promotes trust. Based on our team-teaching experiment, effectively shared experience is grounded in trust and confidence in each other.

Richards and Farrell (2005) report that they “found that it is important for both teachers to have a strong sense of confidence in each other” and identified “trust and mutual respect” as the greatest concern of team teachers. Our experience confirmed these principles:

Trust is important in team teaching. It involves not only trust that your co-teacher will carry her/his load, will bring ideas to the table, participate in planning the class as well as participate during the class. It also involves trust that the co-teacher will not try to undermine you during class with the students. In an ideal situation, co-teachers support each other, both before class—during preparation and planning—and also during class and execution of the plan. (Week 6, AKW Journal)

Trust in team teachers does not mean, however, that both teachers must agree on every aspect of the class. Where true trust exists, differences of teaching perspective and style can be expressed in a way that benefits the students. Mutual trust to agree and disagree allows team teachers to participate fully, recognizing that it is important never to categorically contradict the other teacher but maintain the acceptance of different reasonable opinions. Team teachers should work out any differences that arise in a professional manner in order to obtain their mutual goal in the classroom. Anderson and Speck (1998) say that “an often cited benefit of team teaching is that students gain multiple perspectives because two teachers offer different viewpoints”. For different viewpoints to be compared and assessed properly, they need to be debated in honest communication and open negotiation, searching for solid ground, often middle ground, that will result in the best learning experience for the students.

How co-teachers decide to allocate their class time should be negotiated, to ensure both that the students receive the information they need in the best way possible, and that the load is carried evenly by the teachers. This requires that both teachers participate in creating a lesson plan and sticking to that plan. It requires that both teachers participate equally throughout the lesson. It also requires that on-the-spot changes to a lesson plan—which are inevitable—can be negotiated fairly and with the goal of doing what is best for the students. Team teaching requires consideration. (Week 16, AKW Journal)

Team teachers must be able to react to unexpected things or problems that occur in a class and respond spontaneously, without any conflict between the teachers, but rather a mutual search for a solution or change of direction. As Richards and Farrell (2005) say:

When two teachers teach a class, they can learn from each other’s strengths when planning and teaching lessons. Each teacher will have different ideas on how to deal with any difficulties in the lesson, as well as a different body of experience to draw on. Their combined degrees of knowledge and expertise are bound to lead to a stronger lesson plan.

Teacher Development

Trusting and supportive team teaching, as described above, creates opportunities to share and discuss ideas honestly, even tentative ones, and to help each other develop. As noted by Brouwer et al (2012), “in successful teacher teams, a negotiation process takes place where such shared responsibilities are

brokered... In this context, the concerned teachers start a shared learning procedure where they become familiar with the perspectives and attitudes of their team partner". Richards and Farrell (2005) similarly assert that team teaching "allows teachers to cooperate as equals" and may also include "some elements of a coaching relationship" when teachers' experience levels differ. Teaching teams can, when successful, result in learning opportunities for the teachers. In our case, Martha, as the much more experienced partner, wanted to help Amanda make well-informed, confident decisions and instill trust in her – as discussed above, trust was key. The trust between the two of us teachers was transmitted to the students, providing a positive opportunity for both student and teacher development. Amanda comments on this in her journal: "First time solo in the class. MM has set the groundwork for me to be accepted by the students as one of the teachers, and not to be viewed as *lesser*" (Week 8, AKW Journal). Here we see Amanda at mid-course, half way through the semester, and she reflected frankly how she felt. She had gained the confidence to teach on her own and move forward with the challenge.

In our experience, team teaching was a very useful tool for professional development, not just an improved way of teaching students, in our case trainee English teachers. We both benefited from the experience as teachers and teacher trainers, finding our partner to be a good sounding board and proposer of ideas in all areas and in difficult decision making. Ideally, team teaching creates an even better environment for teacher learning and development than solo teaching. In particular, it may result in faster development for less experienced and less confident teachers, who can learn not only from their own slowly accumulating experiences, but from the experiences of another teacher, perhaps more extensive and almost certainly different in interesting ways. If the team is based on a strong sense of collaboration and trust, as discussed above, the potential for professional growth is strong. In her journal, Amanda reflects on how the benefits of team teaching of a specific class can spill over to other classes: "It is helping me in my other BA classes...what I am learning here, I use elsewhere" (Week 13, AKW Journal). This represented fairly early growth for Amanda in her development as a teacher trainer, and on the other side of the partnership there was a spurt of late growth for Martha.

Conclusion

For us, team teaching was a positive experience and we both felt that we learned from it, but there are problem areas to consider, such as the time commitment and the dependence of effective collaboration on compatibility and trust between the teachers. Our experiment began fortuitously as the solution to an administrative issue, but we quickly saw the potential in it, developed that, and had a unique experience in which we each gained significant value from the other. So, now imagine this new scenario: you are the one being asked to team teach. Would you do it? After our positive experience and understanding both the benefits and costs, we would, with enthusiasm.

References

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