

A Fresh Look at Team Teaching

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Introduction

The notion of team teaching has been bandied about for some time now – it has enjoyed brief periods of interest since the nineteen sixties in various teaching situations – and yet few, if any, of the handbooks currently used in EFL make any but passing reference to it, and the present authors have been unable to find virtually any articles or parts of books dealing with team teaching in any depth. This article then, considers what for the practicing teacher can only be described as an oral tradition, and offers what for us have become new possibilities within this framework.

One thing should be said before we begin: although all the ideas and comments concerning team teaching refer to two teachers only, there is no reason why three or perhaps even more teachers could not participate in a team teaching project both at the planning stage and during the lesson itself.

Running a team-taught lesson

1. The planning stage

The planning stage of a team-taught lesson can, and we would argue should, be as important, enjoyable and rewarding as the lesson itself.

If team teaching is to be true to its name, rather than just an extra teacher being present in the classroom, then the teamwork should begin with the joint planning of the lesson. And in our experience at least, pedagogical advantages aside, this planning offers tremendous opportunities to the teachers. Firstly, one has the chance to talk through the preparation of a lesson – to voice the doubts, alternatives and tentative ideas that teachers must always go through alone, in their heads. This in itself can be a huge source of relief, and a great builder of confidence. And secondly, as anyone knows who has tried it, for all but inveterate lone wolves, the creative energies released when two minds collaborate on a joint project often far exceed those that either of the participants would have been capable of when working alone. It could even be argued that, in some cases at least, to do the planning in collaboration is in itself a form of team teaching.

2. The team teaching lesson

Though, as we have said, we cannot offer written sources to back up this notion, we believe most teachers would agree that a 'traditional' team-taught lesson might well involve the following:

The two (or more) teachers taking part, plan the structure of the lesson. Let us be a little simplistic and take a classic presentation-controlled practice-free practice format. Teacher A offers to present the new material, while teacher B sits in the back row. Teachers A and B then change places, and Teacher B leads the drill, exercise or whatever of the controlled practice. The group is then divided into two, and each teacher leads one half of the class in free practice.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with this arrangement. It offers several of the advantages of team teaching mentioned elsewhere in this article. However, we and some of the other teachers at our Centre felt that, given that two teachers have decided to work together on the planning and execution of a lesson, there are whole vistas of potential that the format described above fails to perceive, let alone utilise; and we should like to indicate directions in which new thinking on team teaching might lead.

3. Some new ideas

At the outset, we must acknowledge the work of our colleagues Magda Kaczmarek and Tom Randolph in developing and realizing many of the ideas described in this section.

The basic notion that we have worked from in our thinking on team teaching was that mentioned above: that, if two teachers are to be present in the classroom, there must be ways of using that fact to the full, rather than have them just take turns at teaching. We strongly recommend that you consider this question seriously yourselves; in the meantime we offer the following specific ideas, which have been used successfully in our Centre.

- a) The two teachers present a dialogue, or more ambitiously a sketch, on which work is to be done later. This may be a straightforward dialogue, an interview, an interrogation, doctor and patient, teacher and pupil or whatever.



Further, it need not be fully scripted – a spontaneous exchange on a given topic, or one based on minimal prompts rather than a script, is an exciting alternative. The point is that, unlike material recorded on tape, or even worse written in a book, the language has a physical form and real-life speakers, and is thus brought much closer to the learner's experience; this is even more the case if the language used is partially or wholly spontaneously produced.

- b) If the learners are going to be asked to divide into pairs/groups to write and perform a sketch on a particular theme, the teachers could first offer an example along the same theme. This may seem an obvious idea; but how often do you as a teacher ask your students to do something like this without first showing them an example? For us the answer is very often, at the least. We have found that, when we first actually demonstrate what we want done, the response from the learners is greatly enlivened and improved. The reason for doing this is not to provide a model either in terms of language or of format but just to get imaginations going and to show that we teachers are not afraid to have fun or even to make fools of ourselves. And the 'performance' doesn't need to be perfect – we're not professional actors any more than our learners are, and if our performance has a few rough edges, so much the better!
- c) One teacher prepares a mime, to which the learners are going to be asked to compose a commentary (we used the example of a mimed advert to which words were to be added). The other teacher leads the class in eliciting this commentary and in speaking it in time to the mime. In this way, both teachers are active simultaneously, but one can concentrate on miming without worrying about teaching, the other is free to deal with the class and doesn't have to think about performing. And again the use of a real teacher provides much more personal investment for the learners, and much more flexibility for the teachers.
- d) A variant on this is for one teacher to mime an action, or perhaps a message (as in the now-legendary Hotel Receptionist game from 'Drama Techniques in Language Learning' (Maley & Duff 1978: 125-8)) and for the other teacher to elicit the action or message from the class. Here again, the two roles that the teacher must normally take on single-handed are divided, and each teacher is free to concentrate on only one.
- e) A joke-telling session: this was done as part of a topic on health, though obviously it can easily be adapted: the two teachers read out a series of 'doctor, doctor!' jokes; the learners are then asked to present a set of similar jokes in the same fashion.

4. Feedback

By its nature, team teaching provides an unforced basis for informal feedback. Two teachers who have planned and taught a lesson together are going to find it entirely natural to sit down after the lesson and discuss it in some detail. We do recommend, however, that you make sure that there is at least an

informal chat afterwards, since putting your feelings, impressions etc. into words often helps to crystallize what you have learnt from the shared experience. It is also important to round off that experience; we should remember that team teaching can affect the professional and personal relationships between teachers as much as the teaching of any one teacher.

We would, however, suggest that from time to time a more formal approach is taken in feedback sessions. Amongst many possibilities, the following might be mentioned:

- a) Make a point of sitting down with your colleague and taking twenty or thirty minutes to go over the lesson in detail. If you like, concentrate on one aspect of the lesson: learners' behaviour, materials used, interactions between the teachers, or whatever seems most pertinent.
- b) Choose a mutual third colleague who was not involved in the project; each of you talk to this colleague separately about the lesson, then all three of you have a discussion together.
- c) hold a five/ten-minute feedback session about the lesson in front of the class, with all present taking part.
- d) Each of you independently write up notes about the lesson, then swap notes and discuss (an interesting example of this is in Plumb and Davis (1987)).

Finally, we may refer you to Chapter 7 of David Hopkin's excellent 'A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Research' (Hopkins 1985:85-104), which offers techniques which are aimed at observation in the context of Action Research but which can successfully be adapted to one-off team teaching feedback sessions.

Why Bother?

All this may (or may not) sound very well; but what's the point of team teaching?

Some of the many advantages of team teaching have been mentioned already; the confidence boost that one can feel by talking through a lesson beforehand and then teaching it with a colleague; and the sometimes improbable amount of creative energy released when two minds set about a task together instead of separately.

Other advantages are not all obvious, but are none the less important for that. One is the effect on the learners.: we have found that seeing teachers work together has a positive effect on the learners, who, seeing teachers collaborating together, are encouraged to follow suit, to open up and thus to co-operate in building an atmosphere of mutual trust and understanding, which considerably contributes to breaking the isolation of the individual in the classroom – and that means the individual teacher as well as the individual learner.

Secondly, the starting point of the whole business, for us, was the question of observation, and this remains an important factor. Just as team teaching allows the teacher to talk about a lesson to someone who is not a passive listener but is just as involved in the lesson, so it offers the chance for teachers to see their peers at work without there being inactive observers in the classroom: in other words, it offers many of the advantages of observation while avoiding many of the most unpleasant disadvantages.

Finally, one advantage has been discovered in what would at first appear to be a disadvantage: it might be thought that team teaching, in both planning and actual teaching, is more time-consuming than solo teaching, but we have found that two teachers working together can prepare more material in less time than if they had been working on their own!

Some words of advice

Here we should like to mention a few points which we have learnt, from experience, to watch out for.

Firstly, it's much better to work with someone you know well and like. Team teaching requires a high level of co-operation and of trust, and working with the wrong person can prove a discouraging experience, as conflicts of teaching style or, worse, personality may be exposed.

Secondly, though team teaching is a great experience we don't suggest you do it all the time! It's not a universal remedy to teaching problems, but if used from time to time it can be an exhilarating experience which can bring teachers closer together and can shed new light on one's own teaching.

We have found that it is better for intensive residential courses than for regular in-town lessons, though the latter are of course not ruled out.

It may be that only part of the lesson – the introduction, perhaps, or a rounding-off activity – really benefits from the presence of more than one teacher in the classroom. If this is so, don't be afraid to admit it, and have the extra teacher in only for that part of the lesson. This is preferable to having an extraneous presence in for an extended period.

And lastly – be prepared to compromise! This is an essential part of any collaboration that is going to work, so be prepared to give up some of your brilliant ideas if your partner doesn't like them – she or he may even turn out to be right!

Conclusion

In this article we have attempted to take a new look at the practice of team teaching. Placing the emphasis on the great rewards to be reaped from creative collaboration at all stages of the lesson from planning, through the lesson itself to feedback, we have pointed to new possibilities towards which thinking on team teaching might usefully be directed. We feel that we have only just scratched the surface of the potential to be found in collaborative work of this kind, and we are very excited about what we have started to explore. We hope that we have conveyed some of that excitement – and that you will be encouraged to do some exploring yourselves and to get your trainees to do the same!

References

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