

A Reflection on Team-Teaching in an EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Team-teaching is a versatile instructional approach that has been implemented in a variety of English language teaching and learning settings for different pedagogical and administrative purposes. Existing research claims that by extending the teaching competencies of teachers through group interaction and process sharing, the quality of instruction provided to the students can be improved. It is believed that this would, in turn, lead to promotion of not only the teaching but also the learning process. This paper reports on an experimental study in which the team-teaching technique was employed to teach a graduate English course at Chulalongkorn University. The students' attitudes toward this particular teaching method, elicited by means of an open-ended questionnaire are discussed. The paper also reviews a number of advantages and disadvantages of the team-teaching technique, both to the teachers themselves and to the students, and suggests guidelines for successful implementation of the technique in EFL classes.

Team-teaching is a versatile instructional approach that has been implemented in a variety of English language teaching and learning settings for different pedagogical and administrative purposes. Researchers and educators have shown a vested interest in the idea of team teaching since as early as 1960s (Hetch, Roberts, Schoon, Perry, and Fansler, 1995). Though the name of this approach signifies some form of collaboration among teachers, the extent to which teachers actually collaborate with one another as a team can

vary considerably. On the one hand, some teachers may work together in designing lesson plans, teaching materials, and assessment procedures, but carry out instruction and evaluation of the students separately by following some predetermined criteria. On the other hand, other teachers may actually teach the same class together, either taking turns in meeting the students or actually sharing the same class period. Despite such variations, the expectations remain the same—that the team will work collaboratively and share resources to

provide a widened range of instructional activities and opportunities for the students (Schmuck and Runkel, 1985).

The question, then, is whether the team-teaching technique does help promote the teaching and learning process. Hetch et al. (1995) claim that by extending the teaching competencies of the teachers through group interaction and process sharing, the quality of instruction provided to the students can be improved. Costello (1987) agrees, pointing out that the single most important influence upon student learning is nothing but the competence of the classroom teachers and their motivation to act for the students' own good. Empirical supports for such a claim can be found in Hetch et al. (1995) and Lundeen and Lundeen (1993), to name but a few, who report that students who received team-teaching instruction outperformed, in overall academic achievement and standardized tests, their non-team taught counterparts.

Given a belief in the benefits the students can attain from teacher collaboration, this paper reports on an experimental project in which the team-teaching technique has been employed to teach a graduate English as a Foreign Language course at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute. In addition, the students' attitudes toward this teaching method, elicited by means of an open-ended questionnaire which was completed at the end of the course, are discussed. The paper then reviews the advantages and disadvantages of the team-teaching technique, both to the teachers themselves and to the students, and suggests guidelines for successful implementation of the team-teaching technique in EFL classes.

The project

In the second semester of 1999, 47 students were enrolled in section 2 and section 3 of the Consolidating Skills for Science Graduates course offered by the Division of English for Science and Technology, Chulalongkorn University Language Institute. The objective of this course was to enable students, mostly from the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Engineering, to develop and practice the fundamental reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills necessary for their graduate studies. Before the semester started, the two instructors who were responsible for each of the sections worked together planning the course and revising the materials to be covered during the 14-week duration of the course, selecting the materials to be retained and those to be omitted, based on past experience of their appropriateness. Although the students were originally divided into two sections by the Office of the Registrar of the University based on either the time of enrollment or the students' own preferences, the students were required to take a proficiency test adapted from the TOEFL test on the first day of the course. They were subsequently regrouped according to the test results. The 25 students who had the highest scores were put in section 2, while the rest went to section 3. The rationale behind the grouping of the students in accordance with their level of English proficiency was to provide instruction that best suited the students' learning capabilities and pace. However, the same teaching materials would be used with each group. The more proficient students would not be slowed down by their less able peers, and less proficient students would not be intimidated or discouraged by those who required less time to comprehend concepts

or complete the assigned tasks. Besides, the instructors would be better able to attend to the students' individual needs such as by giving out supplementary exercises to the more proficient students or occasionally using Thai to explain language structures to the less able.

During the semester, each group met once a week, for three hours. In general terms, the course comprised of 10 units, one unit for each week, except for the last two units--"Listening and Note-Taking" and "Oral Presentation"--which required two and three class meetings respectively. The two instructors decided at the beginning of the semester that although they had planned the classes together and would subsequently have to write and mark the mid-term and final examination papers as a team, they would teach their own sections separately. However, of a total 14 times when the class would meet, there would be five occasions when both sections would study together in a larger classroom—for the units on speaking skills, "Discovering Communicative Functions" and "Different Patterns and Types of Arguments," as well as the final unit on oral presentation when the students could work across sections to carry out a science-related group presentation. The reason behind the decision to combine the two sections for the teaching of the oral communication skills is that it would give the students a chance to practice speaking with those who they had never shared the same classes before. It is also worth noting that the two instructors teaching together would better generate different situations for the students to practice communication. During the semester, each instructor had to miss one class once due to unforeseen circumstances and, instead of re-scheduling, the other instructor taught both sections together in a

larger classroom, thus, creating an unexpected but useful opportunity to further experiment in the team-teaching technique.

At the end of the semester, the students were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire specially designed by the researcher, who was one of the two instructors, to elicit their attitudes towards their experience with team-teaching. The questionnaire consisted of six items as follows:

1. What do you think about the "team-teaching" technique sometimes employed in this course? Please specify your overall impression of this teaching technique.
2. What do you like most about the "team-teaching" technique?
3. What do you dislike most about the "team-teaching" technique?
4. In your view, what are the advantages of the "team-teaching" technique?
5. In your view, what are the disadvantages of the "team-teaching" technique?
6. Do you have any comments on the "team-teaching" technique, or do you have any suggestions that you think would improve the effectiveness of this teaching technique?

Of the 47 students, 24 (or approximately 51 percent) completed and returned the questionnaire. (The fact that the questionnaire was distributed with the final examination paper might somehow have determined the low return rate. It might have been the case that the students felt too tired after tackling the exam to compose their thoughts about something else, or they might just have wanted to leave the room as soon as the exam was finished). However, most of those who did complete the

questionnaire gave very descriptive and vivid accounts of their attitudes towards team-teaching. These very useful and informative insights from the students are discussed in detail in the following section of the paper.

Students' Attitudes Towards the Team-Teaching Technique

This section discusses the students' responses to question numbers 1 to 3 and number 6 in the questionnaire. The students' responses to question numbers 4 and 5 on advantages and disadvantages are discussed in the following section.

Question No. 1: What do you think about the "team-teaching" technique sometimes employed in this course? Please specify your overall impression of this teaching technique.

Of the 23 students who responded to this question, only two stated that they liked studying separately in their own group best. One of them reasoned that studying on a course with two instructors led to a comparison and contrast between the instructors, *"this one is good, that one is bad; this section is good, that section is bad,"* which he or she did not like. On the other hand, the other student argued that he or she liked to study in a small group because there was more opportunity for questioning.

The remainder of the students indicated that they found the team-teaching technique interesting. Nineteen students agreed that they found studying together in a larger class provided a change of learning

situation and atmosphere that stimulated them. Some students explained that having to study with a large number of students put pressure on them to pay more attention to the lessons and to outperform classmates; others pointed out that having two instructors, each of whom possessed their own teaching style, made them aware of the different ways in which instruction could be provided. Furthermore, eight out of these nineteen students reported that they appreciated the chance to generate more ideas in a larger class, and one of them gave a more detailed explanation of this, *"Good. It's proper in this course that contains a lot of students. Moreover, the team can brainstorm that each person has their own skill. When combine or mix all skills together, it can make the creative results."*¹

Question No. 2: What do you like most about the "team-teaching" technique?

Apart from stating that they enjoyed the team-teaching technique which was interesting and made learning fun, the majority of the students (21 in total) gave responses which could further be divided as follows:

First, the students believed that the more people there were in class, the more versatile the ideas that could be generated. They felt that they had more classmates to exchange ideas and information with, which, in turn, enabled them to learn more than they did when the two groups were separated; as one concluded, *"I was satisfied with the instruction because the team-teaching gave me more chances to learn."*

¹ Some students responded in Thai; others responded in English. If the students' responses were in Thai, their translations are marked with an asterisk. The students' responses in English were not revised for grammatical correctness.

Secondly, the students believed that the two instructors brought different and varied teaching styles into the classroom. Better still, they felt that the instructors complemented each other. The feelings of the students can be observed in such responses as, *"I had a chance to take in something more varied from two instructors,"* or, *"because I had two instructors to give me advice, I could learn more."*

It is also worth noting that four students reported that what they liked most about the team-teaching technique was that it enabled them to give a more realistic oral presentation. With two instructors who helped each other to keep a close eye on them and 'grill' them in the question-answer session, it was as though the instructors were their graduate theses' committee. Furthermore, they indicated that the large audience made them feel they were giving a presentation in a real-life situation, and they also had the chance to learn more as a result of there being a larger number of presentations.

In addition, a number of students, seven in all, said that the team-teaching technique gave them a chance to meet more people and make more good friends, which, in turn, led to a far more enjoyable learning situation.

Question No. 3: What do you dislike about the "team-teaching" technique?

Ten of the students indicated that there was nothing they did not like about team-teaching. Among the remainder, the responses can be classified as follows:

- Six of the students felt that the class was sometimes too crowded, and that this undermined their opportunity to make the

most of the instruction. One of them said, *"I felt that sometimes my chances to be engaged in the instruction was lessened,"* whereas another commented, *"sometimes a large number of students in one class made the instructors unable to pay close attention to them."* One even questioned the ability of the instructors to provide the most effective instruction in the circumstances: *"their teaching performance can be affected as well."*

- Four students pointed out that, for its promises, the team-teaching technique, when applied with a large number of students in class, could result in time being wasted. For example, while some students were satisfied by having a larger audience for their oral presentation, two felt that, *"it takes a long time for everybody to do their presentation,*"* and, *"the presentation took longer than studying separately."*

- Finally, one student believed that, to his or her dislike, the team-teaching technique necessitated his or her adjusting to the different teaching styles of different instructors, while another complained that the classroom was arranged in such a way that he or she did not get a good view of the instructor, *"the area is wide, not deep, so it's hard to incline the desk or neck!*"*

Question No. 6: Do you have any comments on the "team-teaching" technique, or do you have any suggestions that you think would improve the effectiveness of this teaching technique?

Undeniably, the students' comments helped shed light on ways in which the instructors could improve the quality of the team-teaching method and thereby make instruction as effective as possible. Five of the students suggested that a detailed

schedule for each class, which clearly indicated who was going to teach what and when, would be of great help to them in their preparation for class, *“if you have more detail of outline schedule, it will be the best course.*”*

One student made an interestingly recommendation that the course be divided into two parts, with 70 percent of the course devoted to the teaching of contents in separated sections, and the other 30 percent spent on practical use of language in a large class. His or her argument is definitely worth taking into consideration, as it is stated, *“because in a small group I can learn more contents (I can catch up with the lessons), but in a large group, I can see how I can make my learning effective (watching how other classmates learn). We can try presenting [the oral presentation] in a large group.”*

Finally, six students cautioned that the number of students in class should not be too large; otherwise, the instruction would not be as effective as it should, and could be. They also suggested that the number of the instructors should not exceed two as this could lead to confusion on the part of the students. According to them, it would be even better if the two instructors could sometimes crack jokes together, thus making the lesson more fun.

Advantages of Team-teaching

Both teachers and students can benefit from team-teaching. However, although both teachers and students agree that participation in the team-teaching technique is a rewarding experience, the actual benefits they receive from such participation are somewhat dissimilar. As a result, the advantages of team-teaching as perceived by the teacher and the students who had

encountered with the team-teaching technique seem to better be discussed separately.

Teachers

One obvious advantage of team-teaching is that with more than one teacher working to achieve certain instructional goals, a combination of individual talents will inevitably result. For example, one teacher might feel more confident teaching speaking skills, while another might find that he or she can do a better job when teaching writing. When such a situation arises, the students will of course reap the benefits of being taught by a teacher who is particularly happy teaching a particular skill. However, this does not mean that the teachers do not have their own share in the benefits. Teachers, as they work together, benefit from sharing teaching strategies and techniques associated with their own areas of expertise (Portocarrero & Bergin, 1997). According to Giles, Koenig & Stoller (1998), when teachers plan classes together--while brainstorming, culling resources, probing questions regarding instruction and assessment, solving problems, and sharing successes and failures--a chance for professional development could result. In addition, teachers who are part of a team can consider themselves having a strong support system since academic and personal feedback are both faster and more frequent (Hetch et al, 1995). Finally, direct involvement in team-teaching which necessitates discussion among teachers can lead to diverse perspectives and creative instruction in which the individual talents of each team member are combined.

Finally, Calderon (1995) summarizes a number of advantages of the team-teaching technique and reaffirms that team-teaching facilitates different aspects of instruction including developing an extensive teaching repertoire, making lesson-planning easier, enhancing and enriching lessons, complementing each other to achieve a more holistic instructional program, giving the comfort of sharing and changing, creating a spirit of cooperation and mutual support, and helping to confirm or dispel assumptions about individual student needs. She concludes that all these advantages result from the fact that the teachers like to learn in much the same way as their students—through active participation and construction of collective knowledge based on discovery, inquiry, and ample discussion of what if, how and why.

Students

For the students, engaging in team-taught instruction brings about a number of benefits. When asked what they perceived as the most important advantages of this particular technique, more than half of the students mentioned their belief in the benefits gained from encountering more than one teacher in one class. For instance, one student said that, *“the more teachers, the more knowledge they can help complement one another.”*

In addition, a large percentage of the students, or 16 of them, agreed that the learning atmosphere improved when the two sections were combined together in a larger classroom even though they had different reasons. Some felt that such an occasion provided them with a greater opportunity to share, and of course learn from, a wider variety of new and interesting ideas of their classmates, whereas others pointed out that

they felt compelled to try harder because the feeling of competitiveness was raised when there were more students in the class. As there are more students in a combined class, group work is sometimes unavoidable since allowing the students to work on their own can be too time-consuming. Although this may result more from the nature of this particular method, it was comforting to know that most students, or 21 of them, reported that they liked having a chance to learn how to work cooperatively in groups of various sizes. One student reasoned that, *“I became more confident in expressing myself which was fun,”* while another admitted that, *“I learned to open up my mind more.”** However, the most important thing the students learned from such a classroom arrangement may best be exemplified by one student who tried to explain: *“when the team have problems, they find the way out together which may not assure that the result is the best, but it soothes the members that they’re responsible for the results together.”* Overall, the students agreed that with team-teaching, *“there are more chances to practice speaking,”** a fact that might have resulted from their having more conversation partners to practice with.

Disadvantages of Team-teaching

Like other teaching methods that have undergone scrutiny and testing, team-teaching is not without certain drawbacks when implemented in an actual classroom setting. Some disadvantages can be seen to have been experienced by both the students and their teachers who have had a chance to experience a team-teaching technique. The discussion in this section is presented based on such an experience.

Teachers

Although different teachers bring different skills and areas of expertise to the classroom, these differences can sometimes lead to conflicts of interest between them. If the teachers are not prepared to compromise, (or, in other words, to sublimate their ego), they may find it difficult to achieve the instructional goals they have set as a team. Not unlike the students involved in group work, the teachers have to adjust in order to work effectively with others in areas where previously they have had a certain degree of autonomy. Otherwise, the teachers may waste time arguing over a course of instructional action upon which they can all agree instead of actually carrying out instruction that would best serve the interests of the students.

Furthermore, team-teaching is unavoidably time-consuming. Instead of making one's own decision concerning the provision of instruction, the teachers have to spend more time outside the class planning a co-ordinated approach. In addition, the instruction itself will be no less demanding in terms of time. Each teacher has to make additional efforts in order to get to know the resulting larger group of students in the class.

Students

Despite its many advantages, team-teaching can pose some problems to students who are unfamiliar with it. First and foremost, although the students may have different classes with different teachers, most of the time there is only one teacher in each class. As a consequence, when they have more than one teacher in the class, the students may be faced with confusion which results from having to adjust themselves to

the different teaching styles of the teachers. In addition, the students may also have to adjust themselves to changing classroom environments, from small groups to larger groups where they are confronted by unfamiliar faces. This can lead to a number of problems, including overcrowding (*"sometimes it is too crowded"*), students' loss of concentration (*"I can't concentrate when there are too many students in class"*), and fear of losing the instructor's attention (*"the instructor doesn't have an opportunity to teach the students closely—no one-on-one interaction—because there are too many students in class,"* or *"the teacher cannot pay equal attention to the students"*).

Although deserving of full attention, the problems of overcrowding, students' loss of concentration, and the teachers' inability to provide equal attention to all students are easier to deal with in comparison to the problems which arise from teaching students of differing abilities in the same class. Experienced teachers know full well how difficult it is to select instructional materials and exercises for use in a class in which the students' proficiency levels are varied. However, one solution to this problem, with students sometimes separated in small classes and sometimes studying together in one large class, may be to have them study contents in a large class where detailed explanation of a topic is given and have them practice the skills with other students of similar aptitude in smaller classes.

Finally, when asked what were the things they did not like about team-teaching, some students responded that they felt uneasy having to work in groups or practice speaking with a larger number of classmates; one of them wrote, *"a person who doesn't like to express themselves will*

have less chance to participate.” However, since group work has been shown to be an effective aid to classroom learning because it enables students to use language across a broader range of social and interpersonal functions (Pita, 1994), the teacher should help them realize the advantages participating in group work offers them as well as gradually guide them to practice and familiarize themselves with this seemingly threatening but advantage learning activity, as suggested by Reid (1998), that students can adjust themselves to different learning styles with experimentation and practice.

Limitation of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

One limitation of this experimental study lies in the fact that only a small number of the students who had had experienced with the team-teaching method responded to the questionnaire. As previously discussed, it might have resulted from the students’ unwillingness to respond to the questionnaire in an extended form of writing. Had a rating-scale type of questionnaire been used, the return rate might have been higher. In addition, the graduate students who took this particular course were mostly in the field of science and technology. In the future, if an experiment with team-teaching could be conducted with a broader range of students, in terms of both major areas of studies and levels of proficiency, different outcomes may result. Lastly, the teachers should have an opportunity to experiment with different arrangements of team-teaching so as to reach an understanding of which arrangement that best serves their instructional situations as well as the students’ needs.

Guidelines for Successful Implementation of Team-teaching

Although there were some problems found to be associated with team-teaching, the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages when it is implemented with careful consideration. Should teachers wish to adopt this particular teaching method, the following guidelines, derived from instructional experience of implementing team-teaching, will help them in making the integration of the team-teaching technique a rewarding experience for both themselves and their students:

1. *Learn to communicate.* Teachers should always remember that communication is the key to success in team-teaching. Not only do they need to communicate with their team members but also with the students. Communication among teachers should be continuous, thus ensuring that every member of the team has adequate understanding of the nature and objectives of the lessons, the expected outcomes of the various activities, and the overall progress made by each team member as well as the students themselves. Only when shared understanding is achieved can the implementation of team-teaching be carried out effectively. Furthermore, if and when possible, the teachers should also explain to the students early on why this teaching method has been chosen and how it will be implemented. By preparing the students for what they are going to encounter and pointing out the benefits, the teachers will avoid confusion and uncertainty amongst the students with regard to class arrangement and different instructors. This is because, as Bialystok (1986) explains, the teaching strategy may fail not because the students lack basic competence to benefit appropriately from

the approach, but rather because they may be ideologically, pragmatically, or motivationally opposed to the strategy, for whatever reasons.

2. *Learn to work collaboratively and systematically.* Although some teachers may have the chance to teach one section of a course to different groups, the situations involved in team-teaching are different. When a teacher is solely responsible for only one section of a course--his or her own, they often do not bother to discuss the course as a whole with their other colleagues. However, team-teaching requires teachers to work much closely, and to do this effectively, they need to learn how to adjust themselves to work with others. For example, they need to be open-minded and receptive to the opinions of others. Although this may pose certain difficulties to experienced teachers who believe that they "have seen it all," with the right attitude, they will soon appreciate the advantage of sharing experiences with other team members. Besides being collaborative, teachers need to find a mechanism that would enable them to direct instruction in a systematic way (Stewart, 1997). Explanation lies in the fact that team-teaching simply involves more teachers and more students and without the systematic planning of instruction, chaos can result much more easily than in a normal classroom with only one teacher.

3. *Learn to be flexible.* In order to be successful in teamwork, teachers need to realize that not every element of the instruction will necessarily be to their liking. In other words, they need to learn to accept the instructional decisions that the team as a whole agrees would be to the best of the students' benefits. In addition, apart from being flexible lesson planners, the teachers also need to be flexible teachers. In some

cases when different sections are combined into one larger class, teachers may themselves need to adjust to different levels of proficiency and needs. This means that with students who are not their "regulars," they need to allow time for any unexpected situations that might occur. For instance, some planned activities proven to work well with a smaller group of learners might just not work with larger groups, or some lessons may require longer and more detailed explanation than they have done previously. With more teachers and students involved, it can often happen that classroom instruction will not go as initially planned. However, flexibility with the number of students in a team-taught class does not mean the number can be unlimited. Rather, the teachers need to be careful not to let the number of students exceed a manageable limit where teachers are unable to address the needs of all the students. Besides this, increased class size can be a threat that puts some positive features of the learning community classes such as smallness, intimacy, and opportunity for collaborative learning activities at risk (Solano Community College, 1996).

4. *Learn to manage time.* The teachers who wish to engage themselves in team-teaching have to be willing to sacrifice more time to their work than those who go about their teaching individually. Obviously, team-teaching requires regular meetings of the team members as they trade ideas and discuss progress of individuals and the group as a whole. In addition, they need to discuss how the students are progressing and what course of action the team members agree to follow as the next step. If any critical situation comes up, the team members have to consult each other before solutions can be found and necessary action can be taken. Teachers also need to realize

that with combined sections, all of the activities will take longer than they would in an individual class. Unless teachers understand that even simple activities require more time for the students to complete and that classroom presentation can take a long time, they may reach the end of the semester and find that they have been unable to cover the course schedule as planned.

Conclusion

Team-teaching is not an instant success story with regard to mastering a foreign language. However, that does not mean it is not a promising language teaching

technique. If the teachers who want to make changes in their approach to language teaching choose to adopt the technique with the aforementioned guidelines in mind, it is believed that team-teaching could prove to be as successful as, if not more so, than other currently-used teaching methods. It is also believed that with an understanding of the nature of the technique, hard work, and commitment both to teaching and to the students and with collaboration and cooperation with other team members, the teachers will benefit from professional growth and the students will ultimately reap the rewards of this.

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