



# ON THE METHODOLOGY OF TEAM TEACHING

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**This paper examines the much applauded but rarely practised classroom teaching strategy of team/collaborative teaching. Positive aspects and potential disadvantages are discussed through the analysis of the authors' two-year team teaching pilot project. Given the complex nature of team teaching, there are many issues that must be addressed if team teaching is to be a success. The authors point out the crucial importance of adequate time allocation. Team teaching partners must be willing participants with compatible personalities and similar teaching philosophies. Equal collaboration and division of responsibility are recommended and they contribute to creating a positive student perception of and response to team teaching. Overall, team teaching has many benefits, not only in terms of student achievement, but also for the teachers themselves. It aids in teacher self-analysis, the development of teaching skills and promotes professional growth.**

*Key words: team/collaborative teaching, teacher partnership, partner compatibility, division of power/responsibility, teacher development*

## □ INTRODUCTION

Teaching is not usually thought of as an isolating profession. When we think of education, we picture huge buildings brimming with people, numerous teachers and hundreds of students, all of which can create the false impression that teachers are constantly interacting educationally with each other. However, the perhaps unfortunate reality is a four-walled classroom of students in which a teacher spends his or her teaching life, for the most part, willingly separated from colleagues (Vrhovac, 2002:201). Furthermore, what goes on in the classroom, is, for the greater part, surrounded in mystery known only to the actual students and the teacher involved.

Team teaching, or collaborative teaching as it is otherwise known, is a strategy that attempts to overcome this, we believe, educationally disadvantageous situation. In general, team teaching holds an antithetical role being

both complementary and contradictory in classroom teaching. It is complementary because a great number of teachers perceive the strategy of team teaching as a positive and a beneficial one (Nunan, 1992:5). However, it is contradictory because, despite this favourable attitude towards team teaching, very few teachers actually practise it. In fact, so few, that there is a lack of literature and research into this strategy (Nunan, 1992:118).

Why does this anomaly exist? This article tries to address the discrepancy arising from this question and provides some general guidance which can contribute to ELT methodology. Simultaneously, the article analyses team teaching in the Department of English at the University of Split within the core subject of *English Language Practice (Jezične vježbe)* where all groups of students were taught by the same teachers. In this subject, team teaching was incorporated as a key factor and piloted over a two-year period. Then, the team tea-

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ching pilot project was analysed and evaluated.

Team teaching can be defined in various ways. One definition assumes the constant presence of the two teachers in the classroom who consistently plan, conduct and evaluate the educational process (Benoit and Haugh, 2001; Cranmer, 1999). This option in the Croatian context is not financially feasible because teachers would not be paid individually for the hours worked. Another definition does not require the constant presence of the two teachers in the classroom but they must, nevertheless, collaborate closely and work inter-dependently (Shafer, 2000:1). The second definition formed the basis for our approach to team teaching because, among other reasons, it is practically applicable to the Croatian context. Regardless of definition, what is crucial to team teaching is that partner teachers are equally responsible for and collaborate intensively on course content, teaching methodology and assessment.

### □ ANALYSIS OF TEAM TEACHING

Teaching foreign languages lends itself very well to team teaching. Various teachers have different strengths and weaknesses and team teaching allows the capitalisation of these strengths which inevitably benefits students' language learning. For example, a Croatian teacher of English is far more attuned to students' potential problem areas while it may be more beneficial for students to do pronunciation exercises with a native speaker. Students gain a wealth of cultural insights from all teachers, and so on. It is important to note that the strengths of team members do not have to be the stereotypical ones. For example, a native teacher can greatly enhance students' writing or grammar skills and not just their pronunciation or conversational skills whereas a Croatian teacher's knowledge of foreign language learner pitfalls can also help students with pronunciation. This supports the opinion that the native teacher should not be perceived

as 'the walking tape-recorder' (Sturman, 1992:148), but that all teachers have a salient role in the team teaching of language skills.

Equally important is that, although our team consisted of both a native and a non-native teacher, it is not necessary to have a native speaker in order for team teaching to be successful. A combination of different teachers is, at all times, beneficial to student learning.

### *Administrative support*

Successful team teaching requires support and understanding of the concept from the administration of the particular educational institution. For example, administration should not view team teaching as a new-fangled strategy that will one day go out of fashion. In our case, we had great support and encouragement from our Head of Department who views team teaching as a highly positive and fruitful strategy.

### *Time*

Team teaching demands that teachers collaborate closely. This means time. In our case teachers planned time for preparation and organisation before, during and after the academic year. Before each year started, they met to plan and assign course responsibilities. During the year, a regular meeting session of one hour per week was set aside to discuss and co-ordinate teaching. After final examinations, teachers met yet again to evaluate the successfulness of the team teaching process and to rethink strategies for the next year.

Another essential tool which aided teacher communication and collaboration was the written weekly teaching record in the form of a file. In this file what had been done in class each week was written and any other useful pieces of information and observations were included. Copies of all teaching materials used were also incorporated.

Two essential factors emerged. One is the necessity of allocating extra time to the team

teaching strategy. Without this, team teaching cannot be effective. The second is that teachers must contribute this time willingly and not perceive it as a chore. Indeed, the amount of time needed for successful team teaching is probably one of the main factors that deters teachers from undertaking the process. In this sense, time equals commitment. Commitment equals effective team teaching. This can mean many unpaid hours of work. However, teachers can, while learning from each other, gain rewards from the positive effects of the whole process.

### **Teacher compatibility**

First of all, team teaching cannot be imposed upon teachers. The teachers involved must see the strategy as a positive one, beneficial not only to students but to themselves also. In other words, they must want to team teach. If it is forced upon teachers, the chances of success are slim. In our case, we very willingly undertook the challenge and were keen to implement this approach.

Teachers cannot be placed in a team ad hoc. This means that teachers involved must have mutual respect and loyalty, similar educational philosophies and similar personal beliefs. If teachers do not get on, the following can occur: (a) they will not communicate effectively and will not give of their time readily to the strategy; (b) they will not learn from each other; (c) they will probably not be loyal to each other, in other words they might talk negatively about each other to fellow colleagues or even to their students; (d) students will feel the lack of teacher commitment and respect and therefore might not see team teaching as a beneficial process. The absence of a high collaborative bond and the presence of team partners who do not complement each other drastically reduces the effectiveness of team teaching.

In our case, the level of mutual respect, commitment and empathy between team partners was extremely high. We felt that we

could learn something new from each other as we valued each other's teaching style and appreciated differences. What is also of crucial importance is similar teacher attitudes towards students. For example, we had a positive reinforcement teaching style. Furthermore, when approached by students we maintained loyalty to each other at all times.

### **Division of responsibility**

Cunningham (as cited in Bailey, Dale and Squire, 1992:163) has an interesting taxonomy which identifies different types of team teaching and focuses on the degree to which responsibility is allocated to team partners. Four arrangements are described. One is the *Team Leader Type* where one teacher has more responsibility and control over the programme than the other(s). Another is the *Master Teacher/Beginning Teacher Type* where one, more experienced teacher inducts a new teacher into the profession. The former may have more decision making power than the latter. The *Coordinated Team Type* involves common planning by team members who teach different groups of students.

Our division of responsibility was similar to the *Associate Type*. In this pattern no single team member is dominant. Decision making power and responsibility for all aspects of the learning process are shared equally. Team teaching emerges as an interactive effort based on mutual consent. In our situation, for example, the native speaker was not seen either as the ultimate expert to whom the Croatian teacher of English had to bow down, nor was the native speaker seen, at the other end of the spectrum, as a mere token gesture to the language programme. Another example was the joint choice of teaching materials. The teachers were equally important and represented in the team teaching strategy.

Our commitment to the *Associate Type* pattern of team teaching was deliberate and was, we believe, a key success factor. In this pattern, the equal distribution of responsi-





lity contributes to everyone feeling equally worthwhile. The fact that no one is superior or inferior should make teachers more willing to practise team teaching. When the team partners involved make decisions themselves they are all more committed to the programme. Indeed, as pointed out by Bailey, Dale and Squire (1992), the relinquishing of decision making by any partner or having a colleague suddenly in a superior position could be threatening to a teaching professional and could discourage someone from team teaching.

### **Assessment**

The philosophy of equal partnership was extended to the process of assessment. We discussed and designed the assessment tasks and criteria together. However, it must be mentioned here that this could pose a problem, especially if teachers have different perspectives on assessment. We had situations occasionally where, despite even the most carefully constructed assessment criteria, teachers disagreed on what grade should be allocated to a particular student. The problem was resolved by mutual compromise and open discussion. This point reinforces the importance of teachers getting on personally.

On the other hand, collaborative assessment can be extremely advantageous for students. As there are more people involved in the assessment process, the criteria have to be very explicit and the discussion involved in deciding upon a student's grade provides greater validity to the grade given. For example, the final exam for *Jezične vježbe* was designed, conducted and evaluated collaboratively and the final grade was awarded only after mutual consensus. This process definitely increases fairness to all students, especially in potentially subjective areas such as essay writing and oral exams. Collaborative assessment could also be seen as an impetus for teachers. Almost every teacher has had a student whose performance was difficult to evaluate. Having a teaching partner who knows the student

equally well can considerably ease the burden of assessment.

Another useful assessment tool was our student record book. In this book we kept a running record of students' work throughout the year. We wrote in this book on a regular basis as we had a strong commitment to continuous assessment (Bakašun and Blažević, 2003). Our records took the form of comments, observations and grades which provided a complete profile of each student by the end of the academic year. Although this technique is somewhat time consuming, it benefits team teaching's crucial need for constant communication.

### **Training students**

One of the problems which is likely to appear in team teaching, and which certainly did in our case, is how to train students to perceive the two teachers as a team who teach one subject and who have the same goal. Given the students' educational background, team teaching could be initially perceived as a strange and quite revolutionary process. Efforts have to be made at the beginning to overcome student confusion and, in our case, even several months into the course, some students were asking if there would be two different exams for this subject and if they would receive two different marks. Here the teachers' close collaboration and time investment helped to overcome this problem as we could refer to and interrelate what each of us was doing. Gradually, as students saw that we were working as a team, and when they perceived our willingness, commitment and positive teacher relationship within the strategy of team teaching, students' perceptions changed to a holistic approach to the subject.

It seems that many students think that achieving success at school/university involves working out how to satisfy the specific requirements of individual teachers. Team teaching can show such students that learning and studying is a kind of adventure, an activity which



must definitely be beyond passive ingestion. Team teachers should explicitly show students evidence of collaboration (e.g. by referring to each other's lesson), they should remind students of the common goal of the subject and they should clarify which teacher is responsible for what. Furthermore, students should be reassured that all their essays, papers or tests will be graded jointly by both teachers on the basis of previously agreed assessment criteria. Once students become convinced that they will be treated fairly by both teachers, they will readily accept the new approach.

Our students came to see team teaching as positive because, now, they had a choice of teachers whom they could approach to solve various problems according to the particular teacher's expertise and personality traits. Students should be encouraged to seek help when they need it, and, the availability of two teachers enhances the development of good rapport. For example, there were certain students who consistently approached the Croatian teacher of English because they found they were more compatible in personality with her and could relate to their common Croatian educational background. Some other students found that they could relate more to the teaching style and methods of the native teacher in order to overcome certain problem areas. Therefore, students can match their learning styles to a particular teacher's teaching style benefiting simultaneously from the individual teacher and from the team of teachers (Westfield, 1992).

### ***Students' perceptions***

In an attempt to evaluate students' reactions to team teaching and to ascertain the possible benefits to students, a questionnaire was designed. Among other aspects, students were asked to give their opinion on this way of teaching. Here are the results:

The majority of students (89%) viewed team teaching positively. They said they liked

this way of teaching and that it made the course more interesting and the content easier to understand. They also commented that they could perceive the holistic nature of the approach to the subject. Only 3% of students had no particular opinion and were ambivalent as the number of teachers was of little concern to them. Nevertheless, 8% of students expressed their confusion, they were unable to make the connection between team teachers. These students would have preferred only one teacher for this subject. The existence of a small number of students who had difficulty in accepting this method of team teaching, illustrates, among other things, the problems some students may have with disregarding their previous educational background where subjects were strictly unrelated and compartmentalised and where teachers rarely collaborated. The cultural and educational background of students obviously influences the sense they make of any teaching/learning environment (Williams and Burden, 1997). The existence of confusion among students could perhaps be seen as a potential area of student resistance to team teaching, which again might discourage teachers from this strategy. However, this should not be perceived as a deterrent factor because the introduction of something new may produce some initial negative reactions. On the whole, what emerged was that students overwhelmingly found team teaching beneficial to their language learning.

### ***CONCLUSION CHECKLIST***

The conclusion could be best expressed in the form of a checklist which both summarises what we have gained from our experiences in team teaching, and what issues we had to explore. This checklist could also be of practical value to teachers who are perhaps considering implementation of this strategy. The ultimate conclusion is that team teaching is highly beneficial to both teacher and student alike.



### ***Finding a partner / Teacher compatibility***

Ask yourself the following questions. If your answers are positive, it probably means that you believe in learning as a life-long process, which is essential for a person who is part of a team.

- Can you discuss openly your teaching methods and educational philosophy?
- Are you a flexible person, ready to accept new ideas? Are you prepared to take risks?
- Are you ready to admit your weaknesses? Will you willingly learn from your partner?
- If conflicts arise, will you be ready to handle them honestly and professionally?

An ideal partner probably does not exist, but if both teachers are ready to share their professional experience, to recognise their professional/personal strengths and weaknesses, to offer trust, support and loyalty to each other, and to commit themselves to the idea of working as a team, their collaboration is bound to be fruitful.

### ***Planning for teaching***

It is essential to discuss and make decisions about the following issues before the team teaching actually starts. The process should not be left up to chance, and setting clear goals will ensure that the team stays on the right track. On the other hand, room for manoeuvre and spontaneous changes should be allowed because the process of teaching/learning is by definition unpredictable.

- What are the programme objectives? Which books, materials, resources are to be used?

- Which content should each of us teach? Which content should be divided? Which should be taught jointly? Do we have any personal preferences? What skills will each of us bring to the classroom? For example, is one teacher better at explaining grammar and the other at organising project tasks? How can we complement each other?
- How can we set aside a specific time each week for discussion and evaluation of the process? What is the most suitable time for both of us?
- How will we keep records? One notebook or two?
- What assessment system will we use? Who grades what? How often will we formally assess our students? What assessment criteria will we adopt? Who will design test tasks/prepare exams? How will we decide upon the final mark at the end of the year?

### ***Evaluation***

Towards the end of the year, evaluation questionnaires for both teachers and students should be designed. Team partners should look back on the process and assess all positive and negative instances. Likewise, students could rate the overall impact of the strategy, its advantages and disadvantages, and generally assess the effects of team teaching on their learning. Insights gained from such questionnaires may prove invaluable for the future work of team partners. As we mentioned before, flexibility, adaptability and willingness to learn are the key ingredients for team success.

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## O METODOLOGIJI TIMSKOG PODUČAVANJA

### Sažetak

U članku je riječ o timskom podučavanju, strategiji o kojoj mnogi imaju pozitivno mišljenje ali koja se rijetko primjenjuje u praksi. Na temelju rezultata dvogodišnjeg proučavanja autorice razrađuju dobre i loše strane ovog pristupa nastavi. S obzirom na kompleksnu prirodu timskog podučavanja, treba odgovoriti na mnoga pitanja kako bi se ova strategija mogla uspješno primijeniti. Potrebno je uložiti dostatno vrijeme, a nastavnici-partneri moraju biti spremni da se uključe u proces. Nastavnici-partneri bi trebali imati kompatibilne osobnosti te slične stavove o podučavanju. Preporučuje se ravnopravno sudjelovanje i podjela odgovornosti što doprinosi stvaranju pozitivnog stava studenata o timskom radu. U cjelini, timsko podučavanje ima mnoge prednosti, ne samo za studente već i za nastavnike. Ta strategija pomaže nastavnicima u procesu kritičke prosudbe vlastitog rada i u razvijanju nastavnih vještina te potiče profesionalni razvoj nastavnika.

*Ključne riječi: timsko podučavanje, partnerstvo nastavnika, kompatibilnost nastavnika-partnera, podjela ovlasti/odgovornosti, profesionalni razvoj nastavnika*