



## Research Article

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# Team -Teaching as a Tool for Professional Development

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**Abstract:** Team-teaching is a prominent approach used widely in the world especially in interdisciplinary and ESP (English for Special Purpose) teaching to enhance the quality of teaching and learning and foster teachers' professional development. However, for many Vietnamese teachers, it remains unexplored territory because it is not fully employed in education system of Vietnam.

The aim of this study was to explore the team-teaching teachers' viewpoints and attitudes towards team-teaching as a tool for professional development through an interpretation of qualitative data derived from classroom observations and post-observation in-depth interviews with 5 participants in a People's Police University setting.

The findings of the study revealed that most participants claimed to have benefited from team-teaching as a tool to improve their professional development. They, however, also had to face some drawbacks arising from this approach. Some recommendations for the administrators and team-teachers were given in the hope of fostering the benefits and reducing the difficulties of team-teaching.

**Keywords:** Effectiveness, Team - Teaching, Professional Development.

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## INTRODUCTION

With the development of regional integration and global participation, increasing the quality of education is becoming an urgent need for the Ministry of Education and Training as well as the government. Since the Vietnamese government sees the quality of teachers as the main/most important factor in improving education, it is setting targets for the revision of curricula and teaching methods in all educational establishments. There have been many education workshops, conferences, research studies conducted by many universities in order to help teachers maintain high performance in their teaching career and encourage them to pursue life-long learning which is vital to their professional development. To ensure this ongoing professional growth, teachers-as professionals-should constantly improve themselves. Teachers' professional growth is necessary to cope with the ever-expanding knowledge base in their subject matter and pedagogy, the rapidly changing social contexts of schooling, and the increasingly diverse needs of their students. EFL (English Foreign Language) teachers are not exempt from this professional responsibility. In short, teachers have to be viewed as learners- "*the teacher as life-long learner*"- and they need to learn together. Teachers today experiment with many approaches to professional development such as: self-evaluation, portfolio collections, classroom observation and performance assessment, peer assessment, keeping a teaching journal, peer coaching, mentoring, and action research. Of these, team-teaching seems to be very effective in enhancing teachers' professional growth, though for many teachers, team-teaching remains unexplored territory.

Although team-teaching is not new and is already being used in many schools around the world, it is an experimental approach at my university. With the knowledge and experienced gained from the Training of Trainers (TOT) course sponsored by the US Embassy in which team-teaching was introduced as a new way to improve the quality of teaching English for specific purposes, I decided to conduct a study on: "*Team-teaching as a tool for professional development*" to investigate and explore the points of view, feelings and attitudes of team-teachers towards team-teaching as a means for teacher development.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Professional Development

#### Definition

The term "*Teacher Development*" or "*Professional Development*" for teachers is a broad term including a variety of aspects connected not only to a teacher's professional development but also to his/her personal development (Igawa, 2002). In other words, "Professional development, in broad sense, refers to the development of a person in his or her personal role" (Eleonara, 2003, p.11). Professional development certainly increases the competence of all the members of a learning community and motivates them to pursue life-long learning.

Underhill (1997) states that professional development involves teachers in a constant process of learning about their practice and discovering and using their full potential. For Richards (1998), this process requires teachers to create their own personal teaching methodology taking their experience, beliefs and

understanding of good teaching into account. He adds that reflection, self-inquiry, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation are essential elements of professional development, since they help teachers to be better informed and to evaluate their professional growth, as well as to plan for improvement. Likewise, Richards and Farrell (2005) assert that teacher development involves teachers understanding themselves and their teaching; analyzing their teaching practices, beliefs, values and principles, keeping up-to-date with theories and trends; and sharing their experiences with colleagues. So, it can be said that in order to develop professionally, teachers should feel a continuous desire to learn more about themselves as professionals, and about their profession. Hence, teachers' professional development becomes a milestone in teacher's continuum of life-long learning and career progression.

Although definitions of teachers' professional development may be somewhat different as scholars approach it from different perspectives, they all share a common view that professional development refers to the process through which teachers attain greater professional competence and expand their understanding of themselves, their role, context and career. It is any experience that teachers engaged in to widen their knowledge, appreciation, skills, and understanding of their work in line with goals, values, of the school and their interests and needs of teachers (Duke and Stiggins, 1990; Beerens, D.R., 2000; Norton, M.S, 2008). Professional development is, therefore, seen as "an ongoing process and an integral characteristic of a fully professional teacher" (Mc Donough, 1997, p.318).

### **Areas of Professional Development for Language Teachers**

Education reform, a rapidly changing student body, technological development, and new views on assessment are just a few of the pressures that today's foreign language teachers are facing. Foreign language teachers must maintain proficiency in the target language and keep up to date on current issues relating to the target culture. Regardless of the skills and knowledge that foreign language teachers possess when they commence teaching, maintenance and improvement must be an ongoing process.

Richards (1998) asserts that professional development is directed towards both the institution's goals and the teacher's own personal goals. Achieving personal growth and improving departmental performance can go hand in hand. Most schools strive for a mix of both. Regarding teachers' personal development, he lists six domains of professional development:

- *Subject matter knowledge*: Increasing knowledge of the disciplinary basis of TESOL, that is, English grammar, discourse analysis, phonology, testing, second language acquisition research, methodology, curriculum development, and other areas that make up the professional knowledge base of language teaching.

- *Pedagogical expertise*: Mastery of new areas of teaching, adding to one's repertoire of teaching specializations, improving one's ability to teach different skills to learners of different ages and backgrounds.
  - *Self-awareness*: Knowledge of oneself as a teacher, of one's principles and values, strengths and awareness.
  - *Understanding of learners*: Deepening understanding of learners' learning styles, problems and difficulties, as well as ways of making content more accessible to learners.
  - *Understanding of curriculum and materials*: Deepening one's understanding of the curriculum and curriculum alternatives, along with the use and development of instructional materials.
  - *Career advancement*: acquiring the knowledge and expertise necessary for personal advancement and promotion, including supervisory and mentoring skills.
- Obviously, the field of language teaching is subject to rapid changes, both as the profession responds to new educational paradigms and trends and as institutions face new challenges as a result of changes in curricula, national tests, and student needs. As a result, teachers need regular opportunities to increase their professional knowledge and skills, that is, opportunities for professional development. Teachers need to be able to take part in activities such as:
- engaging in self-reflection and evaluation
  - developing specialized knowledge and skills related to many aspects of teaching
  - expanding their knowledge base of the research, theory, and issues in teaching
  - taking on new roles and responsibilities, such as supervisor or teacher mentor, teacher-researcher, or material designer...
  - developing collaborative relationships with other teachers (Jack & Thomas, 2005)

In short, language teachers have different needs at different stages of their careers, and the needs of the school and institutions in which they work also change over time. The pressure for teachers to have the latest information on issues such as: curriculum trends, second language acquisition research, composition theory and practice, technology, or assessment is intense, and it is the school and the classroom that provides a major source for future professional development. Thus, foreign language teachers have very specific requirements for professional development that include maintaining language skills, increasing cultural knowledge, and keeping abreast of the latest developments in the field that will enhance their performance in the classroom.

### **TEAM-TEACHING**

#### **Definition**

Davis (1995) suggested that team-teaching is not easily defined. He states that it refers "most often to the teaching done in interdisciplinary course by the several faculty members who have joined together to produce that course" (p.6). According to Buckley (2000), "Team-teaching involves a group of instructors working purposefully, regularly, and cooperatively to help a group of students of any age learn." (p.4). What is certain

is that team-teachers set goals for a course, design a syllabus, prepare individual lesson plans, teach students, and evaluate the results. They share insights, argue with one another, and perhaps even challenge students to decide which approach is better.

A team can be single-discipline, interdisciplinary, or school-within-a-school teams that meet with a common set of students over an extended period of time. New teachers may be paired with veteran teachers. Innovation is encouraged, and modifications in class size, location, and time are permitted. Different personalities, voices, values, and approaches spark interest, keep attention, and prevent boredom.

To sum up, the term *team-teaching* has been defined differently by many researchers. However, they all share the view that team-teaching:

- involves two or more teachers within the teaching and learning environment.
- can vary along a continuum of collaboration.
- facilitates a learning community by impacting on both teaching and learning.
- can be either formal or informal.

#### **Forms of team-teaching**

There are various forms of team-teaching depending on the particular context. Sandholtz (2000) has identified three team-teaching configurations: (1) two or more teachers loosely sharing responsibility; (2) team-planning, but individual instruction; and (3) joint planning, instruction, and evaluation of the learning experience.

Clearly, teaching partnerships can function in different ways. We conceptualize team-teaching as a continuum of collaboration that varies according to levels of coordination and shared responsibility. At the low end of the scale, collaboration would involve courses planned by a group on a faculty and later taught individually by members of the group. They might plan the general content of related courses, but would teach and evaluate the courses separately and they would not observe each other's classes. At the highest level of collaboration, the courses are co-planned, co-taught and evaluated by a pair or a group of teachers.

From analysis of the many types of team-teaching defined by different scholars, there appear to be two basic types of team-teaching: type A and type B.

Type A: two or more teachers work together but do not always teach the same students at the same time. Some authors call this "*team-planning*".

Type B: two or more teachers teach the same students at the same time in the classroom using one or a combination of four basic instructional models: *the Traditional Model*, *the Supportive Model*, *the Parallel Instruction Model* and the *Differentiated Instruction*

*Model*. These models may be used singly or combined in any number of ways.

In the *Traditional Model*, both teachers share the instruction of content and skills to all students. In the *Supportive Model*, one teacher focuses on content instruction while the other teacher conducts follow-up activities or works on skills building. In the third model, the *Parallel Instruction Model*, students are divided into groups and each teacher provides instruction in the same content or skills to his or her group. In the last model, the *Differentiated Instruction Model*, students are divided into groups on the basis of educational needs with each teacher providing instruction based on his or her group's needs. In practice, this often means dividing a class according to the students' ability to provide enrichment activities for the stronger group and extra support for the lower functioning group.

In short, team-teaching is open to several interpretations. For this study Type B team-teaching in which two teachers at the PPU shared a class and divided the instruction between them.

#### **Factors affecting team-teaching**

Theoretically, team-teaching is a very positive model for professional development. However, in practice, team-teaching faces some hurdles. These are revealed in the Pritchett's study (1997) in which the author found three important factors that influence team-teaching: (i) roles and expectations (ii) experience and knowledge and (iii) personality and teaching style.

The first two factors are related to "the conflict that could arise if there is uncertainty or disagreement in the role of each team member." (Letterman & Dugan, 2004, p.6)

The second two factors appear to be a two-edged sword: some team-teachers adopt a more submissive role readily as they learn from more experienced team-teachers, while others feel the need to compete for a leadership role in the partnership.

The last two factors are concerned with personal incompatibility and inadequate communication skills that may cause the partnership to fail.

It is clear that team-teaching has enormous potential to enable teachers' professional growth. Although there have been factors affecting team-teaching, with appropriate understanding of team-teaching, it has emerged as an effective tool for professional development. The literature review of previous studies in the field has provided the background in the field of team-teaching research and can be considered as basis for the investigation of team-teaching in the context of the people's police university.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research questions**

The research questions that guided the study mainly focused on the following issues:

- *To what extent, can team-teaching help enhance professional development?*
- *What are the barriers to team-teaching?*

### Participants

5 participants making up four pairs of team-teachers from the People's Police University (PPU) and an English specialist from the American Embassy

### Instruments

This is a *qualitative exploratory* study because it was designed to explore the team-teachers' points of view regarding the effect of team-teaching on their professional development in detail (or in depth).

In order to collect data for the study, two techniques were used: *in-depth interviews* and *class observations*. The interviews in this study were semi-structured with most of the questions being open-ended. Additionally, the researcher used *class observations* to triangulate the data.

### Data-collection procedures

Each pair of team-teachers was observed three times (three lessons per pair). The teachers were not comfortable with their lessons being video or audio recorded, so extensive field-notes were made of all the observed activities in the classroom. After each classroom observation, the interviewees were invited to the lab for face-to-face interview. The semi-structured interviews lasted around one hour and were recorded. They focused on critical issues arising from classroom observations as well as issues related to team teaching as a means of teacher development. These teachers had class once a week. At the end, the researcher had field-notes from a total of 12 class observations and recordings of 12 in-depth interviews. These recordings were then transcribed for data analysis.

### Data analysis

The data was carefully read and important topics were grouped; then some ways by which teachers improved their professional growth gradually took shape. The most important themes emerging from the data were generalized. These themes were presented in order of salience based on the number of times they were mentioned in the data. The researcher has attempted, as far as possible, to use the words of the team-teachers in the discussion rather than trying to interpret underlying intentions. In other words, the researcher's aim has been to let the team-teachers speak for themselves.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Teachers' professional development enhanced and fostered through team-teaching

The six aspects of second language teacher education, identified by Richards (1998) were taken into consideration when finalizing the areas of professional

development of team-teachers. Five areas of professional development were generated by analyzing the transcripts of field-notes from class observations and in-depth interviews as follow:

- Experience-sharing and knowledge-broadening
- Improved teaching skills
- Enhanced communicative skills
- Developed cooperative-teaching
- Language improvement

### Experience-sharing and knowledge-broadening

Sharing experience and broadening their knowledge (including knowledge of subject matter, culture, beliefs and institution...) seemed to be the most popular ways in which teachers from different ethnic backgrounds strove to further their professional development which were illustrated by the following statements. "...*Working in this way, we were able to make our lessons more effective because we usually had "double vision". (Teacher A)* "*As a non-native English-speaking teacher I felt more confident when I worked with a native speaker in the course of ESP/ESP course. This was because she could act as a more reliable resource for knowledge about linguistics aspects of ESP...*" (Teacher B).

Thus, a better understanding to students might lead to better teaching methods, and the frequent exchange of experiences between colleagues enriched the knowledge and skills of both teachers. "*We met after each class to evaluate the lesson. After teaching a section, we talked about what had seemed to work well and what had not. We commented on the parts/sections that students had seemed to understand well and parts in which they had not done satisfactory/satisfactorily. Then we talked about necessary changes/any changes that were necessary for the following/subsequent lessons. At the end of the course, we both assessed the students and exchanged ideas about the outcomes of the course...*" (All teachers)

Being receptive to feedback from their partner and even able to solicit it also helped some inexperienced teachers to improve their practice/techniques. Being open to learning from their peers was also considered to be a key element for professional development. As one of the teachers said "*I'm a young teacher so I don't have much experience in teaching and team-teaching. At first, I thought this was a hard work/hard and I felt very anxious. However, after duration of working together, I think team-teaching helps me feel more confident about my professional development*" (Teacher C).

### Improved communicative skills

According to Richards (1998), of the areas of professional development, "communicative skills" is a key one and it means "to develop effective communicative skills as a basic for teaching" (p.15). This involved: creating a relaxed atmosphere; increasing students' motivation; establishing rapport with students;

establishing rapport with colleagues; and discipline. As the teachers noted, team-teaching helped them create a relaxed atmosphere:

*"...It was fun...there's more relaxing/there's a more relaxed atmosphere in class. At the same time, they're much lively/livelier classes. We were able to reinforce each other's teaching and fill in gaps for the other. If one of us forgot something or had trouble explaining something, the other was on hand to help. It made learning more enjoyable, and easier in that sort of environment..." (Teacher A & B).*

*"...by team-teaching I could learn the way/how to make students relaxed/ help students relax and make/create a good atmosphere in class. We could talk to students with humor and with smile"*

By "creating a relaxed atmosphere", team-teachers could increase students' motivation. They realized that *"this is a good way to keep students' attention, and interest level up"* and they believed that *"the students could also benefit from seeing teachers' collaboration, which some of students may not see in their regular, single-teacher classroom"*.

#### **Developed cooperative-teaching**

As noted by teachers from two different cultures, team-teaching could contribute to their professional development by allowing them to share responsibilities and help each other. Some team-teachers stated:

*"Team-teaching is a good idea. I like that we can pull each their strengths...I have gained knowledge from my partners..." (Teacher C)*

*"...It is an effective strategy for teaching large groups of students. It is a method for teachers to collaborate in generating ideas..." (Teacher B, D)*

*"I strongly believe that: when responsibility is shared, stress is reduced. One is not alone and isolated from shouldering the sole responsibility for the successful learning of all the students..." (Teacher A)*

*"...I feel it is good, because I got a great partner. Whenever the class did not understand what the first teacher was talking about, the second would clarify (it) for students..." (Teacher A)*

#### **Language improvement**

According to the six aspects of second language teacher education proposed by Richards (1998), "Language Improvement" falls under "Communication Skills" and is obviously for non-native speaking teachers only. Richards states: "Presumably one needs to attain a certain threshold level of proficiency in a language to be able to teach effectively in it, and activities addressing language proficiency are often a core component of many SLTE [Second Language Teacher Education] programs" (p.7).

When team-teaching with the English expert, most PPU teachers said that they could improve their language skills because team-teaching with an English-

speaking teacher helped them make personal efforts every day; and they could be an eternal language learner, try to be like a native speaker and become a good language learner model for students. Thus, one way to increase professional development is to look for opportunities to practice the target language.

#### **Difficulties with team-teaching**

Even though team-teachers gained a lot from team-teaching with regard to professional development, the practice of team-teaching presented the following challenges.

#### **Different personalities and teaching styles**

From the team-teachers' perspective, challenges such as personality and individual teaching styles played an important role in agreeing to a partnership.

Even when team-teachers are close friends, team-teaching situations are seldom without conflict and tension. Team-teaching tends to expose each partner's professional and personal point of view more than the traditional one-teacher-per-classroom setting due to the different personalities and teaching styles, experience and knowledge as illustrated in the following interview statements *"...Partnership sometimes simply cannot work because of the two personalities. I really believe that just as people can be incompatible in relationships, that they can be incompatible in partnership..." (Teacher C)*

#### **Experience**

Experience is also a key factor in the initial stage from a team teaching 'perspective. One would expect experience to play an important role in the pairing process as articulated below: *"...Honestly I was very scared...this is my first-ever teaching experience. So going into the classroom itself was a very frightening experience in the beginning..." (Teacher E)*

#### **A lack of time**

Another problem that team-teachers often reported stemmed from time. In order to teach together effectively, team-teaching required teachers to spend more time before and after lessons: *"...When we didn't spend enough time together, classroom cooperation between us didn't flow-either our ideas were not well thought out or the workload was uneven, which made one of us feel less useful..." (Teacher B)*

*"...We always had to come back together and discuss "what happened", "what went wrong" and "what could be improved in the next class" (Teacher C, E)*

Obviously, without sufficient time to prepare, team-teachers can easily become stressed and the quality of instruction may quickly decline. Another English-speaking volunteer teacher complained about having few opportunities and insufficient time to talk to their Vietnamese teaching partner:

### A lack of clarification of roles

Most team-teachers agreed that roles (in team-teaching) can be a hindrance to successful team-teaching if there isn't definite clarification and understanding of each role in class. The English-speaking volunteer teacher's comment below represents the majority of the team-teachers' feelings: "...For me the main negative thing is a lack of clarification about who has what responsibility. There is so much in the classroom, leading the lesson in general...If this couldn't be done before each team-teaching class, the teaching procedure will not flow and we don't feel very comfortable..." (Teacher E)

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"...Partnership sometimes simply cannot work because of the two personalities. I really believe that just as people can be incompatible in relationships, that they can be incompatible in partnership..." (Teacher C & D)

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study showed that team-teaching with teachers from different cultural backgrounds would be beneficial for professional development in many ways. First, the preparation by teachers has the potential to explore all the relevant issues (*i.e.* culture, beliefs, working styles...). Second, there is likely to be better guidance by the teachers in pre-class discussion and subsequently in the class discussions, which can only result in better outcomes. Third, an integrated approach from different perspectives is entirely possible. Fourth, team-teaching provides ample opportunities for teachers to learn from other experts and in turn become better academics. There were many ways in which teachers could develop professionally such as by sharing experience and knowledge, trying various new teaching methods and acquiring new skills, and they could fulfill their communicative skills. Team-teaching also enabled them to share responsibilities and help each other. In addition, most of the team-teachers also identified some barriers to the team-teaching process due to differences in personalities, teaching styles, beliefs on teaching, as well as their roles and expectations. Additionally, a lack of time and effort can hamper team-teaching. These drawbacks are similar to those found in Prichett's study (1997) in which he outlined these elements in a team-teaching handbook for American educators.

It was found from the study that most team-teachers experienced professional growth through team-teaching. There were many areas in which they could foster professional development such as sharing

experiences and broadening their knowledge; improving their teaching skills and developing communicative skills. They also believed that their improved cooperative teaching was the result of their team-teaching experience. For Vietnamese teachers, team teaching with native English-speaking teachers could increase their linguistic competence. From the findings of this study, it is clear that there is a need to develop a formal team-teaching program for EFL teachers.

However, they also identified some drawbacks to team-teaching including a lack of time, and differences in personalities and teaching styles. Team-teaching with volunteer English teachers and Vietnamese teachers involved additional challenges due to cultural differences.

From what has been found about the current situation, the above-mentioned recommendations have been put forward to support the call for a formal team-teaching program for EFL teachers, as well as to create a teaching environment which is conducive to its success.

This study presents the opinions and attitudes of a small number of team-teachers thus no firm generalizations can be made. However, despite these limitations, this study offers insights into the benefits of team-teaching in terms of professional development. To gain a deeper understanding of team-teaching in the Vietnamese setting, large-scale studies, using multiple methods of data collection, are needed. Thus, the scope of the context can be extended and the validity of its findings, strengthened.

### Research limitation

Author can expand detailed study for each English skill improvement.

### Conflicts of interest

There is no conflict of interest

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