

Team Teaching Tips for Foreign Language Teachers

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Introduction

This article seeks to provide team teachers with specific tips on how to function effectively as equal partners working together in the same classroom. These step-by-step tips are a basic guide to help you establish a dynamic team so you can experiment and find the approach that works best for you. For teachers who have never had a chance to team teach, or have perhaps avoided doing it for a variety of reasons, perhaps this article will help allay fears and give teachers a sense of what exactly team teaching 'looks like' within the class.

From our work team teaching with one another and others in a variety of contexts (elementary, high school, junior high school, and international schools) in Canada, Mexico and Japan, we've had the chance to experience everything from wonderful to disastrous team teaching relationships. Based on these experiences, we have assembled a brief series of tips to help you and your classroom partner.

Background Literature

Team teaching, in the most general sense, encompasses a wide variety of arrangements. One specific form, which has become quite prevalent in recent years, is having two teachers in the classroom teaching simultaneously. This is becoming more and more common throughout Japan and in other Asian countries. Each year on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme alone, nearly 6,000 Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) come to Japan to assist Japanese Language Teachers (JLT) in foreign language classrooms (Horwich par. 22). Recently, Hong Kong launched a programme similar to JET called the Native-speaking English Teachers Programme (NET) Programme that also employs team teaching.

In foreign language teaching, particularly teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), usually one in the pair is a native speaking assistant of the target language. We'll use the acronym NSA (native speaking assistant) to describe these teachers. The main teacher on the other hand, is usually more experienced and not a native speaker of the target language (hence the desire for a native speaking target language assistant). These teachers will be referred to as NNSLT (non-native speaking language teachers).

In some countries where the target language (in this case English) is a second language (TESL), student teachers are native speakers of the target language and work either with other student teachers or cooperative teachers. These pairs share the same L1, are native speakers of the target language and share the same culture as their partner. These pairs usually do not experience the intercultural difficulties that some TEFL teachers experience and since they are in the process of becoming certified (in the case of student teachers), do not necessarily experience the same conflicts that some JTE/AET or HKTE/NET experience in Japan or Hong Kong and elsewhere.

One of the advantages of team teaching is that it ostensibly produces a lower teacher-student ratio, but having two teachers in the class sharing turns speaking does not accomplish this. Only by running separate activities, dividing the class into groups - having both teachers circulate and interact with students is the ratio effectively lowered. Ideally, both teachers should constantly be actively involved in managing and teaching the class.

Aside from these government sponsored programmes, there are countless others which are privately organised also resulting in the presence of a second teacher in the classroom. Team teaching is most common in the domain of foreign language education, but is also starting to be used in a variety of other subject areas. It is a pedagogical approach rapidly gaining in popularity.

Successful team teaching has the potential to benefit all concerned. Teachers stand to gain in terms of their professional development. Team teaching provides teachers with a partner to help them set objectives, make plans, implement lessons and evaluate the results. They have someone from whom they can draw inspiration and who can provide them with constructive feedback on their teaching. Students benefit from the increased quality of the lessons and a lower student to teacher ratio.

Unfortunately, most teachers destined to work together do so with little training in how to team teach. For example, in Japan most training is done by observation of team teaching lessons with little analysis of the strategies/techniques employed by the team, often leaving Japanese Teachers of English nervous about team teaching.

Horwich explains that this lack of training can lead to friction between team teachers and unsuccessful lessons (par. 18). Browne and Evans similarly explain that: "Unfortunately, the implementation of team teaching to date often seems haphazard and lacking in clear objectives. Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) and students seem to have different expectations about the purpose of team taught lessons, with the result often being unsuccessful lessons" (17).

Many teachers refuse to team teach because in a sense, teachers are by definition 'solitary creatures' reluctant to share the limelight or 'be observed' by a colleague. However, in a successful team you should not feel judged or upstaged by your partner. Furthermore, in some situations teachers may not have been given a choice to work together and may not see the benefits of team teaching, or worse, not respect or get along well with their assigned partner.

Horwich, in a survey of 141 Japanese Teachers of English in Ibaraki Prefecture (Japan) in 1999, found that only 56% were "satisfied with their team teaching" (par. 12). Since using two teachers in the same classroom simultaneously is a relatively new educational phenomenon, it is not easy to find practical advice from senior teachers or professional publications.

Many articles written about team teaching merely provide lesson plans that demonstrate which teacher will speak on what topic or lead a particular activity (Wiltshier and Honma 1999). Others discuss the philosophy and history of team teaching exploring the cultural background and the challenges faced by team teachers from different countries (Shimaoka and Yashiro; Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture 1994). Unfortunately, few articles offer practical step-by-step guidelines to establishing a successful team, perhaps because there is a fear that following a prescriptive formula might in fact restrict the team and cause them to fall into strict use of fossilized patterns (Smith 87).

In the Classroom: Team Teaching Tips

The Golden Rule: Never take anything for granted; explicitly discuss everything.

"When expectations are unclear or vastly different, this essential rapport quickly breaks down" (Horwich par.15).

Clear communication on the part of both members of the teaching team is essential to the success of the relationship and the realisation of your teaching objectives. Communication is perhaps rendered more difficult for teams made up of teachers from different cultural backgrounds which value radically different communication styles (Kobayashi 168). Nonetheless, it is essential that you do your utmost to keep this in mind and endeavour to respect and understand one another.

Talking things through at every stage will help you define your individual roles within the team. This is essential in developing a better understanding of one another's teaching philosophy along with the personal and cultural factors that have shaped it and affect its practical applications. Honest discussion also clears up any potential misunderstandings before they have the chance to hamper the flow of a lesson and ensure that you are taking equal responsibility for staying on course towards your established objectives. These meetings will help ensure that you are both feeling comfortable and productive within the team.

Sometimes, despite your best intentions, you have doubts about the strength of your team. In these situations, frank discussion with departmental management about pair reassignment, or if this is not possible, problem solving with your assigned teaching partner and above all maintaining a professional demeanour, may help diffuse potentially unsatisfactory pairings.

Personal conflicts, whether they are gender-based, cultural or personal have no place within the classroom. Despite your differences of opinion, each teacher should remain respectful and professional towards the other in the classroom. Students will be quick to pick up on any tensions and may try to exploit them. In the classroom, the most important people are the students: teachers should set aside personal difficulties and make teaching their number one priority.

Step-by-step Tips: Planning

You first need to work together to analyse your individual strengths and abilities and determine how these can be used within your team context. Remember to consider what skills each of you bring to the classroom. For example, is one better at drawing or singing? Does one of you have better handwriting on the blackboard? Does one of you have more experience with a particular school setting or group of students? Have one of you worked with this particular textbook before?

Work out how you complement one another and how you can facilitate improving your partner's skills in various areas (voice projection and articulation/diction, pacing, giving instructions, teacher-student interaction etc.). Ideally, both partners will take an active part, to a greater or lesser extent, in all aspects of the teaching and not fall into a rigid pattern of acting/teaching only within 'partner 1's domain' and 'partner 2's domain'.

Once you have explored your skill-set as a team, you can begin to set goals for the term and the year. You'll need to consider what goals both of you want the students to achieve so that you can plan lessons according to a timetable. If your school sets department-wide tests, you'll have to discuss goals with the teachers working within the same grade. In situations like these, homogeneity of teaching approach and materials used is critical to ensuring fairness to all students.

Making your timetable (of tests, assignments, presentations, homework), setting objectives together and making sure the other is well aware of the long range agenda, is a wonderful way of determining what,

when and how you can each contribute to the team. It also helps ensure that your teaching is focused and dynamic. It is difficult to successfully guide students through a lesson, a chapter, or a term, unless you both know what you will be exploring along the way and where you want to end up.

Eye Contact and Signalling

Maintaining eye contact with each other is critical in the team teaching classroom. You'll often need to signal each other for transitions to new activities, communicate when to bring activities to a close or modify an activity. Try to keep an eye on each other at least every few minutes. There are often times when Teacher A can 'signal' Teacher B using eye contact about a situation happening near Teacher A. This is particularly useful for classroom management, but is also helpful in pacing and for assisting students who may have questions or need help. In language classrooms where some translation is performed, maintaining eye contact with your partner is a good way to ensure smooth transitions between L1 and L2 instructions.

Circulating in the Classroom

One of the benefits of having two teachers in the classroom is that you can increase the teacher's physical proximity to a greater number of students and thus, hopefully, keep a greater number of students more actively engaged in the lesson more of the time. It may be necessary for you both to stand at the front to address the class for various activities, but this limits the benefits of team teaching's increased teacher-student proximity. It should not be the main classroom position you adopt in your teaching.

During student-centred activities, it is best for both teachers to circulate at a 180-degree angle to one another. For example, if teacher A is at the front, teacher B is at the back; if teacher A is on the left side of the class, teacher B is on the right side. This minimizes the amount of time it takes for a teacher to address a student concern and maximizes the supervision provided by the teachers. It is important to watch where the other teacher is in the classroom and to try to complement their presence.

Individual Roles

In some team teaching pairs, roles in the class can be quite unbalanced. Some NNSLT provide only L1 translation, while the NSA is largely responsible for most of the target language 'talking' in the class. In other situations, these NSAs perform as 'live tape-recorders', undermining student perception of their usefulness in the class (Horwich par. 15).

The NNSLT should be encouraged, as often as possible, to make a concerted effort to use the target language in the classroom that in turn provides students with a role model who has successfully learned the target language.

It is best to avoid having one teacher addressing the class, while the other stands idly by. In the table below we've provided examples of how both teachers can be intensively involved in team teaching. Both teachers should interchange the roles of 'leader/supporter' throughout the lesson to ensure equality and responsibility.

Teacher A (leader)	Teacher B (supporter)
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<p>Explaining an activity</p> <p>(make eye contact with Teacher B, ask Teacher B if they have anything to add to the instructions)</p>	<p>Circulates amongst students keeping them 'on-task', answers student queries.</p> <p>(Maintain eye contact with Teacher A while evaluating their instructions and thinking of something they may have unclear or omitted that can be restated or added).</p>
<p>Giving students instructions.</p>	<p>Writes the instructions given by Teacher A on board for visual reinforcement, or, circulates amongst students to evaluate understanding of instructions.</p>
<p>Leading choral pronunciation while circulating in the class.</p>	<p>Echoes Teacher A while circulating which gives students in all areas of the class a chance to 'hear' the teacher well.</p>
<p>Evaluating student presentations</p> <p>(While making note of grades, signalling Teacher B when you've completed your evaluation so they can cue the next students).</p>	<p>Administers the activity (calling students, ensuring that students are listening attentively).</p>
<p>Calls on a student to answer a question.</p>	<p>Notes which student responded for evaluation/participating grading.</p>

Echoing

There are two ways to employ 'echoing': L1 to L2, or L2 repetition. Echoing is useful during choral pronunciation to provide students with an alternative form of pronunciation, in addition to making it easier for students in another part of the class to hear more easily (as the supporting teacher is located at another part of the classroom). Echoing is also useful where some translation from L1 to L2 is required for student comprehension. Echoing can be done at varying speeds (natural speed or slow speed). The 'supporting' teacher is often in a good position to determine what speed/amount of echoing students may require.

Transitions, Timing and Pacing

To keep the pace of the class going smoothly, teachers should always keep an eye on each other, and the clock. Having two teachers in the class can be a real advantage with time keeping. While Teacher A leads an activity or gives instructions, Teacher B watches the clock and makes sure that the lesson proceeds in a timely fashion.

It is useful to develop a subtle system of signalling each other (hand-signals, eye contact, and verbal cues) to make transitions between activities smooth. Explicit discussion of what is to be done next in the classroom is extremely disruptive to the flow of the lesson and gives off the impression that you are ill prepared to teach the class.

Ideally, both teachers will share in giving directions, taking the initiative to move on to the next activity, and in adapting or curtailing an activity that is not working. Remember to have mutually agreed upon back-up activities, so that you will be able to work together in guiding the class from an unsuccessful activity to the back-up plan.

Classroom Management

Each teacher has a different threshold of tolerance for student misbehaviour. Before your students become disruptive, you'll both need to establish a set of guidelines and agree on what type of behaviour is not acceptable in your class, and consequences for students who disrupt the class. Without a common consensus as team teachers on what is permissible and what is unacceptable, you'll invariably find yourselves in disagreement and have potentially inconsistent reactions by teachers to student misbehaviour in the class.

To prevent this before it occurs, sit down together and make a list of what constitutes unacceptable classroom behaviour by students (a list of class rules). Next, you'll need to determine what consequences you can implement should these rules be broken. Lastly, you'll have to develop a 'warning' procedure that teachers will give to students (for example, three 'warnings' lead to one 'consequence'). You will have to check what types of consequences are acceptable with other department members, possibly your Parent Teachers Association and of course the Principal and Vice-Principal(s).

It is particularly important in discussing the implementation of consequences for the team teachers to do so in complete agreement and support of each other in front of students. Some students may attempt the 'divide and conquer' strategy, making requests of the teacher who is perceived as 'softer' than the other. The gender of teachers will most likely also play a factor here, particularly if students view the male teacher as an 'enforcer', while the female teacher is perceived as the 'softer' of the team teaching pair. Both genders must emit confidence and enforce consequences where necessary.

In the case of NNSLT and NSAs, an open and frank discussion of the roles that each teacher will play is particularly important. NSAs are, in every case, considered 'junior' to their NNSLT counter-parts. It should remain the primary responsibility of the NNSLT to initiate warnings and follow-up on consequences.

There are also considerable cultural differences in classroom management between NNSLTs and NSAs that require explicit discussion. Many NSAs find themselves in the frustrating position of being the sole 'enforcer' in the classroom simply because the NNSLT and NSA have not discussed what kind of behaviour is unacceptable. As a JTE states: "Every year, I have to explain this is not the school where you were taught. This is a school in a different country with students very different from the high school where you graduated" (quoted in Horwich par. 20).

Lesson and Student Evaluation

The first consideration when it comes to evaluation is that it should be meaningful and fair. Too often, teachers create tests or assignments with little regard to practical time restrictions or pedagogical considerations (not matching the test to material covered in class or making a test or assignment simply to fill the grading book).

Having two teachers makes evaluation, both in and out of class, much easier.

Once you have a one-year plan for student evaluation, you can determine how your in-class evaluation will work. Some teachers like to assign participation grades, or make notes of which students answered questions. While Teacher A asks a student to answer a question Teacher B records the student participation in a grading book.

Outside of class, having two teachers clearly reduces the correcting workload. At many schools, there is only one NSA and many NNSLTs. Consequently, without adequate inter-departmental management of the NSA's correcting workload, they can easily become overburdened.

Here are a few other key points about evaluation to keep in mind:

- Work together to make tests and assignments based on what and how you have been teaching to ensure consistency and fairness to students.
- Evaluate students based on a mutually agreed up system.
- Keep up your communication with frequent checks of how you are progressing, always keeping in mind the objectives you set out together.
- Work together to change things that are not working as you go along.

Summary

Team teaching can be an extremely beneficial and professionally rewarding experience if all goes well. In order to accomplish this however, both teachers need to maintain respect for each other both inside and outside the classroom. By following the few simple tips provided above, we hope that your team teaching experience will be a true success and not simply a tolerable compromise.

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