

# **THE CHALLENGES OF TEAM-TEACHING COLLABORATION BETWEEN VIETNAMESE ENGLISH TEACHERS AND NATIVE ENGLISH-SPEAKING TEACHERS IN A VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY**

**Trần Thị Minh Khánh  
Nha Trang University**

*In Vietnam, there have been a number of different overseas organizations coming with the goal of helping the country improve its ability to teach students, researchers and civil servants a second language in order to enhance the country's socio-economic development and integration on the worldwide scene. Particularly, some international volunteer organizations have been working in partnership with Vietnamese institutions with the purpose of assisting local instructors to develop appropriate English teaching materials, methodologies as well as deliver second-language classes. In addition, they would be expected to promote intercultural understanding and bring real-life English conversations into the classroom. Thus, the two groups of local and foreign teachers often work together in the same institutional environment. A longitudinal study with teacher participants based on a qualitative case study research design was carried out employing multiple data collection methods including semi-structured interviews, observation, note-taking, audio/video recording and documents. In this paper, I will point out some challenges of team teaching in roles, which may affect the collaboration and relationship between the team teachers.*

Key words: Team teaching, teacher's roles and relationship

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Team teaching, which requires NESTs and local English teachers to work together, has been very common in schooling in Asian countries with well-established team teaching schemes in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong. Studies in this area have focused on the impact of team teaching on teachers, learners, especially teachers' professional development in team teaching or students' perceptions and attitudes of participating in team taught classes. Very few studies examine the dynamic of the collaborative interactions between team teachers, particularly in the context of EFL team teaching in universities.

In Vietnam, although recruiting native English speakers to teach with local English teachers in EFL classes has recently become quite commonplace in a number of different higher educational institutions in Vietnam, there is no well-established national scheme for this kind of team-teaching collaboration. The only attempt made by the Ministry of Education in 1993 was inviting the English Language Institute in China (ELIC) to send the first NESTs to the country's most well-known universities. Therefore, very little has been published about team-teaching English in Vietnam. In particular, studies on teachers' roles in team teaching EFL students in a tertiary level context are very rare. In most educational institutions, Vietnamese and native English team teachers tend to either take up certain roles or work with each other on their own way without having a clear understanding of their roles.

The paper starts with a brief review on positive and negative aspects of team-teaching, paying particular attention to the roles that team teachers have played in EFL classes. It then describes how data were collected in a case study over the course of a semester from a Vietnamese and NEST team-teaching pair working at a Vietnamese tertiary institution. The aim was to explore how their working relationship developed over time. In this paper I focus on the challenges that they reported and I describe and analyse them from the perspectives of each of the participants, commenting on the impact each of the challenges had on the pairs' classroom team-teaching and/or on their relationship.

### ***1. POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF TEAM TEACHING***

Team-teaching has been described by many authors with different models. Its implementation may be much more flexible or complicated to some extent depending on specific teaching situations and various influencing factors. In fact, the relevant literature on team teaching has also indicated a number of positive and negative issues related to its practices. On the one hand, for example, while local teachers share the students' mother tongue and cultural background with a good understanding of their needs and learning

process, foreign partners as native speakers of English can play roles as cultural and linguistic resources; thus, they can support each other in their teaching (Tajino and Tajino, 2000; Carless 2006). In addition, there are many benefits from implementing team-teaching, as listed by Richards and Farrell (2005), including collegiality, different roles, combined expertise, teacher-development opportunities and learner benefits. On the other hand, empirical studies have also revealed a number of problems and challenges, many of which are associated with the team teachers' process of collaborative interactions such as lack of preparation time and language ability (Sturman 1992, Kachi and Lee, 2001; Moote 2003); confusion of roles and responsibilities (Tajino and Walker, 1998; Mahoney 2004). However, it seems that the complexity of team teaching details such as the dynamics in the negotiation of roles and responsibilities have not been thoroughly investigated in the conceptualization of team teaching.

## **2. HOW CLEAR TEACHERS ARE ON THEIR ROLES IN TEAM TEACHING?**

According to Thomas (1992), one of the most significant challenges that team members usually face is the role uncertainty. In fact, a variety of studies have been undertaken primarily in Japan and other Asian countries (Adachi et al., 1998; Tajino and Tajino, 2000; Mahoney 2004; Ogawa 2011) in order to investigate how team-teaching has been executed in EFL classes as well as various factors influencing its success. For example, Mahoney (2004) comments that role understanding is an important factor for successful team teaching. By conducting a large-scale study with the use of open-ended questions to collect data from 1400 teachers all over Japan, Mahoney (2004) pointed out that the teacher-related conflicts were quite common due to confusion over their roles. In addition, his study revealed that team teachers in Japan do not really have a good understanding of their mutual roles. In other words, the teachers were confused about the roles they were expected to perform as well as that of their teaching partners (role ambiguity). At the same time, the role conflict also happened when what the teachers thought they were supposed to be doing was not congruent with what they found themselves doing in reality (Mahoney, 2004:225).

Moreover, many ALTs felt unhappy when being regarded as a 'human tape recorder' rather than a real teacher by JETs (Tanabe 1990 in Tajino and Tajino, 2000; Mahoney 2004). In a similar vein, Tajino and Tajino (2000) maintain that understanding each teacher's role in class clearly has a positive influence on the smoothness of organizing and implementing a team-teaching approach. It seems that unclear roles and responsibilities could also make team-teaching collaboration problematic (Mahoney 2004, Hasegawa 2008).

In line with Adachi et al. (1998), Ogawa (2011) maintains that ALTs sometimes do not have a clear understanding of their duties, and as a result some are not implemented. She further commented on the role ambiguity of both JETs and ALTs as follows:

JETs sometimes do not know how to effectively make use of the ALTs and conversely, ALTs do not know what to do to meet the JETs' expectations.

(Ogawa, 2011:474)

It is widely recognised that team teachers who come from different backgrounds and experiences without having prior training about membership skills and guidance about their

roles are placed in a blind date. However, they are generally expected by administrators to work well with each other as well as develop a harmonious partnership. Therefore, it is argued that the need to negotiate roles seems to be a significant thing in team teaching.

### **3. TEAM TEACHERS' ROLES IN EFL CLASSES**

Carless (2006a) reports a case study between Tim, an experienced ESL teacher from New Zealand and fourteen LETs. Tim's role was helping the LETs practice speaking English and sharing his new ideas, teaching strategies and knowledge to the students. In addition, he also provided LETs with useful teaching materials so that they could save time in lesson preparation. In return, the LETs gave him advice about local cultures and problem solving (Carless, 2006a:348).

In the context of team-teaching in Korea, Carless (2006a) reported a smooth collaborative experience for a Korean teacher (Kim) and an EPIK teacher (Lewis) in Gangwon province. They enjoyed each other's instructional presentations in which roles were shared equally (p.347). Reflecting on the roles of Korean teachers in team-teaching, Kim mentioned three main advantages:

- (1) Korean teachers know their students' standard so can support the EPIK teacher in preparing suitable materials.
- (2) The Korean teacher can develop her own teaching skills and improve her English communication abilities.
- (3) The presence of the Korean teacher can help to maintain discipline and encourage the students to take the EPIK lesson seriously.

(Carless, 2006a:348)

In addition, Lewis also indicated that:

[...] it is part of the Korean co-teacher's job description to help engender a happy off-work situation for the visiting foreigner.

(Carless, 2006a:348)

## **II. THE STUDY**

### **1. THE SITE AND TEACHERS**

This study was carried out at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of a university in South Central Vietnam. The VET was local Vietnamese English teachers who had been trained in TESOL/TEFL and who had worked long-term in a university EFL context, whereas the NEST was a foreign volunteer coming to the university on a short-term visit from the United States.

Ron was an American volunteer who came to Vietnam in 2010 to work as a teacher of English and as a writer. He was in his late 50s and it was his first year of teaching at the university. He had a PhD in Psychology from the USA and two UK teaching certificates.

Dao was a Vietnamese English teacher who had been working long-term at the university. She was 32 years old, had an MA degree in TESOL, and had been teaching English to EFL students for 6 years. She had had a great deal of team-teaching experiences with NESTs before working with Ron.

## 2. METHODS

A longitudinal case study was carried out during one school semester (from September 2011 to December 2011), using the following data collection methods: observations, semi-structured interviews, informal talks, note-taking, researcher's diary, audio/video-recording, and document and email collection. The observations took place in two different settings: the team-teachers' lesson planning meetings and their in-class team-teaching, and this data was collected by note-taking as well as audio/video recording. The interviews were conducted with each teacher participant during three different stages of their team-teaching: at the beginning, the middle and the end of the semester. In addition, informal chats were carried out whenever it was convenient in order to obtain additional insights. Documents, such as email exchanges between the teaching pair, were gathered and, where available, diaries entries from the teachers. The researcher also kept a diary.

## 3. FINDINGS

### 3.1 *Dissatisfaction over the in-class teaching arrangements: communication and role issues*

Ron and Dao also team taught two classes in the second week, on 10 and 11 October, 2011. Unfortunately, their team-teaching did not go very well due to classroom management reasons. In particular, Ron felt dissatisfied with the way in which their lesson plan was implemented. Below is Ron's email to Dao after teaching the first class in Week 2 with her:

#### **EMAIL 5.10**

- 1 I was a little confused about the class today. Maybe I misunderstood you. In the beginning you asked me if I wanted to show the video first and I said yes, it would be a good review of last week, which has the vowels to be covered today. You said okay. But then you did you lesson plan. What happened?
- 5 You said one thing and did another. I'm confused. I think maybe we need to have a meeting before classes so we can discuss what we will do. Otherwise, if we just follow your lesson plan, I feel like I am only your assistant. And I told the Dean that I did that last year and I don't want to do that again. We are supposed to be team teaching. I think we can either agree on what we teach together, or simply divide up the time in half and you can teach half the class and I teach the other. Tell me what you think about this.

(Ron's email to Dao: 10 October, 2011)

It should be noted that since their initial two meetings (prior to the start of teaching), the two teachers did not meet each other again face-to-face for lesson planning purposes. They did it all by email or through brief chats in the classroom. As can be seen from lines 2-3 of Email 5.10, before Ron and Dao started the class, they (briefly) discussed whether Ron would show the video first. However, this led to a misunderstanding – Ron thought that they had agreed he would show the video first, but then Dao went ahead with her teaching and used so much time that he had no opportunity to do that. As a result, he was very

disappointed and confused, so he emailed Dao about this. At the start of the email he mitigated his ‘complaints’, saying he was “*A little confused*” and that “*Maybe*” he had misunderstood Dao (Email 5.10, line 1). However, a few utterances later, he became much more blunt and frank in his comments, saying “*You said one thing and did another*” (line 4). He suggested they meet before class to discuss their teaching plan, as otherwise he would just be following Dao’s plan. As he pointed out (lines 6 and 8), this would be unacceptable to him as it made him feel he was only assisting Dao and that it did not constitute team-teaching. So he offered two possibilities – either they agree properly on what they teach together, or else they simply divide up the time – and asked for her viewpoint (lines 8-10).

Two days later, Dao replied to Ron’s email as follows:

#### **EMAIL 5.11**

1 I really sorry because you think that you are my assistant. Indeed, I have never thought that. When I asked you if you wanted to show the video first or later. I heard you answer that it would be at the end of the class to introduce the new vowel sounds, so I did my lesson plan

5 And when I asked you what parts you wanted to teach in my lesson plan, you said that I did it first and then you would follow the next classes or we will discuss that teaching way to make it better. Maybe I misunderstood you too. Besides, I learned from you a lot on the Monday class (about connected speech). I think on the days you can come to the classes you can teach alone but you have to follow the schedule that I sent you before. This week

10 you came to Monday afternoon class and Tuesday morning class and you taught 2 vowels sound /i/ and /i:/. So for the next week classes you can teach units 3,4,5 in Ship or Sheep book. And if having change in schedule, I will tell you later. And would you mind if I could come to your class? Because I really want to learn pronunciation from you. Hope that you are not angry with me and I look forward to 15 hearing from you.

(Dao’s email to Ron: 12 October, 2011)

Her email was very conciliatory, perhaps to protect their ‘mutual face’. She apologized that he had felt like her assistant (Email 5.11, line 1), and explained how the misunderstanding might have happened and how she might have been at fault (lines 1-5).

Interestingly, she did not take up Ron’s suggestion to meet before class to discuss their team-teaching; instead she accepted his suggestion to teach alone (line 10). She told him what he should cover, and then asked if he would mind if she attended his part of the lesson as she would like him to help her with her pronunciation (lines 13–14). She ended her email on a relational note – hoping that Ron was not angry with her.

#### *3.2 Ron’s dissatisfaction with his teaching role*

Based on the observational data of the in-class teaching, it can be found that Dao made efforts to involve Ron in her teaching. For example, during Ron’s teaching, Dao tried to support him in different ways such as explaining in Vietnamese what Ron said when she

felt that the students did not understand, underlining some words on the board to illustrate what Ron was talking about, and encouraging the students to ask questions, etc. In some asides during the class, Dao told Ron about the problems that Vietnamese students often encounter in pronouncing some English sounds, and she also suggested that Ron could talk about his difficulties as a language learner. However, Ron still felt a bit disregarded and he raised the concern of not wanting to be an assistant, as shown in his email sent to Dao dated 10 October, 2011. Besides, Ron also told me in one of his emails that he could not really contribute very much in teaching with Dao as follows:

#### **EMAIL 5.12**

1 I do have more to share with you about our team teaching. This past class I was feeling a little like I was wasting my time. Mostly I felt that all I was doing was saying words. The students can listen and watch on a computer and get the same thing. When I teach for the beginning 30 minutes I feel useful and happy. When Ms. 5 Dao runs the class I am not doing much. I am going to suggest that the next time I teach we change the team teaching. I want the students to benefit from my being there, if I am just going to be used to read words I don't want to do that.

We can see that Ron was happy with his solo slot (line 4), but felt that he was not being used to his full potential when supporting Dao. He felt that if students needed to hear how words were pronounced, a computer could be used for that. He wanted to be more useful to students.

In week 8, Ron raised his concern again at being used by Dao as a tape recorder/teacher assistant, as shown in Email 5.12, line 2: “*I was wasting my time. Mostly I felt that all I was doing was saying words*” and line 4-5: “*I am not doing much*”. In fact, this issue was the result of his roles in helping Dao with modeling or practising sounds during her teaching. Ron told me about this in his final interview:

#### **INTERVIEW EXTRACT 5.15**

1 (A)s the semester went on, I just felt that uhm uhm basically  
what I was doing for the other half hour was standing there  
and reading words, you know and uhm I felt like well I have  
been still helpful only half an hour, she doesn't treat me like  
5 she really needs me, it helps a bit but then it's still that's a  
kind of a waste of my time and so...

(Interview with Ron: 4 December, 2011)

The following interview extract from Dao also confirms that she liked using Ron as a pronunciation model, as it was less tiring for her.

1....Having Ron in the class, I don't have to speak so much (.) so I feel less tired than teaching alone (.) I don't have to use CDs in the class because he helped with the modeling and drilling (...) and students can listen to a native speaker much more.

(Interview with Dao: 14 November, 2011)

#### 4. DISCUSSION

One of the challenges for the teacher participants in the present study was that both of them were not very clear about their roles due to the absence of documentation. In addition, verbal directives in faculty meetings did not really enable them to understand how team-teaching should be actually implemented. In other words, since there was no guideline provided by the university or department, they had no ideas what specific roles they were supposed to play. In fact, the Dean or Head of Department usually put them to teach with the VETs in 'blind dates' arrangement in which they had to find their own ways to work with each other. This situation is relatively similar to what happened to most team teachers in Japan, as reported by Tajino and Walker, (1998).

With respect to role expectations, Dao perceived her role as a main teacher / teacher-in-charge, so in her opinion she should take major responsibilities in team teaching with Ron. On the contrary, Ron thought that their roles may be different but the volunteer should have equal roles in team-teaching. Thus, the differing perceptions of each other's role led to some problematic issues in their in-class teaching. For instance, as analyzed in Section 3.1, Ron was very confused and unhappy with his role after the team-taught class with Dao in Week 2 because Dao did not let him show the video clip to the students, so he wrote in his email to Dao: "*I feel like I am only your assistant*" (Email 5.10, lines 7-8). As a result of his strong expectation for his teaching role, he explicitly claimed that he would not team teach if the roles were not equal and that he should be used fully, not partly by the VETs. If he could not contribute very much in their team-teaching, in his opinion it was considered a waste of his time. As a volunteer, Ron said he would like to maximize his valuable contribution in order to benefit the students, so taking the leadership role or doing solo-teaching in the first 30 minutes of their in-class instruction made him feel better and more helpful. However, Ron seemed to be dissatisfied with his role during the rest of the class time, claiming he was used just as a tape recorder. As he stated in the final interview, he would like to have more active roles and would certainly suggest some changes in the way team-teaching works if he had a chance to continue his collaboration with Dao.

It can be argued that Ron's explicit conceptualization of role in his desired roles influenced the professional relationship between him and Dao. In other words, since what Ron expected from team-teaching with the VETs was having equal roles and maximizing his contribution as a volunteer, the fact that his position in the class was at times like an assistant or 'tape recorder' made him feel upset. This finding seems to be congruent with many previous studies in the literature describing the NESTs' role as a human tape recorder or an entertainer ((Tanabe 1990 in Tajino and Tajino, 2000; Mahoney 2004).

#### III. CONCLUSION

We can find in the present study that the role issues between the team teachers emerged quite clearly in their team teaching. In addition, this case study enables us to see the richness of how the team teachers managed their roles as well as negotiated their team-teaching challenges over time. To a certain extent, the dynamism of role expectations and performances of the team teachers could dramatically affect their relationship. Moreover, we can see the flexibility in dealing with the unexpected reality of team-teaching roles as well as other interpersonal qualities appeared to be equally important factors for maintaining harmonious rapport between team teachers.

## REFERENCES

- Adachi, K., Macarthur, J., & Sheen, R. (1998) *Perceptions of the JET programme*. Osaka: Keisuisha.
- Carless, D. R. (2002) Conflict or collaboration: Native and nonnative speakers team teaching in schools in South Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong. *Paper presented at the English in South East Asia Conference (ESEA)*, Hong Kong.
- Carless, D. R. (2006a) Good practices in team teaching in Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong. *System* 34, 341-351.
- Carless, D. R. (2006b) Collaborative EFL teaching in primary schools. *ELT Journal*, 60, 328-335.
- Carless, D. R. & Walker, E. (2006) Effective team teaching between local and native-speaking English teachers. *Language and education*, 20(6), 463-477.
- Mahoney, S. (2004) Role controversy among team teachers in the JET Programme. *JALT Journal*, 26 (3), 223-244.
- Ogawa, C. (2011) *Perceptions about team teaching: From Assistant Language Teachers and Japanese Teachers of English*. In A. Stewart (Ed.), *JALT 2010 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT. Available from: <http://jalt-publications.org/files/pdf-article/jalt2010proc-45.pdf> [Accessed 18 December, 2012].
- Richards, J. C. & Farrell, T. S. C. (2005) *Professional development for language teachers: Strategies for teacher*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sturman, P. (1992) Team teaching: a case study from Japan. In D. Nunan (Ed.), *Collaborative Language Learning and Teaching* (pp. 141-161). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tajino, A. & Walker, L. (1998) Perspectives on team teaching by students and teachers: Exploring foundations for team learning. *Language, Cultural, and Curriculum*, 11, 113-131.
- Tajino, A. & Tajino, Y. (2000) Native and nonnative: what can they offer? Lessons from team-teaching in Japan. *ELT Journal*, 54, 3-11.