

OPEN DOORS: TURNING “MY” STUDENTS INTO “OUR” STUDENTS

D. Patrick Allen
(dpallen@lc.chubu.ac.jp)
Chubu University, Japan

Seiko Oguri
(oguri@lc.chubu.ac.jp)
Chubu University, Japan

Tetsuo Kato
(tetsuo@lc.chubu.ac.jp)
Chubu University, Japan

Abstract

The practice of collaborative and team teaching has been increasing throughout the world and much research has been conducted on team teaching in primary and secondary schools. However, teaching in the university context is still seen as a mostly isolated activity. Despite the popularity of collaborative learning as applied to student instruction, the methods and techniques of collaboration have rarely been used in the development and management of lessons outside of the classroom. The presenters have been participating in a collaboratively taught blended learning course for engineering majors at a Japanese university. Due to the nature of the program, defining and maintaining teacher roles and expectations is essential. As such, an “open classroom” environment has been adopted in which instructors openly share lesson plans and materials and are free to observe any class in the course. This presentation will describe how the instructors of the course define their roles, develop lessons, and provide feedback on student performance. Furthermore, we will discuss how collaborative teaching and open course observation allows for closer integration of each class in the course. Finally, we will analyze the impact of collaboration on both accountability and trust among faculty members.

1 Introduction

The most important resource available to teachers is the experiences and ideas of their colleagues. This is reflected in the ever-growing volumes of teacher handbooks, websites, workshops, and conferences where instructors share their experiences and ideas with each other. However, this collaboration seems to extend only as far as the lesson plan. Once the doors shut in the classroom, teaching morphs into an isolated activity. This is even reflected in the language used by many EFL teachers when discussing courses and students. It is common to hear phrases like “my class was good” or “my students were talkative today.” In both cases teachers seem to take private ownership of both their class and the students attending it.

The idea of collaboration in teaching is hardly new. In fact, collaborative team-teaching and co-teaching have been practiced for decades. For example, the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, founded in 1978, was started to create a co-teaching environments in which a native English speaker assists a non-native English speaker with English language instruction. In many school in the United States, English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors are often teamed with content instructors in an attempt to provide linguistic knowledge and support in regard to the content area the students are learning.

Despite the seeming rise of co-taught or team-taught courses, many instructors have been reluctant to adopt them (Austin, 2001). This may be due to the nature of co-teaching requiring instructors to share not only ownership of the students, but the classroom and their labor. As such, collaboration between teachers is often “a delicate dance” as they attempt to find a balanced share of responsibilities and space without “stepping on each other’s toes.” (Martin-Beltran, Percy, & Selvi, 2012, p. 117).

This paper will describe a collaborative teaching project at a Japanese university and introduce a different model of collaborative teaching in which instructors teach and plan together, yet still maintain a sense of autonomy and ownership of instructional space through the use of “open classrooms,” which will be defined and analyzed.

2 Context

2.1 Students in the course

According to Freeman and Johnson’s (1998) review of historical changes in language teacher The teachers in this study are participating in a collaboratively taught blended-learning course at a Japanese University. The students in the program are all first through third-year engineering majors focusing on robotics. Most of the students in the program entered it with very negative views of English learning and very low motivation. As such, one of the major goals of the program is to reduce these negative images of English learning by providing a safe and personalized language learning environment. Much of the first and second year of the program focuses encouraging and motivating students while exposing them to English fundamentals, whereas the third year of the program introduces English for Special Purposes (ESP) classes aimed at helping them communicate within their field of expertise. As such, the first and second year courses are the focus of this study.

2.2 Class structure

Students in the course are separated into separate classes of roughly 20 to 25 students based upon results of a CASEC (Computerized Assessment System for English Communication) test administered every school year. Each following, instructors discuss the placement of the students and move them up or down a level based on their personal knowledge of each student’s aptitude, level of autonomy, and motivation.

As seen in table 1 below, students in this course meet once a week for 90 minutes of face-to-face instruction split into two 45-minute blocks, each with a different instructor, except for the lower-level freshman classes, which have two 90-minute sessions that are

co-taught in a Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) classroom. Sophomore classes are taught in dual 45-minute blocks split between a language lab (LL) class taught by a Japanese Native Teacher (JNT) and a workshop led by an English Native Teacher (ENT). It is important to note that the 45-minute classes are held in separate rooms with different instructors. At the end of the 45-minute block, the students trade classrooms.

Table 1. Class divisions for freshman and sophomore courses

Sophomore	Mon 5-6	B/D	45+45	LL	Workshop
	Tue 5-6	A/C		JNT①②	ENT①
Freshman	Tue 1-2	A/B	45+45	CALL	Workshop
				JNT①	JNT②
	Thu 7-8 9-10	C/D	90+90	CALL	
				JNT ①②	
Year	Day/time	Classes	minutes per week	Classroom/teacher	

JNT=Japanese Native Teacher, ENT=English Native Teacher
Classes assisted by teaching assistant, and occasionally observed by Robotics faculty

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Note. Reprinted from Oguri S. and Kato T. (2016, August) Turning anxiety to hope: the roles of teachers in a new blended EFL learning

The decision to split the classes this way and co-teach them, came about as a result of the struggle to keep the students engaged in activities during an entire 90-minute session. If classes meet only once a week for 90 minutes, it is not easy for the low-motivated students to be engaged. Forty-five minute split blocks give the students a short "break" in between. In addition, two atmospheres and teachers helps keep classes feeling fresh and engaging.

3 Open classrooms

According to Dr. Lynne Cook of California State University, there are six basic approaches to co-teaching (Cook, 2004). These approaches can be seen in the table two below:

Table 2. Six approaches to co-teaching

Approach	Description
One Teach, One Observe	The primary instructor teaches while a secondary instructor observes and takes notes. The lesson is analyzed after the class.
One Teach, One Drift	The primary instructor teaches while the secondary instructor circulates and facilitates activities.
Parallel Teaching	Both instructors teach the same content to two groups at the same time.
Station Teaching	Both instructors are in charge of content stations that

	students circulate to in groups.
Alternative Teaching	The students are split into a larger and smaller group. The smaller group typically receives special attention from the secondary, or assistant, instructor.
Team Teaching	Both instructors simultaneously teach one lesson to one group of students.

The open classroom approach does not fit into any of the above categories and thus requires its own definition. Similar to station teaching, the open classroom approach splits students into groups that learn the content with different foci. For example, one instructor may focus on grammatical form and vocabulary building, while the second focuses on facilitating communication activities based on the previous instruction. Instead of stations inside the same room, however, each instructor has their own classroom. Students receive instruction in the separate rooms and then switch classes. This allows each instructor full use of the learning environment without interrupting another lesson.

Also, the open classroom approach allows for a third or even fourth instructor to participate in a one teach, one observe or one drift approach simultaneously. In practice, teachers who will be teaching a separate section on a different day may observe or help facilitate another class their students are taking so that there is better cohesion across the entire curriculum. This helps students scaffold their learning not only within one class, but across multiple classes. It also allows instructors to dynamically learn new approaches and share ideas. As such, lesson observations become a tool for helping instructors create their lessons in additions to serving as a method of teacher evaluation or a tool for training. Open classrooms, then, are those in which ownership of lessons, space, feedback, and evaluation is shared among all the instructors in a course.

3.1 Teacher roles

As with most collaborative teaching models, the teachers in this course have both shared and specified roles. In general, all the instructors monitor student attitudes and behavior as well as the progress of their language acquisition. In addition, all the instructors have been tasked with developing personal relationship both with the students and each other. The latter being crucial to effective cooperation in the collaborative teaching context. Finally, instructors are jointly responsible for creating and adapting learning materials to student needs based on shared observations of the students in the course.

In addition to the shared roles, instructors have specified roles dictated by the sections of the course they hold the primary responsibility for facilitating. Instructors of the CALL classes focus more on input: building listening, prosody, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammatical structures. The main thrust of the freshman CALL courses is self-regulated learning. In the second year, CALL is replaced with the Language Lab (LL) courses. Instructors in these courses take on the role of facilitators for both individual and pair work. Much more focus is placed on active learning among peers. Both the CALL and LL classes, then, focus more on input. Workshop instructors, however, focus more on output: helping students to use the structures they have learned and build confidence with communicating in English. These classes are also facilitated more than taught, but are done so in English only.

3.2 Open classrooms and co-teaching challenges

Like all other co-teaching approaches, open classrooms must overcome the challenges of teacher collaboration. Research has shown that there are three main difficulties that instructors in a co-teaching environment must overcome: lack of time, lack of clarity, and issues of ownership and responsibility (Martin-Beltran et al., 2012). Figure 1 from the 2012 study by Martin-Beltran, Percy, and Selvi illustrates these challenges and how they can be overcome.



Note. Reprinted from Martin-Beltran, M., Percy, M., & Selvi, A. F. (2012). *Collaboration to teach elementary English language learners*.

Fig. 1. Tools to overcome challenges in teacher collaboration

As the above figure indicates, the collaborative nature of the dual-taught classes in the current study's open classrooms approach makes it imperative that instructors in the curriculum be in constant communication. Lesson plans must also be designed in a way that successfully integrates the dual-sections and build upon the language they are learning in the other sections of the course. Since the classes are taught simultaneously in two locations, total transparency of lesson development, assignments, grades, and student notes are essential in creating a successful collaborative teaching environment.

An extra degree of difficulty is added with the open classrooms approach to collaborative teaching because it does not connect only two teachers in a course. Rather, all the teachers in the curriculum share ownership of all the classes and students. Because of this, lesson planning can be a challenge. However, the seemingly daunting task of coordinating lessons between multiple classes and instructors is mitigated through the use of several readily available technologies.

Instructors in the current study are using several internet-based tools to help organize lessons and class observations. The first of which is Google Drive. Google Drive provides several tools that allows multiple instructors to share, check, and alter lesson plans dynamically. Firstly, instructors can plan simultaneously from any location with access to the internet. The chat function helps teachers to coordinate in real-time as they build the lessons together. Also, comments and suggestions can be made in real-time or left and read later. Moreover, a record of changes is automatically recorded and saved by Google Drive, making any alterations easily reversed. Since plans can be checked and changed at any time, Google Drive returns some of the flexibility of planning a solitary lesson to the teacher. Finally, Google Drive is free, so it can be used by anyone.

Learning management systems, such as Glexa, are also useful for collaboratively creating

activities and materials for students across the courses. In addition, progress notes and grades can be seen at any time, making it easy for instructors to collectively monitor student progress in the course. This shared knowledge, in turn, creates a more holistic view of each student's performance in the course. More details on how technologies

This is not to say that the open classroom approach does not require face-to-face meetings. Like any collaborative teaching approach, in-person discussions and socializing are very important, not only for keeping colleagues informed, but also for building team cohesion and facilitating a support structure for the instructors in the course. The open classroom approach, however, strengthens that cohesion by distributing ownership and responsibility to all the instructors under the curriculum.

Typically, small discussions are held at the end of every class in order to reflect on the lessons and share observations of the students. This constant communication helps reduce amount of times the instructors have to spend in officially scheduled meetings. Furthermore, because all instructors attend scheduled meetings already knowing the necessary information, such meetings tend to be more efficient and, perhaps more importantly, shorter. Further detail on the open classroom approach and teamwork will be described during the presentation.

4 Conclusion

As with any collaborative endeavor, it is important to understand that conflict can and most likely will arise between the collaborators. Collaborative teaching approaches require instructors to give up quite a bit of personal control over the classroom. In addition, collaborative teaching forces instructors to expose both their strengths and weaknesses as a teacher, especially in the open classrooms approach. This can lead to feelings of insecurity or embarrassment. Teachers may be reluctant to open their classrooms and lesson plans. Therefore, development of collaborative teaching courses should start small and be implemented in gradual steps with the support and of the instructors involved (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2012).

It is also important to remember that the benefits of collaborative teaching far outweigh the challenges. Collaborative teaching gives teachers different views of the students. It is natural for a single instructor to sometimes fail to notice changes in the students if they are the only set of eye on their 20 students. No matter how information and observations of the students is exchanged, teachers cannot fully understand what is happening in another teacher's classroom without being inside it. Instead, if the classrooms are open and students are shared, every instructor learns more about the students from the observations and comments of their peers. In classes that meet often, this may only be a minor problem, but in a one-a-week course, instructors are meeting the students only 15 times, and there is not enough time to truly learn about the students, there motivations and goals. Furthermore, it is human nature to gravitate to like-minded people. Thusly, different instructors will have different relationships with the students. A student that is less likely to be open to one teacher may be very open to another.

This gradual changing of the culture of isolated teaching can lead to more thorough support and increased trust between instructors as well. An open classroom approach can help mitigate possible feelings of intrusion by affording teachers full control over their teaching environment while simultaneously building a more dynamic support structure as

responsibility for student outcomes can be shared among colleagues. These are all good reasons to change the culture of teaching from a closed classrooms to more collaborative and open classrooms. Certainly, more research is needed to better assess both the challenges and benefits of open classroom environments in areas such as teacher attitudes, training and professional development, and conflict management. This research is best done through wider-spread implementation of collaborative teaching.

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