

"I Can Teach Alone!": Perceptions of Pre-service Teachers on Team-Teaching Practices

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Team teaching by local Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) and foreign assistant language teachers (ALTs) has met with widespread approval and attracted great empirical attention. It is notable, however, that no study to date has explored the perceptions of pre-service teachers on team-teaching practices. The absence of such research is surprising and regrettable, considering that pre-service teachers are required under the new national foreign language curriculum to gain a deep understanding about team teaching in their teacher training courses and that they will inevitably team teach English with ALTs in their future careers. In this study, we collected data from three pre-service teachers on this subject through semi-structured interviews. From the data, three dialectics with regard to team-teaching practices were inferred: (a) encouraging/intimidating, (b) helpful/burdensome, and (c) worthwhile/unnecessary. Based on these findings, suggestions are provided for addressing these ambivalent perceptions towards team teaching in pre-service teacher training courses.

日本人英語教師(JTE)と外国語指導助手(ALT)によるチームティーチングは各方面から高く評価されている。同時に、それを題材にした様々な学術研究が行われてきた。しかし、教員養成課程学生が抱くチームティーチングへの認識に関する研究は、現在まで行われていない。その学生達が大学講義や教育実習中、更には将来正規教員としてチームティーチングに携わることを考えると、これは極めて遺憾なことである。本研究では半構造的インタビュー手法を用いて、教員養成課程学生からデータを収集した。その結果、それらの学生は(a)励み・恐れ、(b)有益・負担、(c)有意義・不必要、といった複雑な思いをチームティーチングに対して抱いていることが明らかになった。本論では最後に、教員養成課程においてチームティーチングを扱う際の留意点を提示する。

Since its establishment in 1987, one of the world's largest international exchange programs, the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, has welcomed more than 70,000 participants from 75 countries (CLAIR, 2020). Over 90% of the participants have been employed as assistant language teachers (ALTs), whose role is to support English lessons with local Japanese teachers of English (JTEs). The team-teaching arrangement is believed to improve teacher efficiency and student

learning by reducing the student-teacher ratio (see Villa et al., 2008). This arrangement in turn creates a communication-oriented learning environment and promotes internationalization at the local level (CLAIR, 2020). Team teaching English lessons in Japan has therefore enjoyed widespread approval and served as the subject of numerous empirical studies (e.g., Hiratsuka, 2016; Tajino et al., 2016).

However, to our knowledge no previous study has investigated *pre-service* JTEs' perceptions of team teaching. This is surprising for three reasons. First, under the provisions of the current national foreign language curriculum, pre-service teachers are required to gain a deep understanding of team teaching with ALTs in their teacher training courses (MEXT, 2017). Second, they are often expected to team teach with ALTs during their teaching practicums, not to mention in their future careers. Third, attitudes formed during JTEs' pre-service training programs have a significant influence on their opinions about what makes a good teacher (see Wiggins et al., 2007). After graduation, this influence is said to continue to impact what teachers think and what they do in the classroom (Freeman, 2016).

In the present study, we investigated pre-service teachers' perceptions of team teaching, revealing their ambivalence towards it. This ambivalence was categorized into three diametrical pairings: (a) encouraging/intimidating, (b) helpful/burdensome, and (c) worthwhile/unnecessary. Our research is of particular value because, firstly, it describes pre-service teachers' idiosyncratic perceptions of their team-teaching experiences, which have not been addressed in the field of ELT in Japan. Secondly, it provides practical suggestions for pre-service teacher training to make the team-teaching experiences of the stakeholders involved more fruitful.

Team Teaching

Although the term *team teaching* seems straightforward, consensus has not been reached on its definition. Sandholtz (2000) maintains that team teaching sometimes means a simple allocation of responsi-

bilities between two teachers outside the classroom and at other times means full collaboration inside it. Villa et al. (2008) assign team teaching to one of four categories of *co-teaching*, namely, supportive teaching, parallel teaching, complementary teaching, and team teaching. According to them, co-teaching means “two or more people sharing responsibility for teaching some or all of the students assigned to a classroom” and involves “the distribution of responsibility among people for planning, instruction, and evaluation” (p. 5). In supportive teaching, one teacher has primary responsibility for designing and instructing a lesson, while the other provides individual support to the students in the class. Through parallel teaching, teachers instruct different groups of students simultaneously in a classroom. In complementary teaching, one teacher works to enhance the instruction of the other, such as by paraphrasing the instruction or demonstrating how to take notes. Villa et al. (2008) assert that, among these four modalities, team teaching is the most sophisticated, occurring when two teachers divide their lessons equally while alternating fluidly between leading and supporting roles. In the context of Japan, it is important to distinguish between the commonly used term *team teaching*, referring to JTEs and ALTs collaborating on teaching together in the classroom generally, and the definitions of team teaching outlined in the literature. The latter can differ in practice from lesser to greater sharing of responsibility (Sandholtz, 2000) and can include any of Villa et al.’s (2008) four different types of co-teaching. Therefore, this study acknowledges that the degree and type of collaboration between team teachers in Japan can vary by teacher, class, school, or course.

Recent studies of team teaching in Japan have investigated a wide array of topics with a variety of methods, such as by documenting the effects of a collaborative professional inquiry in the form of exploratory practice (Hiratsuka, 2016) or by demonstrating the significance of dialogic and cooperative practice conceptualized as team learning (Tajino et al., 2016). However, most of the research focuses on teachers’ and students’ perceptions of how they viewed themselves/their teachers, team-teaching practices, and student learning in team-taught classes. This literature reveals JTEs to be perceived as successful English language learner role-models for their students as well as mediators who are tasked with facilitating effective interaction between their students and ALTs, whereas ALTs are regarded as the authorities and providers of the target language and cultures (Hiratsuka, 2017a; Miyazato, 2012). Furthermore, the studies found that teacher roles and the pedagogies employed are not

rigidly pre-determined (Hiratsuka, 2015; Ogawa, 2011). The literature also presents multifaceted perceptions of student learning in team-taught classes, perhaps due to the variety of interpretations of the rationale, goals, and pedagogical focus of team teaching (Hiratsuka, 2013; Johannes, 2012).

It is notable that all the studies of team teaching in Japan reviewed above concern in-service teachers and have not included pre-service teachers. Thus, we addressed this gap by examining Japanese pre-service teachers’ perceptions of team teaching. The guiding research question of this study was “What perceptions do pre-service teachers of English have concerning team-teaching practices?” We found that the perceptions of the pre-service teachers concerning team teaching were formed from their prior experiences as students in team-taught classes and as pre-service teachers in their teacher training courses and teaching practicums.

Methodology

As participants in the study, the authors recruited three students at a university in southern Japan taking a teacher training course with a team-teaching component. The participants were selected using both purposeful and convenience sampling strategies based on their experiences in team teaching as well as on their accessibility and availability. Only after they had fully understood the nature of the research and the consequences of their participation did they join the study by signing written consent forms. All participants were senior-year undergraduate students studying for Bachelor of Arts degrees. Each was assigned a pseudonym in the individual descriptions below. Atsushi was a 23-year-old male with intermediate English ability. He took part in team teaching on three occasions with three different classmates during the course. Kazuki was a 22-year-old male with intermediate English ability. On two occasions, he team taught English lessons with two different classmates during the course and, on ten occasions, he team taught English lessons with an ALT during a teaching practicum a few months prior to data collection. Tetsuko was a 21-year-old female with advanced English proficiency. She took part in team teaching twice with two different classmates in the course and six times (three times with a JTE and three times with an ALT) during a practicum one year prior to the data collection.

Data were collected from the three participants through semi-structured interviews immediately after the course ended. Each interview took approximately 90 minutes. We believe this interview technique was an appropriate data collection method

for this study because our purpose was to obtain rich information regarding the participants' perceptions of team teaching within their idiosyncratic histories and contexts (see Seidman, 2013). The interviews were conducted by the second author, in Japanese, the first language of the participants and himself, in a lecture room at the university. He started the interview with "Tell me about your thoughts on team teaching" and then asked the participants follow-up questions, such as "What accounts for successful/unsuccessful team teaching?" and "Why do you think so?" All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. After transcription, the interview data were translated into English with attention to maintaining the nuances of the original utterances in Japanese. The data were then analyzed through content analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), in which we concentrated on the meaning of the participants' perspectives, identified similar and recurring ideas (e.g., encouraging, helpful, and worthwhile), and grouped these together into salient themes (e.g., relating to emotions, impressions, and rationales). This analysis was applied within and across the participants' responses in a reiterative manner before arriving at the final three themes presented below.

Findings

The reiterative analysis resulted in three diametrically opposed pairs of perceptions of team-teaching practices: (a) encouraging/intimidating, (b) helpful/burdensome, and (c) worthwhile/unnecessary.

Team Teaching as an Encouraging but Intimidating Practice

The first diametrically opposed pairing relates to the participants' *feelings* towards team teaching. The participants felt team teaching was both encouraging and intimidating. Regarding the former, Atsushi shared his perception as follows: "It is comforting that there is another teacher besides me in the classroom. We can deal with problems together if they arise." Kazuki perceived team teaching, particularly with a native speaker of English, in a positive light: "ALTs can promote students' intercultural understanding. They can also expose the students to some foreign games. I feel confident when my teaching partner and I have respective strengths to offer." Similarly, Tetsuko expressed her appreciation for having a teaching partner: "It was easier for me to conduct team-taught classes than solo classes because the students got excited and the class atmosphere became lighter when they saw the ALT." Despite these positive comments, the participants expressed uncertainty as well. For example, Atsushi indicated:

"I did not know what to expect from team teaching because I had never really seen how it works." Kazuki commented: "We do not know what we will do in class until we actually do it even if we meet and plan the lesson with our partner beforehand. It is scary not to have total control over the lesson." Along similar lines, Tetsuko remarked: "When I conducted team-taught classes, there were often awkward silences because we did not know who should speak next. That made me feel nervous."

As pre-service, non-native English-speaking teachers, the participants felt their teaching partners' pedagogical and cultural contributions as well as their presence comforting (see Tajino et al., 2016). At the same time, however, they feared the uncertainties that are unique to team-taught classes, where two teachers, often with different experiences, skills, and expectations, attempt to teach in the same classroom together (see Ogawa, 2011).

Team Teaching as Helpful but Burdensome Practice

The second diametrically opposed pairing of helpful/burdensome is associated with the *practical implications* of team teaching. The participants thought that team teaching helped the lesson to progress smoothly: "One teacher can lead the class, and the other walks around the classroom to give individual assistance" (Atsushi); "ALTs can talk to the students in authentic English, and JTEs can explain what they said in Japanese when the students don't understand" (Kazuki). The participants also believed that team teaching promoted student learning by providing both controlled, targeted English sentences and fluent native-speaker English: "Both teachers can provide proper English sentences that include target grammar rules of the lesson" (Atsushi); "With ALTs, students can be exposed to lots of English spoken by native speakers of English" (Tetsuko). However, these benefits were tempered by an acknowledgment of the concomitant burdens of the practice. For instance, Atsushi noted: "I have to compromise my ideas and opinions because I need to take into consideration my teaching partners' thoughts and ideas." Additionally, Kazuki relayed that "because we have to make time to prepare lessons together, team teaching takes a lot more time than solo teaching." Tetsuko recounted a perceived negative episode from one of her team-taught classes: "When I asked my ALT to explain our crossword puzzle activity to the students, she used unfamiliar words such as 'upwards' and 'downwards.' It made it necessary for me to explain everything in Japanese all over again."

The participants accepted team teaching as a helpful practice for students, as a result of the increase

in individual support and their exposure to both targeted and native-speaker English (see Johannes, 2012). Nonetheless, when they taught with a teaching partner, they felt burdened, as they had to make adjustments to their teaching, invest more time in planning, and interpret when the ALT used vocabulary unfamiliar to the students (see Hiratsuka, 2015).

Team Teaching as Worthwhile but Unnecessary Practice

The final diametrically opposed pairing of worthwhile/unnecessary concerns the participants' perceptions of the *rationales* for team teaching. Atsushi addressed how it is worthwhile for the students: "Team teaching with ALTs can offer rare opportunities for students to observe conversational English in action." Likewise, Kazuki said, "In team-taught classes, I can show students various interactions of two proficient speakers of English." Tetsuko echoed, "Showing real conversations in English with ALTs is important. I cannot do that with even the most fluent student in class." Notwithstanding, the participants also perceived that team teaching is sometimes unnecessary to attain the goals of the lessons. Atsushi recounted: "While my partner was leading the lesson, I was just writing students' ideas on the blackboard. Now that I think about it, either of us could probably teach the class alone without any problem." Kazuki's comments were thought-provoking: "ALTs are just a human tape recorder, anyway. I can teach alone!" Tetsuko also had doubts about team teaching: "Even after experiencing team teaching, I still don't see the point of it in English classes in Japan . . . All ALTs do is read the textbook with clear pronunciation. Just the pronunciation part is different, I guess." Team teaching was perceived to be worthwhile because it enabled spontaneous and authentic communication between the two English-speaking teachers (see Miyazato, 2012). At the same time, it was also viewed to be sometimes unnecessary because the participants could not justify the need for two teachers, believing instead that they could adequately teach the lesson alone (see Hiratsuka, 2013).

Discussion

The findings of this study corroborated those of previous studies. The participants recognized the advantages of team teaching, such as collaboration between two teachers (Hiratsuka, 2016; Sandholtz, 2000; Tajino et al., 2016), increased individual support for students (Hiratsuka, 2015; Johannes, 2012), exploitation of both teachers' strengths and expertise (Hiratsuka, 2017a; Miyazato, 2012; Ogawa, 2011; Villa et al., 2008), and the provision of model

conversations in English (Hiratsuka, 2013). The participants' ambivalence was also in line with previous findings: They oftentimes felt uncertain about the roles of each teacher and, consequently, about how to manage their lessons, thereby feeling fearful at times (Johannes, 2012; Ogawa, 2011). The participants in this study also viewed the practical aspects of team teaching to be burdensome (Hiratsuka, 2015) and considered team-teaching practices to be sometimes unnecessary (Hiratsuka, 2013).

Based on these findings, we offer three suggestions. First, in order to cope with the perspective of team teaching as an intimidating practice within the diametrically opposed pairing of encouraging but intimidating, we should provide student teachers with access to a collection of exemplars of team teaching in the form of video clips, audio recordings, and documents from diverse teaching contexts. These would ideally introduce a range of lesson objectives, pedagogies, teacher roles, and classroom activities and materials. Pre-service and in-service teachers could then familiarize themselves with several possibilities for their team teaching, though they should not treat such resources as prescriptive. They should instead be encouraged to adapt them to their unique circumstances. Second, to address the helpful but burdensome dialectic, we should increase opportunities for communication between team-teaching partners while attempting to reduce, or at least better manage, the extra burdens that team teaching entails. Pre-service JTEs can increase their shared understanding by exchanging their thoughts and ideas more frequently and deeply through pair discussions, email exchanges, and joint journal writing. To make this practically feasible, however, they need support from their course instructors/teacher educators as well as classmates and colleagues. For example, decreasing their required course assignments/teaching loads is one way to make time for engaging in increased collaboration and reflection (see Hiratsuka, 2017b). Lastly, in order to deal with the worthwhile/unnecessary dialectic, team teachers should be given the opportunity to read books and articles and participate in lectures and workshops on team teaching in order to broaden their knowledge and evaluate their beliefs about the rationales behind team teaching. This knowledge might lead to the team teachers' discovering and/or reconfirming the worthwhile aspects of and opportunities for team teaching while giving them the language and concepts to critique disparaging discourses about it, such as the resistant conclusion "I can teach alone!"

Conclusion

The findings of this study support those of previous studies (e.g., Hiratsuka, 2013, 2015), that the

pre-service teachers' perceptions of team-teaching practices are like those of in-service teachers and their students. We have categorized the pre-service teachers' perceptions into three dialectics: encouraging/intimidating, helpful/burdensome, and worthwhile/unnecessary. Our hope is that our suggestions to address each of these pairings be put into practice to help reduce ambivalence towards team teaching. This study is a small-scale investigation and the first of its kind to our knowledge to examine this group regarding team teaching. Therefore, we acknowledge the need to examine larger samples in different contexts with more robust and triangulated data collection methods, such as classroom observations, journal writing, and reflection papers. In doing so, we hope to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the perceptions of team teaching and generate more and better ways of making team teaching more successful.

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