

A Model of Team Teaching in a Web-mediated EAP Course

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This article presents a model of team teaching in a web-mediated English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. Descriptions of the course and the typical class structure are provided with explanations on the decision of the use of the web (as the medium of instruction) and of team teaching. Students' feedback on the classes and teaching is also offered. It is hoped that educators who plan to run or are currently running a similar web-mediated course can benefit from this example of team teaching.

Introduction

Team teaching has been increasingly popular and strongly advocated in various educational settings due to its advantages such as a lower student-teacher ratio. Advantages of team teaching however do not end at benefiting students but extend to the teachers themselves. Teachers can further develop and enhance their teaching techniques by learning from each other. Team teaching can take various different forms, but it mainly involves two or more teachers teaching the same course (Shafer, 1983). The dominant form of team teaching in English as a Foreign language (EFL) settings, widespread in Japan, Hong Kong, and other Asian countries, seems to involve two teachers in class: one native speaker teacher of the target language and one non-native local teacher (Benoit & Haugh, 2001). A common practice of team teaching in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) settings engages the language specialist and the subject specialist (Brennan & van Naersen, 1989). However, other forms of collaboration are also well-known in other educational settings.

This paper attempts to present a model of team teaching in a web-mediated EAP course, which has been employed in the English for Excellence (EfE) project¹ at the University of Luton. The course was a non-credit bearing optional one offered to the University of Luton students. The form of team teaching employed was different from the common EAP practice mentioned above since it involved two language specialist teachers. The teachers were jointly responsible for materials development, teaching, evaluation, and further development of the materials. It is hoped that educators who plan to run or are currently running a similar web-mediated course can benefit from this example of team teaching.

Description of the Course and Students

The EfE course was offered to students from ethnic minority backgrounds to whom English is the first or an additional language. The web has been chosen as a medium of instruction, as students are on the whole are positively inclined to working with the web (Felix 2001). As Felix explains, the web offers advantages such as time flexibility, reinforced learning, privacy, ability to repeat tasks, and a wealth of information. It was also hoped that students who possessed poor IT skills would familiarise themselves with their way around the web through the lessons.

It was clear from the beginning that there was a choice to be made regarding the teacher role in this web-mediated course. The teacher role as instructor could be kept to a minimum and she/he could adopt the role of facilitator, mentor, or helper. In other words, the teacher could be merely present in class to help students when requested, and not lead the lesson. Alternatively, the teacher could take an active role by initiating and facilitating the lessons, explaining things and giving

instructions as well as helping students with their tasks and mentoring them. Active teacher roles were judged to benefit students more in this type of classroom because they might increase interaction between students themselves, and between students and the teacher. In a class where students work on their own at their own pace, they may feel they are in a self-access centre, the environment of which does not necessarily encourage interaction between students themselves, and between students and the teacher. By having teacher-led classes and encouraging students' group work whenever it would fit into the lessons, it was envisaged that interaction between students, and between students and the teacher would be enhanced. However, in order to maximise the benefits of the assignment of one computer per student, all written tasks were carried out individually. Only verbal discussion was conducted in groups or pairs, which was designed to raise awareness of main issues of the day's lesson.

In addition to the active teacher roles, team teaching was thought to benefit these computer-mediated classes since more attention to and help with individual students were judged to be required for the following reasons:

1. **Target students:** The course targeted students from diverse backgrounds in terms of age, discipline, degree level, ethnicity, and proficiency in their English.
2. **'Accident-prone' web-mediated environment:** Things can easily go wrong in the web-mediated environment. For example, students tend to have accidents which bring out the following statements: 'I clicked the wrong button', 'I can't go back to the previous pages', 'I lost my work', 'I forgot my username and password', 'What is the website address?', 'How can I submit my homework?'. These problems are simple but require immediate individual attention from the teachers. Network problems or problems with the website host can also take place during the lesson, which requires a contingency plan.
3. **Poor IT skills:** Students' level of IT skills can vary, but there seem to be always some students whose IT competency is not good. Problems with logging on, highlighting a part of text, copying and pasting, dragging and dropping, and navigating are common examples of what some students experience in a computer-mediated learning environment.
4. **Distraction of the web:** It is so easy for students to browse other webpages which are not relevant to their curriculum.
5. **Physical setting:** A large-sized classroom often proves to be a difficult environment in which to sustain students' attention. In our case, the position of the master computer and the projected screen also complicated the matter. The master computer was situated at one corner whilst the screen was in the middle of the front part of the classroom. It would not have been easy for one teacher to demonstrate navigation and explain teaching items at the same time. This problem was solved by having the demonstrator at one corner with the computer and the main teacher of the day in front of the screen. Both teachers then circulated around the classroom while the students are carrying out the tasks.

Description of the Class

Before Class

The two teachers double marked students' pre-test comprising a summarising and a essay writing part. The teachers co-wrote the learning materials, and agreed on the order of the lessons in advance. The lessons were presented on the web in the order they would be dealt with in class, with clear lesson objectives. In case students missed a class, they still knew which lesson they had to look at. The teachers determined how each lesson would be led. They then took turns leading lessons.

In Class

The maximum number of students in one class was about 15. Students were seated in four rows. There was a projector which projected the page on the master computer onto the front screen. With this visual aid, students could instantly see whether they were on the right page. Teachers made sure all the following stages would go smoothly.

1. **Logging on:** As soon as students came to class, they were reminded to login onto the website where materials were presented. Both teachers circulated to help with their login process. This proved to be essential, as some students did not remember their username or password, although they were provided with a piece of paper and a handbook with them on (e.g., some were in the habit of not bringing the piece of paper or the handbook!).
2. **Go to the day's lesson:** Students were then taken to the day's lesson by clicking on the appropriate lesson number.
3. **Outline of the day's lesson plan:** The leading teacher outlined the day's lesson plan together with the lesson

objectives and the structure of the lesson.

4. **Awareness raising discussion:** Students were led to discuss in a pair/group certain issues related to the day's lesson, which was carried out in order to raise awareness of and interest in the specific issues related to the lesson.
5. **Lesson points:** Each lesson point was presented in order of introduction to the lesson point, further explanation, instruction of how to carry out tasks on the lesson point, and performing tasks. Both teachers circulated to help students individually with their tasks and to answer questions. This individual help has proved very effective especially when students wanted teachers to check their answers to open-ended tasks, which were different from the suggested answer (s) provided by the computer.
6. **Wrapping up the class:** After all the lesson points were covered, students were led to Self-assessment and Lesson Feedback. Whilst the Self-assessment page was only for themselves to monitor their own learning and to take notes on any aspects of the day's lesson, Lesson Feedback was a facility for them to give feedback on the day's lesson to the teachers.
7. **Assigning homework:** Students were assigned homework for the week. Homework was writing a mini-essay on a given topic. The assigned homework was also announced on the Bulletin Board on the website.
8. **Question and Answer Session:** About five minutes was allocated for this at the end of the lesson. Students used this session for various purposes such as showing their personal work to teachers, asking for teachers' recommendations on supplementary books, problems they encountered during the lesson or when they accessed the materials at home, etc.

After Class

The teachers discussed specific points which cropped up during the lesson. In particular, they discussed students' responses toward tasks and perception of difficulty level of the tasks. Tasks were being modified according to students' feedback for the following intake of students. After the completion of the course, students took a test, which was again double marked by the two teachers.

Students' Feedback on the Type of Teaching

Students' feedback on the classes was obtained after completion of the course through questionnaires and interviews. Among those, questions relevant to teaching include appropriateness of the pace of the course, usefulness of the classes, effectiveness of classes in comparison with working on their own, standard of teaching, preference of the pre-set plan of the lessons to developing their own pathways around the materials. Students' answers to these questions (number of student: 56) are shown in Figure 1.

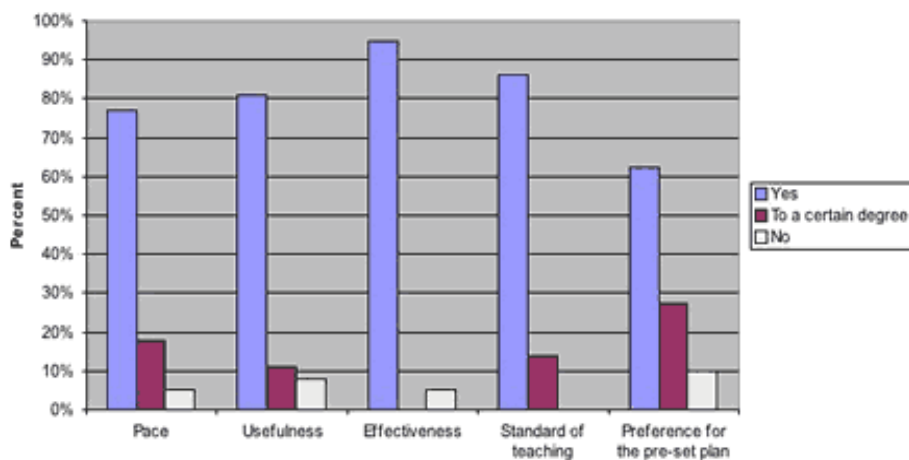


Figure 1. Students' feedback on teaching

Students' comments on team teaching include the following:

- The tutors made sure I understood everything before they continued.
- The tutors made sure all individuals understood the work
- I could get immediate help.

- The teachers were cheerful and helpful.
- Tutors could look at your work and guide and explain.
- You learn more when there is a minority of individuals on the course.
- The classes worked well with the website. It was good support and made me very comfortable, if I was not sure about anything.
- I learn better with a tutor.
- Nice to have and make human contact.
- Assistance is provided as and when required.
- Because I was able to ask questions. If I did not understand anything I could ask and it was explained.
- The tutors spoke clearly and made sure help was given when needed.
- They work hard and helpful.
- If I didn't understand, I was able to ask and I was helped.
- The teachers were friendly and willing to give.

From students' comments emerged some interesting facts regarding their responses towards web-mediated learning. Students stated they enjoyed the friendly atmosphere and interaction in class. Students' comments to this effect particularly focused on 'very approachable and encouraging atmosphere' and 'informative, easy and effective' teaching and 'interaction with teachers'. Many of them also commented on the usefulness of web-based classes. In contrast to one or two unfavourable opinions towards web-mediated classes, there are many favourable voices stating 'it also helps with IT skills. It's like killing two birds with one stone'. They also preferred the pre-set plan of the lessons to developing their own pathways. They found it 'hassle-free' and did 'not feel the need to develop their own pathways' since experts gave them the necessary guide.

Conclusions

Students' positive responses to the course and teaching clearly showed team teaching worked in this individual attention requiring web-based EAP course. Many students' comments particularly focused on the fact that the teachers looked at their individual work and that they could ask questions (if and when needed) and received answers from the teachers. These comments also showed that even in a computer-mediated learning environment students preferred friendly atmosphere and human interaction to independent and impersonal learning.

This paper presented a form of team teaching in web-based classes, but admittedly there are possibilities for different types of effective team teaching. One important lesson our team teaching could pass on which is transferable to all types of team teaching (which any educators would probably know) is that attention to individual students and human interaction in class can make a great difference for learners and the learning process.

Notes

1. EfE is a research project jointly funded by the University of Luton and the Higher Education European Social Fund (HE ESF) which aims to provide tuition in EAP for students from ethnic minority backgrounds, which is expected to contribute to increasing these students' academic success, which is in turn envisaged to contribute to their retention in higher education.

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