



An Action Research of Co-Teaching Practices at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University

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Introduction

Setting

The School of Foreign Languages (SFL) is an active unit of the Thai Nguyen University (TNU) in the Northern part of Vietnam. The school is responsible for training its students so that they have good command of foreign languages to serve the workforce. Currently, there are five different languages taught: English, French, Russian, Chinese and Korean. Students after graduation can work as language teachers or in sectors that require language ability like translators, interpreters, reporters or tour guides. Of the five languages, English is the most popular with the largest number of students enrolling in its two main majors of English Education and Bachelor of English.

Apart from the four language skills being taught, students also learn a number of subjects in fields such as linguistics (grammar, semantics, pragmatics), cultures (UK-US country studies, Cross-cultural communication, English literature), teaching methodology (teaching practicum, material development, teaching methods), project-based subjects (TV show, drama, magazine, excursion), and translation (oral translation, written translation, translation theory). Cross-cultural communication is a compulsory course for third or fourth-year students of English majors which aims to provide students with basic knowledge of culture and communication and how the former affects the latter. Basic concepts of the course include communication (definitions, elements and channels of communication), culture (definitions, and taxonomies), verbal communication, non-verbal communication, problems in intercultural contact (culture shock and cultural biases). Throughout the course, students learn a lot about different cultural patterns around the world with some more focus on a comparison and contrast between Anglist and Vietnamese culture.

Rationale

The idea of applying a co-teaching model came from trying to solve the current problems inherent in teaching at SFL, TNU. In the past 10 years, the English department at SFL has hired a number of native English speaker teachers (NEST) from different cooperation and exchange programs. They often work for a duration of one or more academic years. Nevertheless, their actual teaching practice has seldom been observed or summarized. Besides positive feedback from students in respects of teaching methodology and classroom management, there exist drawbacks such as the NESTs' lack of awareness of Vietnamese cultures as well as students' competence which lead to inappropriacy in addressing cultural issues and even misunderstandings at times. Therefore, the current study implemented a co-teaching model with the expectation that school administrators would have a closer look into the actual teaching practice of NESTs. In addition, the involved teachers can learn from each other and the knowledge gap can be bridged.

Literature Review

Co-teaching

Beuwens and Hourcade (1995) defined co-teaching as “a restructuring of teaching procedures in which two or more educators possessing distinct sets of skills work in a co-active and coordinated fashion to jointly teach academically and behaviorally hetero-generous groups of students in integrated educational settings” (p. 46). Based on this definition, a number of co-teaching models and practices have been developed and evaluated over time.

Cook and Friend (1995) provided five model variations: (1) the *one teaching – one assisting* in which one teacher leads the instruction while the other assists and supports students, (2) *station teaching* which divides both the teaching content and the teachers into stations while the students rotate around the stations, (3) *parallel teaching* which requires the teachers to co-plan the lesson and then deliver it simultaneously to half of the students, (4) *alternative teaching* that allows one large group and one small group of students and permits intensive instruction for students with special learning needs in a reduced teacher–student ratio. Simultaneously, the other instructor provides instruction to the large group, and (5) *team teaching* in which both teachers plan and instruct. Teachers continually alternate the role of the primary instructor within individual lessons. Following the models, Vaughn et al. (1997) improved the instructional aspects of the one teaching–one assisting model, i.e. while one teacher leads the class, the other teacher provides brief intensive instruction to individual students, student pairs, or small groups. Walther-Thomas et al. (2000) suggested the *interactive teaching*. In this format, the two teachers present instruction to the whole group, alternating the role of instructional leader for periods of 5–10 minutes. Since the lead teacher role changes frequently, both teachers have several opportunities to serve as the primary educator (Walther-Thomas et al., 2000).

Co-teaching practices have long been applied and discussed in education literature. The majority of previous research has been conducted in the context of special education and focused mainly on co-teaching to aid students with disabilities. In this model, a special knowledge teacher co-taught with a general knowledge one. In their 3-year study, Walther-Thomas CS. (1997) pointed out the emerging benefits and persistent problems encountered as they implemented the co-teaching model in the setting of special education. The model was said to bring great benefits for students (regarding the aspects of academic performance, self-confidence and self-esteem, social skills performance, peer relationship, teacher's time and attention) and teachers (professional satisfaction, professional growth, personal support). However, problems occurred relating to scheduled planning time, student scheduling, caseload concerns and administrative support.

Other research has focused on different aspects of co-teaching. For example, Takacs, (2015) critically examined co-teaching models at secondary level and emphasize the importance of the relationship between the co-teaching partners, a shared professional philosophy, compatible instructional practices, and administrative support. Meanwhile, Bafaro (2016) investigated the process of developing long-term co-teaching partnerships and revealed the four factors that facilitated the development of long-term co-teaching partnership: building genuine trust, recognizing each other's strengths and weaknesses and knowledge, handling disagreement and developing inclusive co-teaching partnerships. Bean (2013) discussed the planning processes of co-teaching implementation that led to teacher satisfaction and found that administrative leadership - the engagement of administrators into certain specific practices - was the key. Nierengarten (2013) provided twenty suggestions covering the three stages (before, during and after co-teaching) for high school administrators to consider when implementing co-teaching in order to support the teachers who engage in this promising practice.

From the co-teaching literature, it can be seen that most of the previous research focused on co-teaching in special education. None of the previous research was conducted in the context of English language teaching as a second or foreign language nor looked into the matter of cultural support by the co-teachers of different cultural backgrounds. However, the current literature provides this research with useful background such as the model of co-teaching to follow, the benefits and obstacles that co-teaching possesses or factors that guarantee successful implementation of co-teaching. These are useful for the logistics of the actual co-teaching practice in the local setting of this research.

Native and Non-native English Speaker Teachers

Another aspect to look at is the matter of NESTs and NNESTs. Both kinds of teachers have their own advantages over the other and disadvantages compared to their counterpart. NESTs, on the one hand, are linguistically advantaged for exemplifying how the language works in everyday situations in terms of their intuitive knowledge of English. In other words, they have a better command of English and, thus, have a better advantage of understanding the expectations of English academic discourse. As Ferguson (1982) states, "native-speaker expertise is assumed to extend to the teaching of the language" so that native speakers "not only have a patent on proper English, but on proper ways of teaching it as well". However, in dealing with NNEST learners, it seems that there exist problems for NESTs. Research in the 1990s began to understand that ESL students were from the standpoint of cultural different and contrastive rhetoric compared to NS students and therefore needed very specific types of attention (Fox, 1994; Leki, 1992; Lustig & Koester, 1993). In addition, Chang (2011) claimed that NES tutors may not have had much experience interacting with NNEST students, so "tutors' increasing awareness and sensitivity to other cultures and languages will help them better understand why NNEST students have difficulties in certain areas" (p. 41).

NNESTs, on the other hand, have a better advantage of the "intuitive knowledge of teaching a language" because of their experiences of having gone through similar experiences in learning English as a second language (Chang, 2011, p. 61). NNESTs' knowledge of linguistic rules and their experiences of learning a language equip them with an advantage of being language teachers who might better locate second language learners' difficulties in the process of acquiring language. As Canagarajah (1999, p. 80) points out, "their proficiency in more than one language system develops a deep metalinguistic knowledge and complex language awareness". However, Chang (2011, p. ii) remarks that:

... despite cross-analyzed findings that NNEST tutors were perceived as more able to explain the causes of error, findings also revealed NES tutors' confidence in their NES status as compensating for their lack of grammar knowledge and NNEST tutors' perception of themselves as inferior and needing to compensate for their non-NES status through teacher-like directness in assistance offered. Also, despite tutees' expressed appreciation for NNEST tutors' explanations of errors, tutees still expressed a preference for NES tutors and applied a double standard, with NNEST tutors seen as

effective only if proved to be good writers and NES tutors assumed to be effective by virtue of their native speaker status ...

In short, both NESTs and NNESTs possess certain qualities that could be beneficial to learners. The idea of combining the two teachers in a course, therefore, has its standpoint. However, there has not been much research focusing on the co-teaching between NESTs and NNESTs either in the context of ESOL higher education or courses related to cultural issues.

In our context of the School of Foreign Languages, especially in a course like intercultural communication, the knowledge of the NEST about the cultures of English speaking countries could compensate for the lack of practical cultural experience of the NNEST; meanwhile, the understanding of the nature of learners and their culture that the NNEST has could be helpful in minimizing the frustrations that the NEST might have.

Methods

Objectives and Research Questions

The objective of this study was to investigate teaching staff and student perceptions of the co-teaching practice at SFL during the first year of the implementation of the program. The study addressed 2 questions:

- Q1.** What do student perceptions of the co-taught setting reveal about the effectiveness of the experience?
- Q2.** What do teaching staff perceptions of the co-taught setting reveal about the effectiveness of the experience?

Subjects

The participants in this study were five teachers at the School of Foreign Languages. Four of the five teachers were Vietnamese, who had more than five years of teaching experience. The exception was a special education teacher who had a PhD at International and Comparative Education Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida. He was a member of the Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program chosen to work at SFL. He had seventeen year experience in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and conducting research related to Intercultural Development in EFL/ESL Teacher Training. The five participating teachers were selected based upon their willingness to co-teach and to participate in the study. All of the teachers taught subject Intercultural Communication to third year students at SFL. Students included in the study were 100 third year English majors, who were in the second term of the school year 2017-2018.

Data Collection Instruments

The effects of co-teaching were measured through two online surveys for teachers and students.

Survey for teachers

The teachers were asked about their overall perceptions of the co-teaching experience through the survey. The survey consisted of 4 parts with 17 questions in total. Part 1 (6 questions) was for the teachers to share their hopes, attitudes, responsibilities, and expectations about co-teaching. In Part 2 (3

questions), the teachers were asked to respond to the questions related to how they planned for co-teaching with the expert. Part 3 (5 questions) was related to the teachers self-evaluating the effectiveness of practice of co-teaching. Finally, the teachers were asked to reflect and give suggestions for further co-teaching practice in Part 4 (3 questions).

Survey for students

In addition to the teacher input, the researchers collected information based upon student perceptions of the co-teaching experience. The instrument used for the students was a survey consisting of ten questions, which were divided into three parts. The first part contained the students' perception of the co-teaching experience (question 1 including Likert items ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree"), the second part comprised of questions relating to being in co-taught classes (questions 2-7), and the third part asked the students questions about their expectations for co-teaching in the future (questions 8-10). Questions 2-10 were open questions, which asked for students' longer responses.

Procedure

The surveys for both the teachers and students were administered during the last two weeks of the semester, after one semester of potential exposure to co-teaching. All data were cross checked by two different research members. Before analyzing the data, the raters were trained how to analyze the answers to the surveys in order to establish agreement in interpreting the subjects' answers. The inter-rating was done independently and then after two days, the results were discussed. Whenever the two raters disagreed, final decisions rater discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Findings and Discussion

Teachers' Perceptions of the Co-teaching Experience

In responding to the first part of questionnaire which asked about their hope, attitudes, responsibilities, and expectations, the teachers expressed various opinions, mostly positive. They believed that co-teaching practice was a great chance for them to exchange ideas, teaching experiences and teaching method. This was also an opportunity for them to get more experience in teaching. In addition, lecturers could learn from each other to enhance their language ability, improve teaching methods and cultural understanding. In the co-taught classroom, the teachers expected that the class would be more energetic and the students could learn more from both Vietnamese and foreign professional. There would be a variety of activities for the student to participate. They hoped that all participants would listen and share with each other freely. The lecturers shared that they were in good and excited attitude when teaching co-taught students, and they were always supportive and ready to "provide students diverse perspectives and teaching practices that enhance and reinforce learning" (Co-teacher 3). All the co-teachers were highly conscious of their responsibilities when joining this project. They felt that they needed to be sharing, creative, cooperative and contributively in teaching and co-working. The majority of the co-teachers strongly agreed that grading, classroom management or behaviour/ discipline matters, and planning were the shared responsibilities of the co-teachers. Except for giving lectures, the co-teachers had to support the other to give feedback, design activities and regulate the class as well. All the co-teachers agreed that professional learning should be a fundamental requirement for them as it would help the process of working and teaching with each other become enjoyable and easier. Nevertheless, constant communication and professionalism was decisive as they created a transparent and cohesive working environment for all.

When turning to planning (part 2 of the questionnaire), the common agreement was that planning for classes was the shared responsibility of both teachers; common planning or feedback time was found to have open and honest communication. The most common planning time was discussing primarily before and after classes, after that was planning via email, texts, and phone calls. Sometimes, they had common planning period or met at weekend. Rarely was spontaneous planning, with changes occurring during the instructional lesson. It took normally 1-6 hours a week to discuss and prepare the lesson. In general, all the co-teachers often tried their best to work effectively during any common planning period as time was treasure to them. Normally, to plan instructions, two would work together at the same time or share the job, after that the other checked whether those directions were appropriate or not.

When asked about co-teaching models, all the teachers claimed their awareness of the six given variations. A variety of co-teaching approaches such as team teaching, one teaching-one assisting, interactive teaching were applied by SFL lecturers, in which one teach, one assist and parallel teaching were employed most, accounted for 80%; following was one teach, one observe (20%).

In providing details of their actual co-teaching practice, the teachers’ responses were quite focused and strongly reflected their attitudes, beliefs and expectations as stated in their answers to the previous part. For example, all of them chose “always” for such tasks like jointly developing classroom rules and routines, sharing responsibilities for classroom management or discipline matters, agreeing on lessons’ goals, sharing teaching materials, holding meetings for honest feedback about the lesson. In addition, five out of six of the teachers made “rarely” for spontaneous planning with changes occurred during the lesson or letting the “chalk” pass freely between the co-teachers. Their answers also revealed other aspects such as the frequent support from the administrator (five teachers claimed “always” and one stated “usually”), the lack of confidence of whether or not students accepted both teachers as equal partners (100% of the teachers chose between “sometimes” and “usually”; none claimed “always”). All the teachers always or usually felt comfortable in their co-taught classroom; various measurements for grading were stated to be used and the teachers were usually confident with their knowledge of the subject.

Figure 1 shows that when assessing the effectiveness of the co-teaching, there appeared to be some disagreements at some points with the co-teachers agreeing that co-teaching was beneficial to both the teachers and students.

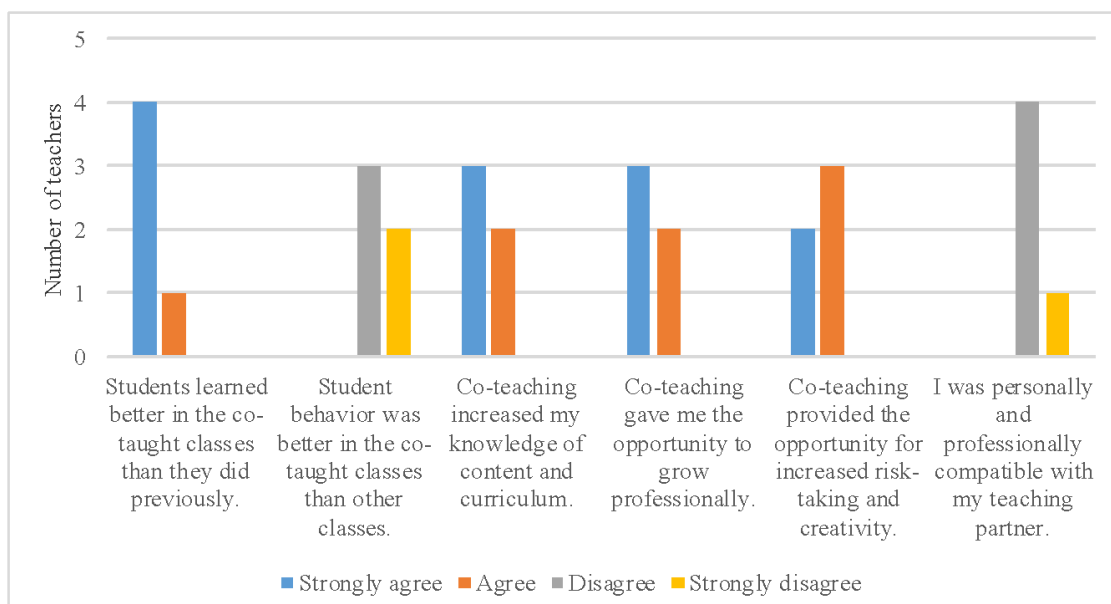


Figure 1. Teachers’ evaluation of co-teaching practice’s effectiveness.

For the students, almost all teachers agreed that co-teaching was benefiting every student who proved to learn better in the co-taught classes than they did previously. The co-teachers all expressed that co-

teaching was highly effective (60%) or effective (40%). However, most of them concurred that the student behaviour was not better in the co-taught classes than in other classes. For the teachers themselves, all the teachers considered that their knowledge of content and curriculum increased and co-teaching helped them grow professionally. Moreover, they agreed that co-teaching provided the opportunity for increased risk-taking and creativity. They, however, denied that they were absolutely aligned with their co-teacher personally and professionally.

Turning to what the teachers believed to be the greatest barriers to co-teaching, according to the co-teachers, scheduling was the most important issue, which could possibly be explained by the difference in timetable and personal agenda. There were also some other critical barriers, i.e., personality and philosophical clashes, lack of training or professional development, limited resources, and lack of planning time (Figure 2). Some professional training was proposed by the co-teachers to help themselves become more effective at co-teaching. These include workshops or professional guides on co-teaching issues such as suggested activities used in classes, different methods of co-teaching, and classroom management. When asked to propose some changes, the teachers stated that changes were not necessary as long as autonomy for the teachers to create activities and alternative forms of assessment that allow for more active learning are tolerated.

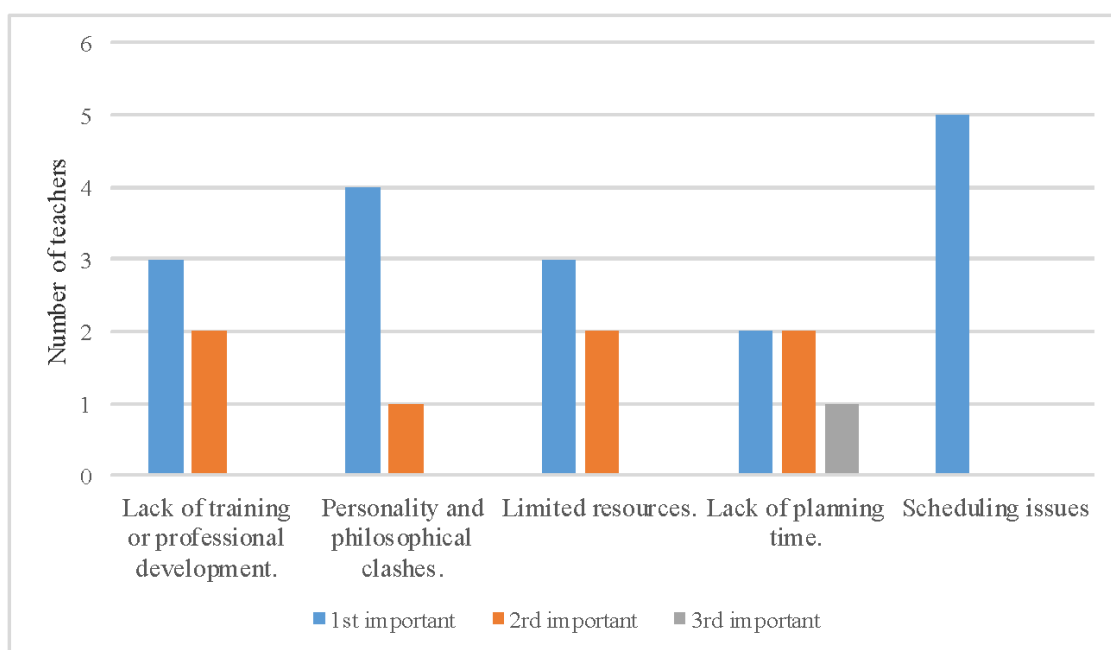


Figure 2. Barriers to co-teaching at SFL.

Students’ Perception of Co-teaching Experience

The application of co-teaching for the first time at SFL received positive responses from the students. Figure 3 shows that 100% of students responded “yes” when being asked if it was good to have two teachers in one group. Almost all the students stated having two teachers in class was enjoyable (>80%). Most students felt they were treated equally in the class and as a matter of fact they claimed their attitude toward learning was improved. This was interesting because the teachers’ responses indicate that they did not agree that the students’ behavior was better in co-taught classes than in others.

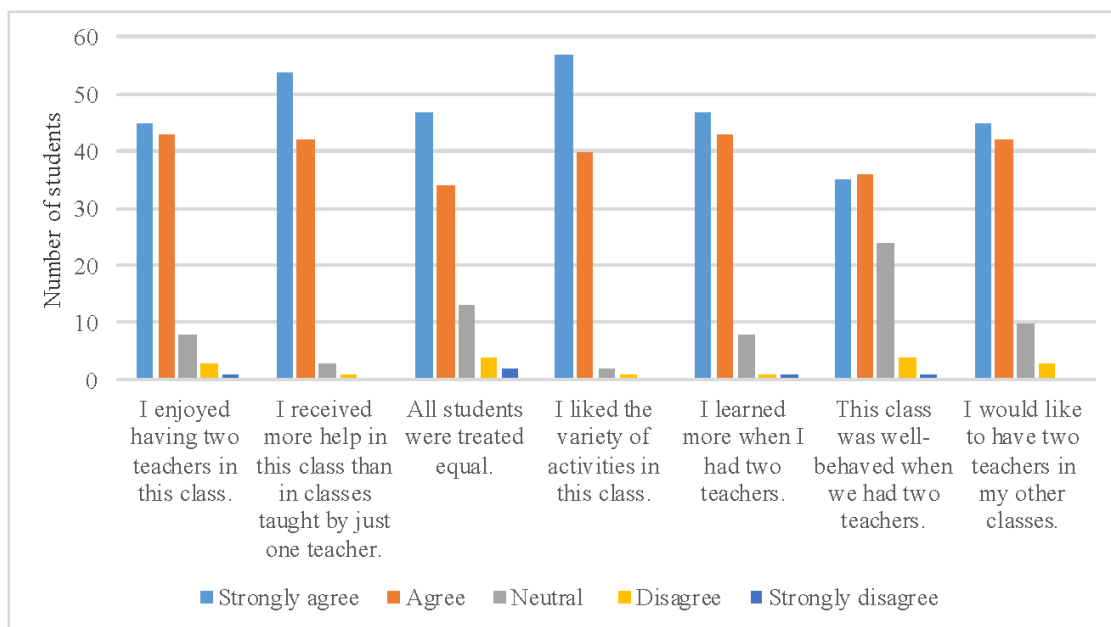


Figure 3. Students' evaluation of co-teaching practice.

In their later responses to open-ended questions, the students shared that it was an amazing experience to have one Vietnamese teacher and one foreign professional in class. In fact, the lessons were more interesting and understandable to the learners. The alternative teaching methodology of both lecturers changed the class atmosphere, bringing a new energetic mood to the students. Further to this, they could receive more help, learn more things, and participate in more activities when having two teachers in one class and the teachers could pay their attention to more members in class as well.

The students also admitted that having two teachers in class meant they had two resources available at the same time, which was definitely advantageous for them. One of the common reasons given was that when they did not understand their foreign teacher, they could ask the Vietnamese teacher for an explanation and vice versa. The teachers also had more time to explain, guide and lecture the students when the responsibilities were shared between the two. For large classes (about 30-40 students), the students felt they were being taken care of thoroughly, especially during group work or discussion sections: while one teacher led the class, the other could instruct or explain in detail to each group. Moreover, the teachers were said to have more time to work with the students individually to direct and give support for them to work on different assignments. Somehow, the students became more confident and fluent as they had chance to communicate and interact with foreign teachers inside and outside of class. Additionally, the students responded that this type of class offered an opportunity for them to obtain a range of valuable comments or feedback from different views, which definitely assisted them to improve not only their four language skills but also their outlook on cultural differences and how to perceive them as well. Some students said that the judgment was also fairer in this class than the others as they had two judges to give scores.

Differences in teaching method were also an advantage since it may make the lessons more understandable to the students and change the class atmosphere. The majority of the students agreed that they felt less bored and more excited to learn in that type of class. For the Cross-cultural Communication course, with a co-teaching method, the students can receive cultural exchange right in the class and abundant knowledge or justification was delivered on time. Two lecturers suggested a variety of methods to tackle and think critically about an issue related to culture that was sometimes a fairly concerned issue; especially the foreign lecturer provided a great deal of fresh and original information, which might not be available on the Internet. The majority of the surveyed students hoped that they could have other opportunities to learn in such motivating environment in future terms or with other subjects.

Although a large number of the students expressed their satisfaction about co-teaching practice in class, there are still some expectations. Organizing more games and activities to attract the attention of the students and refresh the class' atmosphere was one of the most frequent statements. Another necessity was the connection between co-teachers in terms of lecturing. The students expected that the lecturers interacted more during teaching instead of only one taught, one observed. Moreover, for some difficult terminologies or theories, the Vietnamese teacher should explain in Vietnamese for the students as sometimes students did not fully understand if merely being taught in English. The students also expected that the teachers allowed them more chance to discuss and share their thought rather than teaching only theories.

For long-term and future application, a number of the students suggested that the administrators should invite or employ more foreign teachers to teach at school and apply co-teaching into other classes as this proved an effective project. Furthermore, the university might enhance class outcomes by facilitating the class with modern equipment such as computer with Internet connected, projector, or speaker. The students also expressed their desire to learn in such classes in the following terms and hoped this project was put into practice in other subjects like Country studies of the US and the UK, Oral Proficiency Courses, Phonetics and Phonology, or English literature.

Conclusion

Based on the collected and analyzed data, the authors believe that this program can be applied in many foreign language teaching institutions as it proved to be an effective and enjoyable teaching style to some extent for both teachers and students. The result of the study indicated that co-teaching would enhance teachers' attitude toward developing professionalism, at the same time, create an active learning environment for students. However, further research still needs to be conducted to assert the effectiveness of this model in teaching English as a foreign language.

In order to apply this model productively, the most important requirement is teachers must work together at every stage, from planning, organizing, lecturing to evaluating both learners and co-teaching practice. Besides that, it is essential for teachers to communicate and share regularly and openly with their own partners when necessary; to work on personal differences and clashes; to elaborate working and learning as well. Additionally, teachers should co-operate and connect with each other while teaching to enhance students' understanding. Furthermore, professional training is recommended for co-teachers to be familiar with co-teaching methods and to be more confident when taking part in such a project. Finally, creativity in teaching by brainstorming games, activities to draw attention of learners and to create an active learning environment is fundamental.

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