

Co-teaching in EFL classroom: lessons from collaborative teaching practice in Thailand schools

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ABSTRACT

Professionalism of educators is crucial for high-quality learning. To this end, the education study program implemented an internship program to provide direct experience for students (prospective teachers) and engage them in the active and ongoing process of teacher identity construction. However, the increased professionalism of prospective English teachers from this programme is still questionable. This study aimed at i) explaining the importance of collaborative teaching (co-teaching), ii) describing the practice of co-teaching between English mentor of Thai schools and Indonesian prospective teachers, and iii) exploring how co-teaching strategy develops teachers' professionalism. It applies a descriptive qualitative approach, using observation and interviews. The subject of this study involved two English mentors and two prospective teachers who joined the internship program in Thai schools. The research findings revealed that co-teaching is very important and helpful for prospective teachers in developing teacher professionalism. In this case, English mentors and prospective teachers collaborate since planning stage, implementing the lesson plans developed, and evaluating process. As result, the collaborative teachers indicated some improvement on their pedagogical competence, social competence, and also their English competence.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Numerous initiatives aimed at elevating the professionalism of teachers have failed to provide the desired results. One of the most difficult jobs for teachers is to educate, train, and instruct. Teachers need to have classroom experience in order to attain this skill because they are the key to the learning process's success. This is consistent with the justification provided in Law on Teachers and Lecturers Number 14 of 2005, which states that educators need to possess four primary competences, namely personality,

professional, social, and pedagogical skills. These four skill sets are an image of a qualified educator because all four of them form a single entity and are connected; hence, educators must keep developing them [1].

The common problem occur that many teachers struggle to adjust to the classroom because they believe they lack the skills necessary to develop their pedagogical talents [2]. Due to their lack of experience, new teachers are likely to encounter a lot of strange and unexpected circumstances in their educational practice. Additionally, novices frequently make short-term plans and strictly adhere to the curriculum, failing to consider the requirements of their students or the classroom environment [3]. The biggest challenge faced by new instructors is managing the classroom because they find it difficult to understand how lesson planning, student behaviour, and classroom management are related [4], [5], also to maintain students' learning motivation [6]. Through experience, the acquisition of useful knowledge, and problem-solving skills, this process is repeated until the inexperienced teacher reaches the level of expertise [7]. Another challenge is that to teach in the 21st century, teachers really need mastery of digital technology [8]–[10], teachers mostly had low proficiency in digital technology mastery [11]–[13]. In addition, for the English teachers, the challenges also relates to their English and communicative competenc [5], [14] and strategy to teach English as foreign language [15]–[17].

In response to these demands for teacher competency, numerous studies on teacher professional development methods have been conducted. In the recent years, a large body of research on teacher professional development methods has been conducted. The first studies on strategies to increase teacher professionalism through training [2], [17], research [18], [19] innovative learning [20], [21], and numerous studies on measuring and improving teacher digital competence to support students' lifelong learning [9], [22]–[24]. However, in the literature, there is only a limited amount of research that identifies strategies to increase the professionalism of prospective teachers and to engage in the active and ongoing process of teacher identity construction [25], [26] through activities that provide direct experience for prospective teachers to practice at school [17], for example through internship programs at schools, collaborative teaching (co-teaching) with teachers at schools, or teaching assistance [27], [28]. This article seeks to fill this gap by describing how co-teaching model promotes teachers' professional development by answering three questions. First, why is co-teaching practice (between prospective teachers and tutor) important for teachers' professional development? This question focuses on describing the importance of implementing co-teaching model for the English prospective teachers with the teacher leader. Second, how is the co-teaching model implemented by prospective teachers and English mentors in Thai schools? This question explains the implementation of co-teaching model. Third, how does English teacher professionalism develop as the implication of the collaboration? This question deals predominantly with the way of teachers' professional development has been promoted by the co-teaching practice (between prospective teachers and teacher leader) during the internship program in Thai schools. These three questions are answered in the following sections.

This article departs from three arguments. First, the importance of providing direct experience to prospective teachers to teach directly in the classroom with assistance and guidance from the teacher leader. Second, the implementation of co-teaching could improve the quality of teaching English as foreign language (TEFL). Third, there are few opportunities for prospectice teachers to directly practice TEFL in non-English-speaking countries, where they can improve their professionalism by using the target language a lot and think about the most appropriate strategies for TEFL. Thus, education study programs, especially English language education study programs could establish a lot of international collaboration to provide opportunities for English prospective teachers to develop language competence and teacher professionalism through co-teaching models.

2. METHOD

This study is qualitative research, with the data collected from observations, interviews, and documentation. Observations were used to see how the co-teaching practice between teacher candidates/prospective teachers and leader/mentor teachers in the internship program, as well as the strategies utilized in TEFL in Thai schools. Interviews were conducted to the four respondents (2 English mentors and 2 prospective teachers) about barriers and challenges faced in teaching TEFL, their perception towards the co-teaching practice, the practice they experienced during the co-teaching, as well as the implications of the collaboration implemented towards their teacher professional development. While documentation was taken from the result of students' assessment.

In qualitative research, instead of considering the sample size, the selection of information sources was prioritized in order to gather more comprehensive and representative data [29]. Thus, the respondents of this research involved two English mentors form Ban Elert and Jiawaranon-Utit 4 Schools, Loei Thailand, and two prospectice teachers from two universities in Indonesia who participated the academic collaboration, internship, and community service program in Thai schools. All respondents involved are considered to really understand the concept of co-teaching which is applied in English as foreign language (EFL) classroom. The program was held

around four months. Observations and documentations were conducted during the programme, while interviews were conducted after the programme was completed.

A thorough text analysis of the interview results was conducted. The writers examined the parallels and discrepancies among the many responses and distilled the key ideas from each comment. After that, the themes that had been discovered were reclassified according to shared characteristics, and comments with standout characteristics were also signed. The results of this identification were then presented and combined with other relevant information to answer the three questions of the study relating to i) the benefit of co-teaching model for teachers, ii) the steps taken during co-teaching, and iii) the implication of co-teaching practice for both mentor and prospective teacher' professional development. The qualitative data were analyzed with the model of [30] starting from data reduction, data display, and ending with data verification. Two data sources were used as a triangulation tool to maintain the reliability and validity of the data collected from the research carried out [31].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The importance of co-teaching model for prospective teachers

The internship programme at school is one of the things that is really needed by prospective teacher students, where they can directly feel and adapt to the school environment, get to know the school culture, understand school administration, understand the duties and responsibilities of teachers, practice teaching and interact with students in class. In terms of practising teaching in the classroom, the collaborative teaching (co-teaching) model is one model that is very effective in providing prospective teachers with the opportunity to practice teaching with the direct assistance of a tutor.

At first, the question of the importance of co-teaching between English mentors and prospective teachers in Thai schools started with the question of teachers' barriers and challenges to TEFL. The results showed that English teachers in Thailand encountered many barriers and difficulties in teaching English, such as the following:

"Most Thais use the Thai language from childhood, which has different alphabets from English. So, teaching English means teaching them new alphabets, which are also a bit difficult for them to pronounce." (Informant A)

"Teaching a foreign language is definitely more difficult than teaching a first or second language, because it is rarely heard and encountered in everyday life. vocab limitations are one of the main problems so there is often anxiety and fear of learning English." (Informant B)

As a result of these problems, schools in Thailand felt the need to collaborate with teachers from other countries, such as Indonesia, who have a different dialect from Thais, in TEFL. Following this, the importance of co-teaching model was highlighted by several informants:

"Actually, teaching English to foreign speakers in a non-English speaking country is not an easy thing. With the co-teaching model, I can share with the tutor about the right strategy to teach. We develop a programme, called soft power programme, where we teach communicative English through various learning experiences according to the context of the school, for example with cooking class." (Informant A)

"It's great, I collaborate with the English tutor to develop a daily language learning programme, and she tells me what is possible to implement for Thai school students. Students in my school found it very difficult to memorise vocabulary, so we made a daily vocabulary programme and I ran it with the help of tutors in my school." (Informant B)

"To be honest, I initially felt uncomfortable and unconfident having to do co-teaching, but it turned out that this model really helped me in conditioning crowded students, and helped me in translating when communicating with students." (Informant C)

"I collaborated with the tutor to develop materials based on his expertise in chicken farming and it is very helpful. My tutor also evaluates and reflects on the learning that I have done, she gives suggestions for improvement." (Informant D)

Based on the statements of these informants, it may be ascertained that the co-teaching model is very important and helpful for prospective teachers, especially at the beginning of the internship programme in order to adjust to the native language of students in Thai schools. In addition, prospective teachers can get feedback and suggestions for developing lesson plans, choosing the learning strategies, methods, materials, and activities that are suitable for students and enable them to improve their communicative skills.

According to some earlier research, collaborative reflective practice is crucial because it helps aspiring teachers develop deeper ideas, insights, and knowledge. Co-teaching model is important to set an impetus for the prospective teachers to engage in the active and ongoing process of teacher identity

construction [25]. Teachers who collaborate work together toward a shared goal and typically serve a variety of learners very effectively [32]. When teachers believe that their pupils require further support to enhance their fundamental language competency and performance, co-teaching can be used as a remedial strategy [33]. Co-teaching model provides opportunities for reflective practice contributes to educators' professional development and personal growth [34], and peer learning among teachers build collective expertise and more effective in advancing students' learning [35].

3.2. The implementation of co-teaching practice

Data on the implementation of co-teaching was obtained through both observation and interview. Based on the observation results, both prospective teachers and English mentors in Thai schools collaborate during the teaching and learning process. Prospective teachers act as main teachers and mentors as co-teachers. This is because the main purpose of the co-teaching programme is to bring in English teachers from outside Thailand who are considered more fluent in English, thus helping to develop TEFL there. This co-teaching process can be described as follows. To complement the observation data, the interview results can be presented as follows:

"We collaborate since developing the lesson plans, implementation the teaching activities, and evaluation process. We exchanged a lot of ideas about the obstacles and problems encountered during learning, planning games, learning activities, learning evaluation models, and learning strategies that are most likely to improve students' English language learning outcomes." (R1, R3, R4)

"We exchange ideas, strategies, and experiences to improve teaching effectiveness and create more meaningful learning experiences for students. This collaboration involves in-depth discussions, joint reflection, and efforts to support each other and strengthen each other's teaching practices." (R2)

Furthermore, the interviews also provided information on one strategy that was agreed upon by the Thai schools that participated in the co-teaching programme.

"There is one excellent programme from this co-teaching called Soft-Power, which is an English learning design with an experiential and contextual learning approach. In this programme, students directly practice the English they learn by using the context according to the uniqueness of each school. Such as integration with gardening or livestock activities in Jiawaranon-Utit 4 School, by using English fully to communicate among teachers and students." (R1, R2)

"In our school (Ban Elert school), Soft-Power programme is implemented through daily vocabulary programme. So, every day students get new vocab and then immediately practised used in daily conversation according to the theme discussed that day. little by little, without feeling the student's vocab will continue to grow and help him in other language skills." (R3, R4)

The responses from the respondents demonstrate the range of collaborative teaching strategies, from course design to evaluation after instruction. This is consistent with past research which emphasize the collaborative education's holistic component, which includes cooperative instruction, cooperative learning design, and cooperative reflection [33]. Additionally, the emphasis on sharing strategies, ideas, and experiences aligns with a research which highlights the importance of collaboration in fostering pedagogical innovation and improving teaching efficacy [28]. The process of thorough reflection, evaluation of teaching strategies, and analysis of factors affecting the learning process aligns with a study which emphasize the value of methodical reflection in improving the standard of instruction and student outcomes [36].

On the other hand, insightful perspectives shaped by conversations with Indonesian tutors brought to light intriguing facets of cross-cultural cooperation in the classroom. This is consistent with the research conducted by [37] who examined how cross-cultural collaboration affects pedagogical approaches and emphasized how cultural interchange might improve teaching practices. Respondent 2's narrowly focused reflection, however, emphasizes the necessity of more research into the unique dynamics of cross-cultural collaborative teaching and its consequences for all teaching efficacy and student learning outcomes. All things considered, the answers offer insightful information on cooperative teaching strategies and point to directions for further study into the subtleties of cross-cultural cooperation in learning environments.

3.3. The implication of co-teaching for professionalism development

As a prospective teacher, the experience of teaching directly in the classroom with the guidance of a tutor will be very useful to develop teaching skills. With this co-teaching model, prospective teachers will receive direct guidance from tutors in planning, implementing, organizing, and evaluating learning. In terms of teacher professionalism, the co-teaching model really helps prospective teachers to improve it. As they elucidated:

“I think the co-teaching model really helps me develop my professionalism as a teacher, such as how to behave and interact with fellow teachers or students, how to plan lessons, choose the right materials and strategies for teaching and assess students' abilities.” (Informant A)

“My professionalism as an English teacher is shown by my ability to use English during teaching and interacting with students, and by collaborating with teachers I can find solutions to overcome the challenge of teaching students in Thai schools, because the daily language of students is Thai, with English speaking skills that are still very minimal.” (Informant B)

“Co-teaching model is one of the models that really changed me from not being confident in teaching, to being more confident. My mentor teacher really helped me by sharing and being very supportive while assisting me in teaching. she also taught me to be a professional teacher. Besides that, I learnt a lot about how to handle students who have diverse characters.” (Informant C)

“I really felt the improvement of my teacher professionalism after collaborating with the English teacher at the Thai school. My teaching ability was also accompanied by the improvement of my English ability, because during teaching I had to use active English. More than that, I also learnt a lot of Thai, because sometimes I have to use Thai to explain things that the students don't understand.” (Informant D)

These statements indicate that the prospective teachers really felt their professional improvement as teachers after collaborating with English teachers in Thai schools. This is indicated by i) the increase in English language skills of prospective teachers, ii) the increase in the capability of prospective teachers to plan, implement, manage, and evaluate learning, and iii) the development of the ability to solve problems.

This implies that co-teaching model is important to set an impetus for the prospective teachers to engage in the active and ongoing process of teacher identity construction. The identity of prospective teachers can be reflected through their lived experiences in co-teaching practice during the internship programme at school [25]. With co-teaching, senior teachers will be able to help junior teachers in solving problems, related to choosing the right strategies in class or problems related to students [34]. The integration of problem- solving, critical thinking, collaboration, and the development of transferable skills through problem based learning creates a more meaningful, engaging, and relevant learning experience in the classroom.

Moreover, previous researches indicate that pre-service teachers' decisions to enter the teaching profession and their intentions to stay in the field after graduation are significantly influenced by their professional commitment and efforts. They, who took part in collaborative activities, such as lesson study, collective lesson planning, micro-teaching, and collaborated with each other, got improvement in their professional competence [38]. The teaching professionals of novice teachers is the result of a manifold factors, include mentoring novice English language teachers in their initial years of classroom teaching, classroom teaching experience, capability to reflect on and analyze their instructional behaviors, along with content knowledge, knowledge of learners, and pedagogical knowledge [3]. To conclude, the collaboration implementation and its impact on teachers' professional development could be drawn as shown in Figure 1.

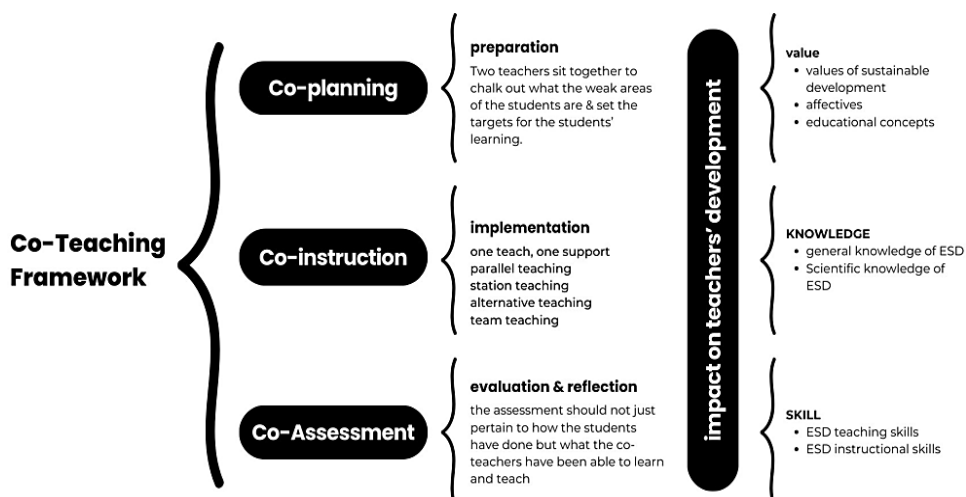


Figure 1. Framework of co-teaching adopted from [39] and teacher professional development from [40]

Figure 1 showed how co-teaching was implemented by the subject of the study and its impact on the development of teachers' professionalism was in line with [39], [40]. Murawski's procedure of the entire

process of co-teaching is hinged upon three independent processes that is, co-planning, co-instruction, and co-assessment of the same class by the two teachers. Those process was proven improved the students' activeness, engagement, and achievement [33]. On the other hand, both teachers (co-teachers) have also developed their creativity, knowledge, and skill [41]. For that reason, educational institutions should encourage students to collaborate and engage with practitioners in the world of work to promote the improvement of professional competence for sustainable development.

4. CONCLUSION

This study intends to examine i) the reason why co-teaching practice (between prospective teachers and tutor) is important for both parties, ii) the implementation of co-teaching in Thai classroom, and iii) the way of prospective teachers' professional development has been promoted by the co-teaching practice (between prospective teachers and teacher leader) during the internship program in Thai schools. The data highlight the fact that it is crucial to use a co-teaching approach to encourage both prospective teachers and mentor to participate actively in the continuous process of creating their professional identities. However, prospective teachers were still need guidance from the senior teachers (their mentor), particularly in planning their teaching and implementing the teaching practice through practicum or internship program. The findings, in addition, reported, whether prospective teachers and mentors were actively collaborated to improve the qualities of TEFL in Thai schools by implementing soft-power program. Co-teaching has been proven effectively improve teachers' knowledge (language skills), pedagogical competence (to plan, implement, manage, and evaluate learning), as well as their ability to solve problems.

This study has contributed to the understanding of strategies to promote the professional development of prospective or beginning teachers and teacher leaders. As such, it offers insights that can guide future study program to design similar activities related to professional development of prospective teachers through direct experience in schools. Further research needs to be conducted to investigate more deeply through qualitative or quantitative research to explore the the effectiveness of co-teaching to improve teacher ability and student achievement.

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