

Building a Successful Teacher Team in ELT

by Alan Hall

“Your staffroom has now become your classroom, the teachers are your new students.” Were the words of advice from a mentor and friend as I was moving out of a teaching and teacher trainer role, and into a full time Director of Studies (DoS) position. Having spent the last fifteen years working across Europe in private language schools, community centres and local colleges, I knew from my experiences (some great, some not so) that a quality teaching team with a positive working atmosphere was not just key to the success of the school as a whole, but also teacher retention and job satisfaction. Through trial and error, we, as a team, developed a system where each teacher can take control of their CPD (Continued Professional Development). The intention of this article is to share ideas and raise awareness for managers of how to easily train their teaching staff internally, building a team around the classes that are available at any given time.

From my own experience, the schools I look back on fondly were the schools where a team of teachers worked with each other, perhaps not every day, but certainly several times in a week. We would review lessons, throw ideas around the staff room, share horror stories or laughs and mistakes in the classroom, but always come out feeling better for it. On the other hand, schools where the teacher was expected to simply appear when students were present, then leave once the classes finish were not exactly constructive working environments for staff, and so happened to have much higher turnover of staff. This affected even simple CPD tricks, such as one I picked up while working in a school in Spain. In one school we had a 10 minute break between each class. We also had CPD Notebooks which were submitted to the DoS every Friday, where we made comments and notes on every class which had just finished. This meant the lesson was fresh in our minds, and anything we wanted to work on could be noted instantly. It also meant that we would recollect the lesson much easier when planning the next, as well as being able to focus on individual student performances. Of course, if a class went fine we could simply jot down “grand” in the comments section, but when we wanted to work on, say exam preparation technique or language grading, we could, and we would then self-evaluate the lesson once it was over. This is in stark contrast to some schools where I worked which had classes change every 90 minutes with no breaks. This meant that by the end of the working day, the teacher had forgotten the students' names from the first two lessons at least, never mind activities carried out and how they went. This led me to consider what sort of classes and school I would prefer to run further down the line, taking the best parts from multiple schools taught in previously.

The statistics on teacher retention around Europe are quite startling, for teaching as a whole, teacher turnover is 30% of staff per year (Federičová, 2021), in English Language Teaching it is 50%, where only 10% of teachers remain in the same school after two years (Bentley, 2022). It is no secret that ELT has a teacher retention issue so in the process of opening a new school, steps have been taken to ensure that job satisfaction, teacher training and team building became part of the everyday.

As our new school opened its doors, we were lucky, from a pedagogical standpoint at least, in that we had more teachers than students. This gave us a great advantage in that we had more freedom to experiment, but above all, to simply get to know each other. This was when we initially started team teaching – when two teachers are in the one room teaching the class together. As class numbers increased with students joining on a weekly basis, teachers were paired up, to ‘lighten the load’ on teaching, so teachers were able to plan together, share ideas, and combine lessons. This was initially carried out by pairing up more experienced teachers, with fresher teachers more recently off their teacher training courses. Once each teacher was able to gauge the room and students, several recommendations were made to cater for teachers’ ‘always on’ feeling in the classroom. Some teachers were both always teaching together, so bounced off each other in the room when an activity was being run. Some teachers instead decided to take the lessons activity about, alternating the points on the lesson plan, while others planned 30 minute or 90 minute sections of the 3 hour lessons students were present for. Generally this was successful, although some personality types within the classroom led to some teachers wanting more control than others. After a 3 week period, teachers then swapped levels, which allowed them to both experience a new level, as well as work alongside another colleague in the team.

With multiple teachers in a classroom at a time, this also led to the added bonus of running teacher training sessions with half the staff at a time, while the others taught longer lessons, allowing everyone to carry out CPD in teams, while still within working hours. This gave myself as the director of studies the ability to run the same meeting, several times, with different members of the teaching staff present, then collate the notes together for emails to all, ensuring no one missed anything and the expertise was still shared.

As well as the standard observation sessions that are run four times a year for all teachers, and once within the first fortnight of a new teacher arriving at the school (which involved a feedback session with the DoS), teachers had the freedom for peer observation. This was planned in advance so that the DoS could cover a 90 minute section of their class, while they observed another teacher with either the same or a different level of student and then both of those teachers could sit down together, and discuss the lesson. Thus far within the school, this has been a highly popular activity, possibly due to the fact that out of a dozen teachers, no two teachers share the same nationality, bringing with it a massive range of experiences, cultures, mother tongues and angles from which they view learning the English language.

There was also a shorter form of peer observation planned as teams in the school. As classes were 3 hours in length, with a 15 minute break when the teacher decided (normally 90 minutes into the lesson), teachers could plan when they took breaks with other teachers, so breaks didn't clash, and instead 'drop in' observe a lesson for 10 minutes of their break. This allowed for quick fire observations around the school, with teachers often deciding to peer observe multiple lessons and multiple levels over the course of a week - and usually stealing the best bits from every classroom.

One final point on the observations within the school was that teachers could request observations to work on a specific point of teaching, or even based on certain students in the room. One current teaching point that teachers are working on together with peer and DoS observations has been to work on gamifying their games more constructively in class – that is, how to adapt certain games already within the classroom, so it can act as a brain break or more 'fuller' activity in the room, rather than just a randomly placed part of class that lasts two minutes. Some teachers also requested parts of class to be observed due to certain students in the room, particularly if they had not taught that culture or nationality before, ensuring the student was getting the most out of the class, or if they were struggling with a new concept to perhaps discover why. Shadow teaching was also an option for teachers here, where instead of simply observing the lesson, parts were observed, then the DoS or another teacher would also take part in the lesson as the primary teacher, or even as an additional student, depending on what the original teacher wished to work on. This was planned in advance while lesson plans were written, and then an after class feedback discussion was had, working as a team on what was observed and experienced.

Extra rooms were also set aside for team planning sessions, where everyone who was teaching a particular level could plan as a group, sharing ideas, experiences and techniques on planning their specific level. These opened into the sharing of ideas with all levels via shared online folders which everyone could access, or simply just by mixing the planning teams each week, to see what ideas other teachers had at any point.

So as to not always have teachers working in larger groups, a buddy system was also set up with teachers where teachers would work with the person in the neighbouring room, regardless of level. This helped share ideas, check up on one another and keep bonds between teachers up.

Some challenges and issues still remain. As teachers we prefer or need 'ownership' of a class, and in terms of team teaching with rolling enrolments in a school this is not always possible from a logistical standpoint – it depends on the students coming into the school each week. Three week changes to classes were made permanent after a while to help with stability for teachers, as well as small classes given to more teachers ensuring they had a permanent room and ownership of a class, while still able to work with another teacher in the next room. Another unexpected downside which arose was when team teaching was that teachers used their non-teaching time to formalise their lesson plans before submission as another colleague was in their place teaching. This meant that when the school increased in size and teachers moved to working alone in each class (and therefore were able to take up their complete allotted contracted teaching hours) there were complaints of their lesson plan time eating into their spare time. This then encouraged myself, the DoS, to run training sessions on streamlining lesson planning and how to use time constructively.



Extra-curricular team building activities were also planned, including this group painting session contains artwork from all teacher nationalities

Pic by Author

“With teacher retention, job satisfaction and teacher energy levels low coming out of a pandemic it was vitally important that we attempt to create a team of well qualified and motivated teachers.”

With teacher retention, job satisfaction and teacher energy levels low coming out of a pandemic it was vitally important that we attempt to create a team of well qualified and motivated teachers. These are a few of the ideas we have implemented in a new school in the hope that they help build up rapport between teachers, keep spirits up and encourage each other to try new things and be comfortable getting things wrong in the classroom as a teacher. Only time will tell whether these steps work in the long term and how constructive they are in managing a team.

References:

Bentley, J. (2022) *How Large Is The Job Market for English Teachers Abroad?* Available at: <https://www.internationalteflacademy.com/blog/how-large-is-the-job-market-for-english-teachers-abroad> (Accessed: 25 September 2022).

Federičová, M. (2021) 'Teacher turnover: What can we learn from Europe?', *European Journal of Education*, 56(1), pp. 102–116. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12429>.



About the Author:

Alan is a Director of Studies, teacher trainer and storyteller currently based in Cork, Ireland. He holds two Masters. He is particularly interested in language and identity, folklore and emotional intelligence in language learning.

Email: alanstewarthall@gmail.com