



# Team Teaching Revisited

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I have lived in Japan for over half of my life and have had a range of teaching experiences, including working alongside Japanese teachers in public schools. I have also coordinated team taught programs where I served as the non-native instructor, for example, in Thai and French. Recently, I conducted workshops for foreign and Japanese instructors working on the AJET program. I heard praise and complaints similar to those I had myself many years ago. The French have an expression for this: “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.” – The more things change, the more they are the same.

My first team teaching experience took place in 1984, before the Ministry of Education (文科省) programs were established. While living on Shodo Island in the Inland Sea, I was approached by two local high schools to work alongside their teachers in class. The goal was to give island kids a chance to interact with a native English speaker. My experience with each school was radically different.

In the first school, I excitedly arrived on the first day to consult with my teaching partner. What were the activities? How would we interact? Would I be responsible for some sections or would we do everything together? But the teacher I was to work with, F-sensei, didn’t appear until minutes before the class started. When I asked about the lesson plan he said, “何でもいい。 – Anything is okay.” then walked to the back of the classroom and sat down. I felt like a curiosity on display. Sadly, my eagerness soon disappeared and I did not look forward to working at this school.

Fortunately, my team teaching experience at the second school was completely different. I met the instructor assigned to work with me, Y-sensei, several days before we began teaching. He led me straight to his desk in the staff room and showed me the activities he had planned for our first lesson together. His English wasn’t perfect, but his attitude was. We discussed who would do what and things went incredibly well in class. Y-sensei was completely involved in the lesson and inspired his students –

and me – with his pleasant, approachable manner. I finished the school year with a new friend, convinced that team teaching could work with planning and sensitivity towards your teaching partner.

A few years later, I became the Community Supervisor at the Language Institute of Japan (LIOJ) in Odawara. LIOJ had just received a contract for team teaching with a local high school and I was asked to set up the program. Thanks to my experience with Y-Sensei on Shodo Island, I was very excited. The LIOJ group worked closely with the local teachers, planning lessons and assigning duties. Everyone knew what their tasks were and did them well. We ended the school year on a high and frightening note: 40 education officials came to watch our classes – as many observers as students! Subsequently, Odawara City asked LIOJ to expand the program to seven schools, a testament to its success.

Why was the LIOJ team teaching program so successful? Positive rapport between local teachers and LIOJ staff was the key. Our program was founded on three principles.

## 1. Consultation is critical.

I learned on Shodo Island that taking time to discuss the role of each teacher is essential. Both teachers are under pressure: the local teacher doesn’t want to look incompetent in front of students, the visiting instructor doesn’t want to be treated like a dancing poodle for entertaining students. Meet in the staff room, over coffee in a café or simply talk on the telephone. Consultations go a long way to making your classroom efforts a success. And you may make a new friend in the process!

## 2. Lesson plans equal less stress.

Your end goal should be a concrete lesson plan that you are both satisfied with. A good lesson plan is like a stage script with clear activities, estimated time and assigned “roles”, or tasks. In other words, who does what and how long will it take. A lesson plan reassures both teachers and makes for productive discussion before, during and after the lesson.

## 3. Attitude saves the day.

Teachers should respect each other’s efforts. Each teacher has his or her own strengths. The local teacher knows which students will best model an activity; the visiting teacher can add energy to a repetitive routine. Design the lesson plan around these strengths then maintain a flexible attitude. If an activity is not going well, talk with your partner and make adjustments in class. Students are not stupid. If they see their teachers working well together, they will respond with respect, too.

Years have passed since my classes on Shodo Island and I have had many chances to team teach, both as a native English speaker and as a non-native speaker of French, Spanish, Japanese and Thai. I know that with planning, patience and sensitivity towards your teaching partner, the end result is a productive experience for everyone, especially your students.

\* For a longer version of this essay, as well as two earlier articles on team teaching in [Cross Currents](#) and [The Language Teacher](#), check out entry 36 in my blog “Fool for Language” at <http://blog.donmaybin.com/>.