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## Expanding Peer Coaching: Pedagogical Applications of Conference Coaching

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### Abstract

Recent research demonstrates that peer coaching can be a productive and constructive method for promoting teacher professional development and can build increased collegiality and confidence (Galbraith & Anstrom, 1995). This paper reviews current models of peer coaching; technical, collegial, challenge and team coaching--and suggests practical applications for its use in individual professional development and personal self-growth for classroom teachers. One objection to peer coaching has been that it can be time intensive, with teachers often too immersed in their schedules to participate. This paper presents a variation of peer coaching, conference coaching, which requires minimum preparation time and employs "micro pre- & post-conferences" done with a teaching partner. This variation will suggest that classroom observations can remain optional. Therefore, this approach is appropriate for busy teachers in Thailand, who would like to be involved in a professional development project but are under serious time constraints. Peer coaching is an excellent example of how teachers can take responsibility for their own pedagogical improvement and growth.

### INTRODUCTION

Studies on teacher collaboration and peer coaching have been conducted regularly for quite some time (Berelson, 1960; Berman & McLaughlin 1975; Easterby-Smith & Olive,

1984; Galbraith & Anstrom, 1995). This paper will review peer coaching as an important type of teacher collaboration by examining current coaching models and discussing how peer coaching can best be used by EFL teachers in a country like Thailand.

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Although much has been written on peer coaching, it has not been accepted as a common practice in the classroom. Resistance to peer collaboration involves several variables. Historically the culture of schools has isolated teachers in the classroom (Bartunek, 1993) and this isolation can be an impediment to peer interaction and professional development (Hopfengardner & Leahy, 1987; Zimpher & Reiger, 1988). Also, class size, lack of time for non-instructional projects and administration-dictated policy (top-down decision making) are all factors that inhibit collaboration between teachers (Goodlad, 1984). These factors are especially applicable to the teaching environment found in the Thai formal education system (Ketudat, 1973).

One objective of this study is to demonstrate how peer coaching can break through this resistance and isolationism to promote an effective and constructive method of professional development by building increased collegiality and confidence among faculty. Another important objective of this paper is to describe an effective, practical model of peer coaching for Thailand that does not involve too much of teachers' already limited time. A variation of peer coaching--conference coaching--will be suggested as an appropriate, realistic model of peer coaching for EFL teachers in Thailand today.

## PEER COACHING TERMS & BENEFITS

*Coaching* has been operationally defined as "the provision of on-site, personal support and technical assistance for teachers" (Baker & Showers, 1984:1, in Neubert & Bratton, 1987). *Peer coaching* has been defined as a professional development method that involves "teachers supporting each other's efforts, talking to each other, and engaging in mutual problem solving" (Mueller & Patterson, 1988). Peer coaching also refers to a peer who supports and assists a teacher in attempting to incorporate a new teaching method or technique from a workshop or in-service training into the classroom.

*Peer coaching procedures* typically include an in-service workshop or series of training sessions where the theoretical background of a method or teaching skill is presented, followed by a pre-observation meeting of a pair of peer teachers, an observation, and a post-observation meeting.

There are variations on these procedures which will be described below.

*Peer coaching feedback* is different than teaching evaluation in the traditional sense, where a superior 'grades' or judges the teacher's classroom performance. In most peer coaching models coaches give each other impartial, non-judgmental feedback based on what is observed of the skills or techniques being emphasized in the lesson. Peer collaboration needs to take place in an environment of trust and support, where teachers can take chances, make mistakes, and try out new ideas, without being concerned about criticism and evaluation by others.

Teachers receive many benefits from participation in peer coaching, including but not limited to: increased motivation, productivity and creativity. Many teachers report they are more willing to take risks in the supportive environment of peer collaboration as well (Parker, 1990). Peer coaching is an excellent vehicle by which teachers can take responsibility for their own pedagogical improvement and growth.

Peer coaching can also be a valuable resource for the school (Little, 1982). In this form of professional development, educators teach each other pedagogical skills and techniques--in this respect, the school makes maximum use of its own resources. Successful schools are ones that actively incorporate specific support for peer discussion of classroom practice, mutual observation, and shared participation in professional development.

## EXAMPLES OF PEER COACHING

Four prevalent models of peer coaching are summarized in this section: *technical*, *collegial*, *challenge* and *team coaching* (Joyce & Showers, 1983; Garmston, 1987; Neubert & Bratton, 1987). A fifth possibility, *conference coaching*, is then presented (see Figure 1 for the major distinctions between these peer coaching models).

### Technical Coaching

Joyce and Showers (1982) developed the *technical coaching* model of peer coaching as a way to transfer new teaching strategies and techniques from in-service training workshops to the classroom. They were interested in a

	Technical Coaching	Collegial Coaching	Challenge Coaching	Team Coaching	Conference Coaching
Major Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accomplish transfer of training</li> <li>• Establish common vocabulary</li> <li>• Increase collegiality &amp; professional dialogue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refine teaching practices</li> <li>• Stimulate self-initiating, autonomous teacher thought</li> <li>• Increase collegiality &amp; professional dialogue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop solutions to persistent instructional problems</li> <li>• Conduct action research</li> <li>• Promote instructional improvements to other teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan, teach &amp; evaluate class together as partners</li> <li>• Increase collegiality &amp; professional dialogue</li> <li>• Facilitate transfer of skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow autonomous discovery of new ideas through dialogue</li> <li>• Self-initiating pedagogical growth</li> <li>• Increase collegiality &amp; professional dialogue</li> <li>• Non-judgmental approach</li> </ul>
Observer Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Checks presence, absence, degree of teaching behaviors</li> <li>• Makes value judgments</li> <li>• Establishes several observations, post-conference cycles on the same topic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarifies in a pre-conference learning objectives, teaching strategies, and observer role</li> <li>• Helps teacher recall, analyze, and evaluate teaching decisions</li> <li>• Enables teacher to make value judgments</li> <li>• Enables teacher to select conference topics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Envisions a desired state or defines a problem (challenge)</li> <li>• Plans action research</li> <li>• Develops, conducts, and tests solution approaches</li> <li>• Evaluates and recommends adoption for self or others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simultaneous observations</li> <li>• Collaboration on lesson development</li> <li>• Offers constructive feedback</li> <li>• Supports and facilitates the development of new teaching skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not observe actual classes: optional</li> <li>• Enables teacher to select pre- and post-conference topics</li> <li>• Listens to descriptions of class in pre- and post-conferences</li> <li>• Does not make value judgments</li> </ul>
Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Observation and data collection of specific teaching methodology</li> <li>• Feedback, reinforcement, conferencing skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Observation and data collection of success indicators, teacher behaviors, and special areas about which teacher requests data</li> <li>• Facilitating, in-depth conferencing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpersonal communications, problem solving, and planning</li> <li>• Observation, data collection, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitating, in depth conferencing</li> <li>• Feedback and teamwork skills</li> <li>• Ability to build trust and collegiality through collaboration and cooperation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpersonal communications, problem solving, and planning</li> <li>• Facilitating, brief/concise conferencing</li> <li>• Active listening skills</li> </ul>
Major Premise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers will improve teaching performance provided objective data is given in a non-threatening and supportive climate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers will acquire career-long habits of self-initiated reflection and improvement provided opportunity to develop skills in doing so.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem-solving efforts by those responsible for carrying out instruction can produce insightful, practical improvements in instructional design and delivery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Combining team teaching and peer coaching, teachers will improve teaching performance by observing each other, while planning and teaching a class together</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers will learn and develop new teaching skills through peer dialogue and self-awareness</li> </ul>
Special Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training in teaching methodologies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training in coaching</li> <li>• Models from administrators, department chairs, faculty meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Norms of collegiality and professional dialogue</li> <li>• Release time for planning and group observations</li> <li>• Access to literature or specialists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training in theoretical basis of teaching method or new skill</li> <li>• Time to observe new method or skill demonstrated by experts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None necessary</li> <li>• Optional training in coaching skills, if feasible</li> </ul>

**Figure 1. Major Distinctions Between Peer Coaching Models**  
(Adapted and expanded from Garmston, 1987:25)

teacher training vehicle that would promote a collective professional vocabulary and increase collegiality and pedagogical dialogue. Technical coaching usually involves an in-service training segment where the theory behind the teaching method or technique is presented. There are then demonstrations of the method by the trainers, where the training teachers have an opportunity to practice the new techniques and strategies in a non-threatening environment with the consultants and/or other teachers. Finally, the teachers are paired and coach each other in real classroom situations, fine-tuning the new teaching methods and techniques. This approach to peer coaching assumes that with the proper theoretical training, demonstrations and constructive feedback, teachers can improve their performance; provided this is done in a positive and supportive environment.

Shalaway (1985) points out the disadvantage of technical coaching; even with a relatively straightforward teaching technique, teachers may need 20 to 30 hours of theoretical instruction, plus 15 to 20 demonstrations of the technique by trainers. Furthermore, additional coaching sessions (10 - 15) may be necessary to transfer more sophisticated teaching techniques or strategies from the training sessions to the classroom. This becomes an expensive proposition in terms of release time and trainer costs.

Another objection to the technical coaching model is that the positive and supportive environment sometimes breaks down due to the evaluative nature of some of the constructive feedback. Because the coach is often required to observe and comment on the presence, absence or degree of a specific teaching technique or behavior, comments can appear to sound like criticism.<sup>2</sup> Because technical coaching gives the peer coach an evaluative capacity, often 'advice' and 'value judgments' are made and this can be counter-productive for many teachers. Collegial

coaching avoids this problem by being less evaluative in its approach.

### **Collegial Coaching**

*Collegial coaching* is similar in nature to technical coaching in that it attempts to develop better teaching methods and techniques, promote collegiality and pedagogical dialogue. However, collegial coaching also attempts to increase teacher self-awareness about their profession and their pedagogy. This approach assumes that teachers can develop techniques that will allow them to reflect and improve on their teaching styles over the whole of their careers. This type of peer coaching encourages self-initiating development in pedagogy.

Collegial coaching involves pairs of teachers working together to decide what teaching techniques, learning objectives and/or any other aspect of the class the *observed teacher* wants to focus on. The coaching focus is based on the teacher's interests and needs, rather than the topic of an in-service training session. The observer/coach helps the teacher to recall and analyze his/her own pedagogical techniques. The coach assists the teacher to develop and reflect on the teaching performance for the future. Unlike technical coaching, the collegial coach refrains from offering evaluations or critiques of the observations. This type of peer coaching is more attractive to many teachers, especially novice teachers who might be easily intimidated by many forms of criticism.

Like technical coaching, the collegial coaching model also consumes a lot of time and resources. A training-for-coaches program, which will develop and fine-tune coaching skills while demonstrating to teacher-coaches how to observe and collect data in the classroom is necessary. Release time is needed so that teachers have ample opportunity to plan, discuss and review the observed class.

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<sup>2</sup> The criticism may seem perfectly reasonable to the coach, but may be interpreted as inappropriate by the teacher. Constructive criticism is defined in this context to mean analysis or evaluation that is considered helpful, pertinent and acceptable by the person receiving the comments. Inappropriate criticism is when the analysis or evaluation is perceived as offensive, captious and/or unacceptable by the person receiving the comments.

## Challenge Coaching

*Challenge coaching* involves teams of teachers using coaching techniques to solve recurring difficulties in teaching situations and/or curriculum. *Challenge* is used here to mean resolving a problem or difficult pedagogical situation. This coaching approach is based on the premise that teachers can work together as knowledgeable peers to solve shared pedagogical difficulties and improve teaching methods and techniques through constructive collaboration. Challenge coaching has much in common with the coaching models described above; the emphasis is on collegiality, professional dialogue and a cooperative, supportive environment. However, the process and the product of challenge coaching distinguishes it from technical and collegial coaching.

Technical and collegial coaching are normally done in peer pairs, whereas challenge coaching usually involves a group of teachers (and may include administrators and staff, if they have an expertise or specific knowledge about the problem to resolve). The **process** of challenge coaching starts with the identification of a difficult teaching situation or shared problem by the group. When the group has observed the problem, it then plans action research appropriate to resolve the problem, as well as developing and testing possible solutions. Challenge coaching may result in the group producing a formal proposal for a solution to a specific issue/concern. The proposed solution or **product** is recommended not only to the teachers involved, but to the whole organization or school for implementation, which is a more extensive application than for the previous models presented. Clearly, this approach again takes up valuable teacher time. The planning, action research and group observations are all quite time consuming.

## Team Coaching

*Team coaching* is a combination of team teaching and peer coaching. Two peers teach a class together but add elements from technical, collegial and/or challenge coaching by planning, discussing, and evaluating a class as partners. During the class they alternate between teaching and observing/coaching. Team coaching assumes that the merging of

these two roles will intensify the professional dialogue between peers and will lead to improved teaching skills and techniques through observations and interaction. Team coaching differs from the previous models in that the roles of teacher and coach may switch at any convenient point in each class, dependent upon how the peer partners wish to divide up the teaching/coaching responsibilities. Often a resource teacher, or an expert in a specific area will come in and participate in team coaching with a regular classroom teacher. In this model teachers may offer constructive criticism, when appropriate, especially if one teacher has expertise in a specific area, e.g., a language resource teacher coaching a Thai secondary teacher in a new EFL oral skills technique.

Team coaching involves similar kinds of time considerations as the other coaching models examined above. Moreover, it can intimidate some teachers by the constant sharing of the classroom with a peer who may offer inappropriate criticism.

## A MORE PRACTICAL APPROACH: CONFERENCE COACHING

Although the observation in peer coaching can be extremely valuable and worthwhile when done appropriately, it has two main drawbacks. First, observations can be potentially threatening to the teacher if done in a judgmental, evaluative manner. When there is a suggestion of assessment, or a feeling that the observations are authorized by the administration, the positive aspects of peer collaboration may get lost in the fear of possible negative appraisal and/or reprisal from superiors. Also, there are teachers who are uncomfortable with any outsider in their classroom, even if it is a peer, a friend or even a family member. Second, and perhaps more importantly, peer observations are time consuming. Most teachers today already feel completely overworked and pressed for time. Teachers in Thailand often have 25-30 contact hours of class a week--when are they supposed to find time to observe another teacher's class or classes?

I would like to suggest a variation of peer coaching that does not need to involve observations, thus making it more practical as it takes up much less of a teacher's valuable and limited time. Also, as this approach does not

involve constructive criticism, it has less chance of intimidating or threatening the teacher by being judgmental.

This approach can be called **conference coaching**. Conference coaching is similar to the coaching models discussed above, in that it involves many of the non-observational elements and goals of technical, collegial, challenge and team coaching. It differs from those models by attempting to eliminate the most time consuming, and intimidating aspects of peer coaching. Conference coaching consists of brief and concise exchanges--discussions between two peer teachers; not evaluations or critiques. In short 10 to 15 minutes meetings before and after a class (micro pre- and post-conferences) the peer teacher and coach explore and reflect on one or two specific pedagogical issues or areas--important to the teacher--to be examined in the upcoming class. In the pre-conference, the colleague teaching briefly describes what is planned for the class and what specific issue or concern is to be focused on. The partner/coach can ask questions for clarification and/or to stimulate further reflection by both participants. After the class is taught, the teacher and coach meet to review the outcome and to consider the objectives and issues previously discussed. The coach does not offer constructive criticism or evaluation. The coach can, however, encourage the peer to self-assess his/her own teaching performance. This can be done through a series of questions rather than comments and suggestions. Participants exchange roles, alternating between teacher and coach on a regular basis.

Conference coaching is based on the premise that teachers can gain valuable insights and improve teaching skills through brief and specific dialogues with a peer, before and after teaching their own classes, without a coach's direct observation and evaluation of the class. Observations remain optional. This is not to suggest that observations are not valuable--they are, but much can be learned through discussions about the class without the necessity and possible imposition of observations. If the teachers find time for observations and feel they would be helpful, certainly they can incorporate observations into the conference coaching model, without changing the essential framework of the approach. But when teachers are pressed for time, the non-observational conference

coaching approach can be an excellent, effective alternative to other more time consuming, and possibly intimidating models of peer coaching. Below is a more detailed explanation of how conference coaching works.

### **Pre-class conference**

The objective of the pre-class conference is to allow the teacher to consider and articulate issues in the teaching plan and choose one or two pedagogical concerns to be focused on in the class. Examples of issues and concerns that could be discussed are: lesson pacing, question wait time, specifics of classroom management, discussion techniques, how to elicit student response, organizing student-centered tasks, etc. This gives the teacher a new perspective on his/her pedagogy. The teacher has the opportunity to look at pedagogical issues in a more conscious, verbal way through the pre-class conference.

The peer coach can ask for clarification or further edification, but should not be judgmental or give advice. A non-critical, questioning point of view is necessary. The focus should be on one or two specific points that the teacher chooses for each class, and the meeting should not take more than 10 or 15 minutes. This time limitation encourages participants to be specific and concise; to use the time to good effect.

### **Potential coaching questions:**

"What do you want to focus on in this class?" (what pedagogical issue or concern)

"Can you give me a brief overview of your lesson plan?"

"How will you put that plan into action?" (implementation)

"How will you set up that activity?"

"What questions will you ask to elicit student response during that activity?"

"How will you know if the students understand you?"

"What classroom management skills do you wish to focus on? Why?"

If the peer coach notices areas of indecision, or gaps in the teaching plan, this can be questioned: "Have you left time for the groups to summarize their findings to the whole

class?" The peer coach can check for clarity by paraphrasing: "Do you mean that you will introduce the topic by eliciting student suggestions and then divide them into groups of three to solve the problem?" But the coach should avoid giving advice or criticism. Obviously, keeping to one or two issues in meetings 10-15 minutes long, only a few of these potential questions might be used in any one conference.

### **Post-class conference**

The objective of the meeting following the class is to reflect on what went on during the session. The peer coach asks specific questions related to the pre-class discussion and the teacher responds and describes what happened in the class.

### **Potential coaching questions:**

"How did the teaching issue--that we discussed before class--work?"

"Do you feel it was successful? Why or why not?"

"How was your pacing?"

"Did all the students have an opportunity to participate?"

"What did you do about that?"

"How would you change that the next time you teach it?"

### **BENEFITS OF CONFERENCE COACHING**

The obvious advantage to conference coaching is that teachers do not need as much time to participate in this professional development activity. There are no time consuming observations and although training in coaching is desirable, it is not essential for this model to be effective.<sup>3</sup> It is also a less threatening, non-confrontational approach that should appeal to teachers who are uncomfortable with any outsider observing their teaching and/or receiving evaluative criticism.

This type of peer coaching can be beneficial to both the teacher and the coach. For the teacher, conference coaching creates awareness of new perspectives on curriculum

planning, and classroom management issues, among a multitude of other potential pedagogical topics. The teacher may see details or items that were overlooked before. Also, the teacher has the opportunity to rework and possibly improve the class based on the peer conferences. The coach benefits from insight into a peer's teaching methods, curriculum planning and strategy, etc. The coach might get new ideas and/or new materials for his/her classes. Furthermore, the coach has an opportunity to improve his/her active listening skills and to use a non-critical, questioning point of view. Through collaboration both peers develop collegiality and confidence. "Simply increasing the work-related communication between peers enhances teachers professional self-concept" (Garmston, 1987:21).

### **POTENTIAL FOR THE FUTURE**

Conference coaching and the other models of peer coaching, if adopted by teachers in Thailand, have the potential to become a bottom-up, grass roots approach to effective EFL teacher professional development here and in other similar educational environments. Teachers do not need to wait for their administration or Education Ministry to organize a peer coaching program. In fact, peer coaching is more effective when it is organized and led by teachers themselves. There need to be safeguards to protect teachers' confidentiality. In addition, such a program will not succeed unless it is voluntary and carries the support of the participating faculty. The administration can act as a catalyst by encouraging but not insisting upon cooperation in this type of professional development.

The isolationism of the classroom that can inhibit teacher collaboration and professional development can be overcome through peer coaching. "Coaching reduces isolation by providing the professional dialogue that encourages teachers to generate solutions to their own problems" (Galbraith & Anstrom, 1995:2). Successful application of peer coaching models can increase collegiality between faculty and build confidence which will improve school culture.

<sup>3</sup> A one-day workshop on coaching skills and techniques should be sufficient for most situations.



For peer coaching to be effective it must be applied in a practical, realistic way that does not take up too much of teachers' already limited time. Thus the innovation of conference

coaching can be an appropriate model of peer coaching for EFL teachers in Thailand today and in the future.

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