QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF COLLABORATIVE TEACHING IN A CONTENT BASED JAPANESE WOMEN'S COLLEGE

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will discuss the results of a qualitative analysis of teachers to assess the effectiveness of a new co-ordinated, topic-based ELT program. The paper will start with a description of the methodology, followed by a look at learner profiles and teaching context. Next, the analysis will look at information collected through unstructured interviews and surveys, which will be followed by a description of the qualitative analysis and the results. Finally, some concluding comments will summarize the findings.

2. METHODOLOGY

An ethnographic approach was used to conduct the qualitative analysis. The validity of ethnographic research methods has been discussed in the current literature (see for example Nunan, 1992; Wallace, 1991), substantiating its usefulness in assessment in the English language-teaching environment, particularly with the goals of internal assessment. The initial motivation for conducting the research came from a desire to assess the effectiveness of a new program which introduced collaborative teaching, materials development and topic/content based classes.

Information was collected using two methodologies: 1) confidential questionnaires completed by teachers teaching in the new Co-ordinated English Program (CEP) and 2) informal discussion or unstructured interviews with teachers.

The questionnaires and interviews were conducted mid-second semester, in October and November. All teachers but one (1) who teach in CEP participated. The questionnaires were free-response surveys, while the interviews were conducted one-on-one privately for between half and hour and two hours.

3. LEARNER PROFILES AND TEACHING CONTEXT

3.A) LEARNER PROFILES

Learner profiles inform judgements of appropriacy and this section will describe the relevant factors. Students are first year English major college students, streamed based on their test-taking skills, specifically the Michigan test. Students have extensive passive knowledge of English. They range from low intermediate to high intermediate level.

3. B) JAPANESE TAUGHT CLASSES:

DEVELOPING READING AND WRITING SKILLS, GRAMMAR AND PRONUNCIATION

Japanese teachers teach reading and writing and grammar classes. Teachers use a product-based approach, with product evaluation as a major component. Products include written work such as essays, reports and writings as well as speeches, presentations and discussions on which they are given feedback and evaluated.

Regarding grammar classes, it was decided that teachers would use the Audio Lingual Method (ALM) in order to teach grammar classes. It was

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also decided that pronunciation would be taught in grammar classes by Japanese teachers.

3. C) DEVELOPING SPEAKING/LISTENING SKILLS

Native teachers are responsible for teaching speaking and listening. Native taught speaking and listening classes are focused on activating the passive knowledge that students have acquired geared towards varied levels.

Pennington & Esling (1996) refer to spoken language competence or "communicative competence" as consisting of two areas. The first called alternatively "free conversation", "chat", "interactional language" and "pre-generic" discourse, tends to be "open ended, loosely structured and unpredictable in terms of topics" (Pennington & Esling, 1996: 154). The second, referred to as either "transactional language" or "generic" is "a structured form of language built on certain topical areas and linguistic conventions for the organization of text to achieve certain purposes" (Pennington & Esling, 1996: 154).

The literature on effective teaching methodologies for building these skills is quite inconclusive. Needless to say, historically Japan has depended on translation methods for language acquisition. Additionally, in acquiring speaking and listening skills, the audio-lingual method ALM has been the preferred method of instruction. It is evident that after decades of ALM having a near monopoly, Japan, for the most part, has not been successful at producing competent speakers. With that in mind, the teaching of speaking and listening skills requires varied and creative, sometimes unorthodox methods by cultural standards.

4. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The qualitative research consisted of two parts; informal interviews and discussion with teachers; and free-response questionnaires. This section will begin by looking at the topic areas that were discussed in the informal interviews which somewhat overlapped with some of the questionnaire responses. The second part of the analysis will look at the direct responses to the questions asked in the open-ended questionnaires.

The research made it clear that overall teachers were happy with the new program, and felt that students in general were benefiting from the new CEP curriculum. The following information is a summary and touches on the main points that were discussed. It has been impossible to include everything, and has therefore been limited to those areas that were mentioned by a number of teachers, and areas that seemed of great importance. Therefore, this is by no means comprehensive, but rather a summary of overall impressions.

4. A) INTERVIEWS and QUESTIONNAIRES

i. The Interviews

The interviews were conducted in relative privacy, with the interviewer asking open-ended questions, taking notes, making supportive comments, asking for clarification and paraphrasing. The interviews commenced with asking about teachers’ impressions of the coordinated program, or what stood out in teachers’ minds. Responses ranged from friendly and informal, to interviewees giving cautious, carefully prepared, professional responses.

The three main topics that were mentioned were: 1) collaborative teaching and professionalism and autonomy 2) content/topic based classes and 3) materials development and co-ordinated topics.

ii. The Questionnaires

The questionnaires consisted of eight (8) questions asking for free-responses. Teachers were asked to complete the questionnaires and return them within the month long period. The questionnaires were confidential, and all questionnaires had fairly long, detailed responses. The questions used were:

1. The new CEP program is topic based. How do you feel about having a topic-based program?
2. The new program is co-ordinated between teachers. How do you feel about the coordination?
3. For teachers who teach grammar classes, the Audio Lingual Method teaching was decided
on. How do you feel about using this method?
4. For teachers who teach grammar classes, teaching pronunciation was also decided on. How do you feel about this?
5. For teachers who teach reading and writing classes, how do you feel about a product based evaluation based on such things as speeches and essays?
6. How do you feel about meeting twice a week with the CEP classes?
7. Students have been streamed by ability levels. How do you feel about this?
8. Other comments

5. COORDINATED TOPICS AND COLLABORATIVE TEACHING

This seems to be the strongest part of the CEP program with positive comments. Teachers had numerous stories to indicate its successes and many anecdotes of students becoming motivated and interested in particular areas of study. It was mentioned that lack of language focus has been noted as a drawback of content-based courses (White, 1998), though White also mentions the positive aspects of content-based courses, some of which were mentioned by interviewees and will be discussed below.

Overall, teachers felt happy about collaborative teaching and felt that the students were happy with co-ordinated topics. Every teacher made comments on this aspect of the new program, most being positive. Teachers felt that students were motivated and happy to be able to recycle the language and vocabulary they were learning, and that students had a high awareness of goals and expectations. Additionally they were able to use and manipulate vocabulary in varied contexts, and had opportunities to experiment with what they had learnt and extend their language capacity. Furthermore, teachers felt students were interested in the topics, though some teachers did mention the drawback of having such a limited number of topics.

Articles, videos and authentic materials as well as ELT materials could be shared and discussed between teachers, fostering a sense of shared responsibility. However, there was some concern about the availability of materials, and this will be discussed below in the materials development section.

There were two areas where a collaborative teaching curriculum seems to be conflictive. The first was its encroachment on teacher professionalism. A number of teachers felt very strongly about this area, while some mentioned it only in passing. About half the teachers interviewed mentioned this as a potential problem in terms of their own feelings of professionalism and more importantly its impact on being able to address student needs. The second related point was the lack of autonomy for students, particularly in relation to lack of control of what is being learned and how it is learned. These two points will be examined next.

1. Professionalism

A time-restricted structured curriculum with pre-assigned topics has a number of drawbacks in relation to professionalism. It potentially removes a certain amount of decision making power from the teacher impacting their ability to address what they feel are their particular students' needs. Working collaboratively also could curtail their ability to take risks as their work becomes "monitored" and perhaps misinterpreted. This is a deterrent in trying to develop an innovative program, especially when being creative depends on the freedom to take risks.

A program where pair teachers have a say or can exert pressure guarantees a program where teachers will be cautious and take a "safe" route versus being dynamic which sometimes risks temporarily getting off track. These points have to be seriously considered both in terms of teacher satisfaction and student satisfaction.

"Motivation problems arise when there is a lack of fit between individual needs and work characteristics" (Kakabadse et al, 1988; 140). As professionals, teachers' needs include achievement, self-actualization and intellectual challenge. It is important to note here that interpreting motivation has a cultural component and care must be taken in
making judgements in a cross-cultural context when using outward non-verbal cues and behaviour (Yrizarry, Matsumoto, Wilson-Cohn, 1998; Akimoto & Sanbonmatsu, 1999; Yoshida & Hayes, 1999) Hackman and Oldham (Hackman and Oldham as quoted in Kakabadse, 1988: 136) found that three factors were crucial to job satisfaction and intrinsic motivation: meaningfulness, responsibility and knowledge of results.

Kakabadse et al (1988) list 3 components of meaningfulness: 1) skill variety, 2) task identity and 3) task significance. The first, skill variety, allows the individual to use their expertise and develop their talents. As college teachers, this would be in the form of classroom creativity, material development and self-assessment. Next, task identity enables the individual to identify an identifiable work and what has been accomplished, such as text completion. Next, task significance, is the impact on people’s lives of one’s work, such as student successes in exams or in-class projects/products. Responsibility for outcomes positively affects intrinsic motivation, such as determining procedures to carry out “one’s own” teaching, and the autonomy and independence that are expected by professionals. Finally, feedback from the work itself, allows the individual to reflect on their teaching, providing growth and satisfaction. (see for example Wallace, 1991, for a discussion on self-reflective practice)

Accommodating differences, through differentiation, gives the organization a flexibility that will foster growth. By integrating the needs of teachers, their input will contribute to quality. Handy points out the importance of cultivating differences in organizational ‘cultures’. Culture, not in terms of Japanese/Foreigners, but in terms of how different people approach getting a job done. “Organizations that are differentiated in their cultures and who control that differentiation by integration are likely to be more successful” (my italics and bold) (Handy, 1993: 204). A team built on differentiation, will assist in the building of a ‘critical mass’, which is important in innovation, to counteract the tendency for resisting change. Getting people ‘on board’ and creating a group supportive of the changes, creates the necessary ‘critical mass’.

If there is collaborative teaching, there needs to be an atmosphere of trust so that teachers are willing to take risks and be creative. The teacher is the best judge of what is happening in a classroom, and any group in transition might initially exhibit resistance, only to embrace what was first rejected. To foster this trust requires an allowance for differences in teaching styles, and an acceptance of the unknown, with openness to things moving non-linearly.

ii. Autonomous Learning

Autonomous learning as a goal has been discussed at great length in the literature for the past decade or so, and has been a topic of discussion amongst some of the teachers in the CEP program. More than half the interviewed teachers mentioned this in the interviews and a look at the literature followed by the teachers’ comments will be discussed in this section. This section will then examine these concepts in relation to collaborative teaching.

Benson and Voller’s (1997: 25) definition of autonomy includes three components.

1. autonomy as the act of learning on one’s own and the technical ability to do so;
2. autonomy as the internal psychological capacity to self-direct one’s own learning;
3. autonomy as control over the content and processes of one’s own learning. (my italics)

The role of the teacher changes when autonomous learning is introduced. Terms such as: a helper (Scrimshaw, 1997; Voller, 1997) tutor (Levy, 1997) or facilitator (Voller, 1997) have been used to describe the new role of the teacher. The teacher is able to assess autonomous learning through reflective practice (Wallace, 1991).

Autonomous learning, discovery learning, student centred learning and learner-centred approaches are all terms which have been bandied about in the literature in discussing the changing role of the teacher and learner. A discovery learning style of classroom is based on constructivist methodologies, where students have control over what and
how they learn, and it can "accommodate multiple learning styles and interests, encourage cooperative learning and social skills, foster active learning by promoting interdisciplinary investigations, develop critical thinking, reasoning, problem-solving and metacognitive processes, enhance presentation and speaking skills" (Ivers and Barron, 1998: 29).

One of the three areas of student control mentioned above by Benson and Voller (1997) was students having control over content. This becomes difficult in collaborative teaching, as the team teachers need to control the content of the classes. This puts the teacher’s ability to 'read' what is happening in the class and respond to the students’ needs in conflict with covering a curriculum. Furthermore, a curriculum based on a time-line will put the demand of 'getting through the material' ahead of the needs of the students or the needs of the teacher who will have to forfeit building a particular type of class, developing particular learning skills, fostering relationships or developing a particular type of atmosphere in lieu of covering materials.

As the student’s development in autonomous learning progresses, teacher control diminishes. Some students achieve the transition easily and enjoy freedom they have been unaccustomed to. For other students, taking responsibility for their own learning can feel confusing. In a Japanese context, this transition may feel disorienting. Students can become resentful of the teacher’s lack of guidance, feel they are not doing their job, not helping them enough, or expecting too much from them. (see, for example Warschauer et al, 1996, Benson and Voller, 1997). They continue by pointing out that for students “unaccustomed to having power in the classroom or taking responsibility for their own learning” it could “be disheartening if care is not taken to facilitate the necessary cultural leap” (Warschauer et al, 1996: 10 Benson and Voller, 1997).

For teachers committed to fostering autonomy, this points to the importance of understanding the transitional aspect, knowing that it is temporary with a positive final outcome which the teacher herself/himself, through knowledge of the process, can interpret the meaning. Not all students go through the a 'withdrawal' when the teacher hands over control. In fact, some students, move easily into this new role. In easing the transition, scaffolding (Scrimshaw 1993) supplies levels of built in guidance from which learners choose the assistance necessary at different stages in their development.

Sheerin (1991) discusses the role of teacher as tutor or helper, assisting the student in understanding their needs, or guiding them. Teachers need to be facilitators (Sheerin, 1991) so students don’t feel overwhelmed. Finally, she mentions creating what Nunan (1991) calls a 'learner-centred curriculum.'

Particularly for Japanese women this transition is a critical point, as students might be very well unused to critical decision-making. Additionally, being unused to making decisions based on a careful look at their future prospects could result in making study choices based on avoiding hard work, in lieu of enjoying the moment, or enjoying the company of their peers. This is often a rudimentary step in the transition that transforms into active decision-making. Culturally in Japan students are used to relying on what Laurillard calls "teacher-constructed knowledge" (Laurillard, 1995). This has been the basis of the teacher-student relationship in Japan.

Autonomous learning is not for the faint of heart pair teacher, especially for teachers or schools where there has been a high level of control over student learning, for a certain amount of 'anarchy' can develop especially in transitional phases. The most frequent comments in the interviews were that a coordinated topic-based program based on collaborative teaching has some drawbacks in relation to autonomous learning.

The first is the need for detailed, constant communication that is demanding and at times an impossibility due to the lack of physical proximity of some offices, heavy workloads and different schedules.

Also discussed is the role of the teacher in teaching students how to learn and how to work collaboratively so as to learn from other students through organizing face-to-face communication. This is
important in a communication class, where the bulk of activities are based on student-to-student interactions. The teacher as ‘expert’ is replaced by the peer as collaborator.

To summarize this section, collaborative teaching impacts student autonomy negatively. A structured syllabus, with the need for co-ordination compromises the amount of control students have over their learning, particularly control over what they learn, and how they learn. Teachers feel positive about collaborative teaching and co-ordinated topics. However this section points to the restrictiveness that teachers might feel and the resultant lack of being able to give students what they believe is in the students’ best interests, as this is curtailed by giving precedence to co-ordination.

6. CONTENT OR TOPIC BASED CLASSES

The comments on teaching topic based classes were positive, particularly in terms of student successes, mastering of the related language and vocabulary and perceived student motivation. Teachers felt students tended to enjoy the topics and seemed motivated to learn them in depth. Perhaps the point receiving the most comments was the increases in student interest in the topics as they began to master the topic.

A topic-based program developed after researching student needs which enabled students to delve deeply into topics of interest for them, while providing the time to recycle grammar and vocabulary, design projects and presentations. Widdowson and Abbott (as cited in White, 1988) discuss learning the language through exposure to content, though defining what the topic is can be ambiguous and varied. White says “topic selection and ordering will be determined by educational rather than linguistic criteria, as the value of topic lies in the provision of meaningful and relevant content to stimulate motivation and lead to opportunities for meaningful discussion” (White, 1988: 68). Being task based, the program can “engage the learner in thinking processes, the focus of which is completion of the task rather than learning the language” (White 1988: 103).

Nunan mentions the importance of evaluating content in terms of its relevance and meaningfulness to the learner (Nunan, 1991). Cultural knowledge awareness is necessary for interpreting materials, and he posits familiarity with the subject helps understanding (Nunan, 1991). Perhaps the limited number of topics covered in the CEP program might be pertinent here, and a couple of teachers did mentioned the limited choices as a drawback to the new curriculum.

Some teachers mentioned the difficulty of implementing a topic based program, stating that it is difficult to get people to follow it and you can’t guarantee how much material is being covered. Additionally, it was stated that teachers have different ideas about its application. On the same note, some teachers saw these differences as positive. Phillips (1997) states that teachers tend to fall somewhere on the continuum between positivism/objectivism and constructivism. A topic based curriculum allows a teacher at varied points on this continuum to maintain their style of teaching, their philosophy, while still fulfilling the topic requirement.

Positivism, (Benson, 1997) or objectivism (Marra and Jonassen, 1983) are educational theories based on knowledge existing independent of human experience. The epistemology’s premises assume that knowledge is “constructed in a logical way based on small components, or learning objectives” (Phillips, 1997:19). The methodology, instructional design allows for the analysis of curriculum material, with the implication that learner control is minimized, in opposition to autonomous learning. Constructivist epistemology, at the other end of the scale, is where the student constructs her/his own knowledge from their environment, with the task of the teacher to support and facilitate, yet let the student synthesize their own knowledge. (Phillips, 1997).

7. MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

How successful this new program of co-ordinated
topics will be is dependent to a large extent on materials development. The co-ordinated topics have been a positive part of the new CEP program. As this is the first year of materials development, the semester started out without any materials apart from the assigned text. Materials development has progressed throughout the year and this section will look at how the first year has transpired. Originally teachers discussed emphasizing authentic materials. A few teachers though, questioned the concept of authentic materials versus teacher-produced materials, and there has been some discussion in the ELT literature recently on the 'slippery' definition of "authentic" (see Breen 1985). For the Japanese teachers, the first semester consisted mainly of teachers collecting authentic materials, books, videos and other materials related to the topics. Some worksheets and exercises were written by teachers. The Japanese teachers used these materials in their own classes giving copies to pair teachers to let them know what they were covering in their classes apart from this year's text.

The native English speaking teachers developed worksheets and readings which they shared with the other native teachers, so that they could be used by all the teachers teaching speaking and listening. The text which listening and speaking teachers used had insufficient materials related to this year's topics, hence these teachers were much more dependent on outside materials. By the end of the first semester therefore, these teachers used self-produced materials, unlike the reading/writing teachers. By the beginning of the second semester, quite a lot of materials had been developed including readings, in class exercises, information from the Internet and other sources, prepared video class worksheets and exercises, as well as homework materials.

A positive point about materials has to do with teacher job satisfaction. Collective 'ownership' of whatever work is 'produced' can be developed through participation of the 'implementers', through their input and participation in the development of innovation. The ability for teachers to give input means not only that the college can capitalize on this valuable resource, but also that teachers, being in the closest contact with their own students, can make the best judgements. Some teachers mentioned how their students felt happy seeing materials developed "especially for them". The teachers who had developed some materials felt positive with the materials development as a whole.

A number of drawbacks to materials development were mentioned by teachers. The first has to do with available time and the overall workload. Materials development is very time consuming, and with the many meetings, CEP research, CEP paper writing as well as class preparation, testing and homework correction, conversation lounges and study clinics, little time was available to develop materials. On top of a heavy class load (7-8 classes for the tokubetsu 'special' teachers, versus 3-6 classes for full time teachers) little time was left for materials development. With the topic based curriculum's success being dependant on quality materials, this is problematic, and was mentioned by quite a few of the teachers. For example, time restrictions and workload meant the Japanese teachers developed very few materials, and they said they felt quite behind the native English speaking teachers, producing feelings of dissatisfaction or stress.

Regarding the first year's topics, very little of the material has been classroom tested by more than one or two teachers, which means the quality of the materials for next year will not be up to par. Understandably, there was a sense of urgency in the first year. A number of interviewees mentioned the potential for lack of commitment to co-ordinated topics by those who do not participate closely in materials development. Ideally, teachers felt that all CEP teachers should be involved in materials development to foster commitment, though this might not be a possibility, nor desirable by some of the teachers.

8. SPECIFIC RESPONSES ON THE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Grammar Classes: ALM and Pronunciation

Few of the interviewed teachers taught grammar classes. There were a few comments about using
ALM, mostly showing uncertainty in its use, including feeling perplexed about pattern practice, questioning the overall effectiveness of ALM and lack of confidence in teaching ALM.

There were also a few comments on teaching pronunciation. While the teachers agreed that pronunciation should be taught and that students would benefit from learning systematic pronunciation 'rules', it was mentioned that it might be more effective for native English speaking teachers to teach pronunciation.

ii. Frequency of meeting the same students

This had a wide range of responses, falling into three categories. The first, stated by the majority of teachers was that meeting twice a week was good as it enabled teachers to get to know the students better. The second stated that twice was indeed not enough, and that students should be taught solely by native speaking English teachers during the first year for reading/writing and speaking/listening. There was also one teacher who mentioned it wasn’t necessary to meet twice a week. Most teachers did mention it would be good for students to have a variety of native English speaking teachers in terms of exposure to different accents and cultural information.

iii. Streaming

This seemed to be a topic of concern for some teachers. Again the responses were quite varied. Regarding reading and writing classes, some teachers felt the Michigan test was effective for streaming, others felt they could see no differences in student levels. Some comments were made about the fact that streaming had improved over previous years.

Perhaps the weak point has been in relation to speaking classes, with mention that a separate streaming is needed to determine the levels for these classes. It was mentioned that the weakness of this approach is it dilutes collaboration as classes will be split up. It was also mentioned that the class ‘atmosphere’ would be affected. On the same points, some teachers felt this would be positive, and welcomed the diluted collaboration and diluted control of the pair teachers.

CONCLUSION

The results of this qualitative research show that teachers in general have positive perceptions about teaching content-based classes. The positive feelings about collaborative topic-based were mitigated by the difficulties of implementing the program.

The benefits of pair teacher collaboration were outweighed by teacher autonomy being compromised and infringement on teacher independence and professionalism. However, the benefits to students of coordinated topics were recognized and outweighed implementation problems.

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**ABSTRACT:**

This paper will discuss the results of qualitative research of a newly instituted English teaching program at a Japanese women's college. It will examine the appropriacy of using collaborative teaching and topic based classes. Qualitative analysis has been a practice in the ELT environment and the impetus of this research is to assess the program's effectiveness to enable continued improvement of the English department and the college.