Promoting Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Three Case Studies

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Abstract

This paper reports on the processes and results of three cases of interdisciplinary collaboration. Having the opportunities to approach and contact teachers of other disciplines, the researcher worked closely with the representatives of three academic departments: social work, education studies and physical education, in syllabus design and materials development in the past ten years. With input and advice from the representatives of physical and social work departments, an interactive CD-ROM was developed to improve vocabulary for first-year physical education students (Lee, 2001), and some materials about professional writing skills for an EAP course for first-year social work students were revised. Responding to a request from education studies, the researcher collaborated with a discipline representative in designing the syllabuses of two advanced English enhancement courses for postgraduate diploma English major students. The new courses took account of the comments and pedagogic suggestions made by the representative on two fundamental courses for the same group of students. It is felt that obtaining comments and teaching ideas from discipline teachers at different stages is conducive to curriculum design. Nevertheless, the success factors for collaboration are teacher willingness to cooperate, patience and an open attitude (Lee, 2000).

1. Introduction

Working with teachers of other disciplines or within the same
discipline at different levels is generally challenging, exciting and beneficial to learning and teaching, particularly for English language teachers (e.g., Adams, 1970; Chamberlain, 1980; Brumby & Wada, 1990; Tajino & Tajino, 2000) who are used to be and thought to be the only course developers. Cooperating and collaborating (in Dudley-Eva n and St. John’s terms) with subject teachers is a significant task for English language teachers at tertiary level. Interdisciplinary collaboration helps English language teachers to be more effective in course planning, delivery and evaluation. This paper reports on three cases of cooperation and collaboration, followed by a short discussion about some benefits and foreseeable problems. The results of joint effort are encouraging, with positive students’ feedback and subject teachers’ support.

2. Cooperating and Collaborating with Teachers Across Disciplines at Tertiary Level: Three Cases

At tertiary level, each academic staff member has his or her area of expertise, however, language (in this case, it is English) may be a common element and topic across disciplines. English language teaching, no matter it is for academic or professional purposes, is closely hooked with subject contents and it is unrealistic to detach language from content or to teach the language in isolation. Understanding or being aware of what students are studying, their needs and the discipline discourse definitely helps an English language teacher to develop the syllabus and materials. This is best achieved if the English language teacher takes the initiative to gather information from discipline teachers. This initial stage is termed as cooperation, in Dudley-Evans and St. John’s words (1998, p. 43), followed by the stage of collaboration which is a stage involving “more direct working of the two sides” (ibid, p. 44). However, it is argued by Lee (2000, p. 24) that cooperation and collaboration between English teachers and subject teachers do not guarantee
any success if there is a lack of the willingness to cooperate, patience and open attitude from both sides. The following cases report on and describe the cooperation and collaboration processes between the researcher and the departments’ representatives. Both sides make good use of the opportunity to consult and work with each other with a view to facilitating the learning and teaching of English.

2.1 Case One: Developing Self-access Materials

Cooperation and collaboration began after a discussion about students’ learning problems with a physical education teacher on an informal occasion. It was felt that physical education students lacked adequate vocabulary and vocabulary learning strategies. In view of this, the researcher started to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies of first-year to third-year physical education students with the help of the teacher. Moreover, with the assistance of another five physical education teachers, reading texts and vocabulary were selected from a course book for the study of the psychology and sociology of sport for materials development purposes. Both the researcher and the subject teacher agreed to develop a CD-ROM\(^1\) to help the students to improve their range of vocabulary on a self-learning basis to supplement the EAP course (Lee & Chow, 2001). On the basis of the investigation of students’ vocabulary learning strategies and identification of words for academic communication, both sides of the teachers contributed to the learning package in their own ways. The researcher was responsible for developing the introduction to vocabulary learning strategies, tasks for learning the selected words and self-tests. The subject teacher assisted in administering questionnaires on vocabulary learning strategies, selecting words and giving suggestions on the instructional design of the CD-ROM. The CD-ROM was a joint product and effort of the parent and language teaching departments.
Diagrams 1-5 illustrate the design and content of each part of the CD-ROM.

Diagram 1. Contents page of the CD-ROM

Diagram 2. An introduction to vocabulary learning strategies

Diagram 3. Test 1 (Pre-test)

Diagram 4. A reading text

Diagram 5. Test 2 (Post-test)

The CD-ROM was piloted in the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) course for first-year physical education students. Improvements in instructional design were made based on an evaluation of the pedagogical effectiveness of the CD-ROM by students through questionnaires. The majority of the students...
agreed that the CD-ROM was user-friendly (85.18%), word explanations (80.77%) and association exercises (88.89%) were helpful. It had raised their awareness of the ways to learn vocabulary (81.48%), and had helped them to improve vocabulary power (70.36%) (Lee & Chow, 2001). The entire process of collaboration, from surveying students’ vocabulary learning strategies to piloting the CD-ROM, lasted for a year.

2.2 Case Two: Providing Input and Revising Course Materials

Collaborating with parent departments is crucial in developing EAP courses and should be an on-going matter, because dialoguing with subject teachers enables English teachers to better understand the needs, wants and demands of stakeholders (including students, subject teachers and departments). This in return benefits course development. Being the coordinator of an EAP course for first-year social work students, the researcher arranged a meeting with the department’s representative who is in charge of first-year students, inviting comments and suggestions on the course syllabus and materials. Prior to the meeting, the syllabus and materials were sent to the teacher representative. The teacher representative agreed to the aims and course coverage and found the materials appropriate. In spite of this, she supplemented the existing materials which were mainly adapted from books, students’ work and some authentic documents (e.g. specifications for tenderers) with more updated samples published in the profession. She suggested extracting relevant writing samples from a recently published writing reference kit titled *English Writing Reference Kit for Social Workers*, printed by the Social Welfare Department of Hong Kong SAR government in 2001. After reading the writing reference kit, two case summary writing samples and one proposal sample were extracted. Follow-up exercises such as analysing and comparing the structures, verb-tenses and
language of the case summary writing samples and the proposal were developed. Two assignments were also devised to practise and consolidate both the writing skills and students’ understanding of the generic structure of case summaries and proposals. The following are some activities for students to study the structure and language of two case summaries: intake record form and transfer summary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>About structure…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. In what ways is example 1 different from example 2?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>About language…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. What kinds of verb tenses are mainly used in the summaries? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Compare the verb tense that is mainly used in the section of ‘Intake worker’s commentary – risk areas requiring further exploration’ in Example 1 with that in sections 6-8 in Example 2. What is/are the reason(s) for using the specific kind of verb tenses?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Diagram 6.** An exercise for the study of structure and language of two case summaries

The exercise aims to help students to understand and be aware of the kind of information they should provide for the specific type of case summary, and the verb-tense that is frequently used in the document. Students were asked to read the two record summaries, discuss in groups and present the structure and language based on the questions given in the exercise, particularly the verb-tense for the section of ‘Intake worker’s commentary’. Teacher’s comments on the discussion results were given immediately after the presentation. Students’ feedback on the provision of authentic writing samples taken
from the writing reference kit and the follow-up exercises was very positive. It was found that 85% of students rated 4 and above (on a 6-point scale) on the usefulness of practising summarising skills using social work texts in the end-of-course questionnaire.

2.3 Case Three: Developing Two Courses Syllabi

Receiving a request made by a teacher representative from the Education Studies Department to offer two courses on pronunciation and grammar at an advanced level under the Language Enhancement Programme for postgraduate diploma English major students, the researcher who is the coordinator of the Programme started discussing the syllabus, teaching approach and logistics with the teacher representative. The discussion began with a review of two fundamental pronunciation and grammar courses offered to the same group of students in the previous semester, focussing on course coverage, appropriate level of the materials and teaching approach, as well as the end-of-course evaluation results. During the three hours of discussion, the teacher representative suggested adopting a discourse and contextualised approach for the advanced level in lieu of the de-contextualised approach which introduced language items at the sentence level in the two fundamental courses. It was agreed that the new courses should be intensive and spread over six weeks (for two hours per week) prior to students’ placement exercises. As for the advanced grammar course, it could include items such as identifying errors, error analysis, explaining grammar in context (particularly at the discourse level), and using corpus linguistics to consolidate grammatical knowledge. As for the advanced pronunciation course, its aim is to help students to understand how intonation and stress affects meaning and communication, and raise the students’ awareness of Cantonese learners’ problems with consonants, vowels,
consonant clusters and sequences at the word level, as well as intonation at the sentence and discourse levels. A total of 28 students enrolled on the two courses and the end-of-course evaluation results show that they were well-received. The students found the materials useful, appropriate and stimulating (an average of above 4 on a 6-point scale, 1=strongly disagree; 6=strongly agree). The course also helped them to better understand English grammar and usage and made improvements in many of their spoken discourse areas such as rhythms, pitch and intonation. Both the researcher and the teacher representative worked closely for about one semester. Tables 1 and 2 present the students’ ratings on a few important questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mean Score (6-point scale)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How useful were the materials?</td>
<td>5.455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How appropriate were the materials?</td>
<td>5.455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The course has raised my awareness of the functions of intonation.</td>
<td>5.346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The course has raised my awareness of the functions of pitch.</td>
<td>5.237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The course has helped in achieving my aims.</td>
<td>5.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Pronunciation course – Students’ ratings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mean Score (6-point scale)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The course has improved my confidence in using English more accurately.</td>
<td>4.833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The course has helped me better understand English Grammar and its usage.</td>
<td>4.833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The course has helped me better understand common grammar mistakes.</td>
<td>4.833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The course has raised my awareness of using accurate English.</td>
<td>5.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How appropriate is the course materials?</td>
<td>4.500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Grammar course – Students’ ratings
2.4 Some Thoughts on Cooperating and Collaborating with Subject Teachers and Parent Departments at Tertiary Level

There is a general belief that English teachers are the sole persons responsible for developing EAP courses. This belief, however, is partially true. Inputs from parent departments and subject teachers on the needs and wants of students as well as the department’s expectations, learning and teaching culture, and assignment requirements are particularly useful at the preparation stage. Such inputs and stakeholders’ perspective help English teachers to be more focussed and achieve effectiveness in course design, materials development, teaching and assessment. It relieves much concern about the appropriateness of materials that were adapted from published sources and course coverage. It also increases English teachers’ awareness of the learning and teaching culture at students’ parent departments. In spite of that, parent departments may not conform to the belief and work with English teachers. In this light, English teachers may have to take the initiative to discuss matters with subject teachers or parent departments. All this should be done with patience and tact in spite of repeated unsuccessful contacts. Regular contacts, for instance having a short meeting once a year, establish mutual trust and form the base of cooperation, collaboration and high quality teaching. Students’ positive feedback on the products (materials and syllabus) confirms its significance.

3. Conclusion

Seeking inputs from and collaborating with parent departments take time and the three reported cases ranged from one semester to one year or beyond. Although the cases are based on personal experience, they witnessed the importance of involving parent departments at different phases
of course design and the results (e.g. product and syllabus) are encouraging. The success is definitely attributable to patience, the positive attitude of and the willingness to participate by both parties.

Notes

1 The interactive CD-ROM was a product of a Teaching Development Grants Project (TDG/9899/IV/2) funded by the Hong Kong Baptist University in the academic year of 1999-2000.
2 Thanks should be given to the MaGraw-Hill Companies which granted permission to use the text in the CD-ROM.
3 The course aims to develop students' ability in using English for academic and professional settings.
4 The syllabus includes paragraph and essay writing skills, reading skills, oral presentation skills, proposal writing and case summary writing skills. It enables students to practise the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking), academic writing (paragraph and essay writing) and profession-related writing (proposal and case summary writing).
5 The exercise is taken from the EAP (Social Work) course in the academic year of 2002-2003.
6 This idea has been expressed in another article written by Lee (2000).

References


Lee, C. F. K., & Chow, B. C. (2001). The words you need for academic communication: An interactive CD-ROM. In *The compendium of selected teaching development grants projects* (pp. 77-86). Hong Kong: Hong Kong Baptist University.


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