Interdisciplinary collaboration in English language teaching:
Some observations from subject teachers' reflections[1]

Cynthia Lee
Hong Kong Baptist University

ABSTRACT

This paper explores interdisciplinary collaboration in English language teaching from a new perspective by analysing the reflections of three subject teachers. Their thoughts provide valuable insights for English language teachers when they pursue collaboration with subject teachers. The three subject teachers worked closely with the researcher on a web-based essay writing teaching project which developed an essay critiquing system and conducted a series of workshops for Cantonese English learners at a secondary school in the past few years. The workshops were well-received, with positive comments from the students. Informal interviews which resembled conversations with the subject teachers were arranged at the end of the project and their oral reflections were transcribed for analysis. The subject teachers delineated the benefits, problems, challenges and key successful factors of interdisciplinary collaboration. They felt that obtaining comments and teaching ideas from English language teachers at different stages is conducive to system design and student learning. Although their discipline encourages them to contact end-users, some practical issues such as high communication cost and publication trend are some factors that may deter collaboration.

KEYWORDS: *ELT, interdisciplinary collaboration, benefit, barriers*

Introduction

Interdisciplinary collaboration exists in professions such as health care, social work, medicine, education and business due to their practical demands (e.g., Louise, 2002; Wyatt, 2002; Forman & Markus, 2005). Interdisciplinary collaboration appears in many forms. For instance, an occupational therapist may work with a social worker to meet a patient's needs; a teacher may work with a social worker to educate a child; or a business person and a trainer may give a workshop together. In education, interdisciplinary collaboration takes place between colleagues within or across institutions in research and teaching. It is often commended and recommended as it provides evidence of a staff's continued

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learning and professional development, and can make the best use of the large amount of public funding made available to the institution. Likewise, working with teachers of other subjects at different levels is generally challenging, exciting and beneficial to English language teachers who are used to be and thought to be the only course developers (Adams, 1970; Chamberlain, 1980; Brumby & Wada, 1990; Tajino & Tajino, 2000). Cooperating and collaborating with subject teachers is a significant task for English language teachers at tertiary level because it helps the latter to be more effective in course planning, delivery and evaluation.

This paper explores interdisciplinary collaboration based on the reflections of three subject teachers who collaborated with the researcher on a web-based essay writing teaching project. Their reflections allow the researcher and other English language teachers to know how subject teachers feel about interdisciplinary collaboration, a phenomenon which English language teachers may not be aware of and quantitative research may not be able to describe.

Definition, benefits and barriers of interdisciplinary collaboration

'Inter' is a prefix that literally means something moves, exists or happens between two or more places, things or groups of people (Collins Cobuild English Dictionary, 1995). Interdisciplinary collaboration usually refers to some form of work between or among people from two or more subjects within the same or across institutions. Bronstein (2003) defines interdisciplinary collaboration in a more positive way by referring to it as an effective interpersonal process in which communication, coordination and partnership are involved. Whatever form it takes, interdisciplinary collaboration can benefit teachers in the following ways: continued learning in content knowledge, modern technology and recent methodology; sustained enthusiasm for teaching and professional development (Shibley, 2006; Forman & Markus, 2005), generation of a new outcome such as course design and teaching (Mavor & Trayner, 2001), curriculum development (Parks & Goldblatt, 2000), multipled input from experts of other subjects, increasing awareness of incompatible personalities, working style, beliefs about learning (Perry & Stewart, 2005) and perceptions of learners' needs (Jackson, 2005). All this in return maximizes productivity, improve student learning and facilitate personal professional development. Nevertheless, such barriers as fundamental differences in philosophy, pedagogies, personalities and rejection of publications of collaborative work may jeopardize collaboration between people (Lynch, 2006). To overcome the constraints, it is believed that on-campus administrative and structural support, official recognition of collaborative work as scholarly research, time release and rewards, setting common goals among parties and institutionalizing collaboration are the most felicitous conditions (Fauske, 1993; Kezar, 2005).

Interdisciplinary collaboration: Collaboration between English language and subject teachers

English language teaching at tertiary level is also closely hooked with subject contents and it is unrealistic to detach language from content or to teach the language in isolation. Although each subject teacher has his or her area of expertise, language (in this case, it is English) is a common element and topic across subjects. Understanding or being aware of what students are studying, their needs and the subject 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 subject teachers, and both sides are involved in more direct working at a later stage. Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998) term the two stages 'cooperation' and 'collaboration'[2]. However, it is argued by Lee (2000, p. 24) that cooperation or collaboration between English language teachers and other subject teachers do not guarantee any success if there is a lack of the willingness to cooperate, patience and open attitude from both sides. Therefore, it is important for English language teachers to know more about subject teachers' thoughts and feelings of interdisciplinary collaboration.

Interdisciplinary collaboration, however, is little researched in the English language teaching profession particularly from subject teachers' perspective. Although collaborating with subject teachers has been recommended in the profession and we know that pooling inputs from both sides to the same task is useful in respect of course design, material development, teaching, assessment and even understanding of the learning and teaching culture at students' parent departments (Lee, 2000), we know very little about the thoughts and feelings of subject teachers on interdisciplinary collaboration. In view of this, I attempted to explore the issue based on their reflections. Therefore, at the end of a collaborative initiative, I interviewed my collaborators who are computer science teachers, hoping to find out the benefits, problems and challenges they had encountered in the past few years. In the following paragraphs, I will first describe the collaborative initiative, and then summarize and discuss the subject teachers' reflections. I hope this paper would help English language teachers to know more about the thoughts of subject teachers and generate greater confidence to approach the issue.

A collaborative initiative: Developing an Essay Critiquing System (ECS) and conducting workshops for high school students

A computer science teacher, *W*, invited me to join an Information Technology (IT) project on developing a web-based Essay Critiquing System (ECS)[3] for Cantonese English learners in spring 2005. Apart from me, the project team consisted of two other computer science teachers—*K* and *F*. All of them had three to 20 years of teaching experience in my university. We worked together to develop a system that could provide just-in-time formative feedback to students in two forms: (1) new sub-themes or arguments suggested to include, and (2) the

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[2] I used the terms 'cooperation' and collaboration' interchangeably in the paper.
[3] The project was funded by two sources. In 2005, it was funded by the Hong Kong Baptist University. In 2006, it was funded by the Quality Education Fund, the Education Bureau of Hong Kong Government.

visualization of the existing sub-themes' organization (Appendix 1). With the help of the immediate feedback, students could further revise their compositions, practise and speed up the writing process outside the classroom and without waiting for the teacher's hints or comments (Wong et al, 2008; Lee et al, 2008; Wong et al, 2007). When I joined the project team, the three computer science teachers had developed the prototype and my role was to provide feedback on the teacher and student interface, assisted in searching interesting writing topics and building a corpus, and compiled arguments for each writing topic in the initial stage. The project team met regularly and it took us two years to develop and pilot the system, fine tune its design and develop a corpus for five writing topics. Later, we discussed the classroom pedagogy and workshop evaluation results. A series of five workshops were conducted at a local English-medium secondary school so as to test the integration of the system and the process writing approach from September 2007 to January 2008. We administered an anonymous questionnaire at the end of the last workshop. The results of the questionnaire were encouraging, with an average score of 4 on a 5-point scale (5 for very great, 3 for moderate and 1 for very least) given by the students on the extent to which they thought the system could improve their essay content in terms of number of arguments and organization.

At the end of the project, I conducted an informal interview which resembled a conversation with each subject teacher so as not to make them feel conscious of being involved in a research study. Three open-ended questions related to the benefits, problems and challenges in the collaborative initiative, and the key factors influencing interdisciplinary collaboration were raised, aiming to provide space for the subject teachers to elaborate and expand their ideas. They were: (1) In what way do you benefit from the collaborative initiative? (2) What are the problems and challenges you have encountered? (3) What do you think are the key factors affecting the collaboration? Each subject teacher talked about his or her thoughts and feelings for around 20 minutes, and I also shared mine with them. The conversations were tape-recorded for transcription and translation purposes.

Some observations from the subject teachers' reflections

Benefits

The greatest benefit mentioned by one collaborator, *W*, was that he knew more about language and language teaching. W said he did not know what constituted a good essay. It was from the project that he knew some key writing concepts and the concepts helped them fine tune the system. Another collaborator, *K*, felt that the cooperation was successful because there was no confrontation among the team members. Cooperation continued with tangible outputs such as the series of workshops conducted at a local secondary school.

The subject teachers also stated that interdisciplinary collaboration was encouraged in their field. *W* said that Information Systems which was related to high-impact technology could not avoid cooperation with end-users. Their job

was to find out what was useful to end-users and ascertained the acceptability level. In other words, it was a field that cried out for contact with people of the outside world. However, analysts who are more theory-oriented may not need to take the initiative to work with English language teachers (See Appendix 2 for some of their verbal reflections).

Problems and challenges

F and *W*, expressed their concern over publishing interdisciplinary collaborative outputs in journals of their respective discipline and job appraisal. They said that discipline journals did not favor publications about interdisciplinary collaboration because they failed to address the state of the art or central focus of the discipline. Furthermore, unfavorable evaluation of articles about interdisciplinary collaborative products in refereed journals, sequence of collaborators' names in publication, the institutional funding situation, time availability and long working process for a single publication were their worries. As expressed by another collaborator, *K*, looking for collaborators could be a hard task as collaboration requires investment of time, effort and energy from both parties. He was hesitant to bother other subject teachers as he feared that collaboration might add additional burden to other colleagues who were busy with their teaching, research and administrative work. However, he would not decline any collaborative initiative if he had time and interest in it.

Key successful factors

All collaborators felt that open-minded and conflict-avoiding personality traits are the secrets of a successful collaboration. They were willing to play their role in a flexible manner, sometimes as a team player or sometimes as a leader by complying with the team's goal and direction, providing feedback on system design or leading the team to explore the problems respectively. They believed that when there was collaboration, collaborators should be willing to listen to comments, study problems arising from various domains and go for a win-win situation. Regular team meetings and email communication also helped collaborators understand the progress and problems, make the right decisions and maintain a good relationship. Moreover, there must be mutual understanding and mutual respect (For more information, see Appendix 2).

Discussion

Most of the problems, challenges and success factors mentioned by the subject teachers are in line with those discussed in the literature. In my view, there are two issues that deserve more attention.

The first issue is the high communication cost. As stated by *K*, university teachers are very busy with their teaching, research and administration. Although regular meetings are believed to be an effective communication method, the importance of full commitment and time investment from individual staff in the

task could not be underestimated. It is because of this that *K* was hesitant to invite colleagues for collaborative work, fearing that it would impose additional burden. Furthermore, spending too much time in interdisciplinary collaboration may jeopardize subject teachers' research and job appraisal because of the publication trend in their respective fields. Therefore, if a proper signal is given to subject teachers that English language teachers welcome collaboration; and if recognition of collaborative work by people in senior positions and practical support such as small grants and proportionate time release for subject teachers to work closely with English language teachers in lieu of verbal encouragement are given, it may help promote collaboration from an individual to the departmental level.

The second issue is the discipline nature. The willingness of other subject specialists to collaborate with English language teachers is perhaps dependent on the discipline nature. Information Systems (IS) is a discipline whose nature is trouble shooting and problem solving that require its analysts to contact clients and end-users. Therefore its practitioners are more eager to look for collaborators to improve the end product quality than other disciplines'. However, this unique nature may not exist in other disciplines.

Conclusion

It is true that interdisciplinary collaboration could energize both subject and English language teachers to pursue the task. Nevertheless, English language teachers may not be aware of the potential problems mentioned by the subject teachers and the characteristic feature of the discipline. Any cooperation or collaboration may be caused by a number of external factors which are beyond the control of English language teachers. Therefore the more we know about the thoughts of subject teachers and their discipline, the more confident we are to approach the issue. In this paper, the subject teachers' thoughts and voices, though small in number and is restricted to one department, have generated some useful food for thought.

CORRESPONDENCE
Any correspondence should be directed to Cynthia Lee, Hong Kong Baptist University (cfklee@hkbu.edu.hk)

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Appendix 1: Screenshots from the Essay Critiquing System

Figure 1

A screenshot of ECS with suggested sub-themes shown on the left-hand side of the essay.
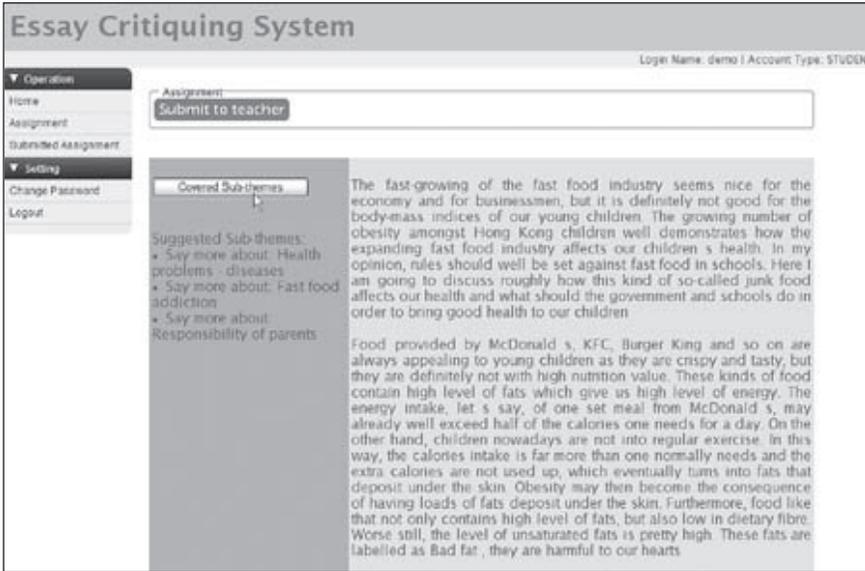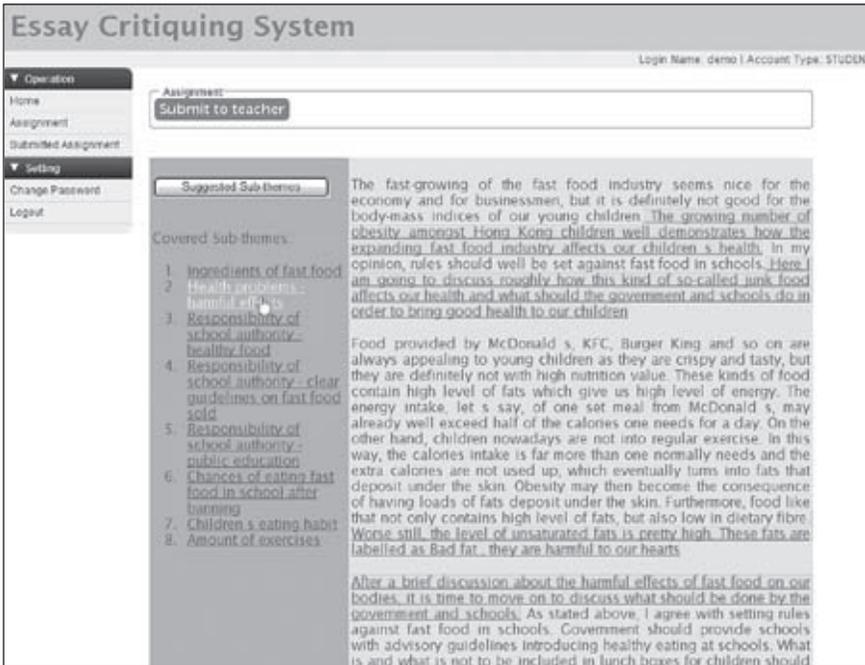

Figure 2

A screenshot of ECS with suggested and covered sub-themes and their detected locations shown with the corresponding sentences highlighted.

Appendix 2: Some verbal reflections

On benefits:
F: I can see that many colleagues in our department work with colleagues of other fields or other universities because Information System analysts need inputs and comments from users. *(translated version of F's interview)*
K: IS [Information Systems] is a field that requires contact with people of the outside world. In developmental methodology, we have to find a method to deliver the system (e.g., how to do it within budget) or ensure a system is well-received by end-users. *(translated version of K's interview)*

On key successful factors:
F: I believe collaboration works well when collaborators have the same goal and there is mutual understanding. We need to understand why someone raises an argument. *(translated version of F's interview)*
W: Everyone is busy at the university. Regular team meetings are highly preferred, especially for corpus monitoring, understanding the progress and problem, and decision making. One good example is the e-learning writing project. All investigators are used to meeting once a week on Tuesdays, from the early brainstorming stage to pilot studies and result analyses. At the brainstorming stage meetings, we discussed what functions should be included in the system design, who wrote the proposal and where to submit. When the system was ready for use, we went through it and suggested additional features or steps to be included in the system. When it was time for the first pilot study, we sat around the table as usual talking about logistics, who to do what in the classroom. All investigators and Research Assistants were present at the pilot study. When we analyzed the pilot studies' results, we discussed the statistical significance and what to write in the report to the funding organization. We also reviewed the entire process, spotting inadequacies and finding out a way to improve them in the upcoming pilot study. It is good to solve problems at face-to-face meetings. We also email one another for comments on the paper and report. The principal investigator also instructs the two Research Assistants what to do for the analysis and how to improve the precision rate of the algorithm. *(translated version of W's interview)*