

“I wonder why they don’t talk to us more”: Exploring interdisciplinarity in Japanese higher education

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigated interdisciplinary attitudes within the English Language Teaching (ELT) department and across its boundaries, drawing upon case study research, conducted by means of questionnaires and follow up semi-structured interviews among ELT and non-ELT faculty in four Japanese colleges and universities in one prefecture. Three themes are argued as impacting upon the concept of interdisciplinarity: disciplinary cultures, collegiality, and collaboration among teachers both within the ELT department (intradisciplinarity) and across into other disciplines within the institution (interdisciplinarity). Findings suggest that interdisciplinarity suffers when strict hierarchies in an institution marginalize ELT practitioners irrespective of their full-time or part-time status. Additionally, institutional and personal constraints based upon real and perceived differences in disciplinary cultures appear to limit collaboration and collegiality. As a possible solution, the introduction of more content-based instruction in English and English for Specific Purposes courses is voiced as a possible means to improve interdisciplinary collaboration although such measures require institutional approval.

KEYWORDS: *interdisciplinarity, disciplinary cultures, collaboration, collegiality*

Introduction

As English language programs at the tertiary level in Japan are increasingly faced with the challenge of preparing students to meet real-world and academic study needs, especially in content-based instruction (Bebenroth & Redfield, 2004), there is a necessity for English language teachers to collaborate both within their discipline and particularly across disciplines—termed as interdisciplinarity—to create more relevant English language programs. With this shift towards English language programs which are more integrated with content-based objectives (Stewart, M. Sagliano, & J. Sagliano, 2002), however, there is reticence shown by many Japanese teachers of English towards collaboration within disciplines and across boundaries (Takagi, 2002), as issues concerning teaching, curriculum, and research are viewed as a matter of personal reflection (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999; Sato & Kleinasser, 2004). As a result, efforts to pursue collaboration between

Japanese and non-Japanese teachers may face a struggle with various cultural barriers. In an attempt to respond to this trend, this paper investigates attitudes towards interdisciplinarity within and towards the English Language Teaching (ELT) department at a local Japanese tertiary level institution to ascertain the feasibility of moves towards creating English language programs which address content-based needs. It will review the literature in the field and draw upon findings from a questionnaire survey and interview-based research in a local Japanese context. The review of literature embraces two broad fields of enquiry which are argued as being directly related to interdisciplinarity: firstly, the ELT department's disciplinary culture compared to other disciplines; and secondly, concepts of collegiality and collaboration among teachers within the ELT department and across into other disciplines.

For the purpose of this study, the definition of interdisciplinarity is taken from Mansilla and Gardner (2003) as work which brings together knowledge and ways of thinking from two or more disciplines with the objective of furthering understanding in ways not possible by a single discipline. The elements constituting interdisciplinarity are essentially grounded in the concept of different disciplines collaborating within or across institutions to achieve an educational goal, one which is focused upon improvement in teaching or research. Bronstein (2003 in Lee, 2008, p. 130) identifies three areas in the process of interdisciplinary collaboration which are key to its success: communication, coordination, and partnership. However, Lee (2008) notes that little research exists about the views of subject-matter teachers when collaborating with ELT faculty, a key issue in interdisciplinary studies. This study attempts to address this paucity by considering the views of both ELT and non-ELT faculty members.

Context

The context of this research is that of a large Japanese prefecture in which there are several key two-year colleges and universities, both private and public. Four of these institutions have been chosen for this investigation as past and present colleagues work in them. They are also well-established institutions in the region and have ELT staff working in departments which are either separate entities to other faculties or integrated into larger departments. I worked until recently for seven years in one of the colleges chosen, positioning me as an "insider" in one institution and an "outsider" in the other three (Sikes as cited in Sikes & Potts, 2008, p. 145).

Of importance to a study of this nature is the positioning of English within each institution, i.e., the status and role of English and the department within the institution. This may constitute a variable impacting upon attitudes towards collaboration with English teachers. From Table 1, it can be seen that there are similarities and differences in this regard.

The review of literature addresses the themes of disciplinary culture, collaboration, and collegiality since interdisciplinarity involves crossing faculty boundaries for various collaborative purposes with others on issues of research, teaching, or administration. The difficulties in this process lead us frequently

Table 1
Institutions and ELT positioning

Institution	Positioning of English
Teacher training college/university	English taught for teacher training purposes ELT department combined with a culture department to form an "International Communication" department Compulsory and optional English courses available
Science and technology university	English as a compulsory subject for first and second graders, and optional courses available Separate ELT department exists within a broader "General Education" department
National university	English as a compulsory subject for first graders Some optional course also available ELT integrated into a larger "General Education" department
Local college	English semi-compulsory and many optional courses available ELT department now integrated into a larger "Communication & Culture" department

to compare our own disciplinary culture to others and reflect upon the nature of collegiality and collaboration we experience. I turn firstly to the literature of disciplinary cultures.

Disciplinary cultures

Research by Adamson and Muller (2007) into academic support among ELT teachers in Japanese tertiary institutions shows a perceived lack of collegiality and collaboration within their own faculties and beyond. Research by Willet and Jeannot (1993), Pennington (1992) in the USA, and Ferguson and Donno (2003) in the UK also reveal a sense of inequality among the faculties and the feeling that ELT is not valued as highly as other disciplines. In explaining these perceptions, Ferguson and Donno (2003) argue that entry into the ELT profession is easier compared to that into other university faculties which requires extensive postgraduate qualifications and that ELT practitioners are perceived by non-ELT faculty as lacking "distinct, specialized knowledge" (p. 29). This suggests that the disciplinary culture in ELT departments is in some way different to that of other faculties. This difference could be conceptualized in the work of Bernstein (1971) and Becher and Trowler (1989). Bernstein (1971) refers to "integrated" (p. 53) and "collected" (p. 66) codes or groupings of teachers, the former frequently found in primary schools, and the latter in secondary schools and higher education. In "integrated" departments, teachers frequently teach different subjects and are therefore used to crossing disciplinary boundaries in discussions on student welfare and academic progress. In contrast, teachers in "collected" departments

have stronger disciplinary boundaries. This resonates with Becher and Trowler's (1989) studies into the "tribes" (departments) and "territories" (knowledge) of higher education institutes. Using these metaphors, as the ELT "tribe" is often made up of teachers with differing backgrounds and "territories", non-ELT faculty may see that tribe as lacking consistency in knowledge.

Within the context of disciplinary "cultures", disciplines may be viewed in terms of being "hard" or "soft", and "pure" or "applied" (Nesi & Gardner, 2006). As ELT departments tend to focus on context and personalization of instruction to meet student needs, non-ELT faculty may perceive it as lacking a homogeneous knowledge base in contrast to "hard" disciplines like science and mathematics which appear to emphasize the more uniform learning of facts and concepts. The difficulties of collaboration between the two are exemplified in Lee's research (2008) between ELT and Information Systems staff in Hong Kong in which interdisciplinary collaboration was reported to be detrimental to the research agenda of non-ELT staff due to the time commitment needed for collaboration.

Furthermore, recent debate surrounds the nature and positioning of applied linguistics (AL) as a discipline which so frequently engages in interdisciplinary ventures. Widdowson's (2006) commentary on the effect of interdisciplinarity on AL expresses doubts about the validity of the belief that AL can be dependent upon others and yet regarded as an independent field of enquiry. Widdowson (2006, p. 95) also regards it as an "illusion" to presume that interdisciplinarity leads to the acquisition of multi-perspectives since "disciplinary consistency and coherence must set limits on how much diversity you can accommodate".

Having identified differences in disciplinary "cultures", issues need to be addressed about the problems of crossing the disciplinary boundaries. Heintz and Origgi (2008) identify four key issues of potential conflict in this process. Firstly, the language norms of other disciplines may differ, specifically in the academic writing for research in that discipline. Secondly, differences in teaching and research methodologies may be apparent. The third issue concerns the institutional constraints on interdisciplinary communication, meaning that, in some cases, other faculties are placed in geographically separate buildings or campuses. The final issue focuses on personal cognitive restraints, meaning that a teacher in either the ELT or non-ELT faculty may simply have personal prejudice or reticence to crossing over into other disciplinary areas. Further to these areas of conflict, Lele and Norgaard (2005) warn that hierarchies based on funding allocation lead to elitism between disciplines resulting in reticence to embark upon interdisciplinary collaboration based on financial grounds.

Exceptions to these common areas of difficulty in crossing disciplinary borders can be seen in the emergence of new "interdisciplines" (Lele & Norgaard, 2005, p. 970) such as ecological anthropology and ecological economics. Interestingly, among the social sciences, to which ELT and AL belong, economics takes a "hegemonic position" (p. 974) as it employs predominantly positivistic research methods as in the natural sciences. These "deep divisions" (p. 972) among social sciences show an enduring prejudice towards fields which use interpretivist research methods.

Collegiality and collaboration

As a precursor to addressing concepts of collegiality and collaboration between teachers in the Japanese context, Hofstede (1990) notes that strict hierarchical relationships in higher education create a sense of rigidity of academic specialization and clearly-defined academic communities. This hierarchical rigidity needs to be assessed in terms of how it may hinder collaboration both within and across the disciplines. Optimal conditions for conducting research or improving teaching methodology require "... time to discuss teacher issues with colleagues, research assistance, and instructional autonomy" (Bondy & Ross, 1998, p. 232) and the presence of workplace collegiality (Tsui, 2003). Sanger (1990, p. 175) adds to these requirements for healthy attitudes towards development of knowledge by stating that a teacher needs to question "the deepest and least changeable" of their "structures of knowledge", a pre-requisite consisting of intimate collegial collaboration, a willingness to embark upon teacher development and even retraining.

But what is understood by the term collegiality? Bush (1998) describes five components for the ideal model of collegiality:

1. Normative democratic principles
2. Professional staff with authority in their fields
3. Assumption of a common set of values
4. Size of decision-making groups
5. Consensual rather than top-down decision-making.

However, the collegial model is often criticized as being "gender-biased" and elitist in universities in terms of "decision making and organization" (Lucas, 2006, p. 19) and has been overtaken by "new managerialism" (Lucas, 2006, p. 19) in which collegiality remains an idealized, perhaps even nostalgic, concept. This is seen especially in the work of Harvie (2000) who refers to an old, idealized sense of collegiality in universities as "intellectual commons" in which equality in decision-making and research was to be seen. This "nostalgic ideal" (Lucas, 2006, p. 17) is claimed to be under attack by cynical "research capitalism" (p. 17) which decreases job security by means of unequal allocation of research funds. Further negative effects of institutional pressure are reported by Atkinson-Grosjean (2006) who illustrates how a previously healthy sense of collegiality and collaboration among scientists in Canadian science institutes broke down when they were compelled to produce more immediately applicable research, rather than pursue a balance of pure and applied research. Other critics of collegiality see it as a means to "reinforce hegemonies, by assuming common values, professional and academic ethics, goals and lifestyles" (Morley, 2003, p. 107) and is frequently formed either because academics feel besieged by outside evaluation and quality audits or because those able to create it seek to "ensure compliance" (p. 109) in decision-making at the workplace.

Research into how ELT teachers collaborate within and across disciplines is quite rare. Notable exceptions are Schechter and Ramirez (1992) who consider how institutional teacher support groups organize themselves effectively to avoid the constraining inhibitions of the institution's hierarchy. Yeh (2005) looks at how non-institutional support groups collaborate in a teacher education program,

giving important insights into individual and group motivation to see the group as a systemic whole, advising that the “collaborative direction of the focus should be owned by each member” and not the institutions they are affiliated with (Yeh, 2005, p. 54). The overriding message from these studies is that collaboration within the ELT department will be more likely to succeed if the importance of non-hierarchical relations between teachers is stressed.

Even if a sense of collegiality and a willingness to collaborate exists within the ELT department, the transition from this intradisciplinary (Mode-1) to interdisciplinary collaboration (Mode-2) (Gibbons et al., 1994) is fraught with potential stumbling blocks. Specifically, Heintz and Origgi (2008) outline four issues: firstly, the language norms of academic writing and speaking may be different in another discipline; secondly, methodologies of research and teaching may also be different; thirdly, institutional constraints may stand in the way of collaboration (other faculties may be on different campuses); and finally, the personal cognitive restraints may exist, for example, personal bias against working across faculty boundaries.

Heintz and Origgi (2008) pinpoint these four areas as being universal issues in interdisciplinary collaboration. However, more culture-specific issues may exist in the local Japanese context of my current research. Takagi (2002) states that collaboration on teaching and research issues among Japanese teachers is rare unless institutional pressure exists to do so. Sato and Kleinasser (2004) explain this reticence as originating from the belief that Japanese see teaching as a “private undertaking” (p. 811), whilst Okano and Tsuchiya (1999) note that Japanese regard pre-service training, termed as “front-loading” by Freeman (2002, p.11), as a sufficient knowledge-base for a teacher’s career. The overriding emphasis from the literature is that Japanese teachers view collaboration for the purpose of research or teaching improvement as an unnecessary interference and that personal reflection and relationships with older, more experienced teachers in their institution are the preferred ways to develop. This stands in stark contrast to the long-term “generative learning” (Senge, 1990, p. 14) frequently proposed in western teacher education.

Methodology

This small “collected case study” (Stake, 1995, p. 5) has involved collecting questionnaire responses from ELT and non-ELT faculty members and then conducting follow-up interviews with selected respondents to expand upon and clarify certain written responses. The four institutions were selected based on their proximity to me and represented the major tertiary institutions in the large prefecture. Respondents were a mixture of local Japanese and non-Japanese lecturers and professors across a broad range of disciplines in each institution. Table 2 shows the text of the questionnaire sent out to ELT and non-ELT faculty (translated into Japanese) which attempted to elicit responses concerning disciplinary cultures, collegiality, and collaboration. Question 2 was included for the questionnaire sent to ELT faculty but not included for non-ELT participants as their perceptions of the ELT department can be elicited in question 3.

Table 2

Questionnaire

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1. How do you think the ELT department and its teachers are regarded by teachers in other departments in this institution?
 2. How do you regard other departments and their teachers?
 3. How is the ELT department positioned in terms of its status in this institution?
 4. How would you describe communication between yourself and teachers of other subjects in this institution?
 5. Is there any collaboration/co-operation between your department and others in terms of teaching, research or sharing of information regarding students? If so, what form does it take?
 6. How do you think the relationship between your department and others could be improved?
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Over 30 written responses were collected, and follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 respondents who were willing to discuss their questionnaire responses in more detail. The content of those interviews was based directly on questions from the questionnaire itself. The settings for these interviews varied between their offices, neutral sites (coffee shops), and my own office. The questionnaires represented the primary source of data as responses were usually quite extensive, and the decision to conduct short follow-up interviews was based on whether I felt a questionnaire response was lacking in clarity or that it could be expanded upon. The flexibility inherent in semi-structured interviewing of delving further into topics was particularly beneficial for this process (Drever, 1995). In addition to questionnaire and interview data, the departmental profiles presented for each institution in the findings may play a role in shaping the attitudes expressed. Accordingly, I have gathered documentary evidence (from university and college webpages and brochures) to gain an understanding of each ELT department's history and positioning in the institution. This data is presented before the questionnaire and interview findings intentionally to foreground the institutional context.

Findings and discussion

The findings from the documentary evidence will be presented for each institution in order to contextualize the ELT department's role within it. That is followed by data from questionnaires and interviews which is discussed in relation to the literature.

National university

Background

Founded in 1949, this national university has five branches in the prefecture. As it is affiliated with a hospital, the medical school of this branch enjoys a high reputation for research. Other faculties in the arts, economics, and science are located on separate campuses. English is not a department per se but integrated

into a larger General Education Center in which e-learning is taking an increasingly important role. General English is a first year compulsory subject; however, few optional courses are offered in subsequent years. Full time foreign ELT staff do not have the right to attend faculty meetings, are not encouraged to research, and are given a teaching load of up to 15 hours per week which is unusually high compared to other universities where 6 to 10 hours is the norm.

Findings and discussion

Seven questionnaires were returned from four full-time and part-time ELT and three non-ELT respondents. However, the latter mostly gave very short answers such as "I have no idea" or "There is no problem about collaboration." Three foreign full-time ELT staff were keen to participate in follow up interviews. Two proposed that English for Specific Purposes be introduced to supplement the existing curriculum or replace the current compulsory General English classes in order to make ELT more relevant at the university. Enthusiasm for content-based teaching in English was also expressed, but some doubted the Japanese teachers' ability to deliver lectures in English, and also professed to having little knowledge of specialist subjects taught in the university.

One ELT foreign full-time lecturer stressed elitism at the university among faculties and noted, as Lele and Norgaard (2005) do, that an awareness of funding allocation is necessary to understand the hierarchy. Regarding interdisciplinary collaboration, some frustration was evident in his aside: "I wonder why they don't talk to us more." This could be seen as an example of Heintz and Origgi's (2008) personal cognitive restraints among non-ELT faculty members. Other ELT full-timers also noted the "minimal" and "civil" communication with non-ELT faculties which was illustrated with one shocking example where an uninformed English language teacher called the roll which included the name of a student who had passed away tragically.

Surprisingly, one ELT respondent claimed to have no knowledge of any interdisciplinary collaboration at the university, despite awareness among respondents of an interdisciplinary project to encourage student autonomy in English language learning through an e-learning project.

One most apparent issue in this branch university was the positioning of the ELT department in the institution, which one respondent described as being "in the lower half of the hierarchy." Another corrected my question about the department's positioning in the institution by saying that there was "no ELT department as such" and "confusion as to what exactly the department is" existed even among ELT staff. Reflecting on the responses given by ELT and non-ELT faculty, there is a clear marginalization of ELT in the university which is compounded by the fact that ELT full-timers were denied the right to attend faculty meetings, the clearest example of a delegitimization of their voices in the institution. In addition, since other faculties were "historically different schools" on "physically distant and different campuses", a clear institutional constraint (Heintz & Origgi, 2008) existed to interdisciplinarity.

Teacher training college/university

Background

This private, Catholic teacher training college was established in 1966 and expanded to include a four-year university in 2003. The two-year college which still exists as part of the institution offers early childhood education and international communication courses and the university courses in human studies, culture and psychology. The English department and International Culture departments of the two-year college were combined in 2003, forming the International Communication department. The institution enjoys strong links with the local Board of Education and helps to provide inservice teacher training for local secondary school English teachers. Full-time ELT faculty members are active in committees, faculty meetings, and promotion of the institution.

Findings and discussion

Unfortunately, no questionnaires for this institution were returned by non-ELT staff. Seven ELT faculty members responded, two of whom agreed to follow-up interviews. The data from the seven ELT respondents was nevertheless insightful in that full-time and part-time staff exhibited clear differences, as can be illustrated in the views of one full-timer towards the positioning of the ELT department and his perceptions of how non-ELT lecturers saw the role of English in the institution:

The English department is well-regarded as the focus is on pre-service training for junior high school teachers.

He further explained in a follow-up interview that since many non-ELT faculty had PhDs from English-speaking countries, they could "understand how difficult it is to learn a second language and understand different educational cultures." As a consequence, it is planned that some of those teachers teach their content-based classes in English.

Some part-time ELT teachers were critical of non-ELT staff, one noting that communication with them was commonly "aloof" and "cordial", but not professionally grounded", explained later in an interview as meaning that discussion of teaching and research issues was more likely to occur between full-time ELT staff and non-ELT staff than with part-time ELT staff. Expanding on this last comment, the respondent expressed that teachers "are interested in teaching only, and don't seem interested in reflective practice or classroom research" which results in "considerable unfulfilled pedagogical potential." In comments which clearly resonate with Takagi's (2002) observations on Japanese teachers' unwillingness to engage in inservice teacher development, he claimed that collaboration with them would necessitate "an institutional decision."

Summing up the findings for this institution, there is a marked contrast between part- and full-time ELT teachers' attitudes towards their non-ELT colleagues. Full-time ELT staff are active in faculty meetings and committees which is a positive aspect of their day-to-day involvement in the college and university life. Non-ELT staff cannot participate in this manner and as a consequence naturally have less exposure to possible forms of collaboration with non-ELT

faculty. The exception to this is the teacher training scheme operating between the institution and local secondary school English teachers in which both full-time and part-time ELT staff are active.

Science and technology university

Background

This private university is a regional branch of a science and technology university in Tokyo and was founded in 1990 as a two-year college. It became a four-year university with a graduate school in 2002. The main fields of study are engineering (mechanical and electronic systems), business, and environmental science. English is taught in first year compulsory classes and is offered in limited optional courses thereafter. The English department is integrated into a larger General Education Center also giving remedial support in mathematics and physics.

Findings and discussion

Six sets of questionnaire data were collected from ELT (four returns) and non-ELT staff (two returns), and follow-up interviews lasting between 20 and 30 minutes took place with three ELT respondents. From the non-ELT responses, a mathematics lecturer stated that the ELT full-time staff are “terrible” in terms of everyday communication and collaboration and the status of the ELT department is “a little bit lower” than that of others. This negative view appeared to have stemmed from an incident earlier in the term in which he requested a timetable change with a full-time ELT teacher, but was refused. A physics part-time lecturer cast some interesting insights on the hierarchy of the university, noting that its strict, vertical style “mirrors Japanese society” as faculty teaching science related to medical applications were at the top and therefore attracted higher funding than other faculties. Both full- and part-time ELT staff also bemoaned the ELT department’s status as being “positioned one step below”, and “peripheral” in the institution. In an interview, one Japanese part-time ELT lecturer expanded on this relatively lower positioning with the comment that the “English staff’s qualifications are not so high comparing to other departments.” Asked as to what research ELT faculty did pursue, it was found that no full-time staff conducted research in the fields of gender and drama, language learning or linguistics. Overall, these findings corroborate those of Adamson and Muller (2007) from their research in the same prefecture and also resonate with the reports of lower institutional positioning in UK universities by Ferguson and Donno (2003).

Investigating the relationship between ELT and non-ELT faculties, the existence of “tension” was cited by a Japanese part-time ELT lecturer:

When I consult about my students to her (non-ELT department head), the reply is always dry. Perhaps they do not take care of their own students very much.

Further to this, in responses reported by a full-time ELT staff member, the reply of a science lecturer to an enquiry as to how she could improve ELT provision in the university was mimicked:

I expect almost nothing because they (science graduates) usually go to a job interview where English competence is not counted.

She continued by remarking that compulsory first year English provision was probably seen as a "necessary evil" in the university and explained the complex hierarchy in the institution and, interestingly, also within the ELT department:

My institution puts "sen-mon" (science and business) fields above the humanities and liberal arts. There is another kind of hierarchy among English teachers: (Specialist) teachers like linguistics or literature who give lectures to 3rd/4th year(s) and graduate students rank first, while General English ones come second.

The combination of interdisciplinary "tension" and a clear hierarchy both across disciplines and within them would then appear to verify Hofstede's (1990) findings on Asian hierarchies. The issue of the qualifications base between the ELT and non-ELT staff is accentuated by the fact that no full-timers in the ELT department hold doctorates or are active in research in ELT. This immediately recalls one of Bush's (1998) criteria for collegiality, that of "professional staff with authority in their field", which means that non-ELT faculty may perceive ELT faculty as lacking "authority" in their own ELT field. It also raises the issue of what 'field' full-time ELT staff do affiliate themselves with.

Despite some apparent discord, most respondents wished to improve interdisciplinary communication, often by "face-to-face" interaction. One Japanese ELT full-timer did, however, express doubts about this.

I wonder if it needs to be 'improved' to begin with. I think there is much to be done inside our department before going out for the interdepartmental relationship improvement thing.

On reflection, although this comment showed an unwillingness to engage in interdisciplinary collaboration, it was insightful in that the idea of better intradisciplinarity in the ELT department itself was a clear, and quite rational, priority.

Local college

Background

This private two-year college was established in the mid-1980s and enjoyed growth till the mid-1990s. Similar to enrollment in many rural colleges in Japan, its population has since declined due to lower birthrate and economic recession. English was initially a priority on the curriculum and at one time the college offered teacher training for secondary school English teachers. The English department was merged into a general Communication and Culture department in 2001 and in 2008 into a pre-school teacher training course with no emphasis on English. English now has the status of a semi-compulsory subject but a variety of English for Specific Purposes and linguistics courses are still offered as options.

Findings and discussion

Ten questionnaire responses from seven ELT and three non-ELT faculty were returned, five of whom agreed to be interviewed (three ELT and two non-ELT faculty, respectively). Notably, foreign part-time ELT staff expressed a sense of marginalization not only in terms of interdisciplinary, but also in intradisciplinary collaboration, one complaining that English had deteriorated in status to become the “poor cousin” in the curriculum. In that part-timer’s questionnaire response she had mentioned that “our presence here is taken for granted” explaining later in an interview that part-timers were left out of important departmental decision-making despite the insights that they could give. Other foreign ELT staff also indicated that the ELT department’s recently reduced role in the institution made it difficult to pursue interdisciplinary collaboration. This represents a form of institutional constraint as outlined by Heintz and Origgi (2008). This current situation contrasted sharply with the more central role enjoyed by the ELT department when the college first opened. Some long-term part-time ELT teachers reminisced about the frequent interdisciplinary collaboration at that time (for example, English field trips and English summer camps). Non-ELT staff respondents who had worked for a long time voiced the opinion that the recent introduction of a more corporate management style at the college had led to the decline in communication, a situation which concurs both with the nostalgic sense of collegiality (Lucas, 2006) and also the breakdown of collegiality (Atkinson-Grosjean, 2006).

Newer non-ELT staff were ambiguous in their responses on interdisciplinarity, one stating in an interview that he was “not at all interested in communication with ELT staff” because their (foreign teachers’) manners are sometimes “pleasant” but sometimes “too casual and over-familiar.” However, others claimed there was “no difference” in status between departments, one even putting forward an idea in her response to collaborate with ELT staff on a new project to improve students’ overall communication skills in English and Japanese. This is perhaps reminiscent of the interdepartmental focus of Bernstein’s (1971) “integrated” codes on student welfare. Significantly, though, one non-ELT respondent did note that “ELT staff don’t seem to cooperate with each other” and that as the ELT department is now merged with a larger department, it has “low status” in the college.

As an “insider” researcher (Sikes as cited in Sikes and Potts, 2008, p. 145) in this institution, one issue did emerge from one new non-ELT respondent which reminded me of the problems inherent in researching my own colleagues. His observation at the all-teacher meetings was that:

The foreign full-time teacher (me) clearly has low comprehension of what is said in general meetings as he is often silent.

As a result of this apparent lack of comprehension, he felt strongly that I should not attend these meetings. These views shocked me personally as the research process of asking teachers to fill out questionnaires and discuss their views was intended as an awareness-raising exercise rather than an opportunity to advocate exclusion from important meetings. His genuine wish that I should

not participate in these regular interdisciplinary meetings was clearly a sign that he regarded me as lacking the competence to interact, a situation similar to the situation facing ELT full-time staff at the national university.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study has attempted to explore the beliefs of both ELT and non-ELT academic staff towards interdisciplinary collaboration with each other. Among ELT staff, findings from questionnaires and interviews reveal that in the cases investigated within one prefectural area in Japan, a "complex" does exist among both full-time and part-time ELT faculty members. These feelings may be traced to some localized variables surrounding the ELT department's positioning in the institution, namely whether it offers compulsory general English or more specialized ESP classes related to the students' present or future content-based needs. Further possibilities may lie in the overall status of the ELT department within the larger institution, particularly if it constitutes a department in its own right or has been merged into a larger department. Furthermore, data differs somewhat between full- and part-time ELT staff within their own institutions, with findings from the latter at times showing strong feelings of marginalization not just in the institution as a whole, but even within the ELT department. Of interest is the historical perspective provided by some long-term teachers, particularly in the case of the local college where part-timers clearly harbor nostalgic feelings about the previously more prominent role that ELT used to play in the institution.

Non-ELT faculty generally viewed collaboration with ELT staff as problematic due partly to some reticence to communicate with foreigners, and also to doubts about the ability of non-Japanese to communicate in Japanese. Other opinions showed that non-ELT staff believed that ELT staff did not seem to collaborate between themselves, a point which one full-time ELT lecturer confirmed when expressing skepticism towards this "interdepartmental relationship improvement thing". The lower rate of response to the questionnaire by non-ELT staff (eight in total) compared to that of ELT staff (22 in total) could be seen as a sign that the issue of interdisciplinary collaboration was not an important issue for research. The lengthy responses by ELT staff in questionnaires and follow-up interviews were, in contrast, perhaps a sign that this issue was of some concern to them in their working lives.

Finally, findings from this "collected case study" (Stake, 1995, p. 5) reveal that Japanese regard pre-service training as a sufficient knowledge-base for a teacher's career, termed as "front-loading" by Freeman (2002, p.11). There are a number of possible hurdles to interdisciplinary collaboration, namely the institutional constraints and personal restraints (Heintz & Origgi, 2008). Reticence among non-ELT teachers appears to lead back to cultural tendencies (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999; Sato & Kleinasser, 2004; Takagi, 2002). However, it is important to note that some Japanese ELT staff also share the same frustration as their non-Japanese colleagues towards the unwillingness of non-ELT faculty to share information about student welfare. Relating the findings to the literature on disciplinary cultures, particularly concerning perceptions shown towards the English department (Ferguson &

Donno, 2003) and the complex perceived by ELT departments in that geographical area (Adamson & Muller, 2007), it appears that institutions such as the teacher training college/university view collaboration with the ELT department as much more commonplace due to the important role English plays in the training of teachers. Despite this higher positioning of English, there is nevertheless the perception among some ELT teachers that opportunities for more collaboration are neglected, possibly due to differences in status between full- and part-time ELT staff. Findings from my own small college, the national university and the science and technology university in which English does not have its own separate department, or where it has experienced a downgrading in status, illustrate how the lack of an “applied” nature of English to content-based goals (for example, teacher training licenses or ideas for the introduction of more ESP syllabi) reduces the necessity of ELT and non-ELT faculty to collaborate. This has, in turn, resulted in the downgrading of its status among the various departments and has led to calls for interdisciplinary collaboration by ELT faculty to be regarded as troublesome interference to the non-ELT departments’ own research and teaching agendas, similar to findings by Lee (2008). Disciplinary culture is, in brief, a concept which in this study needs to be interpreted according to the local, specific role that English plays in the wider curriculum of that institution, and also according to the relative status (full- or part-time) of teachers wishing to collaborate across disciplinary boundaries. Faculty teaching English for general purposes in departments without clear departmental status appear to be, in the words of one foreign ELT teacher at the local college, merely a “poor cousin” to other departments.

Implications

The implications for this small-scale study are firstly to expand the investigation into other colleges and universities to see if resonance exists in the findings. The purpose of conducting this present research has been primarily to raise my personal awareness as an outsider and insider in the cases investigated about the state of interdisciplinarity in a region. However, a case could be put forward to suggest that those completing the questionnaire and participating in the follow-up interviews have also begun to reflect upon how they collaborate within and across disciplinary boundaries. These personal reflections have focused on whether healthy intradisciplinarity exists in my own working place, if it is a prerequisite for crossing faculty boundaries into interdisciplinary collaboration, and how curricular innovation, for example, in the creation of ESP courses or provision of content-based instruction, can present a means towards the interdisciplinary collaboration that I hope for.

A keynote talk entitled “ELT and interdisciplinary attitudes: Insights from Asian contexts” based on this study was presented at the ESP: Through and Across Disciplines conference at Shih Chien University, Taiwan on April 25, 2009.

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