

English for Specific Purposes Teachers' Perceptions of Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Writing Classes

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Abstract

Interdisciplinary collaboration between language teachers and content specialists is an important activity in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). However, collaboration is an under-researched practice in the Philippines, where some ESP teachers have difficulties in teaching specialized writing courses due to lack of training in technical content. Thus, exploring collaboration is worthwhile, especially because of its potential in informing curricular decisions in specialized writing classes as a result of curricular revisions in the K to 12 program. This exploratory qualitative study reports on the perspective of two ESP teachers, who are involved in teaching English for the Professions, on interdisciplinary collaboration. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and the informants' responses were thematically coded to reveal how they understand collaboration, what its benefits and challenges are, and how it can be established. This study has implications for understanding how interdisciplinary collaboration may work and be sustained in the Philippine university context.

Keywords: interdisciplinary collaboration, teachers' perspectives, specialized writing classes

Introduction

The prominence of English as the international language for cross-cultural communication has highlighted the need for students to master discipline-specific communication skills for them to succeed in their academic careers. One approach used for developing such abilities is English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Hyland). Because ESP utilizes the content of specific disciplines, integrating content with language learning is a common practice. However, this integration is challenging for ESP teachers, because they often teach specialized content without much preparation for the discipline they are assigned to (Gonzalez and Louis). One possibility is to “engage with the disciplines” through interdisciplinary collaboration with content specialists (Dudley-Evans and St. John 42). Collaboration is vital in describing the language skills that students will use in their professions (Feak) and also provides teachers with professional development opportunities (Belcher).

Despite it being a widespread practice in ESP contexts, few studies on interdisciplinary collaboration have been conducted in the Philippines. Although ESP is a dominant language teaching approach (Martin), many Filipino ESP teachers struggle in teaching specialized writing in the professions because of their lack of training in ESP methodology and specialized content (Carreon). Consequently, exploring interdisciplinary collaboration is important because it potentially addresses ESP teachers’ content teaching needs. It is equally crucial to seek ESP teachers’ perspectives regarding this practice, because their understanding of collaboration will affect how they implement it (Davison).

Thus, the goal of this exploratory study is to answer the following research question: “How do ESP teachers understand interdisciplinary collaboration, and what are their views on its implementation for ESP writing classes?” In doing so, this study hopes to provide a better understanding of how collaboration may work in the Philippine ESP context and offer insights that could inform how collaboration may be established.

Literature Review

Definition of interdisciplinary collaboration

Interdisciplinary collaboration can be broadly defined as “collective action undertaken by English and content area teachers to address the needs of English language learners” (Pawan and Ortloff 464). It may involve activities that range from informal discussions, to highly structured and formal team teaching models (DelliCarpini and Alonso).

Generally, collaboration in ESP may be undertaken for two reasons: first, language teachers are given specialized content that they are not adequately prepared to teach (Tatzl); and second, they need to contextualize language teaching in students’ disciplines by describing the language and genres students need to acquire (Shannon and Meath-Lang). Such collaborations contribute to the success of ESP programs (Crandall and Kaufman) because content specialists are more aware of students’ language learning needs (Stewart and Perry), and language teachers highlight language skills relevant to learners’ future professions (Craig), thus improving student achievement (DelliCarpini)

More specifically, collaboration can be more concretely viewed according to three levels of involvement between the language teacher and content specialist (Swales). The first is called *cooperation*, where the language teacher becomes more familiar with the content of the discipline by seeking information from contentspecialists, but teaches the subject alone. The second level is *collaboration*, where the language teacher works with the content specialist outside the classroom to develop discipline-specific language skills by designing syllabi, creating instructional materials and activities, or assessing tasks. Finally, the third level where both teachers are most involved is called *team teaching*, where both teachers work together in the same classroom to instruct students simultaneously. Thus far, it can be seen that collaboration varies depending on how language teaching is more closely matched with the activities of content courses (Hyland). Swales’ descriptions will be used to analyze the type of collaboration being practiced in the research context.

Collaboration thus occurs along a continuum of complexity, instead of being limited to particular activities or types. This is because collaboration varies according to implementation and is better understood by identifying the context where it occurs (Austin and Baldwin). Thus, regardless of the form it takes, collaborations that English teachers undertake can be thought of as “a close, functionally interdependent relationship ... [where parties] strive to create mutually beneficial outcomes for all participants” (Jap 87).

Benefits and challenges of collaboration

Collaboration has several benefits. First, collaboration makes teaching efficient, since the duties are shared by two teachers (Barron). It also helps generate different solutions to both content and language academic concerns of students (Dove and Honigsfeld). Thus, students’ needs are more comprehensively addressed because they discover different perspectives on concepts in the course (Jordan). Second, collaboration provides ample opportunities for teachers’ professional development (Martin-Beltran and Peercy). It helps teachers learn new pedagogical techniques and content relevant to their students’ backgrounds (Craig), and also improves lesson delivery and reflective practice (DelliCarpini and Alonso). Third, collaboration provides teachers with moral support (Kelchtermans). Working with other teachers, especially those outside their discipline, allows teachers to build a collegial culture that reduces the isolation they may experience because teaching is typically an individualistic job (Dove and Honigsfeld).

While collaboration has advantages, it can also be challenging. First, it is time-consuming; teachers are hesitant to collaborate because of the additional time needed in running a course with their colleague, since they have heavy workloads to begin with (Tatzl). Second, teachers prefer to work alone because they are used to the individualistic nature of their job (Friend and Cook). Because not all teachers are used to shared-decision making, learning to collaborate may entail a big adjustment for them (Stewart, Sagliano and Sagliano).

Third, teachers from different fields may have difficulty in overcoming their disciplinary barriers, especially if they do not understand or respect each other's expertise (Craig). This may lead to issues of parity in the partnership, because content specialists may be concerned that their students will learn watered-down content (Crandall and Kaufman), while language teachers may feel that content specialists are not as sensitive to students' language learning needs as they should be (Hyland). Because language teachers are collaborating to integrate content and language into learning, content objectives tend to drive the collaboration, which may mean being relegated to a lower status compared to content specialists in the partnership (DelliCarpini and Alonso).

Finally, formal collaboration usually needs to be facilitated between departments, which can be difficult due to administrative costs, additional workload, schedule coordination, and lack of commitment and communication (Hui and Leung). Thus, it seems as though informal collaborations are more feasible, since they are possible without departmental support (Brennan and van Naerssen).

Methodology

Research design

This exploratory study used a qualitative case study design (Cresswell) to discover how interdisciplinary collaboration is understood within one English department of a university in the Philippines. It investigates the views of two professors who are involved in teaching English for the Professions, which is an ESP class; their perspectives are probed to obtain a better understanding of how collaboration may be practiced in this context.

Background of research setting and participants

The research context is a public university with about 25,000 students, 300 programs, and 1,500 teaching staff. It was chosen because its English

department has explored developing specialized writing courses in response to curricular revisions necessitated by the K to 12 program.

The researcher sought to interview two professors from the English department regarding their views. In selecting participants, purposeful sampling (Patton) was used: first, they are teachers who are involved in teaching the general education subject English in the professions; second, they are knowledgeable about the context of their department and the needs of their students.

The two participants in the study have diverse backgrounds. The first, Mina, has been teaching with the Department for twenty years. She has completed a doctorate in English Language Studies. Additionally, she has been teaching the Department's general ESP course (English for the Professions) for more than ten years. She is also the head of the team of language teachers who are designing new writing courses for engineers and has begun talks with engineering content specialists. Meanwhile, Kat is relatively new, having taught with the Department for five years. She has a master's degree in English Language Studies. She has taught the ESP course for four years and is part of a team designing new freshman writing courses.

Data collection and analysis

This research made use of individual interviews, which allow researchers to determine how people perceive phenomena and make sense of them (McMillan and Schumacher). The interviews were semi-structured, which guided the interview flow and allowed the researcher to pursue related topics (Glesne).

Afterwards, data analysis took place. First, the interviews were transcribed by the researcher. Next, an iterative process using thematic analysis was applied in order to better understand both the explicit and implicit ideas in the data (Barbour). This allowed for both deductive and inductive data analysis. First, the researcher identified themes from the literature and used these during

initial coding of the transcripts to guide analysis (Saldana). Additional codes were developed, where relevant, based on informants' answers (Corbin and Strauss). Afterwards, categories were developed by rereading the data and comparing and contrasting participants' answers to a question (Cresswell). Lastly, themes were chosen and analyzed in response to the research question (Corbin and Strauss).

Results and Discussion

Understanding experiences of collaboration

Collaboration in an ESP class is often undertaken to integrate language and content (Crandall and Kaufman). When asked to share their experiences with collaboration, Mina and Kat mentioned how they have not yet attempted to collaborate with subject specialists.

Instead, they shared how they deal with teaching specialist content. Mina mentioned that she "reads articles with specialist content and attempts to write in the genre that is used in the readings, and equally focuses on form and content." She does her own research and takes the initiative to consult content specialists to check if she is on the right track.

Meanwhile, Kat said she prefers to "teach general principles of effective technical writing which are applicable to different disciplines," because of the heterogeneous composition of students in ESP classes. She believed that "students already know the content of their field." While she has not yet taught any specialist content, she said she intends to familiarize herself with the content by asking students about the writing requirements in their field, and consulting informally with practitioners.

The degree of collaboration, especially when designing a course, depends on circumstances unique to the teaching context (Basturkmen). While the participants say they have not yet collaborated, using Swales' description shows otherwise, because they have engaged in the least involved form of

collaboration, known as *cooperation*. Even if they have not taught a class with a content specialist, the informants have sought their help in familiarizing themselves with the content. The content specialist offers them information about texts, assignments, and the discursal framework of the discipline. The English teachers gather necessary information about the content course and find out what students and content specialists prioritize in those disciplines. Essentially, in undergoing cooperation, the informants are conducting a needs analysis. Additionally, because they are teaching the class armed with helpful information from content specialists, they employ self-instruction in order to acquire the knowledge they need to teach the ESP class (Orr).

When asked about why they have not yet attempted collaboration, Mina said, “there is not a strong need to do so.” She mentioned the individualistic teaching styles and the culture of academic freedom at the university as factors affecting this need, which is characterized as typical of college professors. Kat agreed, and mentioned the ESP course’s objective of teaching students the general principles of effective technical writing as something that decreases the need to collaborate.

However, they did acknowledge that as the department develops more specialized writing courses, the need to collaborate may increase. Mina believes that collaborating with content specialists “can help develop a writing course that is very specific to the concerns of the students’ discipline.” Meanwhile, Kat believes that collaboration is useful mainly in the needs analysis stage.

It appears the informants believe that working with subject specialists is not necessary yet, and they anticipate how the university’s organizational and academic culture may hinder collaborations. Additionally, their responses highlight their belief that both content and language teachers need to have shared goals when establishing and implementing collaboration (Friend and Cook), and there is a need to create a culture of collaboration in order to encourage more collaborative efforts (Cohen and Mankin). Finally, this further highlights that, based on the experience of the two informants, cooperation is the form of collaboration most commonly practiced in the department.

Benefits and challenges of collaboration

Both participants believe that collaboration can be advantageous. Mina said, “collaboration is enriching, since you have two practitioners helping each other in designing, teaching, implementing, and evaluating the course.” Kat believed that collaboration is beneficial since it “allows students to be exposed to different teaching strategies and perspectives.”

In spite of these benefits, collaboration also contains challenges. Mina believed that a challenge in collaboration lies in administrative matters. She explained, “It’s about who gets the teaching units, and how many units, or who does much of the marking of the assignments.” She added that differences in perception regarding the ESP course’s value are also an issue, because “content professors sometimes see language skills simply as tools or skills, and thus do not prioritize them. Meanwhile, we language teachers argue that learning about language improves critical thinking, and we wish they would give it more importance.” Kat concurred with this perspective, wishing that content specialists “would not just see us as a service course.”

Their views are corroborated by the literature on the benefits of collaboration, such as improved motivation for students because of the variety of teachers (Craig), and achieving teaching efficiency for teachers because the workload is shared (Barron). However, they also highlighted issues prevalent in the literature regarding the issues of collaboration, particularly regarding administrative matters and different disciplinary views of writing. These concerns are highlighted by Creese, who emphasizes how language teachers often feel relegated to a lower status because they are seen as support units to academic departments; thus, their expertise may not be sufficiently recognized.

Fostering collaboration

Even if collaboration seems like a challenging endeavor, the participants believe building effective collaboration is a worthwhile venture. When

asked to describe her idea of effective collaboration, Mina said, “Successful collaboration depends on how willing both teachers are to be involved, and how much involvement they have. The successful ones I’ve seen usually involve collaboration from the beginning in the following activities: needs analysis, skills analysis, syllabus creation, and assessment.” Meanwhile, Kat responded similarly and believes that effective collaboration “needs the willingness of the teachers and the support of the administration.”

The participants’ views echo the essential elements for successful collaboration (Jordan): the willingness to collaborate of the part of the staff; clear demarcation of teaching responsibilities; and the students’ perception of the collaboration as complementary teaching. Additionally, they emphasized the necessity of administrative support in effective collaboration, since issues such as defining teaching responsibilities, facilitating communication, and providing sufficient training can be addressed by these leaders.

Such concerns are echoed by the literature (Craig; Crandall & Kaufman), which highlights the need for strong leadership support for successful collaboration (Pawan and Ortloff).

Conclusion

This exploratory study sought to discover two ESP professors’ perspectives on understanding and implementing interdisciplinary teacher collaboration in ESP contexts. The participants in this study, while they have not yet attempted more involved forms of collaboration, view collaboration as occurring in the needs analysis stage. Also, participants see collaboration as valuable in addressing students’ disciplinary communication needs. Additionally, they believe interdisciplinary teacher collaboration is beneficial because they encourage teachers’ development and students’ motivation. However, there are several challenges in its implementation, particularly regarding time constraints, differences among disciplinary cultures, and numerous administrative concerns.

The main implications focus on several considerations in implementing collaboration in the future. Leaders of the department may take advantage of the generally positive attitude towards collaboration in the department by discovering other collaborative partnerships and use these as a starting point for increased communication and coordination, thus starting small and building on existing structures. Focusing on existing collaborations may improve their implementation, spread awareness of these efforts, and can be a basis for leaders to articulate possible policies and practices to guide present and future collaborations and look for feasible ways they can begin concretely supporting such efforts.

This study involved only two Filipino professors from one university. While some useful ideas have been identified, the sample size was too small; thus, care should be taken when trying to generalize findings to other contexts. Additionally, due to time constraints, only one method of data collection was used; thus, this study's findings would benefit from triangulation through other data collection methods. Finally, future research directions include analyzing more examples of interdisciplinary teacher collaboration in the Philippines and researching how teachers may better articulate collaboration policies and participate in effective implementation. Such efforts may help teachers realize that interdisciplinary collaboration is a favorable and feasible endeavor that helps both content specialists and language experts make the most of separate, but equal expertise (Feak).

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