

***Significance of Working Together to Create and Revise a Consistent Achievement
Goal Chart: Focusing on Teachers' Narratives***

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Abstract

Japan's Ministry of Education and boards of education in each prefecture have been emphasizing collaborative activities between elementary, junior high, and high schools. However, it has been pointed out that collaboration between schools has not progressed very well. This may indicate the need for collaborative activity research in English education between different school types is greater than ever. Yamamoto (2019) conducted an interview survey of teachers who initiated a collaborative project in English education of a private school cooperation in western Japan (the first-generation teachers). He found out that what they seek is a "lean connection" and that setting consistent achievement goals is essential in connecting education of different school types. The project has continued, although the core members have changed. Based on Yamamoto (2019), the presenter set the following research questions and conducted interviews in 2021 to compare the attitudes of the second-generation teachers at elementary, junior high, and high school with those of the first-generation teachers. (1) Do the second-generation teachers have different mindsets from the first-generation? (2) How have collaborative activities centered on creating and revising a consistent achievement goal chart affected them? The results show that, unlike the first generation, the second generation has a more concrete and multifaceted perspective in their awareness of lesson planning, student understanding, and self-examination. The results also suggest that collaborative efforts centered on the goal chart have functioned as an opportunity for teacher development, fostering an awareness of collaboration among different school types and improving the quality of information exchange.

Keywords: English Education, Consistent Achievement Goal, Elementary and Secondary School Collaboration

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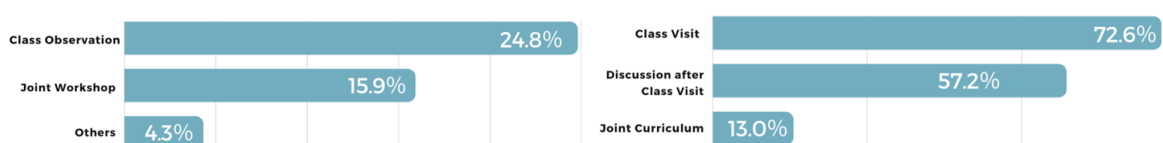
Introduction

In Japan, English education in elementary schools has been one of the required subjects since school year 2020. Before this movement, many prefectural boards of education established policies and goals to promote collaboration among elementary, junior high, and high schools regarding English education. Moreover, they started to carry out projects to promote such collaboration. The importance of promoting inter-school English education collaboration among different school types is generally recognized. For example, the percentage of prefectures with “established policies or goals to promote collaboration among different school types” is 63.8, 31 prefectures out of 47. Furthermore, 87.2% of 41 prefectures answered that they are doing some projects in practice to promote inter-school collaboration on English education (Zenkoku todofuken kyoikuiinkai rengokai, 2018).

According to the 2017 Japan Ministry of Education survey, 12.5% of high schools nationwide responded that they are collaborating with elementary schools, and 27.5% responded that they are collaborating with junior high schools. In contrast, the figure for elementary and junior high school collaboration is 81.2%, which is considerably higher than for elementary and high school collaboration (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2017). This is thought to be due to the municipality in which the schools are located. Most elementary and junior high schools are established in the same city. In recent years, some schools have been established as integrated public elementary and junior high schools or compulsory education schools. 81.2% indeed seems high, but the rate was already 70.0 in the 2009 survey (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2009). This means that their collaborative activities have not suddenly become more active in recent years.

Based on Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2017), let us look at specific forms of collaboration between schools. The bar graphs below show the responses to the question about what kind of activities high schools do with junior high schools. The most common activity is “teachers’ class observation,” followed by “teachers’ joint workshop on a specific theme” (Figure 1, left). Many of the activities between elementary and junior high schools are class observations followed by discussions (Figure 1, right).

Figure 1: Collaborative activities



Source: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2017)

In sum, so far, cooperation among different school types in English education is considered necessary nationwide, and teachers’ exchange activities are conducted to some extent. Such actions include class observations and subsequent discussions, information exchange meetings, or joint training sessions.

Review of previous studies

Previous studies in various subject areas, not limited to foreign language education, argue that exchanging information enhances collaboration among different types of schools. Many practices in schools based on this logic have been reported. Naoyama (2013) states that

information exchange and interaction among different schools are essential to reach the first state of collaboration. They shorten the distance in feelings, and the distance in content is shortened through curriculum collaboration. In other words, the process is from information exchange to curriculum improvement. The author does not object to this position. Exchanging information would undoubtedly be necessary. However, Aoyagi (2016), Matsumoto (2013), and others have pointed out that despite these efforts, the reality is that in many schools, collaboration among different types of schools in English education has yet to progress sufficiently. This indicates that further research on collaborative activities is needed to examine what and how to enhance collaboration among schools.

There are few studies dealing with collaborative activities to set achievement goals, which is the focus of this project and research, as a trigger for promoting collaboration. Okazaki (2014) and Okazaki (2016) have addressed the issue of setting achievement goals in English language education. In particular, Okazaki (2016) points out the significance of setting achievement goals together as effective for positive changes in teaching practices and beliefs and for improving collegiality within the English department of a high school.

The author started a project in 2013 with teachers from an elementary school, a junior high school, and a high school. We believed that jointly creating achievement goals that are consistent and connected could be a catalyst for promoting collaboration based on Okazaki's viewpoint. This project aims to create an achievement goal chart that has consistency from elementary school to high school graduation in English communication skills and the educational philosophy of the schools.

Their schools are affiliated with private school cooperation. Collaboration between schools would be challenging even if they are private schools. When they exist as one junior high school or one high school, it tends to have a stand-alone mindset, and in many cases, educational activities are completed at each school. The schools in question have their own entrance exams, and it used to be hard to see what they were doing in each, though they are located close together. The goal chart in Figure 2 is the 2022 edition made through their collaborative work. Based on it, we have also been working on verifying the achievement of the goals and evaluating the students' degree of accomplishment.

Yamamoto (2019) surveyed the attitudes of teachers involved in this project. He interviewed the teachers who started the collaborative project in 2013 (hereafter referred to as "the first-generation collaboration teachers"). In this project, teachers worked together to create a consistent English education achievement goal chart for their junior and senior high schools. From the interviews, Yamamoto (2019) extracted what they sought in the project is a "lean connection (p.12)" and claimed that making a consistent achievement goal chart can be an essential factor in connecting schools of different levels.

The project, initiated to connect a junior high school and a high school, is still ongoing as of 2022; in 2018, an elementary school was added to the project. Moreover, the core teachers of the project have been replaced over the years.

English teacher in her 30s. Nozomi is a female junior high school English teacher in her 30s. And Takuro is a male high school teacher in his 40s. They are “second-generation collaboration teachers.” They were all assigned to be in charge of revising the goal chart in a situation where this collaborative project had already started.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in August 2021, which lasted 40-50 minutes each. The researcher compared them with the previous survey results. Data were transcribed, and qualitative content analysis was conducted through coding. The questions were the same as those of the first-generation teachers were asked in the 2019 survey:

- (1) How has your involvement in this project changed your thinking about “goal setting,” “collaboration,” and your teaching style?
- (2) What is the state of being “collaborative” like?
- (3) What are some of the challenges you face when collaborating?

Results and Discussion

The second-generation teachers had similar views to the first generation-teachers regarding the nature of the collaboration and the challenges they faced. However, the author refers here to the following imposing points. Many narratives suggest that second-generation teachers have more “concrete forms of connection” and “more focused perceptions of the student condition” than first-generation teachers. What are extracted from their narratives are: (a) Specific, multifaceted understanding of students’ English language skills, (b) Teachers’ perception of their own specific growth, and (c) Recognition that collaboration is being promoted.

(a) Specific, multifaceted understanding of students’ English language skills

While the first-generation teachers made relatively abstract comments, such as “collaboration requires lean connections throughout the information (Yamamoto, 2019, p.12).” On the other hand, many of the second generation’s narratives were more specific in describing the skills and status of the students. They talked about their reflections on teaching based on the existence of the achievement goal chart, their commitment to collaborative activities, and their recognition of different school types. For example, Nozomi said, “I have come to realize that, for example, this student is not very good at writing, but is very good at presentation.” Keiko described her class with the words like, “More and more children are able to respond accurately to questions and instructions.” Takuro said, “If I notice that my students are more into on listening, I think I need to cover this part of the course while developing their skills.” Moreover, Takuro also said, “I always look at the goal chart and decide what we will do in class. I find out, like, ‘Oh, this is where they are expected to reach.’ ”

(b) Teachers’ perception of their own specific growth

After describing their students, all the teachers talked about their own teaching methods and views or beliefs on English language education. Furthermore, all of them talked about the remarkable changes due to their involvement in the project. For example, Nozomi, a junior high school teacher, said, “I have started to pay particular attention to whether my classes are at the appropriate level for new students.” Takuro as a high school teacher, reflected, saying,

“I have improved my classes, which tended to focus on explaining grammar, and I have gained a perspective to increase interaction among students.” For Keiko, an elementary school teacher, the goal chart seems indispensable to planning her classes. Her words are: “I have come to look at the achievement goal chart and think about what activities are necessary to achieve them.”

(c) Recognition that collaboration is being promoted

Though the amount of time teachers spend in face-to-face activities is not that large, elementary and junior high school teachers often expressed an increased awareness that they can share information about different types of schools and that they can cooperate with each other more than the actual amount of time spent. They all spoke positively and favorably about the nature of these collaborative activities. For example, Keiko said, “I really appreciate the collaborative events for students.” “It would be nice if other subject teachers had collaborative meetings as well.” The following is Keiko’s comment. “I am most grateful for the current environment in which we can learn about trends at each facility and revise the goal chart each year.” Nozomi said, “I feel like we are working together now.”

Conclusion

Regarding the first research question, we can say that second-generation teachers have a somewhat different awareness than first-generation teachers. The first-generation teachers described collaboration in relatively abstract terms, such as “lean connections (Yamamoto, 2019, p.12)” throughout the information. On the other hand, second-generation teachers have a more concrete and multifaceted perspective on teaching, student understanding, and self-examination. The second research question was how this project is affecting second-generation teachers. We could say to this question that collaborative efforts centered on creating the goal chart may be functioning as an opportunity for teacher development for them and other teachers in each school. A school corporation office staff and the author, a university faculty member as a coordinator, also have participated in this project. However, what we are doing is by no means a supervisor-subordinate issue. It is an opportunity for each teacher to develop and improve their skills as a language teacher who belongs to one cooperative unit. The schools in this case study are working together to create a consistent achievement goal chart and are continually revising it and exploring ways to validate it. Previous studies address that setting goal activities is suitable for positive change in teachers, such as classroom practices, their beliefs, and enhancing collegiality within an English department of a school. Based on them, broadening the involvement to different school types should foster an awareness of collaboration among them and improve their quality of information exchange. Finally, the author would like to add that this presentation is based on a case study of one project and is not a “collaborative model of English education” that can be widely generalized.

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