

***A Decade of Challenges and Evolution:
Tenri Inter-schools Collaborative Initiatives in English Education***

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Abstract

This paper, based on a practical case study, introduces the collaborative initiatives in English education that Tenri University Educational Corporation's elementary, junior high, and high school have undertaken since 2013: the 10-year process, insights gained from surveys of the teachers involved, the initiative's current state, and future challenges. While the importance of school collaboration is recognized in Japanese English education, clarifying goals and ensuring continuity remain challenging. Tenri Schools' approach emphasizes creating a continuum of educational goals for English language achievement across all school levels, with annual reviews and goal chart revisions. The activities by the team, which was established as the Tenri Schools English Education Guidelines (T-SEEGs) Project, include exchanging information among schools, addressing common challenges, training teachers, and student exchange events. The author, who has overseen the project, conducted surveys and interviews with junior and high school English teachers in 2018 and 2021, revealing that involvement in setting shared school goals effectively promotes collaboration and has led to teachers gaining a more concrete and multifaceted awareness of lesson planning, student understanding, and self-reflection. Participation in these activities has served as opportunities for teacher development, enhancing a sense of inter-school collaboration and improving the quality of information exchange. Although it can be said that the positive effects of these factors have resulted in a continuity of school collaboration over the past decade, there have been some slow progress and problems, such as developing schools' own teaching materials and improving the methods for assessing the achievement of goals.

Keywords: English Education, Consistent Achievement Goals, Collaborative Activities

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Introduction

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) emphasizes the importance of collaboration across different school levels (elementary, junior high, and high schools) in its English education policies. However, according to a 2023 survey, the percentage of high schools that have established curriculum or learning achievement goals in collaboration with elementary and junior high schools was only 3.8%, which is remarkably low. MEXT has highlighted that, moving forward, there is a need to focus on more substantial collaboration, not only through information exchange but also through the sharing of teaching methods and the development of curriculum (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2024). While the importance of school collaboration has been recognized by English teachers in Japan at the classroom level, clarifying goals and ensuring continuity remain challenging.

Public and private schools may differ in the way they conduct collaborative activities, but exploring what needs to be done to facilitate collaboration and how to sustain it will contribute to the enhancement of English education in Japan, regardless of the type of school organization. In other words, accumulating examples of inter-school collaboration in English education and analyzing their practices and challenges will broaden the scope of research on collaborative activities.

Collaborative Efforts in English Education at Tenri Schools

Since 2013, the author has been involved in school collaboration activities related to English education at their affiliated institution. Specifically, from 2013 onward, the author has collaboratively created and continuously revised a set of achievement goals for English education, in partnership with English teachers from both the junior high and high school levels. This was done for the entire progression from junior high school enrolment to high school graduation. Through surveys of English teachers at the time and interviews with the teachers involved in creating the consistent achievement goals chart, the author published findings demonstrating that collaboration between junior high and high schools had been promoted over the several years since 2013. Subsequently, the collaboration meeting has been revising the achievement goals chart every year, and through its continuation, has facilitated information exchange about students and classes, as well as developed new ideas for exchange programs.

Over time, the core group of teachers involved in the committee has changed. As a result, it became necessary to assess the awareness of new teachers regarding collaborative activities, and the author conducted interviews with them. The findings revealed that the revision of the consistent achievement goals chart has also played a role in professional development, fostering the growth of teachers. These findings were published by Yamamoto (2023). This paper, drawing on the two survey results and the collaborative practices carried out by the English teachers of Tenri schools across elementary, junior high, and high school levels over the past ten years, presents the following hypothesis in a more empirical manner: continuously revising the achievement goals chart helps promote collaborative initiatives in English education across elementary, junior high, and high school levels.

Teachers of Tenri Schools, have been working together with a shared vision, focusing on nurturing both students and teachers. This effort has been sustained through continuous revisions of the goals chart. This paper aims to examine the essence of inter-school

collaboration activities in English education at Tenri Schools by reflecting on the history and actual practices of these collaborative efforts. In the following section, the author summarizes the efforts made by English teachers at Tenri Schools.

Background of the Initiation of Collaborative Activities

Let us revisit the origins of our collaborative initiatives. In 2007, efforts within the Tenri High School English Department began to establish consistent goals and a unified syllabus. These efforts were sparked by a tweet from a newly appointed teacher, asking, “What should we aim for in our classes?” From around 2008 to 2011, MEXT eagerly promoted policies regarding English education in schools, such as the introduction of elementary English from the third grade, “teaching English in English,” and the implementation of the Can-Do List.

In 2011, the English teachers at Tenri High School completed a three-year syllabus and presented their efforts at a national conference of English teachers. This presentation served as a turning point, allowing them to reflect on their activities and providing the impetus to develop them further.

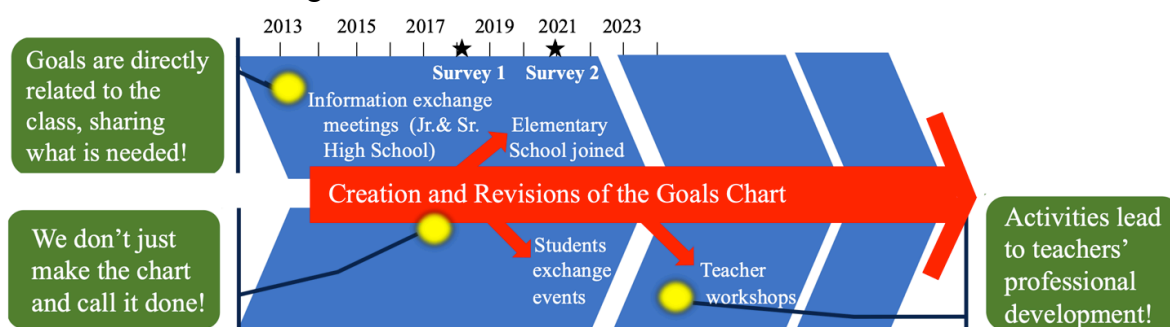
The following year, in 2012, a cross-facility training session was held at Tenri Junior High School. The author, who was then an English teacher at Tenri High School and participated in the session, began to think, “Our consistent goal-setting should be connected with that of the junior high school.” Subsequently, the author requested the administrative office of the educational institution that oversees the school to establish a meeting focused on developing consistent achievement goals for English education between Tenri Junior High School and Tenri High School. In response, the collaboration between junior high and high schools in English education officially began in 2013 under the Tenri Schools English Education Guidelines (T-SEEGs) Project Meeting. In 2020, Tenri Elementary School was added to the initiative, and since then, revisions to the achievement goals chart covering elementary, junior high, and high school levels have continued annually.

What We Keep Doing: Information Exchange and Events for Students and Teachers

The process of revising the achievement goals chart with a focus on continuity has had a positive impact on other collaborative activities among teachers at the elementary, junior high, and high school levels. For example, the following activities and events have been consistently carried out, and they have contributed as opportunities for the professional growth of teachers.

- † Revision of achievement goals chart (since 2015)
- † Regular English education collaboration meetings (since 2013)
- † English teachers’ workshops (since 2021)
- † Students’ English speech & recitation festival (since 2021)
- † Exchange meetings for university students and international students (since 2013)
- † Increase in the number of assistant English teachers (since 2019)

Figure 1: Promotion of Collaborative Activities



Evaluation of the Continuation of Collaboration

Yamamoto (2019) based on the first survey regarding these collaborative initiatives conducted in 2018 argues that the English teachers at the surveyed schools are seeking “meaningful connections,” and that taking an interest in the achievement goals across different school levels, as well as collaboratively working on the creation and revision of a consistent set of achievement goals, promotes a sense of collaboration. And Yamamoto (2023) based on the second survey in 2021 suggests that teachers participating in collaborative meetings gain more concrete and multifaceted insights into lesson planning, student understanding, and self-reflection. Participation in collaboration initiatives provides opportunities for teacher development and enhances the quality of information exchange.

Researchers distinguish between two main types of goals: “learning goals” and “performance goals”. Learning goals focus on the learner’s development of abilities and understanding, whereas performance goals are driven by the desire to appear competent or superior to others. Dweck and Leggett (1988) suggest that students with learning goals are more likely to persist in the face of failure, often viewing setbacks as opportunities for feedback, which in turn enhances their subsequent performance. What we present in the achievement goals chart, of course, are learning goals, and by consistently focusing on these, it is likely that teachers themselves will become more persistent in guiding their students. This mindset may help them to use collaborative activities as opportunities for their own growth.

Challenges: Further Research Based on Practice

While it can be said that Tenri School’s collaboration across different school types has been sustained over time, there have been areas of slow progress and issues, such as the development of schools’ own teaching materials and the improvement of methods for verifying the achievement of goals. In addition, not all elementary, junior high, and high school English teachers are enthusiastic about these collaborative activities, and the level of enthusiasm varies widely. Further investigation and research based on the situation and practices at these schools should be desirable.

Future Developments: Confidence in Our Efforts and Deepening of Connections

It is very significant that we have been able to continue these activities for 10 years for the education of our students. However, teachers are so busy with their daily educational activities that they do not have time to objectively grasp the significance of these activities. Therefore, it will be necessary to visualize their efforts through further publicity activities in the future. It is hoped that the English teachers at the school will gain more confidence in

their efforts and expand their connections with many more people beyond the boundaries of their subject and school. The teachers of Tenri Schools, will continue our efforts to increase student and teacher satisfaction through inter-school exchange activities centered on the revision of the English achievement goals with consistency.

Conclusion

The author, who has overseen the project, conducted surveys and interviews with junior and high school English teachers in 2018 and 2021, revealing that involvement in setting shared school goals effectively promotes collaboration and has led to teachers gaining a more concrete and multifaceted awareness of lesson planning, student understanding, and self-reflection. Participation in these activities has served as opportunities for teacher development, enhancing a sense of inter-school collaboration and improving the quality of information exchange in spite of some slow progress and problems, such as developing schools' own teaching materials and improving the methods for assessing the achievement of goals. In sum, based on the survey results, it is possible to conclude that teachers' awareness mentioned above and continued existence of the activities for a decade demonstrates that continuous revision of the achievement goals chart can promote cooperative efforts in English education at the elementary and secondary school levels.

Lastly, the current limitations of this study should be addressed. While the positive results from interviews with teachers involved in the creation and revision of the goals chart suggest that focusing on the goals chart itself may foster a sense of collaboration, it cannot be conclusively stated that this focus alone is the key factor in promoting collaborative awareness. In this practice, the activities related to revising the goals chart were not compared with other collaborative activities. Therefore, it is possible that similar collaborative awareness was fostered through other collaborative activities, not just those related to the goals chart. Additionally, it is necessary to consider whether there are other factors that have contributed to the promotion of collaboration in English education at Tenri Schools over the past ten years.

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