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Laying the Foundation for Meaningful Research Collaboration: A Reflective Inquiry

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Abstract

For language teachers in higher education, research is essential for career advancement and, for many, an enjoyable part of academic life. However, setting up and maintaining a successful research project as an individual can be daunting, particularly, in teaching-focused positions with a heavy teaching load and no research requirements. In this paper, we discuss the process of reflection on our experiences as three instructors at the same institution with very different academic backgrounds, who came together to develop a meaningful research project. Using reflective inquiry and narrative analysis, we examine the factors that sustained our collaboration and identify three key lessons for other language teachers in Japanese higher education struggling to progress their research individually.

高等教育機関で働く英語教師にとって、研究はキャリアの向上に不可欠であり、学問的な生活の楽しい部分でもある。しかし、一人で研究プロジェクトを立ち上げ、維持することは困難である。特に、教育を中心とする、授業負担が重くて、研究義務のない職位では、研究活動を維持するのが困難である。本論文では、異なる学術分野のバックグラウンドを持つ同じ教育機関に勤めていた3人の教師が、一緒に有意義な研究プロジェクトを開発した経験に対する反省プロセスを検討する。リフレクティブ・インクワイアリ（省察的探求）とナラティブ分析を用いて、持続的な共同研究につながった要因を考察する。研究者の反省を共同研究に関する文献と結び付けることで、単独で研究活動に困難している日本の高等教育機関の英語教師たちに参考になる3つの助言を紹介する。

GD: I was having a lot of fun teaching... But I had consistently struggled to finish writing, start new writing, make any progress on doing anything outside of just teaching since my dissertation finished.

AT: Around 2021 I wanted to continue my research but found it difficult to do so on my own... I knew that there were other colleagues with interest in this type of research.

A Russian fable tells the story of a swan, a pike, and a crayfish who together try to move a cart. Each does what is most natural to them: the swan flies skyward, the pike jumps in the river, and the crayfish scuttles backwards. The result is they are unable to move their cart forward. The fable is a cautionary tale about the potential pitfalls of collaboration. However, in this paper, we tell a different story of three colleagues with very different backgrounds, experiences, skills, and goals who found success in collaboration. To better understand our success, we utilized a reflective inquiry approach to examine our collaborative dynamics and share potential lessons for other teachers so that they, too, may move their carts forward.

This paper advances two arguments. First, that collaboration is a powerful and potentially transformative tool for language teachers in Japan because it allows people with diverse backgrounds and personalities to make mutually beneficial progress in their careers and identities as teachers. More than converting our labor into academic capital in the form of publications or grants, a shared commitment to moving our collective cart forward has the power to transform us from isolated individuals to a supportive community of practice. Simply recognizing that collaboration is beneficial, however, is not enough to make it work. This leads to our second argument: the crucial role of reflective practices in sustaining and strengthening collaboration. Reflection can be transformative both individually and collectively. For the individual, this process can trigger a re-examination of one's professional identity, which in turn can enable personal and professional growth, including a greater sense of meaningfulness in one's work. Collectively, it can transform a group from a one-time goal-oriented endeavor into an ongoing community of mutual trust and support.

Language Teaching in Japanese Higher Education

Language teachers in Japanese higher education often work in precarious conditions, juggling heavy teaching loads across multiple campuses. Many are contingent faculty in teaching-focused term-limited contract positions

where research is not required for contract renewal.

Conversely, securing a tenured or tenure-track position requires a demonstration of research output through publications and grants. Increasingly, even term-limited contract positions demand a publication record. This paradoxically makes research crucial for increasing chances of job security, yet challenging due to demanding teaching schedules—and the often-solitary nature of our jobs.

Our experience shows how collaboration can be a powerful antidote to these challenges. Conducting collaborative research can refresh teaching practices, reduce burnout, and enhance and legitimize professional identity. More importantly, collaboration fosters mutual support and care as well as being an important source of the community and support that can be lacking in solitary teaching roles (Mountz et al., 2015).

Collaboration Background

Until recently, all three authors (GD, AT, and AB) taught compulsory first-year English-language writing courses at the University of Tokyo. Both AT and AB primarily taught science-track students who conducted experiments and wrote papers mimicking the IMRD structure often found in scientific research articles. Students submit a final paper at the end of the semester, and all papers are added to a central database, hereafter referred to as a corpus.

As three language teachers in contract teaching positions, we understood the necessity of engaging in work that increases the chance of stable jobs: namely, carrying out research, applying for grants, and publishing our research. We also had experienced the challenges and frustrations of trying to do these things alone and were motivated to seek out like-minded others to collaborate on a research project.

Our backgrounds vary significantly. AB obtained her master's and PhD in linguistics in Japan, with several years' experience teaching in higher education. AT's first academic role followed a PhD in genetics (completed in the US), and several years of scientific editing experience in Japan. GD had previously worked as a policy researcher in Singapore, before moving to Japan and completing an interdisciplinary social science doctorate.

Despite our diverse backgrounds, we shared an interest in text analysis and corpus linguistics. This common ground drew us into conversations about the possibility of pursuing a joint research project using the student papers' corpus we had access to. In early 2022, we began meeting fortnightly, initially without a clear research goal or question. Our approach was exploratory, using the corpus of student papers as a data source and sharing relevant literature to brainstorm possible uses of the corpus. Initially, we each had our own ideas for analyzing and measuring features of the corpus that could be publishable (such as an analysis of frequent errors, or usage of multi-word phrases) and/or used in our teaching (such as useful examples of student writing).

These regular meetings were not solely focused on the project; we also discussed our teaching experiences and student needs. Allowing for this kind of drift in conversation led us to share an understanding we wanted to focus our corpus analysis on doing something that could be helpful for enhancing our students' learning experiences. By this point, we also had gained a realistic view of our own working pace and the time we could devote to research within the rhythms of the semester (Berg & Seeber, 2017).

This period of brainstorming and trying to find consensus can potentially be frustrating for groups, especially if there is a rigid focus on the end-product or tight time pressures. It is certainly an easy place for groups to dissolve through failing to find consensus. As we share in our reflections in this paper, we understood later that our willingness to persist as a group indicated there was something worth exploring about our collaborative dynamics.

Using Swales' (2004) Create a Research Space (CARS) model to analyze the rhetorical moves of the Introductions of student papers in a sub-corpus of our student papers, we developed and tested teaching materials and classroom activities. We presented the results of this project at JALT2023, marking a significant milestone in our collaborative journey (Terashima et al., 2023).

Although conferences do not hold the same academic capital as research publications, presenting at JALT2023 was a meaningful experience for each of us. For GD, for example, it was the first presentation in the field of language teaching research and something they felt they would not have been able to accomplish alone.

For our group, the conference presentation served as a checkpoint, completing our first research cycle. We evolved from a group with an initial lack of direction to one that developed a shared focus and vision, engaged in meaningful research, and presented initial findings at an academic conference.

Moreover, we connected the recognition we had of the transformation of our group with our own increasing interest in—and desire to actively learn, explore, and apply—research into the various ways teachers can meaningfully work with and support each other. Work presented on critical friendship at JALT2023, and the accompanying book (Uchida & Rothman, 2023) was especially useful. Seeing ourselves reflected in much of this work, we began to recognize that our own group dynamics and professional lives could themselves constitute a valid, meaningful, and useful research context (Adamson & Muller, 2018; Allard et al., 2007). In examining our intra-group dynamics, we seek to not only enhance our own professional and personal development but also to serve other teachers in our community.

Methodology

Rather than focusing on specific critical incidents, a common technique in reflective teaching practices (Brookfield, 2017), we wanted to generate reflections that we could share with each other that could also provide a springboard for further conversations focused on our collaborative group dynamics. For these purposes we drew not only on the reflective practices literature but also were considerably inspired by emerging work situated both in collaborative autoethnography (CAE; see Adamson & Muller, 2024; Chang et al., 2013) and duoethnography paradigms (Lowe & Lawrence, 2018; Jones & Noble, 2021; Sawyer & Norris, 2013).

Critics argue that autoethnographically-inspired methods risk self-indulgence (Delamont, 2009). We recognize it is easier for these approaches to be more obviously self-focused than other forms of research. However, for language teachers who are often isolated, systematically examining shared experiences can reveal structural challenges that may remain hidden in solitary teaching contexts. As such, our method aligns with calls for research on underexplored professional communities (Adamson & Muller, 2018).

By analyzing our experiences together, we gain a clearer view of how our seemingly individual challenges reflect wider issues in our professional community. By sharing these reflections publicly, we create opportunities to uncover common threads in our individual journeys that might otherwise remain hidden. This process of collective meaning-making has the potential to be transformative, not only in how we understand our own experiences, but in how we conceptualize our shared professional identity and collective challenges.

Moreover, it's not clear to us how distinct these autoethnographic techniques are from the varieties of reflective practices often encouraged in teaching and other professions (Brookfield, 2017; Farrell, 2018; Thompson & Pascal, 2012). We see these as complementary and think they have the potential to be transformative at the individual, group, and social level. CAE was particularly fruitful as an initial methodological orientation as it is a "method in which researchers work in community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in their autobiographical data" (Chang et al., 2013, pp. 23–24). However, while through this process we encountered a means to connect our own experiences with "sociocultural phenomena," we were also focused on our professional development vis-à-vis our group dynamics and on a relatively specific timeframe which fits better with some of the work on reflective inquiry.

We collectively worked towards developing six prompts. In addition, we set ground rules for this reflective writing process: (a) everything shared in the group stays in the group; (b) consent must be given before using any reflections outside of the group; (c) everyone may withdraw consent to share at any time. While these were originally inspired by GD's experience with group discussions on a meditation retreat, there are also similar recommendations in the literature (e.g. Bolton & Delderfield, 2018).

The prompts were as follows:

1. Original expectations from the project.

2. Biggest challenge during the project so far.

3. Biggest achievement so far.

4. Looking back, what was the best thing about teamwork? What was the most difficult? What was your personal most significant contribution to the teamwork and what do you think others contributed most to the project?

5. Expectations going forward at this point.

6. Something that surprised you about the collaboration or something unexpected that you discovered, learned, or experienced because of the collaboration.

We conducted our analysis in iterative stages (Chang et al., 2013). We individually wrote responses to the prompts in separate Google Doc files, doing so without reading each other's writing so as not to be influenced by each other. However, we each approached this reflection activity somewhat differently. Some of us wrote from memory, while others referred to handwritten notes taken during our prior meetings, or to emails from the beginning of our collaboration. In addition, while AT and AB wrote their reflections, GD dictated and transcribed their responses to the reflective prompts.

After we all finished writing our own reflections, we then engaged in peer commentary. This consisted of reading each other's writing and commenting on aspects of each other's narratives that evoked a response. We then wrote analytic memos (Saldaña, 2011), with the goal of "captur[ing] [our] initial understanding and 'mini-analysis' of the data as a whole" (Chang et al., 2013, p. 103) along with any evolving insights. These memos were also written as Google Docs, shared with, and commented on by the group members. Finally, we met in person to have a conversation about the process and to discuss what themes we saw arising. This meeting (along with others) was recorded and transcribed as part of the iterative process. We then went back to previously collected notes and emails to provide additional contextual details to themes.

Unlike in a typical qualitative research project, where researchers analyze external data, we were both the subjects of research and the analysts in this case. This was a new (and somewhat strange) experience for us. We

decided to eschew the typical qualitative thematic analysis we might have engaged with if dealing with qualitative data generated by others (Saldaña, 2011). However, we collectively re-read our reflections and analytic memos, and through discussion and further memo writing identified seven common themes, which we presented at PanSIG2024 (Bordilovskaya et al., 2024). These themes were: (a) evolution of project over time; (b) valuing different perspectives; (c) setting realistic goals; (d) low stress and supportive collaboration; (e) alignment of future expectations; (f) professional identity; (g) sense of community.

Results

Lessons for Meaningful Collaboration in Academia

For this paper we condensed the themes that have particular significance for language teachers in Japan and presented them in the form of 'lessons.' This is done with the aim of connecting and contextualizing our reflections within the research literature and the wider social context within which we locate ourselves. We include short, representative excerpts to illustrate how our collaboration shaped our professional identities, mindful that extensive quoting can appear self-focused (Delamont, 2009).

Lesson 1: Change of Research Focus Over Time

Throughout our collaboration, our research focus shifted and evolved. Being flexible and accommodating of new ideas is one of the reasons we could sustain the collaboration.

As Allard et al. (2007) note, "Different perspectives are the reality of collaborative teaching and learning" (p. 308). In our case, AB reflected, "Each of us had a different way of thinking and approaching the research." Similarly, Allard et al. found in their own collaborative reflection on a shared research project that "at the outset of our collaborative journey, we had very different notions about the form that narrative inquiry might take" (p. 310). Our experience mirrors this, as evidenced by AB's observation: "Originally, I expected that the project would be more focused on the collocations and more linguistic analyses rather than genre analysis."

GD: Once the three of us got started in March 2022 — and thinking back to that and where we are now — it really feels way different. We started looking at a lot of linguistic features of texts, student texts. We talked about various things we could do. We were bouncing around ideas for quite some time. It took us a while to have that spark where we all realized this is what we can be working on.

AT: Regarding the research project — what I found most unexpected is how the project evolved over time. Initially I was just envisioning a corpus analysis type of study, but our combined ideas led us in a new and interesting direction and resulted in a multi-directional project that I initially could not have envisioned.

Lesson 2: Balancing Expectations and Realities and Finding a Group Working Pace

Regular meetings and shared reflections helped us gain a more realistic perspective on what we could accomplish given our various responsibilities. This understanding helped alleviate the self-doubt and anxiety that often accompany academic work, particularly in the pressure-cooker environment of publish-or-perish academia (Lee, 2014).

AB: Moving away from slightly unrealistic goals/timeframes and finding how much we can allocate time to the project as a team is probably one of the most challenging but also one of the most important aspects of being able to continue this collaboration. Embracing that between three of us, on the one hand, we can divide some of the work but, on the other hand, we also can't go to the next step/stage unless all of us are on the same page is one of the most challenging but also most important aspects of learning about teamwork for me.

GD: There were certainly times where I felt a little frustrated about the pace of the project, especially I think in the beginning when we were searching for what we wanted to focus on. We were doing a few iterations of some different ways of looking at the texts and trying to come to some sort of consensus and agreement on what we wanted to achieve. At the same time, even if progress was "slow," we always kept coming back to each other, kept meeting every week, or every few weeks when we had time. I think that's meaningful!

AT: It has been really helpful to have regular meetings with AB and GD because this gives me a concrete deadline to get something done. I often set unrealistic goals for what I can achieve in the time that I have, so coming to terms with the fact that I can usually only achieve a fraction of what I imagine I can do has been tough as well. But sharing these struggles with my colleagues and making progress regardless of these setbacks continues to provide motivation to keep moving forward.

Lesson 3: Regular Low-stakes, Supportive Check-ins

Common in all our reflections were acknowledgments that returning to each other—either every week or less frequently as the rhythm of the semesters demanded—provided a key means through which we could begin to reframe our emotional relation to the labor of research. In addition, maintaining a consistent, regular schedule of meetings was a way for us to maintain momentum and to help us overcome periods of low motivation or energy.

AB: The best part for me was that we didn't have a lot of stress or pressure to achieve something … of course, we had a goal but the stakes were not super high, and when some/all of us had some downtime, we could take a break from the project. Feeling support and flexibility but no pressure from my colleagues made this collaboration psychologically sustainable.

AT: For me, the best part of teamwork is the continuous renewal of motivation to get the next step done-even if the next step is very small. I find it is so easy to lose momentum when doing research is not a top priority. Meeting regularly, brainstorming ideas and coming up with the next target is a huge benefit of working on this research project collaboratively.

GD: The best thing, the most rewarding aspect about working together as a research team, was having regular, relatively low stakes, low stress checkpoints, times to talk with each other, space to talk through things with other people. That was really rewarding in terms of sometimes reducing my own internal expectations, keeping things manageable in some ways.

There were weeks where, due to work or family commitments, one of us could not get a small action item accomplished. However, having two other people meant that at least something got done.

Here, technology is a useful support for collaboration. Much of the time we could meet face to face, when we were working in the same university. However, depending on schedules we could use Zoom at times. At a certain point, AB was fortunate to get a new job and we switched to largely using Zoom. This had the added benefit of making it easier to make high-quality recordings that we could transcribe using AI-assisted tools. This also made it possible that if one person could not attend a meeting, we could share the summary and transcript with them. The transcripts have also become an ongoing data source for future ethnographic research.

Discussion

The Value of Reflective Inquiry in Collaborative Work

One of the most significant outcomes of our collaboration was the realization that many of our struggles were not unique to us as individuals, but rather common experiences shaped by structural factors in academia. As Boyd (2023) observes, when we fail to move our cart forward or sustain momentum, we often attribute these setbacks to personal shortcomings. However, the reflective inquiry process gave us the space and means to identify and recognize the broader structural issues that can impede our progress in academic work, while also helping us notice some of the unskillful ways we might relate to the emotions such situations and structures can trigger.

Even more significant was our recognition that we needn't cling too tightly to future goals, or to work only with a fixed view of some future desirable state. Small internally imposed deadlines or external ones from conferences helped us stay focused, but the social dynamics of a group make everything work. Using our meeting times to allow for extended conversations outside of a fixed goal-oriented agenda allowed us to find common ground on issues that have come to help us evolve, refresh, and motivate our research agenda. More importantly, it provided a way for our group to coalesce—from having an unfixed research question, largely driven by anxiety about adding lines to our CV, to what Boyd (2023) terms a "community of support" (p.35) and "warm, supportive companionship" (p.11). Such community and companionship are too often missing from academic life (Lemon, 2022).

Our reflective dialogues allowed us to generate new understandings about our self-assumptions and actions, and their implications for our professional identities. However, the process of engaging in this kind of reflection with others was emotionally charged—an aspect not always acknowledged in the reflection literature. Allard et al. (2007), for example, found that "reading a story of another person's practice [was] highly engaging and a non-threatening method to invite educators into reflective practice" (p. 306).

For us, however, the experience was more complex. While we also found this process ultimately engaging and positive, it was not entirely without discomfort. Writing reflections stirred up emotions, and both sharing our own writing and reading our partners' pieces was, frankly, a little scary. At first, this process left us feeling exposed and vulnerable. Whereas Allard et al. focused on teaching practices and experiences, our reflections perhaps delved more deeply into personal territory. Our project, centered on developing research expertise along with teaching material innovations, may have surfaced uncertainties in areas where we felt less confident than in other areas of our professional lives.

These unexpected emotions were temporary. Once those feelings passed, we found that making our thinking and reflection visible to each other ultimately "opened the door for learning and professional growth" (Allard et al., 2007, p. 307). It helped us understand how much work we could realistically accomplish given our various responsibilities,

 providing a more balanced perspective on our productivity. More importantly, we were able to recognize and articulate the safety and trust we felt with each other.

Although reflecting on our collaboration was a valuable and affirming experience, we acknowledge two potential challenges for other groups considering a similar approach. First, as mentioned above, writing and reading each other's reflections evoked unexpected feelings of vulnerability. This required not only recognizing and acknowledging these emotions but also discussing them openly with each other. We suggest that research groups first consider whether they are prepared for possible shifts in group dynamics that might arise from such reflection. Second, the process of writing, reading, discussing and analyzing reflections, is time-consuming—time that must be allocated in addition to the primary research project. Therefore, research teams should consider whether their collaboration allows for this additional investment in reflective practice. While we found this process transformative, this may not be the case for all groups.

Conclusion

Life in academia can be lonely and challenging, particularly for language teachers working across disciplines in Japan's often contingent job market. Boyd (2023) writes that "without a community of support that reflects on your experience, it is easy to rely instead on explanations of individual inadequacy" (p.35). Our collaborative process allowed for this kind of community to develop, giving us a chance to contextualize our struggles within broader structural challenges that exist within academia.

More broadly, our reflective inquiry process helped us redefine success beyond the traditional metrics of lines on a CV. It led us to reconsider what success means in academia. Doing this conscious, sustained reflection together helped us focus on the meaningfulness of our work. It also made visible how the mutual aid and supportive relationships found in our collaboration had enhanced our learning, well-being, and professional satisfaction. Unlike the crawfish, pike, and swan, we could move our cart forward.

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