

# The Benefits of Curriculum and Teacher Coordination

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## Abstract

It can be argued that given the demands and challenges of the current language educational climate in Japanese tertiary institutions, teachers need, more than ever before, to engage in an on-going dialogue for the good of the programs for which they teach, and for their own professional development. Coordinating curricula and teachers can be seen as a way of implementing positive reform. This paper looks at a university program that has succeeded in creating an environment where both full timers and part timers effectively take part in the dialogue. The author worked as a part-time instructor at the university, and he discusses the benefits of what at first he thought was merely an effort to ‘compel’ him to adapt his teaching to conform to the curriculum.

Keywords: dialogue, curriculum coordination, teacher coordination, part-time teachers, professional development

## Introduction

A few years ago, two contributors to *The Language Teacher* ([lt.jalt-publications.org](http://lt.jalt-publications.org)) underlined both the importance of coordinating university language programs, and the necessity of having teachers work more closely together for the goals and objectives of the programs for which they teach. James Venema (2007) argued that providing quality language education in the increasingly competitive educational climate in Japan comes down to “coordinating the curriculum and learning goals, as well as coordinating and monitoring the actual teaching and education that occurs” (Venema 2007: 9). Nick Wood and Tim Murphey (2007), on their part, argued that language programs and institutions would benefit from helping both full-time and part-time teachers to communicate more openly about professional matters, forming “communities of practice” (Murphey and Wood

2007: 14) in the process. They argue further that the teaching experience of part-time teachers, who barely have any chance to talk to any other teachers given the conditions in which they work, must be tapped and used in the ongoing dialogue both to make them know that their input is valued, and to encourage them to take their professional duties more seriously. The purpose of this paper is to share with the readers my personal experience with a coordinated university English program: how the English curriculum is centralized; the efforts taken to coordinate the teachers; and how I and a few others who were part-timers at the same time as I, and whom I managed to speak to, thought we benefited from all this.

## Understanding Coordination

Curriculum coordination means that the program doesn’t just work on a collection of course titles, but rather on well-defined goals and objectives reached upon with a realistic assessment of the

day to day needs of the students. This, however, requires that both full-time and part-time teachers be coordinated as well; for all teachers need, as Jennings and Doyle (1996) have noted, to feel “true ownership” of the language program, and to feel that it relates to their own situation and to that of the learners (Jennings and Doyle 1996: 172). Murphey and Wood (2007) have also noted that teaching experience gives every teacher a certain stock of knowledge that could be useful to other teachers in similar situations. And that when initiated and encouraged, all teachers, since they are the ones who have real day-to-day contact with the learners, can give a realistic analysis of learning situations and of the student needs therein (Murphey and Wood 2007: 15).

The coordination of both the curriculum and the teachers who teach it means that the aims and objectives of the whole language program are kept in line, that the content of what is taught, as well as its organization, conform to these aims and objectives, and that constant evaluation takes place to ensure this conformity. Coordination thus is not just a process of defining curriculum courses and controlling what the teachers actually do. It rather involves the initiation and sustenance of teamwork, and it draws its strength from ongoing and focused dialogue between all teachers, full-time and part-time. The key to the dialogue, as it were, is providing opportunities for teachers with a common vision to meet, share ideas, and establish a set of shared learning goals. It can be argued that such an approach could benefit language programs as all teachers are incorporated in the decision making process. There are clear goals, while teachers are allowed the freedom to creatively implement practices to attain these goals, and there is an ongoing dialogue that can contribute to both program and teacher development.

#### **The part-time teacher’s situation**

Full-time faculty, who most probably are involved in designing, implementing and

constantly reviewing the broader school curriculum in general, and the language program in particular, can easily understand and keep in line the aims, objectives, content, organization and evaluation of curricula. It would in normal circumstances be easier for them to adapt their teaching to conform to the curriculum. Part time teachers on the other hand, in many cases running in and out of (often) several schools to make ends meet, would barely understand the aims for which they teach, and could therefore easily do their own thing and walk out with their pay checks, but leaving the goals of the program unfulfilled, and missing out themselves on a potential opportunity for personal growth as language teachers. Murphey and Wood (2007) have noted that part timers may, in such a situation, “feel isolated and really not part of a community of teachers.” They have further observed: “in fact many full-time teachers may feel the same way as they are separated from others in their own offices with few chances to actually socialize” (Murphey and Wood 2007, p. 13). Curriculum and teacher coordination can therefore be seen as a good starting point for cultivating mutual support, both social and academic, among teachers, and for enhancing individual and communal academic development.

#### **The Nagoya Women’s University (NWU)’s model**

##### **Program coordinator.**

Several years ago, NWU’s International Department of Language Studies decided to look closely at the idea of coordination. They looked at the existing curriculum and clarified and articulated several aspects including the definition of course goals and course work checklists. While all full time teachers act as coordinators for particular courses, one general program and teacher coordinator was appointed. Some of his duties are:

- To coordinate all communication between teachers in the department, especially part-time

teachers. His office is actually the part-time teachers' room, and this facilitates easy communication.

- To organize and facilitate orientation meetings for all (old and in-coming) teachers at the beginning of each semester.
- To organize coordinating meetings (twice a semester) for teachers teaching the same course.

His presence and accessibility gives part-time teachers a chance to get information and even ask questions in the short time they have, a chance one may not have had at most other universities.

### **Specified time-line**

A general, orientation meeting for full time teachers who coordinate various courses and part time instructors is held before the beginning of each semester. The coordinators and part time staff are introduced. The coordinators in charge of each subject introduce syllabi and texts to the part-time teachers, and questions, concerns and ideas are taken care of. In addition, 30-minute meetings are held twice a semester between the program coordinator and part-time teachers. The meetings are held during class, and students are given tasks during this time. A round-table discussion is held, each teacher gives input on what has worked or not worked so far, and supplementary materials are explained and shared. The coordinator thereafter prints and distributes minutes on the problems and ideas shared. In addition, voluntary observations are held once a semester. An off-site observer is available to help teachers with concerns they may have in teaching the curriculum. A timetable is posted and instructors choose the classes they feel would benefit from an observer's input. Teachers are also encouraged to share the supplements they think worked well in their own classes. They introduce and explain them during the coordinating meetings, but also there is a binder in which they put them to enable other teachers to share them freely. Over the course of the year, therefore, a good collection of supplements is available for the teachers to use

and bring more creativity to their classes; to think outside the text while still following along.

### **Benefits to the part-time teacher**

#### **Inclusion**

Murphey and Wood (2007) have noted that when people feel connected to others as part of a collaborative group, "they can feel energized and their work can greatly improve." (Murphey and Wood 2007: 13). University campuses can be very lonely places for part-time teachers who (usually) hardly have any time to meet and talk to other teachers in the same department. They don't only feel isolated at the very basic social level, but also miss out on the communication they need to understand their responsibilities to the language program and to the learners. Other NWU part-timers interviewed by this writer echoed his satisfaction to the effect that partly through the common handbook, partly through regular coordination meetings, and partly through informal discussions with full-timers, we can focus together on the explicit program goals, share practical teaching strategies, and feel included, knowing that our points of view and our classroom management techniques are listened to and respected. As one part-timer put it, "I feel part of a team. I can get help if I need it. I can help other teachers and I feel good about that." This for me sounded like a prerequisite for genuine commitment which, as Jennings and Doyle (1996) have argued, "can only be generated through an understanding of, and real participation in, the process of change" (Jennings and Doyle, 1996: 170).

#### **Professional development**

"ESL/EFL is a rapidly changing field, and teachers need regular opportunities to update their professional knowledge and skills" (Richards 2001: 206). The on-going dialogue at NWU contributes not only to innovation and curriculum development, but also to the personal as well as professional development of the teachers involved. As one part-timer interviewed put it,

“because of the NWU curriculum, I have gained experience teaching several kinds of coordinated classes that I would not have a chance to teach at most other universities.” And another said, “The classes have a stated goal, which gives the teacher direction in teaching. Also, the coordination meetings serve as a platform for different teachers teaching the same courses to hear, analyze and share different approaches to course contents. It gives part-timers an opportunity to contribute to the program as a whole. This leads to job satisfaction and higher motivation.”

### **Improved lesson plans**

McDonough and Shaw (2003) have noted that one of the current trends in materials and methods in ELT is “the acceptance and adoption of a variety of classroom management techniques designed to allow for a more realistic practice of language in use” (McDonough and Shaw 2003: 253). Articulating and defining course goals and objectives would often necessitate identifying suitable approaches to achieve those goals. Round table discussions by teachers teaching the same course offer a lot of insights in what approaches work best for that particular course. Jack C. Richards (2001) has argued that “a great deal of excellent teaching goes on in schools, but much of it is known only to individual teachers or supervisors.” “Teachers”, he argues further, “should be encouraged to report on their positive teaching experiences, and to benefit, in turn, from the collective expertise of their colleagues” (Richards 2001: 219). The aims and benefits of NWU’s teacher coordination activities couldn’t have been more similar. Each coordinating meeting is like a teacher training session. Ideas are shared, and more experienced staff can help less experienced ones. The testimony and conviction of all the part-time teachers interviewed is that coordination is an opportunity to adopt new and improved lesson planning and class management skills. Active participation enables us to reap the benefits of what Richards calls the “documentation and sharing of good

practices” (Richards, 2001: 19).

### **Testing ideas**

No test is perfect. It is not so easy to plan and construct tests that reflect the all-important principles of validity and reliability. Ideas for testing and grading students can be arbitrary and dangerously impractical. Yet test results bear a great deal of impact on individual learners’ evaluations and future careers. The coordinating meetings cannot address all the theories and practices of good testing, and as one part-timer observed, there are cases when the testing criteria adopted are not suited to all the students’ abilities. Nevertheless, coordination has been a source of many good ideas from other teachers on how effectively particular courses can be tested. They are ideas that individual teachers have tried out and tested. Team planning of particular tests also takes place at these meetings, and for some courses teachers swap classes and test each other’s students, which in many ways is an opportunity to experience how shared goals are spread and realized (or not) in the various classrooms.

### **Concluding remarks: teacher cooperation vital**

A critical look at innovation and change in language teaching would normally have teachers identified as implementers. However, as Markee (2001) notes, they may at times be regarded as adopters. An innovation is likely to succeed or fail depending on how it is adopted by the teachers, its principle implementers. The benefits outlined in this paper are first and foremost reflections by both the author and those of his colleagues who took the trouble to respond to his questionnaire regarding curriculum and teacher coordination at NWU. They have all taught at the university in the period between 2006 and now, when the International English Program at the school has undergone a transition from a mere collection of course titles and definitions to a curriculum with coordinated objectives, and when all the teachers have been involved in an on-going

dialogue to plan and evaluate the curriculum. Their overwhelmingly positive appreciation of the system was given as answers to the following questions:

In what ways do you think the English language curriculum at NWU is coordinated?

In which ways do you think teachers at NWU are coordinated?

What are the benefits to you as a part-time teacher?

What are the disadvantages or setbacks to you as a part-time teacher?

However, I cannot claim that their views and mine represent the views of all the part-time teachers who have worked for this program. Indeed a few other teachers did not bother to respond to the questionnaire, and a couple of others have been known during the author's time at the school to have been less than cooperative with the coordination process. The views expressed here are therefore suggestive rather than exhaustive.

It can be argued, nevertheless, that coordinating activities stands out as one of the chances for teachers to get involved in the planning and evaluation of the curriculum; to give and get feedback on other teachers' and their own pedagogical practices; above all, to benefit the learners especially as they teach them pursuing the same goals even though the details of approaches may be different. Such teachers

see curriculum and teacher coordination as an opportunity to provide input into the program for which they work, and as a means to tap into each other's stock and grow professionally, rather than as a threat to their individual professionalism. It is especially a chance for part-time teachers to beat the time constraints associated with part-time teaching and to feel less isolated and more accepted as contributors to the development of the program.

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