

PERSPECTIVES

Becoming a Teacher-Researcher Through Collaborative Project: Part-Time Teachers' Perspectives

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Teaching is demanding and challenging, requiring a lot of time and psychological commitment. Part-time language teachers in tertiary education are especially one of the most challenging professions from various perspectives, such as career and well-being. In this regard, a growing number of studies suggest that collaborative teaching benefits not only students' learning outcomes but also teachers' professional development and positive emotions. In this action research, two part-timers collaborated with two full-timers working for the same institution in Japan and embarked on a single-semester project to promote students' self-directed vocabulary learning with a digital learning tool (Quizlet). By discussing the teachers' reflections, this study argues for the potential benefits of teacher collaboration from the perspective of part-time teachers.

Keywords: teacher collaboration, part-time teachers, career development, teacher well-being, teacher-researchers

In recent years, the benefits of teacher collaboration have started to be widely acknowledged. OECD's policy brief states that "Collaboration with colleagues allows teachers to learn from each other's expertise, share knowledge within their professional community and, ultimately, improve the

instruction and support they can give to their students" (OECD, 2020, p.2). Collaboration could be a way to together bring about more than each individual teacher could do (Barfield, 2016), and be beneficial to both students and teachers.

In our case, the collaboration project was initiated by a full-time faculty member at the Faculty Development (FD) in the Autumn of 2022. While the project was solely designed to enrich student learning, the collaboration opportunity unexpectedly had remarkable effects on us as part-time teachers. In this article, we will discuss how teacher collaboration, even on a small scale, can benefit part-time university teachers.

Part-time Teachers' Struggle

At Japanese universities, there are three teaching positions: tenured, full-time contract, and part-time (Murray, 2013). While language teaching itself is demanding, part-time university teachers in particular often face additional challenges.

One challenge is related to career development at university. In Japan, two or more publications at minimum are in many cases considered necessary to get a full-time teaching job (cf. Ang, 2022). Nevertheless, many part-time university language teachers may experience difficulty doing research for several reasons. First, part-time university teachers often struggle to publish their work as a single author in in-house publications of their institutions (Milliner, 2017). While there

are large academic organisations which accept submissions in the field of English language education, in-house publications might seem more accessible, especially for early-career university teachers. Moreover, part-time teachers may express difficulties in securing a research budget and also time (Sugino, 2010). Part-timers often teach many classes, as they cannot earn as little as three million yen yearly (equivalent to roughly 21 thousand American dollars as of September 2024) in Japan, unless they teach about eight classes per week (Kambayashi, 2021). Many of them struggle with research, having little motivation and time left at the end of the day. In short, part-time teachers encounter challenges in engaging with research and advancing their careers.

Another problem that many part-time language teachers at university face is loneliness in the workplace. Previous studies (Forbes et al., 2010; Leigh, 2014; Ryan et al., 2013) suggest that part-time university teachers tend to feel isolated or marginalised. A survey conducted on 85 part-time US university teachers revealed that one of the challenges is the lack of “emotional connectivity”; some part-time university teachers are, for example, “not feeling connected, having limited collegial interaction, not feeling respected, and not feeling like a ‘real’ teacher” (Meixner et al., 2010, p.146). Here, Milliner (2017) is worth mentioning, as it presents a full-timer’s perspective on the same issue. As a full-time university teacher working at a Japanese university, the author has almost no opportunity to communicate with part-time teachers except “at formal faculty events and if they are using a classroom neighbouring [his]” (p.173). He points out the importance of interaction between full-timers and part-timers, for example, by eating lunch together. It is important to bear in mind that a sense of isolation potentially results in attrition (cf. Gibbs & Miller, 2014). It is therefore crucial to deal with the well-being of part-time teachers, who are potentially

vulnerable but valuable assets for their institutions.

Benefits of Teacher Collaboration

While the working conditions and environment cause such a serious setback to part-time teachers, there are indeed a number of studies that indicate the advantages of collaborating with peer teachers in terms of career and well-being. For example, a systematic review of 82 studies related to teacher collaboration suggested that teacher collaboration can lead to increased motivation and less isolation of teachers as well as elevated academic achievement of students (Vangrieken et al., 2015). The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) also finds that in lower secondary schools, there can be an association between the frequency of teacher collaboration and levels of teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction (OECD, 2014). Even at an online university, teacher collaboration helped improve teaching, professional development, and emotional links (Romeu et al., 2016). Teacher collaboration can be advantageous for early-stage teachers, whose attrition rate is relatively high (Borman & Dowling, 2008), and collaboration with “empathetic and supportive” coworkers can lead to increased teacher resilience (Skeates et al., 2021, p.32).

In this context, the aim of the current paper is to reflect on our collaborative project and subsequently discuss the potential benefits of small-scale teacher collaboration through part-time teachers’ lens. We believe this will provide a unique perspective to the field of teacher collaboration research as well as career development and well-being of part-time university teachers. Below, we will discuss the design of the vocabulary project and share the reflection on how its participation benefited us as part-timers.

Our Collaboration

Project background

The semester-long TOEIC vocabulary project was initiated by a full-time teacher (project leader) at a university FD session in the greater Tokyo area. Two full-time teachers, one with six years of experience and the other with ten years, along with two part-time teachers who had a few years of teaching experience at the tertiary level, signed up for the project.

TOEIC Vocabulary Project

We conducted the project targeting 448 first- and second-year students aged 18 to 20 in the mandatory English programme. The goal of the project was to encourage the students to engage in self-directed learning in preparation for the TOEIC test, which was set to take place at the end of the semester.

This project used a digital flashcard platform called Quizlet. Widely recognised for its efficacy in language learning and other educational contexts (Dizon, 2016), Quizlet offers a range of features. Students have the opportunity to engage individually through flashcards or various gaming functions. Additionally, the platform supports collaborative learning with a feature called Quizlet Live, facilitating team-based competition games in classrooms.

Using this Quizlet, 15 TOEIC vocabulary study sets, each containing 20 words, were shared with the project members (Study Sets 1). Additionally, two larger sets of the same vocabulary containing 100 and 110 words (Study Sets 2) were also distributed for optional use. Each member then shared the Quizlet sets with their students on LMS and implemented their own approach to teaching the vocabulary, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

How four different teachers used Quizlet sets

Teachers	How Quizlet sets were used
Teacher A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Individual TOEIC vocabulary study was optional. ● Quizlet Live, with one study set from Study Sets 1, was implemented every other week. The winning team received a small prize.
Teacher B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students learned one set of vocabulary in Study Sets 1 while the teacher was taking attendance. ● Vocabulary learning tips were shared in class. ● Quizlet Live during the mid-term and final week.
Teacher C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Two larger study sets (Study Sets 2) were shared on LMS for individual practice. ● Some vocabulary was tested in the exams. ● Quizlet Live on exam day (mid-term and final)
Teacher D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students were encouraged to study one set from Study Sets 1 every week outside the classroom only in the latter half of the semester. ● The vocabulary was tested on LMS. ● No use of Quizlet (neither individual learning nor Quizlet Live) in class.

Information and Skill Sharing

We were advised by the project leader to record our class observations weekly in a digital collaborative document (See Appendix A). We shared detailed usage of Quizlet during class, highlighted successful experiences, and documented any challenges encountered, such as technical difficulties and students' responses. We referred to this document in our time and shared additional information when we had the chance to meet in the teachers' rooms or in the corridor on campus.

During the project, we received various guidance from our full-time colleagues. Towards the end of the semester, one of the part-time teachers created a questionnaire to collect feedback on the effectiveness and usefulness of Quizlet. While creating the questionnaire, one of the full-timers assisted with the format and the question items. After the questionnaire was distributed, the other part-time teacher, along with the other full-time teacher, analysed the survey results. The findings showed that over 75% of the students supported the use of Quizlet as a self-directed learning tool, with 30.4% considering it "very useful" and 44.9% "moderately useful." This collaborative effort allowed both part-time teachers to engage in the data collection and analysis phases with invaluable support from their full-time colleagues.

Conference Presentation

Based on these findings, we presented at the JALT PanSIG conference in 2023 for the first time with the support of full-time teachers. While one full-time teacher was an experienced conference presenter, this marked the inaugural presentation at a conference for both of us part-time teachers.

Reflection

Overall, the teacher collaboration through the vocabulary project felt a success and brought benefits to us as part-timers. As

mentioned in the introduction, part-time teachers, facing financial hardships (Kambayashi, 2021) and managing many classes, may have difficulty in finding time and motivation to do research (cf. Ang, 2022; Sugino, 2010). However, we implemented this collaborative project with no trouble. It is worth reflecting on why the collaboration was effectively carried out from the part-timers' perspective.

One potential contributor was a choice of targeted linguistic skills and flexibility. Our project focus was on self-directed vocabulary learning, which is crucial for all language learners in any classroom regardless of proficiency levels. Therefore, we as part-time teachers eagerly participated in researching vocabulary development. Besides, Quizlet handles well as a digital tool and has a great potential for teacher collaboration, as teachers can easily share study sets and experiment with teaching vocabulary in their own ways. For instance, we were allowed to decide whether to use Study Sets 1 or 2, when to distribute the study sets, what kind of function to use in Quizlet, and whether to include vocabulary learning in formal assessments. The collaboration on the vocabulary project using Quizlet in a flexible manner likely enhanced our motivation for research, influencing the project's outcome.

Besides, the success of our collaboration could partly lie in effective communication among part-time and full-time teachers. Pischetola et al. (2023) discuss the importance of a "safe learning space" in teacher collaboration activities in a teacher development programme (p.7594). In our project, we were able to explore freely with casual consultation with full-time teachers. The online collaborative document effectively facilitated "collective reflection" (Romeu et al., 2016, p.602), complemented by in-person communication in the teachers' room and corridor.

For these possible reasons, the project ended successfully. It should be noted that

while effective communication is essential, collaboration itself could take many forms, such as with different tools (whether integrating technology or not) and for different language aspects, depending on projects. Meanwhile, as for our project, the collaboration with full-time cohorts did bring significant benefits to us as part-time teachers, which can be highlighted from the three viewpoints below.

Research Skills Improved

First, the collaboration helped us to develop practical research skills. With the help of the full-time faculty, we collaboratively involved data collection and analysis, as described above. Also, we had an ample chance to discuss how to present the results and findings of the project for the academic conference. As one of us states, “We felt encouraged to actively participate in our research, which influenced our mindset and productivity greatly.” The other early-career part-timer, who had had no idea about which academic societies to approach, were able to participate in an oral presentation at a conference for the first time. Neither of us was an active member of the academic society before this project; however, with the full-time faculty as a role model, we are now motivated to seek out more academic opportunities to catch up with the latest research.

This surprising result perhaps echoes the findings of Mercer and Pawlak (2024), which suggest that language teacher professional curiosity (LTPC) is a cyclic process, affected by many different factors, including social contexts such as opportunities for professional development (Mercer & Pawlak, 2024). In our case, a research collaboration opportunity yielded a significant change in our identity and mindset, from mere teachers to teacher-researchers.

Teaching Skills Improved

Additionally, collaboration has led to improvement in our teaching skills. First, the research provided us with practical opportunities to learn from others about the use of Quizlet in actual classrooms. As in Table 1, its usage among the project members had both similarities and differences. Through discussion, we were able to compare teaching strategies and gain new insights. One of us as part-timers learned about the Quizlet Live during a casual consultation derived from the project.

It is worth mentioning here that the communication opportunities with the full-time faculties felt like an informal FD opportunity, providing us insights into various teaching ideas aside from Quizlet, including textbook applications, classroom activities, and examination resources. A teacher-researcher can connect these new ideas to new experimentation and research. Since more publications can increase the chances of being hired as full-timers, this could bring benefits to us as part-timers in terms of working conditions as well.

Well-being Improved

Furthermore, the project also led to an elevated sense of well-being among us. As mentioned in the introduction, past research points out an insufficient connection between part-time and full-time teachers in the workplace, resulting in a sense of isolation by part-timers (e.g. Forbes et al., 2010; Meixner et al., 2010; Milliner, 2017), while social relationship between teachers could be a factor contributing to teacher well-being (Babic et al., 2022). Our collaborative research has enabled both part-time and full-time teachers to share teaching goals and communicate their teaching practices with each other. As mentioned, while class observations were formally recorded in the collaborative document, occasional informal chats among teachers took place after classes. Both communication types were

important when we reflected on our experiences.

All the interactions helped us to feel that we are respected as teachers and that our styles of instruction are valued. Importantly, this kind of teacher collaboration, producing more chances of communication, can create a space to share emotions, which potentially leads to increased well-being of part-timers. As teaching could be one of the most demanding jobs, collaboration with full-time cohorts in a supportive environment with empathy and communication enables us to have a sense of belonging and increase confidence in terms of both teaching and researching.

Conclusion

This reflective inquiry delineated three advantages of part-time and full-time teacher collaboration, as perceived through the lens of us part-time teachers. First, our engagement with experienced full-time teachers facilitated the improvement of our research skills. In addition, presenting the research outcome at a conference heightened our confidence, inspiring us to continue our research endeavours. In other words, this collaboration fostered a significant change in our professional identities, evolving from mere language teachers to teacher-researchers.

Second, the exposure to diverse pedagogical approaches using digital equipment enhanced the teaching capabilities of the part-time teachers. It was valuable for all project members to explore various uses of Quizlet in classroom settings, coupled with an understanding of students' responses. Moreover, it also made it easier for the teachers to share broader teaching practices, such as diverse textbook applications, supplementary activities, examination resources, etc.

Finally, the collaboration contributed significantly to our holistic well-being. Active participation in the project fostered our

sense of belonging, developing an environment wherein the participants share not only project-related matters but also broader professional experiences as teachers and researchers. The relationship continues as we remain teacher-researchers. We occasionally attend conferences with one of the full-time teachers, which helps us expand our professional network. This network could potentially help address the issue of isolation or marginalisation often faced by part-time teachers.

However, it is imperative to acknowledge the study's limitations. First, the short duration of the study may not fully capture the effect of the collaboration. Longer-term projects may depict more detailed effects on teacher practices and well-being as a result of the interaction with full-timers. In addition, the small number of teacher participants limited the generalizability of collaboration effectiveness. A larger and more diverse sample could provide different insights into collaborative projects. Furthermore, various types of projects could introduce new factors that might impact collaborative dynamics, such as project complexity and teaching strategies used. Recognising these constraints could offer a further comprehensive understanding of part-time and full-time teacher collaboration benefits.

This reflective study highlights a broader implication of teacher collaboration from the perspective of part-time university language teachers in Japan. Although more research needs to be done, even a small-scale collaboration can create a foundation for higher job satisfaction for part-timers. Ultimately, it will contribute to better students' learning experience in the university classroom.

Lastly, it should also be emphasised that collaboration with part-timers could be beneficial for full-time faculties as well as institutions themselves. When part-time teachers become teacher-researchers, the education and research outcomes at the

university will improve. Additionally, conversations with part-timers can help full-timers to better understand their challenges and situations. This understanding could lead to more relevant faculty

development and an improved educational environment. Therefore, institutional efforts to promote teacher collaboration are potentially meaningful for both part-time and full-time educators.

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Appendix

Excerpt from Teacher Collaborative Document (Google Docs)

(クラス名) ○○名、(クラス名) ○○名 計○○名

Date	Notes
Week 1	Quizlet100語を (LMS名) 上に配布。
...	...
Week 7	学習モチベーションのために中間試験にQuizletに出てきた単語を若干含めました (4 択問題)。両方のクラスでQuizletの部分はよくできていました。中間試験後 (クラス名) で授業内でQuizlet Liveを12問行いました。ほぼ全員が全て正解の様子でした。
Week 8	Quizlet次の110語を (LMS名) 上に配布。
...	...
Week 14	中間試験同様、期末試験にQuizletに出てきた単語を若干含めました。両方のクラスでQuizletの部分はよくできている様子です。授業内でQuizlet Liveを行いました (およそ12問)。間違いも見受けられますが、おおむね正解の様子でした。

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