

do the same.

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Reflection on the JALT 2011 Conference JALT 2011 の感想

National Memorial Olympics Center,
Yoyogi, Tokyo, November 18th – 21st, 2011
国立オリンピック記念 青少年総合センター、2011年11月18日～21日

Matthew Coomber
Kyoto Sangyo University
マシュー・クーンバー
京都産業大学

Were anyone to conduct a genre analysis of ELT conference reports, they would doubtless arrive at the conclusion that conferences are unremittingly sunny affairs, and presentations always professional, thought-provoking and engaging. But of course the reality is not quite the same. Conference-going, like any other activity, has its fair share of frustrations and disappointments. It's just that these aspects of the experience rarely seem to make it as far as the reports, and with good reason considering the huge amount of volunteer work that goes into organising a conference on the scale of JALT National. It seems almost inconceivable to report on a conference in anything less than glowing terms, as if to mention a negative experience is in some way a criticism of the conference as a



whole. Even though this is most emphatically not the case, it is thus with some trepidation that I must report that my two days in Yoyogi included both ups and downs.

Despite the risk of living up to the common stereotype of the British as being obsessed with the weather, it would be difficult to write a balanced report on this year's conference without mentioning the torrential rain which persisted throughout the whole of the first day. I wish I had been able to ignore the effect of the downpour which set in when I was in the middle of Meiji-jingu, having foolishly decided that a walk across the park from Harajuku would be a more pleasant way to get to the site than attempting to change trains at the intimidatingly complex (to a non-Tokyoite at least) Shinjuku station. Sadly though, that would require a more phlegmatic character than that which I possess. Needless to say, arriving soaking wet was not a good start to the day, and with events split between three buildings drying out was never more than temporary. This combination of bad luck and my own bad judgment led me to reflect upon how these two factors can impact upon the conference-going experience.

A more predictable, but equally unavoidable problem, relates to scheduling. While one of the great advantages of a conference the size of JALT National is that there will almost certainly be a presentation appealing to your interests at any particular time, the downside of this is that there will often be more than one. Thus, when deciding on my first presentation of the day during my shinkansen journey from Kyoto, I was faced with the dilemma (trilemma, perhaps?) of choosing between three presentations which, for very different reasons, appealed to me roughly equally. Greg Sholdt's Featured Speaker Workshop - Getting started with quantitative research, sounded just the kind of thing I needed to help me with my current research, in which I am looking at ways teachers can encourage learners to make self-directed revisions to their writing, rather than relying on teacher feedback. Yet on the other hand, I really wanted to hear Marcos Benevides introducing his new series of graded readers, based on the *Choose your own adventure series* I enjoyed as a child. As next year I will be starting a new job at a university with a well-established extensive reading programme, I was especially interested in discovering whether the ELT version of the series had managed to retain the atmosphere of suspense and reader involvement I recall from my own reading.

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Finally, a short paper by Paul Leeming and Stuart Cunningham on group dynamics and leadership in the classroom, the importance of which I feel to be vastly under-represented in ELT research, was something I didn't want to miss. In my own teaching, I have long been mystified as to why certain classes seem to gel far more successfully than others, and was hoping to gain some insights as to how I might be able to promote greater cohesion in my less successful groups.

Ultimately, my poor planning led to me arriving late and took the decision out of my hands, but the process of deliberation made me think about how any one delegate can only ever see a tiny fraction of what is on offer at JALT National, and how the decisions that we make, which involve both luck and judgment, are to a large extent responsible for our perceptions of the event as a whole. Luckily, I was able to attend a later presentation by Sholdt on a similar topic, and was thoroughly glad I did so. Even more fortunate was the fact that no Health and Safety officers happened to look in. By the time the presentation began, a room designed for around 20 people held twice that number. However, it was well worth the effort to squeeze into the room. While quantitative methods can seem intimidating to the novice researcher, Sholdt's clear explanations and sheer enthusiasm for his subject left me with the feeling that quantitative research was no longer the impenetrable mystery I had previously thought, but something I could see myself eventually getting to grips with. While I doubt I will ever attain a true appreciation of what the presenter termed the 'beauty behind the numbers', Sholdt's example of an early research project he conducted into extensive reading helped me to realize both that potential sources of quantitative data are readily available in the classroom, and that results can be analyzed and presented in ways that are both meaningful and comprehensible. To practicing language teachers, such as myself, who have only a rudimentary knowledge of statistics, it would be a refreshing change were more quantitative researchers to consider just how accessible their work is to the typical reader.

By 5.30 on Saturday evening, many delegates' enthusiasm may have been starting to wane, and my thoughts were turning to the first beer of the night rather than the last presentation of the day. After an early start and a long, information packed day, what I needed was a presentation that could re-energise me. Given that Richard Silver is not only co-coordinator of

the LD SIG, which generously sponsored my participation in this year's conference, but also a colleague and a good friend, I am about to lay myself open to charges both of sycophancy and subjectivity. However, not to mention Richard's presentation in this report would seem fundamentally dishonest, as it was by far the best I saw at this year's JALT, providing me with just the burst of energy I needed at the end of the day. Focusing on the issues and challenges which arise when using presentations in the language classroom, Richard suggested several ways in which the activity can be transformed from one dominated by one-way transmission of information by a single student to an experience in which the entire class can be more actively involved. Even more than the highly stimulating content, what set this workshop apart was the innovative way in which the presenter managed to create genuine interaction between participants who had been strangers at the start of the session. Too often, in my experience, presenters' attempts to promote audience interaction in workshops feel forced, awkward, and at times pointless. Yet in this case, the group activity Richard engaged us in was not only integral to his theme of Growing autonomy in presentation-discussions, but also immensely enjoyable. In spite of the knowledge that that first beer was waiting for me, I left the room wishing the presentation could have gone on longer.

After such a positive ending to the first day, and with a dry pair of shoes on my feet and a blue sky overhead, my expectations were high as I set out on Sunday morning for the first plenary speech of the day. A quick glance inside the cover of any of the books in the Cambridge Language Teaching Library reinforces the view that Jack Richards, responsible for more titles in this series than any other author, is without doubt one of the giants of our field. Yet a speaker being an 'internationally renowned applied linguist, teacher educator, and textbook author', to quote Richards' biodata from the conference handbook, does not necessarily guarantee a good speech. Richards though, more than lived up to his reputation, delivering a wide-ranging plenary covering some of the most fundamental issues in our profession, and doing so without apparently feeling the need to pause for breath! As Richards himself acknowledged, the scope of this plenary was such that to do his subject full justice in a mere hour was an ambitious goal. But while the sheer breadth of topics covered meant that at

times the audience may have been left wishing for greater depth, personally I felt that Richards did a fine job in walking (perhaps sprint would be a better choice of verb?) the tightrope of offering something to novice teachers, 40-year veterans, and everyone in between. As a member of the latter group, of particular interest to me was the importance Richards ascribed to disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. While I would certainly agree with the presenter's assertion that teachers who possess both types of knowledge are more likely to be more effective than those who do not, I also wonder about the potential impact of when and how that knowledge was obtained. My practical experience of teaching preceded the theoretical knowledge I have gained, a situation which would be decidedly odd in most professions, but which does not seem unusual among EFL teachers in Japan. It seems to me that overlaying theory onto practical experience, rather than vice versa, may have a significant impact on the ways in which we develop as teachers.

As Sunday drew to a close I faced my final scheduling conflict of the weekend, with my own presentation beginning at the same time as the LD Forum. Thankfully, although I missed most of the poster session, I was able to arrive in time to enjoy the stimulating round table discussion which closed the event, and for me, the conference. While the need to return to Kyoto that evening meant that, much to my disappointment, I was unable to join other SIG members for dinner, I was at least provided with food for thought: Phil Benson's observation that there is a degree of conflict between the principles of learner autonomy and sociocultural theory leading me to reflect on the need to be aware of this potential conflict in my own classroom. And it was with that thought in my head that my participation in JALT 2011, made possible by the much appreciated grant I received from the LD SIG, ended. Now, looking back through the conference handbook as I write this report, I am reminded once again of the incredible variety of expertise that language teachers in Japan possess, and only regret that limited time allows us to enjoy such a small amount of what is on offer at JALT. But perhaps it is better to be left wanting more.

Matthew Coomber has been teaching English in Japan since 2001. Having spent the past five years working at Ritsumeikan University, he is looking forward to different challenges when he takes up a new position at Kyoto

Sangyo University in April 2012.

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At present there is no SIG-wide agreement about running a similar offer for your SIG memberships, so if you do pay for a 5-year JALT membership, please note that you will – for the time being – still need to pay your 1500 yen SIG membership(s) on a yearly basis. For detailed information about joining the LD SIG as a JALT member or becoming a LD SIG subscriber as a non-JALT member, please go to <http://ld-sig.org/join/>.

If you have any questions or comments about any of the above, please contact the Learner Development SIG membership chair Rachelle

Jorgenson

rachellejorgenson@gmail.com.

Many thanks.