

**Maxims for Developing Students' and Teachers' Learning Experiences:
A Constructive Review of the Pan-SIG Conference, 2012.**

学習者と教師の学習経験を発展させるための格言：

Pan-SIG 2012大会の建設的な批評

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Clichés, stereotypes, and proverbs can be applied to many situations in life. Often, I wonder if their messages are sometimes diluted by their overuse, but more often than not, I think that they are apt and sum up a range of experiences perfectly—that is why their use became widespread in the first place. So, to review the recent pan-Special Interest Group (Pan-SIG) conference in Hiroshima, I would like to use three maxims: “be prepared”, “humans are social animals” (therefore [language] learning is a social activity), and “two heads are better than one”. The first one helps me think about what I will do at conferences. The second is a personal observation that may be true of most people, in particular myself. The third is a theme that I am becoming increasingly aware of in teacher-to-teacher conversations and professional development literature, and that was also prevalent in the presentations I watched at the Pan-SIG.

“Be Prepared”

Conferences can be tiring and difficult to enjoy. Firstly, you may have to travel a long way from early in the morning; you may, like me, have to carry a bulky laptop, stationery, and other things through multiple train changes. You then arrive at a busy place where you know no one. Then, in order to see as many presentations as possible, you rush from one room to another, arriving breathless and disorganized. Finally, you may either be disappointed by the relevance of the presentation to your needs, or be inspired by the enthusiasm of the presenters and the quality and enjoyability of the presentations. Having a plan and an awareness of what you want to achieve can greatly enhance the professional and social experience of a conference. To date, the Hiroshima 2012 Pan-SIG conference was one of the most satisfying conferences I have attended for the following reasons :

1. To make sure I had enough energy to talk with others during the conference, I took breaks from some of the presentations, even though they were of interest to me .
2. I prepared a schedule of the day, highlighted the presentations I wanted to see, and kept this schedule in a plastic wallet so I could find it easily.
3. In planning my day's presentations to see, I followed a single theme. I was thus able to stay in the same room for quite some time, saving energy and developing ongoing conversations with some people who were following the same theme.
4. I got to know the layout of the building by walking around it, checking signs and room numbers, and annotating my day's intended schedule so I could know if it was possible to make it to all of the presentations that I had planned to go to.
5. I have started to develop a professional network (I used my SIG for this)—knowing people to chat to and bounce ideas off can make the day far more enjoyable.

This simple shift in my approach to conferences helped me to take full advantage of the learning opportunities available at the Pan-SIG conference, and I will be making sure that I do these things again whenever I attend a conference.

In the next paragraph, I will describe how another shift in my attitude towards work is also helping me learn more from my colleagues, not just at conferences, but also on a daily basis.

“Humans Are Social Animals”

I am including this idea in my conference write-up because whenever I have attended conferences in the past, I have always tended to be a passive attendee—watching presentations, taking notes and thinking things over on my own. This time, I attended the presentation with a growing awareness of how important it is to be socially active at a conference. I am naturally a shy person, who, during the course of my teaching career, has had to develop something of a second persona in the classroom. However, when it comes to research work and lesson/curriculum development, I find myself really enjoying reading, and I find the idea of reading a teaching-related or language-related academic paper refreshing and useful. I also find myself feeling guilty when I start chatting to other people at work, when I know I have lots of written work to attend to. Nevertheless, I have become aware of some of the limitations of my bookish approach. In my previous job, I had a private office—useful for reading and typing, but not useful for conversations. In my current job, I work in a large open-plan teacher’s room; sometimes a little noisy and difficult to concentrate on reading and writing, but, because of the social set-up, it is a wonderful learning environment.

In the past 12 months, I have noticed the following benefits from sharing an office with fellow teachers: (1) conversations are great places to share ideas for teaching events to present at, share publication ideas, and find out about calls for papers; (2) we can easily share recommendations for good books and websites; (3) we can share teaching ideas; (4) we can arrange to peer check applications, submissions and lesson plans; (5) we can help each other in our understanding of, for example, complicated grammar points, and confirming facts, plans and ideas; (6) and, last but not least, we can support and encourage each other when we are feeling under pressure or encountering difficulties in the classroom, or with research-related activities. With my growing awareness of the importance of playing an active social role at work, I attended the Pan-SIG conference with far more focus on meeting people and joining in conversations. These conversations left me with a whole host of useful tips that I may not have gained without talking with other people. For example:

- Recruitment information: some universities seem to employ a point-based system to sort applicants and CVs. So, for example, if we know that a university attributes more points to a university journal article we could concentrate on writing more of those, or on the other hand concentrate on presenting more if a university deems presentations to be more valuable for job hunting.
- Useful books and materials
- Lesson activities
- Useful websites
- Applications of (alternative ways to use) different software and websites
- Ideas concerning our approaches to students who have failed to pass our courses

I have always been an enthusiastic proponent of a communicative and collaborative approach to language learning. Naturally, I think the idea that people can learn from interacting with each other, has been, can be, and should be extended to the classroom, and, in particular, to the language classroom. As an extension of this idea, I would next like to share the content of some presentations that I watched at the Pan-SIG conference that

specifically promoted the concept of encouraging and training students to help students, in a more deliberately direct way than encouraging learning from interaction.

“Two Heads Are Better Than One”

I don't know if it was a result of the presentations I chose to see, or a developing trend, but I noticed that many of the presentations I saw were about using students as a resource to help other students. The first presentation I saw was a really great example of this. Craig Manning described how he had taken students in remedial classes and set them into small groups of three with a peer leader in each group to facilitate discussion. This structure encourages students to help each other, rather than fulfilling a more traditional “teacher as the holder of information” role. The positive results of this approach to the classroom were startling and made me very aware of the power of student discussion. Craig explained the positive results come about because the students' advice to other students can be timelier, in higher quantity, and at a better level of comprehension than advice from a teacher who has to divide his or her time among a whole class rather than a small group. Craig's key idea for me was that we as teachers/instructors can help our students to give each other better advice—not just through direct answering of questions, but by encouraging students to ask each other questions, elicit points from each other and support their peers in their classwork. These are all things that I will be aiming to implement.

The second presentation I watched was also an interesting one, using the power of students' peer reviews to develop students' speaking skills. The presenter, Katherine Song showed us how she was able to use a simple feedback system to give students opportunities for peer feedback. The important point here was that the advice given by students to their peers would be at an appropriate level for them and can also help the teacher to realize when language delivered in the classroom (in this case presentations) is at an appropriate, audience-specific level.

Both presentations highlighted that firstly, as teachers, we need to help guide students in what is useful feedback for peers. Secondly, the feedback process needs to be and can be simple. And, finally, students can be trained to give each other better, more useful feedback.

The next presentation I watched again showed the effectiveness of students helping students. Bill Mboutsiadis and Masashi Nakamura presented on two themes through a poster session in the LD SIG Forum. The first theme was the idea of the students exploring their own L2 self to develop motivation, in accordance with Dornyei's 2009 theory, in a fun way with digital storytelling. The second theme focused on how student Teaching Assistants (TA) helped, advised, and motivated students by acting as successful, English-speaking role models in a student-centered computer lab course. Comments from students who appreciated the student TA's help revealed (in line with the earlier themes) that TAs were able to give timely, comprehension level-appropriate help to students on the course, and were also able to help with relevant advice on language learning skills—something teachers may not be able to do, as they do not share the same background and experience that TAs and students do.

Having watched these excellent presentations at the Pan-SIG conference, I am convinced that encouraging peer-to-peer help and advice unlocks significant synergies in content and language learning. As a result, students learn to better interact in English, share their content knowledge, and gain in subject matter and language confidence. Therefore, I think

it is an important area for further development and research for teachers interested in learner development. With this in mind, here are 10 ways I have been, and will be using to encourage peer support in the classroom.

- 1) Letting students assign team members to concentrate on specific sections of a listening exercise or task, while not ignoring other sections. To facilitate this, students can pass one pen / pencil around the group to make notes during the listening activity.
- 2) Allowing students pair or group discussion time after a listening to check answers and further build schemata.
- 3) Sharing ideas in schema-building activities by having students work individually, then in pairs, and finally in small groups to develop lists of phrases and vocabulary. These are then written on the board to create a class-developed vocabulary and phrase list.
- 4) Encouraging students to individually prepare vocabulary lists at home which can be shared amongst team members in class time.
- 5) Deliberately allowing exaggerated pauses after teacher explanations—giving students time and space to realize their natural tendency to ask classmates to confirm comprehension of teacher instructions.
- 6) Using Google docs to create small peer review groups for paragraphs, essays, and other written submissions.
- 7) Developing banks of example sentences in groups—when practicing grammar points, students write four sentences and dictate them to their group. Students write all dictated sentences down, and then the teacher indicates errors on one student's sheet in each group. This sheet is used as a master copy for the group to try to correct group member's sheets in a discussion activity.
- 8) Creating one-off peer grading teams for an in-class oral test practice—two or three students grade their team members' oral test practices and discuss good points and weak points.
- 9) Assigning on-going peer review groups so that students can review homework, assignments and tests with their teams and discuss in class, or before class, how to improve their language performance and grades.
- 10) Training students in pair work for checking answers by pre-teaching phrases such as “What did you write for question one?” and “Me too, I have the same answer”, and so on.

In conclusion, reading back through this article, I have noticed that the behaviors that I feel that I need to engender in myself to be a better teacher/researcher are also ones I expect my students to have in the classroom. *Be prepared.* Do I expect students to be prepared for class and university in general? Yes. *Humans are social animals.* Do I expect students to talk to each other, as a medium to develop language, run good classes and help keep all students up to speed? Yes. *Two heads are better than one.* Do I expect students to collaborate by working through study difficulties together, by helping each other improve specific skills, as well as by practicing language together? Yes. Do these things always happen in class? No. But it is worth remembering that, while I struggle with these things at work on a daily basis in my own native language, of course my students working in a second language or third language will struggle with these things—we are, after all, *only human.*

References

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Nakasendo Reflections, compiled by Rob Moreau 中仙道大会を振り返って Rob Moreauによるまとめ

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Looking Back on The LD SIG Forum at the Nakasendo Conference, June, 2012

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From December 2011, the focus of the monthly get-togethers held by the Learner Development SIG in Tokyo has been on classroom research and teacher reflections on their practices. Working in themed groups, SIG members have been sharing ideas on a variety of topics. It seemed natural, therefore, to use the LD SIG Forum at this year's Nakasendo Conference as an opportunity to present these ideas and gain new insights from each other as well as from conference participants.

Although the conference was held on the same weekend as JALT CALL, the SIG was well represented by 10 presenters: Tim Ashwell, Andy Barfield, Peter Cassidy, Stephanie Corwin, Robert Moreau, Debjani Ray, Miyuki Sakai, James Underwood, Kazuko Unosawa, and Stacey Vye. The presentations included topics and learning contexts ranging from the use of code-switching in a pre-kindergarten class to vocabulary development in a junior high school setting to collaborative learning in university English classes, among others.

This section of *Learning Learning* will give the reader a taste of the LD SIG Forum experience at Nakasendo through presenter and participant reflections.

Towards Exploratory Practices Around Learners' Vocabulary Development

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Words. More words. Phrases. Vocabulary. So much practice—learners', teachers', researchers'—reifies vocabulary and removes it from the quality of life and the mutual development of learners and teachers. In this poster presentation I tried to take a different look at learners' vocabulary development, and bring together some key developments that my students and I have been going through in a second-year seminar on International Migration Issues. In this seminar we have focused on first developing students' migration histories (where they look at migration within their family across generations), then built up