

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

migration concepts such as *discrimination* and *remittances* from students' action knowledge. In this work learners' vocabulary develops naturally through a living engagement with international migration issues and an exploration of their worlds and surrounding social contexts. Students' vocabulary development is sustained by building knowledge together through doing research projects into international migration issues.

The poster display showed how, at the start of the academic year, my seminar students had gone and collected photos and pictures from the Internet to do with migrant workers, and then later done fieldwork in the greater Tokyo area by taking photographs of the different spaces that migrant workers and their families create, move through and/or author. The students brought these photos to class, discussed and classified them, before creating mini-posters about "migration concepts". They then used these posters in the seminar to explain their starting interpretations of migrant workers in their local communities. The process involved a number of important shifts in learner, teacher and researcher roles, and also led to some striking changes in how students develop concepts and record vocabulary.



Figure 1. Sorting and classifying migration pictures (April 20).

"Through grouping migration I found there are many ways to group. Before I talked with the seminar members I grouped only one way. That way is country they came from, but I talked with others. Other people have many thoughts and to group these pictures so I found many aspects of migration for example there are happy migration groups, official migration and discrimination group," reflected one student after sorting and categorizing different photos and pictures. Another expressed their development like this: "I've come to think of migrants as less strange and less fearful. To be honest, I had some negative feelings and prejudice that migrants might have some bad effect on our community, our country or our future...but after learning in this seminar I take migrants and migration more objectively and more calmly... Once I understand foreign people or how people migrate some of my negative feelings about immigration diminished. Somehow I had some strong belief not ... it's difficult for migrants to live happily in the country they migrate to and the country that accepted immigrants also have trouble I thought so...."

This semester, we have since been talking together about the different processes that students engage in doing research projects in English. We've moved away from a narrow focus on vocabulary for vocabulary's sake, and come closer to seeing lexical development as part of a much more complicated engagement with complex issues. For the past few weeks, the students have been working on their own research projects on international migration issues. In the seminar each week, they spend about an hour in pairs talking through their research notes, explaining what they have been finding out and developing their knowledge further together. As a group we have also been exploring the development of "critical thinking" and what that means as part of their overall research and development.

This exploratory approach has let me notice how clearly students come to see different processes that they engage in. For example, when we discussed the key processes in making research notes, they agreed that the following four processes are key:

- writing notes in a clear way
- identifying important information and ordering it
- summarizing ideas
- making notes easy to see (including visual elements, pictures, graphs); and when we talked about “explaining”, the students identified these processes:
 - planning/imagining how to explain your notes
 - explaining from general to specific, using details, examples, stories
 - making the explanation real
 - checking whether your partner is understanding
 - making your explanation easy to understand / directing your partner’s attention



Figure 2 . Explaining research (June 28) .

Their ideas encompassed both rehearsal and engagement, and their sense of explaining as a co-constructed act with others was very striking.

I’m not sure what will happen next in this seminar, but the Exploratory Practice direction that it has taken is interesting and exciting for all of us. We will probably get back to focusing on vocabulary development at some point, but it does not seem to be a problem if we don’t get there for a while. We are talking about the quality of what we are learning together, and we are following our interests about international migration issues and how we research them. From week to week, we are continuously reflective, both individually and collectively, through dialogue, writing and discussion. We share our reflections with each other, and we seem to be creating, in any case, our own approach(es) to learner autonomy, content-based learning, and vocabulary development.

The Problem of Assessment and Collaborative Learning

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At the LD SIG Forum, the Collaborative Learning Group presented a poster on what we have been discussing at the monthly get-togethers. Starting from basic questions such as “What is collaborative learning?” and “How is collaborative learning different from group work?” we have talked about a wide range of subjects, from theory to practice, sharing experiences, suggesting resources and giving feedback to each other on collaborative learning (CL) activities we have tried in our classes. All of these ideas were collated by Tim Ashwell, who kindly made the poster on behalf of our group.

One attendee at our poster session raised questions we had been discussing but had not focused on in any detail. He explained that his daughter, who was studying at a Design College, was dissatisfied with group work because she felt she had pulled more weight than other group members, and yet she had received the same grade as everyone else in her group. All projects in the course were done in groups and they were evaluated. Some members lacked motivation, and she was facing difficulties in interpersonal relations. We discussed the daughter's case and continued to discuss issues that can hinder the effectiveness of CL in a language course, such as lack of students' motivation and low language proficiency. We agreed at the end of the discussion that the effectiveness of CL should be measured and proved. The conference was a good opportunity to discuss these topics with the attendee as well as with the group.

After this conversation, I reflected on the issue of evaluating group projects and the importance of establishing the effectiveness of CL. I have considered ways to implement CL; however, though I have tried group project work before, I have started to avoid projects that require a product by more than three people recently, in order to avoid conflicts and issues concerning the evaluation of groups and individual contributions. Although group projects may cause conflicts in interpersonal relations and disagreements over the way to do tasks, they are worthwhile because collaboration may add another dimension to learning as students can exchange ideas on tasks, and assume a variety of roles. According to Dörnyei and Murphey (2003), "There is a general agreement that roles are of great importance to the life and productivity of the group..."(p.109). To resolve the problem of the attendee's daughter's case, assigning specific roles to group members, dividing their responsibilities in terms of tasks, might have led to more cooperation. I would like to further discuss how to organize group projects at our meetings and seek better ways to facilitate CL.

At the get-togethers, we had discussed the importance of proving the effectiveness of CL over non-collaborative methods in achieving a range of goals. A few months ago, we agreed to collect qualitative data from our students relating to their experiences of collaborative learning, and I asked the students in my writing class to discuss their experience of giving peer feedback at the end of the first semester. One student wrote, "It was a new experience as it was an opportunity to become conscious of the structure and grammar of the compositions and helped [me] to have an objective perspective when writing [my] own." Although some students mentioned the difficulty of giving peer feedback and their discomfort with the responsibility it entailed, they also wrote that giving and receiving feedback helped them revise their writing. In the second semester, students will continue giving peer feedback, and I hope they will find it more beneficial. Other than collecting students' reflections on giving and receiving peer feedback, I will consider other forms of data collection in order to discuss the effectiveness of CL.

Since then, at the last LD-SIG get-together on June 24th, our group agreed that our long-term goal could be participating in the 2013 LD SIG Forum at the JALT National Conference and, as a mid-term goal, contributing an article to the April 2013 issue of *Learning Learning*. The Nakasendo Conference was an opportunity to reflect on what we have been doing so far, and I look forward to exchanging ideas with group members further on the theory and practice of CL.

A Newcomer's Point of View

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The Nakasendo Conference on June 2nd, 2012 was very significant for me as it was my first time attending it as a member of the LD SIG. I had joined the Nakasendo Conference several times before, had listened to many interesting presentations, and taken part in the group discussions. This time, I was one of the presenters at the LD SIG Forum.

The theme of the poster presentation in which I was involved was Collaborative Learning in Language Teaching. We discussed our experiences of trying to facilitate collaborative learning in our classes, and some of the

participants who came by were keen to discuss their difficulties regarding their students/ children in a collaborative classroom setting and sought some advice and suggestions on how to solve their problems.

Collaborative learning might be a welcome addition to student-centered classrooms but, unfortunately, a departure from the traditional teacher-controlled classrooms can also cause problems. In some cases, certain students might feel used by others; some students may tend not to do their share during the group work but may push the workload onto the other hardworking group members.

One visitor to our group was really troubled by this phenomenon, as his daughter had been facing a similar type of problem in her college classes. As a newcomer myself to collaborative learning, I did not have much to offer, but some of my group members were experienced in using collaborative learning in their classrooms and tried to provide some realistic ideas for how to deal with the problem. One memorable suggestion was to assign group members a distinct role, which would make it harder for them to evade or neglect their duties but would also reinforce individual contributions and boost overall productivity of the group. This sounded convincing and practical to me and I gained some new information out of that discussion.

Later, I went to the other booths to listen to some talks or to see some posters and had a wonderful time learning a lot in different fields of Learner Development. Last but not least, I really enjoyed the vigorous and informative “My Share” presentations by the Teachers’ College Tokyo Alumni Association members. Overall, I felt the excitement of an explorer and felt proud to be a part of the great expedition.

Viewing Research and Laundry from a Different Angle through Peer Collaboration

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The Learner Development SIG Forum at Nakasendo 2012 afforded the participants a glimpse of how teachers are working in partnerships via collaborative groups and pairs, primarily in the Tokyo area, not merely to provide support and guidance to each other, but also to creatively look at different ways of learning and researching in language classrooms and seminars. In previous years, I have always been very much a part of these monthly get-togethers, yet this year I was not able to attend them, so being able to share ideas about learning, teaching, and researching at the LD SIG Forum after such a long

hiatus gave me a particular thrill. For me, the venue could not have been better because it was close enough that I could view my balcony from time to time from where I was discussing my research study and see if my clothes were drying. In addition, I was able to view not only my apartment and laundry hanging out to dry from a different angle, but also my research about my Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) study on university seminar students' learning of English thanks to the insightful comments from peers.

Mingling with other participants and presenters gave me a wide and varied array of views about how teachers and learners conceptualize learning. Stephanie Corwin reminded me that learning vocabulary by making visual collocations of the target words and/or phrases is not only useful for learning second (or other) languages, but also a valuable learning practice for language development in general. With Tim Ashwell, Robert Moreau, Debjani Ray, and Kazuko Unosawa's inclusive and exciting discussion group, I could actively gather ideas about and ponder on how learners (myself included) learn more when they collaborate with others. From Andy Barfield, who was explaining Miyuki Sakai's poster on her behalf, I could see that building an English vocabulary repertoire means so much more to junior high school students when they can create original designs in their vocabulary records. Then Andy himself showed me how the vocabulary development of his seminar students led them to the discovery of a whole new world of migrant communities in close proximity to their homes, bringing the issues closer to their minds and hearts.

Lastly, from Peter Cassidy, I was able to view the complex development of code-switching in young learners and know how allowing L1 language helps with concept-building in both languages. When the Forum was over, I called my friend who wanted to attend, but could not. She was proud of our work, and wished she could have been there. We chuckled together about the fact that I could see my flat (and my laundry too!) from the room where

the Forum was held. The message I got was that different perspectives are needed in learning, and this was precisely what the LD SIG Forum offered.

A Participant's Reflection

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I enjoy Nakasendo for its diversity, inclusiveness, and unpretentiousness; qualities that make it an ideal venue for LD-SIG members to share insights from their research. Having arrived late at this year's forum, I only had time to listen to and speak in depth with two of the presenters, but learned much of value from both.

Intrigued by the photos and mind maps featured in his poster, I first visited Andy Barfield. Andy explained how he had explored a new approach to concept-development with learners in a seminar he teaches on international immigration issues. Learners in the seminar had gone out into their communities, taking photos of places near them, which were of importance to local migrant workers and their families. Andy showed how, through reflecting on these photos via mind maps, learners developed a fuller, more sensitive, and complex understanding of the issues they were studying and did so right in their own back yards. What impressed me most about Andy's approach was how it facilitated learners' discovery of the interconnectedness between themselves and migrants living in their communities. Both learners and their communities are surely better off for it.

Next, I listened to Peter Cassidy talk about his research on L1 use in the language classroom and its relationship with learner output. Peter described and showed photos from a study he had conducted in which children at an English school were either allowed to use their L1 or not allowed to use it while playing with blocks together. Afterwards, Peter looked at the complexity not only of the explanations learners gave of their block creations, but also of the creations themselves. Photos of the respective block structures made by the children in each condition revealed a stark difference in complexity in favor of the condition in which learners were allowed to use the L1. I found these results intriguing and spent the rest of the remaining time at the forum discussing ideas for possible follow-up studies on L1 use with Peter.

Once again, the Nakasendo LD SIG Forum proved to be an engaging event with presentations full of original ideas and fresh insights. Though I only had time to visit with Andy Barfield and Peter Cassidy, it was time well spent that left me looking forward to next year's forum—to which I plan on arriving early!

Reference

Dörnyei, Z., & Murphey, T. (2003). *Group dynamics in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.