

Getting Connected: Local Get Together Reports from Kansai, Hiroshima, and Tokyo

つながりを求めて：関西・広島・東京

LD Get-together Report: Kansai

Gretchen Clark

Our summer Get Together was held as part of the Kansai University of International Studies' Summer Seminar on July 20, 2013. We had a small but enthusiastic group of 7 including Gretchen Clark, Michael Wilkins, Ellen Head, Ann Flanagan and Shuji Narita. We welcomed two new faces, 2013 Grant Winner Brandon Kramer and Mayuko Yamamura. Like the March session, this workshop also focused on the theme of action research where participants discussed their own LD-related problems such as 'how to encourage teachers to participate in professional development workshops' and 'what to do when students have trouble completing their homework'. These ideas were discussed in small groups and then by the whole with everyone brainstorming possible solutions. It was a productive hour of idea exchange!

As an off-shoot, later that day Gretchen Clark presented on an action research project that she developed with Ellen Head at the March Get Together. Entitled 'On Learner Development: Perhaps it is TEACHERS who should be taking risks', her presentation explored overcoming fears and taking risks in the classroom as a teacher. For this project, instead of conducting student-large group presentations, she asked her students to present individually for small groups. As it is an unconventional method of handling the student presentation, she was apprehensive of negative feedback from colleagues and/or students regarding the level of formality and lack of central teacher role in the new process but after experimenting with this small group style enjoyed several positive results including: high student motivation, enjoyment and increased L2 interaction.

Our autumn Kansai Get Together was held on September 28 as part of the Osaka Tech Day +Plus one-day conference at Otemae University in Itami. The theme of Osaka JALT Tech Day was Learner Autonomy, with keynote speaker Thomas Robb's plenary entitled: 'Considerations for the Effective Use of Technology for Language Learning.' With all the apps, games, blogs, wikis which have proliferated in the last few years, the power of technology to entrance students is self-evident, and there are many ways of harnessing that for autonomous language learning. LD SIG members and friends met informally over lunch to talk shop about classes, their learner development projects, and reflect on what they learned at the Tech Day.

The Kansai Get Together team: Gretchen Clark, Michael Wilkins, Ellen Head, and Ann Flanagan
Kansai Get-Together Facebook group <http://www.facebook.com/groups/126518854184011/>

LD Get-together Report: Hiroshima

Jim Ronald

The Hiroshima Learner Development get-togethers continue to happen. We meet most months of the year, and there are typically between five and ten people at any get-together. Altogether, over the year, we have a total of 20 to 30 people joining us, with many get-together regulars also active in JALT's Hiroshima chapter.

Topics we've focused on over the past few months have included the following: Moodle, learner reflection, English camp, cross-cultural awareness, learner advising, autonomy-readiness, out-of-class events, and extensive reading. While I continue to be the main manager of the Hiroshima LD get-togethers, more and more of us are involved in contributing to the get-togethers in some way:

finding pre-reading materials (thanks Mathew Porter!), arranging a CALL room for one session (thanks Monika Szirmai!), bringing things to show or things to ask, and sparking ideas off each other.

One aim has been for the Hiroshima get-togethers to be a launch pad for new projects, initiatives, or teams. In a way, hearing about what has been happening in Tokyo, we may feel that we haven't achieved this (yet!). The get-togethers have, however, provided sparks for new topics or perspectives to investigate, have served as sounding boards for new research, materials or activities, and have been receptive, fertile ground for developing ideas or new projects.

The group aims to keep flexible, to welcome people with different schedules. However, we are almost all university teachers and have not yet done much reaching out to elementary school or high school teachers, or teachers at language schools. This is something we need to address.

As we meet at the get-togethers, we are often reminded that we are all learners, and how valuable this social, supportive gathering is for us as we develop in our understanding and practices in our striving to become more able to assist our students' development as language learners.

I'll finish with comments from two regulars at Hiroshima Learner Development get-togethers: one from Akiko Awa, our model, vocal, lifelong language learner, and one from Naomi Fujishima, whose reasons for joining the get-togethers may be echoed by us all.

It is the best place to speak out my opinions from the view point of students. I have learned English mostly on my own. However, I needed a lot of help from English teachers from time to time. Sometimes I couldn't agree with their teaching method or style, so LD get-togethers are also helpful to deal with my frustration.
Akiko Awa

Attending the Learner Development get-togethers in Hiroshima gives me a chance to share ideas with teachers from other universities. It's refreshing for me to hear what goes on in other schools, and I feel a sense of camaraderie with my colleagues there. I've known a few of the regular members for many years, so it's another good reason to go!
Naomi Fujishima

LD Get-together Report: Tokyo (September)

Andy Barfield

This was the fourth get-together of the new school year, and the first since the summer, and 23 people took part in get-together. We started off by taking the first 15 minutes to mix and mingle and talk in pairs with someone we didn't know so well about our working contexts and our learner development interests. Huw, Mayumi (Abe) and Sami Yoshimuta then led the next hour by taking us through a series of workshop tasks and discussions around the 'The Strategy Tree for Language Learners' that they have developed together in their collaborative practitioner research project. The tree is based on Rebecca Oxford's model in 'Teaching and Researching Language Learning Strategies' (Oxford, 2011), and features four main areas of focus: (a) the four skills + grammar, vocabulary & pronunciation, (b) affective strategies, (c) cognitive strategies, and (d) sociocultural-interactive strategies. Huw, Mayumi and Sami presented the model and then invited us to draw on A3 paper our own trees as language learners. We happily did this and informally talked through our different experiences as we drew, before moving round and talking about our trees with different participants at the get-together.

In the second half of the workshop, Huw, Mayumi and Sami asked the whole group for feedback and comments around these three questions: 1. How can this be used in a classroom? 2. How helpful was it for you as a learner? 3. How can the model be improved? The discussion that followed ranged over a number of areas, both for our ourselves as learners and for our learners too. 'The Strategy Tree for Language Learners' could be used in parallel with Language Learning Histories and as a tool for discussing specific areas of development with learners. Learners could be

asked to draw their 'current state' tree and their 'imagined ideal tree' to map possible pathways for their own development, as the tree helps both learners and teachers to conceptualise and represent language learner development in specific terms. Metaphorically, the tree could help learners shift from a metaphor of success/failure/struggle in terms of test scores to a growth/(learner) development/ecological understanding of their learning and language use. The tree might also have applications for self- and peer- assessment.

As for improvements for the model, people suggested:

1. It could include some kind of 'meta' focus (meta-affective, meta-cognitive, meta-sociocultural/interactive).
2. It could be developed with a self-ranking software tool to generate computer images of trees.
3. Different types of tree (including more abstracted versions) could be presented to learners so that they are encouraged to visualize their learning in different, alternative ways.
4. The (represented) relationship between the four skills and grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation could be re-worked in different ways.

This was a full-on, wide-ranging and stimulating discussion which went through to 14.25, and we were all grateful to Huw, Mayumi and Sami for leading such an interesting workshop.

Before the 10-minute break, Andy mentioned that we would be dividing into learner development groups in the second part of the afternoon. He also invited participants to make a small donation of 500 yen to cover room rental costs at Otsuma. (10,250 yen was donated in total: this will be paid into the SIG's bank account and then used for paying the university.) After the break, we re-started by checking which areas of focus people would like to have in the second half of the get-together. Five groups then formed:

- * Collaborative learning: Debjani Ray, Joel Laurier, Stacey Vye, and Tim Ashwell
- * Developing autonomy: Billy Hassett, Fumiko (Kurosawa), John Garrett, Mayumi (Takizawa) and Rob Morel
- * Learning journals/diaries: Caroline Ross & Stephanie Corwin
- * Pedagogies for social justice: Alison Stewart, Andy Barfield, Huw Davies, Ken Ikeda, and Sami Yoshimuta
- * Reading review: Chris Fitzgerald, Fumiko Murase, Ian Hurrell, James Underwood, and Natacha Piederriere

We took about 10 minutes to form groups and then went through to 16.55 or so in small-group discussions. More detailed reports from each group will be posted on the Tokyo LD blog – just go to <<http://tokyogettogether.blogspot.jp>>

The next get-together in Tokyo takes place on Sunday December 15 from 14.00 to 17.00 at Otsuma Women's University, to be followed by an LD SIG 'bonenkai' in the Ichigaya area.

