

## LD SIG Members' Voices

LD SIG Members' Voices offers spaces for SIG members to introduce themselves to other members of the SIG in a variety of accessible and personalised text formats and lengths:

- a short personal profile of yourself as a learner and teacher (100-200 words or so)
- a short critical reflection on your history as a (language) learner at (a) particular stage(s) in your life (around 200-500 words)
- a story of your ongoing interest in, and engagement with, particular learner development (and/or learner autonomy) issues (around 500-800 words)
- a short profile of your learner development research interests and how you hope to develop your research (around 500-800 words)
- a short profile of your working context and the focus on learner development that a particular institution where you work takes and/or is trying to develop (about 800-1200 words)
- some other piece of writing that you would like to contribute and that is related to learner development.

Many thanks to the following SIG members—all new members of the Learner Development SIG from March 2014 to July 2014—for sharing their voices with readers of *Learning Learning*. We hope other SIG members will also contribute their voice to the next issue of *Learning Learning*. If you are interested in doing so, please contact the incoming Members' Voices coordinator, James Underwood, at <[jamesmichaelunderwood@gmail.com](mailto:jamesmichaelunderwood@gmail.com)>.

“LD SIGメンバーの声”は、SIG会員の皆様が他会員の皆さんに向けて多様な形式・文体・長さで、ご自身の考えや活動をご紹介していただくためのスペースです。例えば、以下のような様々な声を歓迎しています：

- ご自身の学習者および教育者としてのプロフィールを短く紹介したもの。（約100-200語）
- ご自身の（語学）学習者としての経験で、特定の場における逸話を批判的に考察したもの。（約200-500語）
- ご自身が現在取り組まれている、もしくは関心を寄せていることで特に学習者ディベロプメント（または学習者の自律）に関する問題についてのもの。（約500-800語）
- 学習者ディベロプメントに関するご自身の研究についての短い概要と、今後どのようにその研究を展開していきたいと考えているか紹介するもの。（約500-800語）
- ご自身の勤務環境の短い概要と、勤務される特定機関で学習者ディベロプメントに関し注目している、または取り組もうとしていることについて。（約800-1200語）
- その他、学習者ディベロプメントに関する内容のもの。

2014年度下半期に学習者ディベロプメント研究部会に新たに参加され、今号で『学習の学習』の読者の皆様と様々な声を共有いただくSIG会員の皆様に、感謝申し上げます。

## Finding ways to SMILE as a learner and teacher



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Have you ever heard the expression that “the shortest

distance between two people is a smile?” Sometimes I use pictures to depict this phrase as a warm-up activity. Students guess the words that match the pictures that I draw on the board. Following the decoding of the pictures, I then ask students, “Does a smile make you feel happy?” Quickly, students smile back at me and say “yes”.

As an EFL teacher for the last 14 years, I have enjoyed a lot of smiles. I appreciate the moments that transcend language and create a connection between people that is meaningful. Meeting new students each semester is one reason I enjoy being a teacher. The new season of learning new names and information about students is part of the cycle of this profession that challenges me to approach each term with a smile. My meaning of smile is more than just a physical facial feature of friendliness. It is an approach to life learning that I have used a lot since I arrived in Japan in 2009.

Building a positive communication bridge between people often begins with a nonverbal gesture. Breaking through the communication barrier may depend on how safe a student feels in class. It is difficult to share opinions when the learner is hindered by a lack of confidence in the language. I

know this firsthand, for I did not know many Japanese words before I moved to the Kansai area. I needed a lot of SMILES to get me through those first years.

That is why I have created an acronym that reminds me and my students to SMILE when we meet each other.

The “S” stands for ‘Start with a question’, which can be as basic as ‘How are you?’ or ‘What did you do last night?’. To begin with a question creates an opportunity to know someone.

The “M” means ‘Make mistakes’, which reflects an attitude of not worrying about grammatical errors or pronunciation problems. When speaking, it is important to relax and not aspire to be 100% perfect. The freedom to make mistakes usually leads to more learning, not less.

The next letter of “I” is part of the friendship factor of using language. “I” means to ‘Increase your interest in people around you’. It is not easy to meet new people, especially for shy or reserved students, so this step is sometimes the hardest one. Increasing an awareness of others and asking them to share about themselves is a skill that many students have not practiced outside of their usual bubble of family and friends.

The next letter of “L” is a memory recall skill that I learned years ago. “L” is to ‘Listen and repeat’. When I hear a new name or something that I want to confirm in the conversation, I will repeat it. To repeat a person’s name in the conversation makes him or her unconsciously feel special. The personalized touch of remembering someone’s name can really make a difference in building a positive learning environment in a classroom.

The final letter “E” is really the most important of them all, for if you ‘Enjoy your life’, then smiling can occur naturally. Students realize that they can smile and ask questions that are natural and reflect their personal interests. That creates an opportunity to build a new friendship.

Throughout the semester, I have observed that the reminder to ‘smile’ can be used to overcome shyness and perfectionism. Students become relaxed as they create questions for discussion and add follow-up comments to further the conversation with each other. It is my hope that my students will enjoy a ‘smile’ with thousands of people throughout their lives.

Every conversation begins with a SMILE:

S: Start with a question

M: Make mistakes

I: Increase your interest in people around you

L: Listen and repeat

E: Enjoy your life

## Implementing Group Presentations to Foster Autonomy



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Motivating students to take control of their own learning has always been at the forefront of my mind as a teacher. Working for nine years with junior and senior

high school students in Japan, I found one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching to be when students would take control and

responsibility for their own learning and find ways to include English in their daily lives. Some examples of English integrated into my students’ daily lives include listening to music with English lyrics as well as watching TED videos and foreign English dramas. By doing so, they generally became more motivated to use English, and their English skills usually ended up expanding greatly.

In April, I left teaching at the secondary level and began working part time at two universities. In many ways I slid into teaching at both universities with little trouble, however I did face a few unexpected challenges at one. One challenge was the required spring English course for first-year non-English majors, made more difficult because it was my first time to teach English to students who were grouped together with not only varying levels of spoken and written English ability but also vastly different attitudes towards English. My previous school had placed a strong emphasis on English education, especially regarding presentation, discussion and writing skills. Even students who didn’t necessarily like English were motivated to study and learn in order to get high scores on university entrance examinations. However, as the entrance exams were a thing of the past to my first-year university students, now I found my classroom to be filled with a wide spectrum of students, many of whom outwardly appeared to have little to no interest in English. Varying interest levels was not the only challenge I found myself facing; students’ levels also varied greatly. While most students lacked the confidence to speak English, their written English ability was also spread across a wide spectrum of differing

abilities. While some students could write a sentence using conjunctions, I also had students who didn't understand what a subject was or why every sentence needed a verb.

As the semester progressed, I taught the required textbook material and found myself becoming a more confident teacher than before as far as explaining English grammar was concerned. In my previous job, grammar was the responsibility of the Japanese English teachers. Now, I was the sole teacher responsible for explaining grammar rules in a way that the students could understand and apply in practice. In the beginning what seemed like straightforward and easy explanations to me often left certain students more confused. I had wrongly assumed that my students would understand the basic parts of an English sentence. However, despite my best efforts to help my students learn the required material, I found that due to the curriculum requirements and time constraints, there was no time to help them find a way to connect with English. They were just learning the material they needed to pass the speaking and writing exams, but they were not connecting with English on a personal level. It was just a class they had to sit through to get credit, they did not see how what they were learning in the classroom could be applied to interests they have outside of the classroom. I doubt that many of the students even remembered what we studied back in April. I couldn't see how what they were learning was making any long term impact on their lives.

While I found the experience to be frustrating, it also provided me with a strong desire to make a change. I began

brainstorming and bouncing ideas off fellow colleagues at that university as well as other institutions. I desired to find a way to help my students not only find English useful, but also help them begin their own journeys as autonomous learners. I strongly felt that the students needed to be provided with an opportunity to use English not for examination purposes but as a means of self-expression. If I could just come up with a project that students could take ownership of I felt that they would see that English is so much more than just grammar patterns to be memorized and regurgitated onto a piece of exam paper.

Towards the conclusion of the spring semester, I proposed a plan to other teachers in the department to incorporate a semester-long small-group project into the fall English class. The plan is to have students in pairs or small groups plan and create a presentation for a specific audience relating to a day of sightseeing in Tokyo. I had used a similar project with my high-school students in the past and found it to have worked successfully then. With some changes to the focus and delivery, I believe my university students will enjoy the challenge of producing a presentation about their perfect day in Tokyo. The project is still in the developing stages, and I hope it will become an excellent example of action research based on current students' needs. As this project will only be carried out with my classes now, if proven successful, I believe it has the potential to be implemented into the wider curriculum in the future. I hope also that, by devoting small increments of time in class towards the project, even the lower level students will be able to give a presentation that they can be

proud of by the end of the semester. Also, as many students are living in the greater Tokyo area, they should be able to incorporate their own interests and beliefs into the project and not see English as a useless subject only needed to get credits towards graduation, but as a tool in which they can express themselves. Through doing this project, I believe that the students will begin to feel more connected to English and hopefully be able to use the project as a springboard to become more interested and connected to English.

Since switching not only institutions but also academic levels, it has been interesting to see some of the differences between secondary and tertiary education in Japan. While I knew there would be differences between student levels and motivation, I didn't expect that many of my students would feel so disconnected with English. For me the greatest challenge has truly been to try and help my students find a connection with English. In doing so, I have had to negotiate through my own beliefs as a language learner, researcher and teacher to try and create opportunities to let my students engage with English beyond the textbook. Through the implementation and trial of the Tokyo project, I hope to better understand my students' needs and interests and use the project to help them connect with English beyond the classroom. I would be very interested in hearing from other Learner Development SIG members about similar projects they have done in the past or are considering to implement in the future.

## When in Rome, do as the Romans do? Issues of identity and integration living abroad



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I teach English classes such as CALL, TOEIC and English presentation to engineering students at my institution. In 2012 I received a doctoral degree (Ed.D. in Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching) from The University of Warwick, for which I conducted research on identity and L2 motivation under Ema Ushioda and on intercultural communication under Helen Spencer-Oatey's supervision.

As I reflect on my interest in learner development, I notice that it goes back to 2007 when I began my doctoral research in England. I often wondered why my comfort zone expanded, contracted, and influenced my English proficiency depending on the people I interacted with. I thought it might have been influenced by my belief or perception of the culture or ethnicity of the target language (TL) speakers, or perhaps by my own identity.

My primary research interest is integrative motivation, which refers to “a willingness to be like valued members of the language community” (Gardner & Lambert, 1959, p. 271, original italics). This concept has become recently better known as ‘integrativeness’, which is understood as “a

genuine interest in learning the second language in order to come closer to the other language community” (Gardner, 2001, p.5). Schumann (1986, p. 379) developed the ‘acculturation model’ in which he claimed that “the learner will acquire the second language only to the degree that he acculturates”, based on the social and psychological distance between learners and TL speakers. Theories on integrativeness and the acculturation model are congruent in that they both argue that our second language (L2) acquisition hinges on our social-psychological attitudes towards the TL community.

In my doctoral research I also explored the issues of identity. I thought that people’s identity might be influenced by their interaction with people from the TL community or people from their own heritage culture, which in turn might influence how they view the L2. Thus, in the research that I did, I set out to explore the meanings of integrativeness, acculturation, and identity for Japanese people in the UK and look at how such meanings changed over time. What motivated me to do such research was mostly attributable to my personal interest in these topics because I have lived in five different nations, and I have often questioned my identity as a Japanese. This triggered me to explore and pursue convincing academic theories.

Regarding my research paradigm, I was prompted to do quantitative research in my first year of doctoral research, due to my interest in cognitivist second language acquisition (SLA) theories shaping the concept of integrativeness. However, my encounter with Ema Ushioda and her work, and the emerging and convincing theories that I came

across on L2 motivation and identity from a social constructivist perspective, gradually shifted my paradigmatic orientation. I planned to do a mixed methods research halfway through, but I completely changed to a pure qualitative research approach at the end of the first year!

I also became interested in intercultural communication from the initial stage of my research, but I was not aware of any separation between intercultural communication and SLA, which for me was my single ‘target community’. It was not until Helen Spencer-Oatey pointed out that my research has potential uniqueness in ‘integrating’ the two separate fields that I started to realise how separated they were, and also realised my ‘hybridised identity’ in being a part of and apart from them. To be honest, I have been surprised throughout the overall process of doing my research that these two fields still continue to be largely separate. As far as I am aware, only Yashima (2002, 2004) and Jackson (2008) have made cross-references from SLA to intercultural communication.

However, I became all the more convinced that findings from both camps have mutual benefit. For instance, both fields have been treating identity as the centre of attention. Also, I believe that cognitivist concepts such as integrativeness that derived from SLA research need to be examined within the framework of social integration with host communities, in relation to which numerous intercultural communication studies have produced useful and practical insights. In the future, adopting a new research approach such as conversation analysis could also benefit both fields in

studying the identities of people who are in intercultural settings.

I would like to end my self-introduction by expressing my gratitude to Ken Ikeda, whom I met at the Gunma JALT Annual Workshop in Kusatsu last summer. It was my first year in JALT, and I was rather lost in what to do, but he kindly invited me to the LD SIG 20th Anniversary Conference last autumn. I was impressed by the quality of the event, so I did not hesitate to join the LD SIG this year. I hope to touch base with many of you in this promising group!

### References

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and education issues]. Suita: Kansai University Press.

## My Language Journey



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My journey teaching English in Japan began almost 17 years ago! I first taught in several “eikaiwa” situations before obtaining an MA TESL/TEFL (from the University Birmingham) and then moved on to teaching at university. I am currently a “Foreign Instructor” in the Department of International Culture at Aichi Gakuin University.

I was born and raised in Uganda. A few years ago I had an opportunity to reflect on my own learner development when I co-authored a piece for the Autoethnography Column in the SchoolHouse, the newsletter of the Junior/Senior High School SIG (Ashurova & Ssali, 2012). It was a unique, double autoethnography representing my own journey in ESL English learning and those of a colleague from an EFL background. In that piece I outlined my own beginnings as a second language learner, and the realization now that first-time learners of English face a language so rich and practical, but extremely complex at the same time. My reflections made me realize that our learning experiences have a big influence on how we particularly look at the challenges English learners in Japan face.

Even in the ESL environment that I had been brought up in Uganda, where

English had been adopted as the official language of school and government at independence in 1962, I had learned English the hard way. It was the de facto language of school, and we could only use our own “vernaculars” at home, or outside school for that matter. At home, everybody used the local vernacular, Luganda. As a matter of fact, my parents, both farmers, couldn't speak English. My elder siblings did, but nobody expected them to speak it at home. In fact doing so was tantamount to bragging! The English-only-at-school policy was strictly enforced with punishments. Pupils caught by any teacher speaking in the vernacular, inside or outside the classroom, would be smacked, forced to kneel on the ground for some time, or even to do manual labour in the school gardens. This may sound like a brutal way to enforce a foreign language. I think, however, it was appropriate and necessary at that time in a nation where English is the official language of school and government, and with an educational system where English is the language of instruction with a cycle of integration between basic pedagogic structures and integrated, practical usage. All classes and exams in the upper primary (primary 4 to 7) are conducted in English, and pupils need ‘reminders’ to stay in English especially in the rural schools where practically everyone belongs to the same tribe and speaks the same language.

The all-English rule would continue through secondary to tertiary education, and its enforcement as the language of school was even stronger than it had been at primary school. English, even up to date, has remained deeply rooted in administration, media and education, and access to economic

and political power is almost impossible for anyone who has not mastered that language. English is used as the language of communication in public places, in places of work and in audiences, especially where groups of people are from different parts of the country. In their homes and tribal areas people use their local vernaculars, but English is the only way members of various ethnic and multi-lingual groups can communicate among themselves and identify with the larger community. The situation is obviously different for Japanese learners of English. They join the school system equipped with a home language which is also the language of education. In homogeneous Japan, you don't have to be able to speak English in order to belong to society, and practically there is no secondary society to strive to belong to. In Japan learning English beyond the classroom is thus mainly driven by intrinsic motivation. A great many resources and enormous amounts of time are therefore required to create conducive opportunities for learners; for English, while not necessarily a requisite for success in society, is a required part of the curriculum. On the other hand, the ethnic diversity in Uganda implies a deep-rooted instrumental and extrinsic motivation to learn the language beyond just its classroom structure, for English is instrumentally a *sine qua non* for meeting educational requirements, furthering careers and improving social status.

Here is where the Learner Development SIG comes in handy for me. I must strive, as a teacher, to create an environment for my students to go beyond what McKay (2002) has called “*a superficial familiarity with the language*” (p. 19). I have

to be aware always that class time is insufficient, and “*students do not have ready-made contexts for communication beyond their classrooms*” (Brown 2001, p.116). I need to create environments that will enable my students to take “*the all-important step from being language learners to language users*” (Ashurova & SSali, 2013, p.46).

I am currently involved in setting up an English Lounge at my university, and I look forward to benefiting from the knowledge and advice of fellow LD members. I suspect many of them are involved in activities to extend language learning beyond the classroom. I am looking forward to sharing with them lots of professional experiences and insights from their current practices.

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## LD SIG Grants 2014

The LD SIG Grants Committee would like to congratulate all of the 2014 grants winners. We look forward to their contributions to the LD SIG:

### Winner of the LD SIG 2014 research grant:

*Tomoko Imamura*

### Winner of the LD SIG Pan-SIG grant:

*Caroline Ross*

### Winners of the 3 JALT 2014 National Grants:

*Yoko Sakurai*

*Joel Laurier*

*Adrienne Verla*

The 2015 grants will be announced in late January or early February 2015.

For more information please go to:

<<http://ld-sig.org/grants2014/>>

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