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 Hiroshi Nakagawa for sharing his voice 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 Members' Voices coordinator, James Underwood, at <jamesmichaelunderwood@gmail.com>.

"ＬＤＳＩＧ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。

今号の「学習の学習」で、お声を読者の皆様と共有していただきました、Hiroshi Nakagawaさんに大変感謝致します。次号の「学習の学習」でも、他の会員の方々からのお声をお待ちしております。ご興味のある方は、Member's VoicesのコーディネーターJames Underwood（jamesmichaelunderwood@gmail.com）までご連絡下さい。

Utilization of learners' cultural backgrounds for the promotion of a positive learning environment in ELL classrooms

Hiroshi Nakagawa,

Foreign Language Center at Tokai University, Hiratsuka,Japan

Hiroshinakagawa@outlook.com

Currently, I am interested in how the knowledge of our learners' cultural backgrounds can help us to create a sage learning community. After several years of teaching English as a second language in the United States, I have formed the belief that culturally diverse students, such as students from different family and socio-economic background, are unique and need extra attention. From my experience, these students are most likely to expand and improve their pronunciation, intonation, grammatical, lexical and cultural knowledge of a target culture through communication with their peers in a positive and supportive learning environment. Thus, I have been examining ways to support my EFL students at Tokai University and help them succeed to have a great responsibility for their academic and social goals.

One of my recent challenges in my reading/writing classes is creating a learning environment that fosters the students' autonomy. At the beginning of the fall semester of 2014, I had 8 different classes each with 30 sophomore students, who had taken mainly lecture-style courses before, and were therefore used to taking a passive role in their learning by quietly listening, taking notes, and memorizing new vocabulary and grammatical forms that the teacher recommended. According to Tomlinson (1999), EFL learner's performance can be improved by working towards creating a positive learning environment through recognizing individual learner differences. By working

with these learners and arranging seating according to their individual needs and differences and encouraging them to interact with their peers by either teaching or simply helping each other, I started to see positive results. Students were becoming active learners, and there was a greater focus on communication with each other rather than only with the teacher. By talking with each other, students were becoming able to work through their misunderstanding and, negotiate meaning. Through this experience, I realized that if both the teacher and students work together to construct a cooperative and motivating learning environment, the students are more likely to realize their learning goals and rely on their peers more in a way to becoming more autonomous.

Since the fall semester of 2014, I have focused on creating a positive learning environment by adapting Paydon's (2012) model for developing a motivational learning environment. Paydon (2012) hypothesizes that there are 5 levels to classroom motivation: the first four levels—Structure, Trust, Cohesion, and Performance, focus on building and strengthening the group. The fifth — Personal Growth— focuses on supporting the individual's own development. At the structure stage, students find their interpersonal relationship, which provides the basic proximity, contact, interaction, and security that facilitates the development of trust (Paydon, 2012). In order to help students build trust and feel safe interacting with each other, I ask them to create a personal résumé. Each student writes his/her birthday, interests, hobbies, favorite sports, and academic goals. Once created, it provided a way for the students to form and strengthen peer to peer relationships, as by simply asking questions about the contents of the resume they were able to show interest in each other. In this way, students break the language barrier while speaking English to others. By creating a friendly social atmosphere in the classroom, students will, over time, feel more at ease in taking risks to

speak out in English and to share their own ideas, thoughts, and opinions. This enables them to move on to the next stage, Cohesion.

The aim of cohesion is to make the students feel safe enough to take the risk of sharing their own ideas, thoughts, and opinions with other members of the group, not just with those who are in close proximity. For example, I utilize students' personal information from their résumé and identify those who have common interests. Once identified, I group them together. I also vary their partners and change the seating 3 times during a class in order to provide several different types of interaction and grouping configurations in a given lesson with great success. By encouraging the students to feel empathy towards all their peers through the sharing of both their similarities and differences, the class as a whole is able to build interpersonal relationships that enable them to perform at their best. As cohesion is the glue that binds a group of people together, their strong relationship with each other enables them to focus on motivating not just themselves but each other, which is essential when moving on to challenging, authentic activities.

Authentic activities help students share their life experience in discussion activities. Tomlinson (1999) suggests that when teachers teach new academic concepts to students it is important to consider how the students' differing socio- economic statuses, cultural backgrounds, use of the language, and other possible factors, affect their learning. Therefore, I believe it is important to utilize the students' life experiences and ideas by helping the students link them to their learning of new terms as they think critically, significantly apply, and emotionally produce these in a variety of oral communication activities. For example, in my discussion activities, I always encourage the students to individually reflect on what they learnt from the stories they have encountered in the learning materials so that they can construct a personal definition. After sharing these

definitions as a group, I then encourage students to apply what they have learnt so that they connect these lessons critically with their own life experiences, which they then share with their peers. Littlemore (2012) also found that schema, the students' cognitive framework stimulated by their interests, helped students organize and interpret information. Students' learning styles may also be shaped by their past learning experiences and coded differently from their peers. My students' personal résumés contain much meaningful vocabulary and personal information relevant to their life experience. By utilizing the vocabulary in personal résumés to describe life experience, students are able to expand their semantic networks to share with classmates in the discussions, presentations, debates, peer reviewing, commenting, and a variety of other in-class activities (Dunn, 2012). Connecting existing language ability and new concepts developed during interaction and mediation with peers and the instructor helps students learn core concepts and

allows them to fill the language gap (Jenkins, 2012), which resulted in improved language ability. Thus, by contributing their own unique examples, each student feels they have an important role to play in co-constructing the classes' understanding.

Brandt (1998) explains that second language learners tend to equate their ability with outcomes, and motivation becomes more differentiated and complex. Therefore, it is important for them to share with each other the products of their learning so that they can see the results of their development. Also when I have them work with students who have different interests after gathering their own thoughts and opinions in and outside of the class, it seems that they develop a more global sense of their second language acquisition together. Their levels of motivation may change as they relate both to their development and learning outcomes. However, students are encouraged to work

together to set the goals themselves rather than having the teacher set them. This leads to them having longer-term motivation that is developed and sustained through the positive learning environment.

I believe it is important to promote a positive learning environment founded on the students sharing their backgrounds, interests, ideas and opinions both with their peers in close proximity and the class as a whole. These actions can foster student autonomy. This is my challenge, to research the specific aspects for learners with different levels of English proficiency that promote student autonomy and language acquisition. I would like to offer this advice to other language teachers who are interested in assisting the development of learners' English proficiency skills in the same way.

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