

Developing Learner & Educator Identities at PANSIG 2017

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This was my first time presenting at a JALT conference, and the second JALT conference that I had ever attended. As an ALT, I wanted to contribute to this year's PanSIG conference at Akita International University by presenting my research on how effective team-teaching is in Japanese high schools. As a learner myself, I wanted to attend as many presentations and panels as I could to broaden my perspective on how other teachers and students have progressed in their learning experiences over time. To me, the theme, "expand your interests," meant taking the initiative to share my own research interests with a wider audience.

My first JALT conference was JALT2016 in Nagoya. Luckily, I live in Hamamatsu, so it was close and inexpensive for me to attend. I was only there as an attendee, but I felt very welcomed by the Learner Development SIG and was encouraged by members of the LD SIG and the Shizuoka JALT chapter to do research and expand my knowledge on teaching English as an ALT in the JET Program.

I started doing research on the effectiveness of team-teaching after attending JALT2016. The programs chair of my chapter invited me to do a presentation at our local JALT chapter meeting on the current state of ALTs in Japan. At first, I dabbled with many concepts such as lesson planning strategies and pedagogy. In the end, I decided to center my research on teacher training from the ALT's and JTE's perspective because I felt that it would be a good opportunity to give a voice to the types of instructors who usually could not present at JALT conferences for various reasons, including finances, overlapping work schedules, and their unfamiliarity with JALT. I wanted to share what

kind of English education students in Japan would have before they graduate high school and create a dialogue with other educators about what we can do to improve the students' English acquisition.

Since I joined JALT last spring, I have seen many presentations by non-Japanese teachers about how they perceive their agency in Japanese workplaces. The two presentations that really stood out to me in my local chapter were by Diane Nagatomo and Laura Kusaka. In October 2016, Nagatomo presented on how female native English instructors developed their identities after moving to Japan. In February, Kusaka presented on the idea of *Nihonjinron* (a body of discourse which claims that the Japanese race, language, geography, culture, and psychology is entirely unique) and shared quotes from her interviews with Japanese-American university English instructors in Japan over the course of three years. After seeing their presentations, I decided to go towards an ethnographic route and personally interview and survey ALTs and JTEs nationwide for this presentation. To me, statistics are important, but interviews can help directly address and clearly illustrate the issues that are implied in the collected data. Over 7 months, I surveyed 128 ALTs and 14 JTEs, and interviewed 31 ALTs (4 former) and 8 JTEs (1 former) in-person and over Skype. As I started making the presentation, I began to think critically about how ALTs and JTEs are being trained to team-teach, and expanded my interests in team-teaching: how satisfied both parties actually are with their teacher training and how aware other educators are about what's going on in the classroom before their students enter university or vocational school.

One of the local chapter members encouraged me to present at PanSIG and share this research with a wider audience. Before presenting at PanSIG, I was able to present at two local chapter meetings in Hamamatsu and Shizuoka and perfect my presentation in time for this conference. Unfortunately, I had no access to funding, so I was not sure if I could even afford to attend another JALT conference. However, thanks to the LD PanSIG Grant, I was able to fly to Akita and share my presentation with many people. Despite having taught in Japan for three years, I was not a university professor, nor had I published my research; so, at first I felt more like a practitioner, someone who practices teaching, than a researcher, who observes and analyzes what is put into action.

Before I presented at PanSIG, I saw other presentations by AIU students and mentors. After I attended the opening ceremony, I watched the AIU students present Pecha Kucha-style presentations on exploring their identities in English. Some that stood out to me include a Zainichi Japanese student who navigated Japanese, Chinese and Korean perceptions of the Senkaku Islands dispute, and a Japanese AIU student who joined a group of Christian migrants and wandered through Spain with them. These students intersected the theme of this year's PanSIG and the missions of several of the SIGs by connecting their English learning experiences with their expanding intercultural awareness.

At the LD SIG Forum, I also attended several poster presentations on how the members of the LD SIG themselves created opportunities for their students to think reflectively on their learner development. These presentations not only expanded my interest in reflective activities for my students, but they also inspired me to become more conscious of my own development as a teacher. The LD Forum had a rotation of about four different poster

presentations. The methods that these instructors used were especially helpful for visual and auditory learners. Tree diagrams, interviews with native speakers, eikaiwa teaching methods, and other reflective activities were presented. Through these poster presentations, I learned how to adapt these worksheets for my own students. One of the featured presentations included a language learning tree diagram, which was part of a collaboration between Mathew Porter and an ALT. Seeing this collaboration between ALTs and instructors in higher education made me consider doing my own projects in the future. After the LD SIG Forum, I went to a poster presentation by Debra Occhi about one of my favorite Sanrio characters, *Aggressive Retsuko*. She's an atypical Sanrio character who is a clerical worker. She deals with micro-aggressions in every episode, and Debra parallels the character's experience with common workplace issues in Japan. For example, in one episode, she compared the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare's initiatives for combating power harassment with the character pressured to work overtime.

In the middle of the day, I did my presentation. As it was my first JALT conference presentation, I was very nervous. The time slots between presentations were also very quick; we had to set up our equipment as soon as the last presenter finished. The presenter before me happened to be Melodie Cook, who presented on adopted children Japan and the issues they face in the foster care system. Her theme was unique and informative. As I watched her sharing her own personal encounter with raising adoptive children with traumatized pasts, I felt in awe of the idea of presenting a topic that was very intimate with her identity as a mother and a mentor. I'm also interested in research that relates to me but is outside of TESOL, such as immigration and the Asian diaspora. Seeing presentations like Melodie's helped me understand that as learners, our identities and

personal experiences can highly influence the type of research area we would want to pursue.

There were more audience members in my presentation than when I had given it twice before. One member was from my chapter, and two were the presenters whom I had seen right before. The rest were unfamiliar, but I felt honored that I recognized some of my audience. I clicked through each slide and put my audience in the shoes of the modern high school ALT and JTE. Time flew by quickly; it felt surreal once I finished speaking. At the end of my presentation, the audience members gave me such positive feedback and I ended up making a few connections. One was a contributing writer for the Japan Times, whose article I referenced in my presentation. I was impressed at how responsive my audience and other attendees were at my presentation. It made me feel validated, and this experience encouraged me and made me realize that I can play the role as a practitioner and a researcher at the same time as I actively teach as an ALT.

I was unable to attend the banquet because I didn't pre-register; instead, I spontaneously joined some members from the Speech, Drama, & Debate SIG next to whom I had sat on the bus from AIU. We had deep conversations about learning how to teach. "Teaching is a performance", one of them said, "When teachers perform, they practice good teaching strategies instead of only observing them." This

person especially stood out to me. Like me, she was a woman of color who was fairly young. She and many of the other attendees were very diverse and I felt more at home at this conference. If I hadn't attended, I would not have known how diverse JALT is.

On the second day, I felt more relaxed. I switched out my suit for jeans like some of the other attendees and checked out some more presentations before flying back to Shizuoka. This conference had such an amicable atmosphere. Even in the waiting area, it was so easy for me to naturally have conversations with new people. I also noticed that a few people recognized my name and asked me about my presentation. Attending this conference as a first-time presenter was really worthwhile.

It was truly an honor to attend this year's PanSIG conference. I intend on attending (and maybe even presenting again!) at next year's PanSIG. This conference embodied the theme of expanding interests as I interacted with many folks from different SIGs and bonded with ones from my own. Attending the conference allowed me to expand my practice, my experience, and my own identity as a teacher. It also helped me interact and connect with a larger community of diverse learner-educators, providing a strong foundation from which I can truly "expand my interests".



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