

LD SIG 2017 GRANT AWARDEE REPORTS | 研究助成金**JALT2017 International Conference Report***Imogen Custance, Kyoto Sangyo University*

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This year, I was fortunate enough to receive the LD SIG JALT International Conference Grant, was delighted to attend the event itself, and now have the opportunity to sit and reflect on what was, as always, an interesting, informative, and thoroughly enjoyable event. Given JALT2017 took place in Tsukuba, definitely not a short trip from Kansai, where I am based, I had been unsure as to whether I would be able to go. I am very grateful to the LD SIG for providing me with a grant so that I didn't have to worry about that decision. After a long day of teaching, I headed up to Tsukuba on Friday, set my alarm for seven, and went to sleep with great expectations of the following day. I was not disappointed.

This was my third JALT International Conference, and I have always found it open and welcoming. It is an easy place to make friends, reconnect with people, and gain more ideas than you (at least initially) know what to do with. This year was no different. From the energizing opening ceremony, to enthusiastic publishers, I doubt that I am the only person who found a new enthusiasm for all things teacherly in the midst of a very long term. In writing this report, I find myself reassessing and appreciating anew the effort of all those involved in creating such a productive and inspiring event. I hope that those of you

reading this are reminded of similar things or inspired to attend future JALT conferences.

Plenaries

Looking back over my notes from the plenaries really emphasized the importance of conferences and events like the JALT International Conference. Both Gabriel Diaz Maggolioli and Barbara Hoskins-Sakamoto highlighted the importance of teacher training and professional development in helping learners to achieve the best that they can. Maggolioli's plenary, *Shaping the Way We Grow: Teachers and Development*, examined the need for more focused and effective professional development, highlighting the often-haphazard nature of institutional "professional development" days, and the frustration of knowing it is important, but being unsure of where to look to improve independently. Being no stranger to in-house development days, many of the comments about professional development sessions being "unfocused, insufficient, and irrelevant" felt uncomfortably familiar.

Maggolioli said that as professionals, we need to be aware of changes in the profession, whether related to innovations in practice, changes in social purposes for teaching, or new discoveries. Attending conferences, reading research, and conducting action research, whether for publication or not, help us to improve our teaching practice. In addition, he said that professional development is important because it can interrupt routines that might otherwise lead to boredom; it helps us to re-energize and rediscover the joy of teaching. It is necessary as meeting people

who know more than you about something that “keeps you humble.”

Hoskins-Sakamoto’s plenary on Sunday morning took what felt like a more bottom-up approach to professional development. Rather than looking at the need for professional development, she examined how effective classroom techniques often necessitate the presence of teachers who know how to implement them. She argued that effective teacher training helps produce instructors who adapt to what it required of them, rather than teachers whose functionality diminishes when educational aims change. She said that the most financially efficacious methods used in classrooms are collaborative learning, student use of meta-cognition and self-regulation, feedback, and peer tutoring. For these things to be effective, teachers must be trained and aware of how to best organize groups to promote collaboration; how to make students aware of their own learning; how to provide good feedback; and how to promote peer tutoring. The wonderful thing about the JALT International Conference is that opportunities to learn more about all these things abound.

The “myths” section of Hoskins-Sakamoto’s presentation was also a nice reminder that we accept some ideas without really thinking them through. One that I thought particularly important is the idea that younger children are better language learners. Hoskins-Sakamoto said that they often seem better because the expectations of what a child should be expected to do are so much lower than for teenagers or adults. This in turn makes achieving those expectations easier, and more of them are achieved, resulting in a somewhat erroneous belief that young children must simply be better at learning. Whilst a lot of

research shows that starting to learn younger does often result in higher overall proficiency (e.g., DeKeyser, Alfi-Shabtay, & Ravid, 2010), it is important to remember that this is not necessarily useful or practical information when considering the classroom - we cannot change the age at which our students start learning.

Hugh Starkey’s presentation on cosmopolitan citizenship and language learning on Saturday, and Nick Saville’s about changes in teaching as technology develops on Sunday were also very interesting, though they examined very different things. I learnt quite a lot more about the initial reasons for education as a whole (to benefit the state), how a great deal of education was centred on creating good citizens (who would support and identify more strongly with the state), and how these ideas are increasingly less relevant, or perhaps (as I see it) harmful, in a progressively more cosmopolitan and globalized world. Starkey suggested that language learning and international citizenship education are a good fit to help motivate greater awareness of and interest in both subjects.

Saville’s presentation included a joyful romp through his time working on English proficiency testing in Japan thirty years ago (it’s always fun to hear what working here was like in the bubble era - money being thrown around, figuring out how to use these new “computer” things effectively, and very large suits), and raised a number of questions about the effect of technology on teacher roles. One that particularly struck me was the increasing difficulty in determining whether students have written something on their own, or asked Google-sensei for quite a lot of assistance. Students produce better work as a result of

becoming more resourceful and technologically savvy, but are they improving their language abilities? I really feel that finding ways to get students to use technology responsibly will be one of the biggest hurdles to overcome as translation software, in particular, becomes more sophisticated.

Presentations

Being interested in extensive reading (ER), come Saturday afternoon I was somewhat conflicted as to whether to go to David Beglar's presentation on reading fluency, or Paul Nation's on the use of simplified materials. I decided to go with Dr. Beglar's for three main reasons - I could go to one of Nation's other ones; I am very interested in the cognitive benefits of ER; and nostalgia (Dr. Beglar was one of my teachers for my Master's program). I was very happy with the decision. I have recently felt that greater focus on how ER helps to increase the rate at which individuals process texts, rather than its motivational potential, is necessary. Beglar's presentation gave an excellent rundown of various theories relating to fluency development, e.g. ACT (Adaptive Control of Thought) Theory (Anderson, 1983), and Instance Theory (Logan, 1988) and how extensive reading fits in with them. As I start to think about teaching for next year, I find myself wondering how best to synthesise these arguments to present them to students and get more of them to take the opportunity that ER presents for language development more seriously.

I never doubted that the Paul Nation presentation that I went to, How Important are Fluency Development Activities? was going to be fun. I first saw him speak at JALT2015, and this presentation was similarly well-attended

and lively. Just as his books are very accessible, so too are Nation's presentations. His use of easy-to-remember acronyms also continued with LIST (language; ideas; skills; text) taking the floor this time around. He suggested LIST as a useful way to check the extent to which an activity is truly operating as a fluency activity. Fluency is a skill, so it is important to keep L, I, & T easy, so that the skill itself can be worked on. He suggested an example of a good fluency activity that bears this in mind is "best recording." Students record themselves, listen to the recording, and decide whether they think that it is good enough or not. By re-recording until they are satisfied they have done the best that they can, the language needed is made easier, new ideas are not being introduced, and the text difficulty is controlled, thus making it a clearly skill development-orientated activity.

Later in the presentation, Nation also spoke more specifically about reading fluency and the need for learners to improve their word recognition skills. He said that with faster word recognition comes a better ability to predict subsequent words and phrases. This in turn helps learners to become better readers as they can move through a text faster and can devote more time to any unknown words that they encounter. Nation also reiterated his suggestion that learning collocations, and getting used to seeing words that frequently occur together, are effective ways to increase fluency. This meshed very well with what Beglar said about how language is processed, and how these processes become faster.

But I wasn't solely devoted to ER during the conference. Another presentation that piqued my interest was Robert Dormer's

presentation examining how what has come to be known as nudge theory can be used in the language classroom. The tiny room was overly stuffed to the point that people were spilling out into the corridor (I think I got the last seat - lucky me). Nudge theory is generally associated with behavioural economics and relates to encouraging positive behaviour through suggestion rather than specific instruction. An example of this is when a hotel uses a notice suggesting that reusing towels is beneficial to the environment, and that other guests tend to use the same towels over multiple days.

Dormer's presentation explored how nudges might be employed to encourage learners to write more in fluency development activities. He included notes including information about how previous students felt their writing had improved, with some notes including details of by how much students' words per minute had increased in the previous year. Though very much a preliminary investigation, Dormer was cautiously optimistic about the effect that nudges could have. Even if overall effect size is small, the low cost, both monetarily and time-wise, and simplicity of the idea makes use of nudges something that warrants further investigation. I might even look into it myself.

On Sunday morning I went to Yo Hamada's presentation comparing haptic and IPA shadowing. This was partly because I was intrigued by how a full, 15-week course devoted to shadowing worked in practice, and also to find out what on earth "haptic shadowing" was (punching the air with stressed syllables as it turned out; IPA shadowing involved coding the text to be shadowed using the IPA). Hamada's results showed that both

procedures had a positive effect on students' abilities to produce segmentals accurately, and some improvement in comprehensibility, but only the haptic group improved on suprasegmentals. While there were issues with the research (which Hamada highlighted himself) it was nevertheless an interesting presentation, not least because we could see a class full of students all punching the air while reading/shadowing.

Posters

I've largely missed the poster presentation sessions at other conferences so I made sure to go this time. I don't think that I spent enough time there, but it was time well-spent. I focused mainly on presentations related to writing instruction, a genre that, having been to "regular" presentations about writing, seems ideally suited to the poster presentation format. I say this because you have the chance and time to actually read what students have produced, something that you don't really get a chance to do in a 25-minute presentation. It was also a great opportunity to share ideas for similar writing courses and experiences with issues relating to writing instruction.

I also went to the LD SIG Forum which involved a mini-poster session (how could I not?). This was a great way to meet members of the SIG (very lovely people) and see what people are getting up to. I was quite sad to have to leave early on (the forum clashed with my presentation), but left with some good ideas, especially relating to how we examine what skills and language that students need in their professional, post-university life. This is something that I have felt increasingly uneasy with in recent years, and one of the reasons that I joined the LD SIG. The rapid

development of new industries and types of employment have in turn led to individuals needing different skill sets and foreign language expertise. Identifying and adapting teaching to these new realities is no easy task and can seem daunting given the rate at which change seems to be occurring. However, helping students to become lifelong learners, with an awareness of how they can help themselves to further their language abilities as necessary, will never be a wasted effort. Hoskins-Sakamoto highlighted the need for teachers to be adaptable, and I feel the same is true for our students.

Conclusion

Due to teaching obligations, I was unable to stay for the presentations on Sunday afternoon or Monday (Tsukuba really is a LONG way away from Kansai), but I don't doubt the quality of presentations and interesting nature of the topics discussed continued. I am already looking forward to what next year's conference will hold and have my eyes very much open for other JALT-sponsored events in the meantime.

References

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