

# LD SIG GRANT AWARDEE REPORTS |

## LD SIG 研究助成金受

### JALT2018 Conference Grant Report: Using *Comic Life* and *iMovie* for a Cultural Exchange Project

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In 2017 I had the opportunity to join a research project by chance when I sought help from a colleague at the neighboring university for my malfunctioning Mac computer. The Mac was overheating and I needed to reinstall the OS, but with no idea on how to do it I turned to a wiser head. The colleague fixed the OS, and as we talked, he explained that he was involved in a project that was designing e-modules for a cultural exchange with Australian high schools. The Australian students were studying Japanese, so the idea was to share something in each other's language. He was interested in the work I was doing with my third grade high school students that I had chatted about at lunch various times during the year. As the Australian students were of high school age, the project appeared more suitable for high school rather than university students. I am the sole teacher in my class, so I have more flexibility with deciding what to teach compared to other high schools with a set English department curriculum. The majority of the third grade students that I teach are members of a sports team and are on a different track to the other academic classes. I had wanted to do something extra with my students to push their English boundaries because of this. In previous years they had produced comics created and illustrated by themselves for the school's cultural festival as a way to highlight their English ability. Fortunately my colleague had received funding and had purchased five iPads which we could now use for a comic book project between my students and the Australian high school students that my colleague was working with. To explain how the project went, let me take you through the steps that I took from start to finish to bring it to life, including some of the artwork that was used.

Now that we had the equipment to use, I set out to design a short syllabus that I thought would showcase the students' English skills. I had previous experience teaching classes on how to make a story into a comic and I had taught media at another school, so I organised the syllabus in the following way. It would start with the students drawing a comic by freehand and coloring it. They would then take a picture of the page using the iPad camera. There they would import the pictures into *Comic Life* (<<http://plasq.com/apps/comiclife/macwin/>>, an easy-to-use app for creating comic book stories) and add speech bubbles and text. From here their pictures would be imported to *iMovie* and a voiceover and sound effects could be added if they wanted to. These files would then be exported for the Australian school to download.

To set the project in motion, I asked the students to make groups of three and to think of popular Japanese folk tales. We brainstormed a list of different stories such as *Momotaro*, *Urashima Taro*, and *Princess Kaguya* and then eliminated some of the stories because they were internationally known. We wanted to introduce something new in terms of Japanese culture to the exchange students. Each group was asked to choose one story from the list we made and to make a comic based on it. Due to the familiarity of the stories, most of the groups could discuss amongst themselves the various plot points of the story in their group. The groups that were not familiar with the story that they had chosen were allowed to visit the library to read the story again. I also allowed the students freedom in how they wanted to portray the story, so they could add a twist to the tale or something that made the story interesting for themselves if they wanted to. For example, one group changed the turtle in *Urashima Taro* to a starfish:



Figure 1. From turtle to starfish: Re-designing *Urashima Taro*.

The only requirement was that the script had to be in basic Japanese for the Australian students and the voiceover in English. The students usually elected the “best speaker” of English in their group to do the voiceover, or they relied on the tried and trusted “Rock, scissors, paper” alternative.

The majority of students had an interest or exposure to Japanese manga so they had a basic level of familiarity with how a comic was structured. The main issue we had was involving the artwork for their story. Some students could draw and others couldn't. I had not grouped the students according to their artistic abilities, so there were some differences between students in what they could draw. I stressed that it was important to have the reader understand the story based on the pictures rather than have everything looking amazing. By putting the students in groups of three, there was a higher chance that at least one of the students could draw. As part of the creative process I gave them a basic lesson on how gestures are an important part of non-verbal communication, so that they should think about these points when illustrating each panel.

The students gradually learnt how to structure their stories based on the main points. They then drew these panels and colored them. From here they took pictures of them using the iPad camera. They next imported the pictures into the *Comic Life* program and added speech bubbles and extra effects.

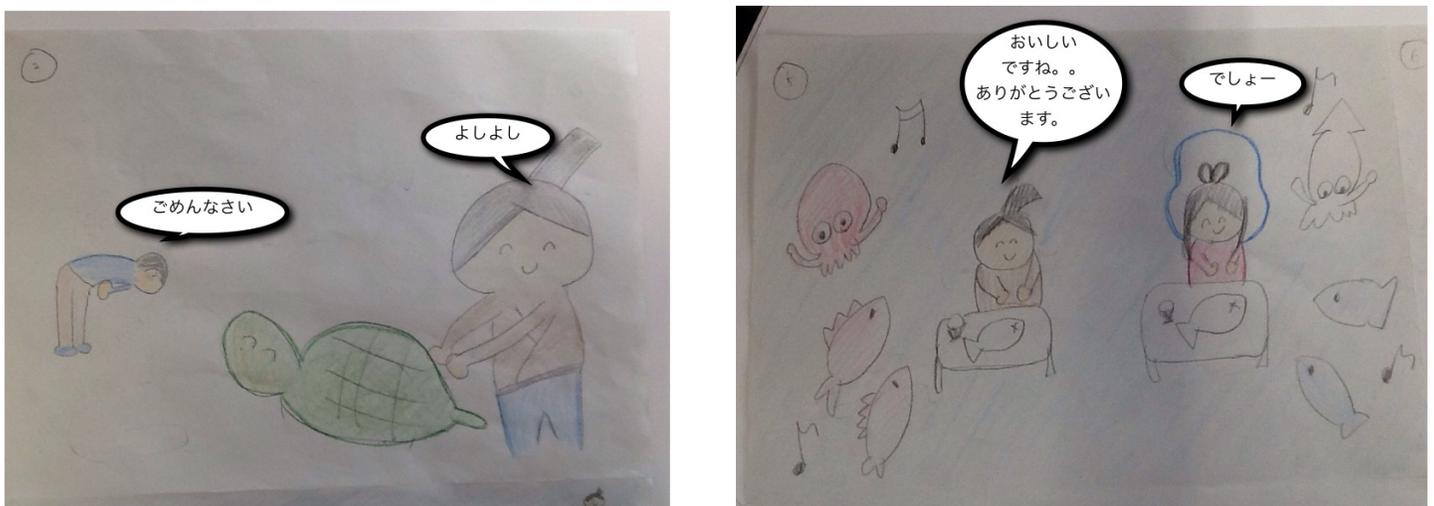


Figure 2. *Urashima Taro* after using *Comic Life* for the speech bubble effects.

The comic pages were then exported back into the photo album folder and imported into *iMovie*. Once this was done, the students went to a quiet area and recorded the narration and added sound effects. The next step involved making everything into a video file to be sent to our corresponding Australian school. This process was also useful for

making a compilation of the students' work for peer review. We showed each group's work to the entire class to see if they understood what they were trying to portray and so they could appreciate each other's work. My goal was to make a DVD for each group of all the work they had done on the iPad, similar to a portfolio.

The overall advantage of using the iPads was that we would be able to extend what we had done in class previously when drawing comics. We would now be able to digitize the students' work using the *Comic Life* software. This was important as it allowed the students to make adjustments to titles, speech bubbles, and sound effects as they progressed without having to redo their artwork if they made a mistake. From here we imported the work into *iMovie* and added a voiceover and sound effects. Each component needed to be relevant to the students and to be achievable, as I wanted it to stretch their abilities but still have the end goal remain possible for each of them. My belief was that as students developed their autonomy more they would need less guidance from myself on future tasks. This would then make the classroom less teacher-orientated and more driven by the students.

### Looking back at the completed project

The students enjoyed reading their peers' comics and would compliment each other on their artwork. The benefit of peer review was that the majority of the language used was at a level that they all understood. This made the comics more accessible for the students. When I had the students complete their final survey for the year describing what they had and hadn't enjoyed, some of the students highlighted the fact that they enjoyed making the comics. There were no negative comments towards the project, which I took to be a positive indication. When I asked what made the project different from their regular mandatory English classes they shared comments like: "*It was interesting,*" "*We were able to speak in English,*" "*We enjoyed being active,*" and "*It did not make them fall asleep.*" The students also stated that they wanted to continue using the iPads to make a movie in English. Unfortunately the semester was coming to a close. I tend to think everyone's goal when they first start learning English is to be able to speak the language. I see so many students coming through the education system who have given up due to the complexity of the English curriculum with its focus on passing exams rather than the language itself. I really wanted to show my students that they were amazing at using English and that there were other methods that they could use to be able to communicate what they wanted to say. One of the joys of teaching is seeing children grasp a new concept and to develop it according to their understanding. The comic book project let me see less confident students progress in leaps and bounds and the more confident students able to tailor their work accordingly. The students could think for themselves about what they were doing as opposed to being spoon-fed by the teacher all the time.

At the conclusion of the project I felt a great sense of pride and felt that the students' efforts should be rewarded. I showed the English teachers in my department the students' work and they commented on the high standard of the artwork and stories that they had produced. They were impressed with the students' level of English and enquired more about how the lesson format worked. I didn't get the feeling that they wanted to follow the lesson plan for themselves due to time constraints, but rather that the teachers were impressed the students could engage in an open-ended, collaborative, and creative exercise and still produce something of merit.

### Mission accomplished

This project was useful for the students to familiarize themselves with the iPad and the functions that it had. This was important as we primarily used the iPad for our projects. By giving the students a task that was meaningful, relevant to themselves and their coursework, I created a class that needed none to little direction from myself. My role was to give groups and individual students advice, and finally check their finished project. This gave me a great sense of satisfaction as I went to class for each lesson with the students.

I am usually happy to do my work at school. It was only by chance with my computer suffering a slow death that I was introduced to this project and to the LD SIG as well. I had never known about the opportunities that were available, and without the LD conference grant I would never have been able to experience the 2018 JALT International Conference where I gave a poster presentation about using *Comic Life* and *iMovie* for a cultural exchange project. This did wonders for myself personally and professionally in opening my eyes to other like-minded academics and different kinds of research being carried out. I recently gave a "Life after JET" talk in Kumamoto for JET participants. During this presentation I highlighted the benefits of being a JALT member, mentioning that there are grants available to members to encourage them to present at conferences when they don't have financial assistance like myself.



## JALT2019 International Conference Report: A Reflection on Self-efficacy, Learner Agency, Teaching Repertoires, and Pedagogical Choices

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The theme of JALT 2019 held in Nagoya was “Teacher Efficacy, Learner Agency.” While this is a seemingly simple theme, it bridges some very complex ideas. This complexity that can be found just beneath the surface of teaching and learning has interested me for my nearly 20-year teaching career. This topic led to some very interesting discussions during the Learner Development SIG forum. The forum theme was about learners’ experiences of Active Learning (AL). As a presenter, I encountered one issue that seemed pertinent to the theme of AL - how could I both present my own poster and see the other poster presentations? As both a teacher and a student, I have experienced situations where the activity of learning has been so involved that time is up before achieving any sense of completion. If we are to learn actively, how can we be sure to cover as much of the topic or theme as possible? While the forum organizers staggered half of the presentations, it was not possible to see every poster presentation. The presentations that I did see were extremely interesting and generated a lot of questions with participants. The level of conversation and debate was so overwhelming that I was unable to see every poster at the forum even though they were staggered. That says a lot about the quality of those presentations and the interest in them. As an analogy of Active Learning, it was frustrating not because of the level of difficulty, but because it left me with a sense of missing out. And this raised the question in my mind whether AL could be used in isolation or if we as teachers should adopt a broader range of pedagogical choices.

In contrast, the conference plenaries might be considered passive learning. Sat in a large auditorium with several hundred other teachers, they certainly reminded me of the lectures that I attended as an undergraduate. As with most conferences, everything else stopped for the plenaries, and I did manage to see the plenary speakers. Much like a lecture, I sat taking notes. Much like a lecture, there were a few in the audience who appeared to be off-task or inattentive, but I do not think this reflected the value of the plenaries. There were two plenary speakers in particular that touched on the topic of learner development, and I think their talks would be particularly interesting to LD SIG members. The first, David Barker, talked about teacher self-efficacy in ELT education in Japan, and the second, Donna Brinton, talked about the connection between learner agency and SLA pedagogy. While these plenaries might be considered passive learning, they prompted a lot of engagement and resulted in more Active Learning on my part. This suggests to me that I need to consider how a mix of approaches to learner development might help me in teaching English at the university level in Japan.

### Plenary Speaker - David Barker

David Barker might be a relatively unknown name in the global TESOL community, but gave one of [the best plenaries](#) that I have seen at a JALT conference (JALT, 2019). Self-described as a scholar of ill-repute, he did not hold back from giving his opinions on teacher efficacy and our own self-efficacy in judging our own abilities to attain teaching goals. He offered the opinion that if teachers had a very high sense of efficacy and did not feel frustration with their work, they either had no idea about language teaching or they had very low expectations, or alternatively they were simply deluded. Language teaching is often a frustrating occupation and I have suffered many of the same frustrations as he went on to describe.

To discuss these frustrations, Barker cited fairly recent PhD research by [Praver \(2014\)](#) into factors that affect both Japanese and non-Japanese university English language teachers’ self-efficacy. The themes that emerged really struck a chord with me. According to Barker, Praver split these themes into “good” - autonomy, colleagues, money (Professional Development funding), and students; and “bad” - administration, employment status, and students. The appearance of students as both a good and a bad theme highlights the complexity of this issue, while the emergence of autonomy shows the inseparable link between efficacy, teacher autonomy, and learner autonomy that any teacher who has read

David Little's work will recognize: Little has argued for more than 30 years that teacher autonomy and institutional support for teacher efficacy are prerequisites for learner autonomy. [Little's recent collaboration with Dam and Legenhausen](#) (Little, Dam, & Legenhausen, 2017) gives a renewed sense of the importance of these factors.

Professional Development (PD) funding is a positive factor that I immediately recognize in the ups and downs of my own teaching career. Employment status has had a major impact on the amount of PD funding that I have received throughout my career. Starting out as a school teacher in the UK with some PD funding, the amount of funding has varied enormously as I have moved to contract teaching at small universities in Japan with generous PD funding, to contract teaching at a big name university with zero PD funding. Receiving no funding from my institution for PD meant that receiving a Learner Development SIG conference grant to attend JALT 2019 improved my own sense of self-efficacy.

To address these themes of teacher efficacy, Barker suggested that there are some problems with the aims and policies of ELT in Japan, teacher training, and collaboration. The somewhat muddled goals in Japan do not help as Barker highlighted: university course titles are typically uninformative and approved course descriptions do not provide sufficient detail of what is actually being taught or how within an ELT programme. Barker noted that, while course titles might be numbered sequentially, there were no guarantees that those courses were coordinated and that teachers knew what their colleagues were or were not teaching in the preceding course. I frequently encounter course titles that simply do not tell me what to expect from the course either as a teacher or as a student. This has often led myself or colleagues to just copy and paste on old syllabus into a course description or occasionally completely rewriting a course when time and funding have been made available. Other teachers are then expected to follow this description in planning their teaching without much insight into what was actually intended.

The courses that I have rewritten collaboratively illustrated to me the differences in pedagogical experience and teacher training that Barker focused on. In defence of ELT, Barker raised the argument that students are not tired of learning English, but tired of not being taught English properly. Having started my teaching career as a Science teacher before retraining in TESOL, I have always been surprised at how much teachers' pedagogical repertoires can vary in English language education in Japan. I realize that we are all creatures of habit and I can often fall into a routine if I am not careful - a routine that does not expand or use my full repertoire, but I try to make myself aware of different ways that I can achieve my teaching goals by, if possible, attending conferences such as JALT, reading teachers' accounts of their practices, reading both ELT publications and articles from the wider educational field, and also observing other teachers. I also try to learn from talking with and observing my learners.

However, I agree with Barker that there are insufficient opportunities to develop these practical skills in Japan. For example, many of the "new" teaching methods that are popular in Japan today, such as Active Learning, Task-Based Learning (TBL) and Project-Based Learning (PBL) have been around for a long time. In a book on the "Project Method: The Use of the Purposeful Act in the Educative Process," [Kilpatrick \(1922\)](#) lays out the foundations of both PBL and TBL, making these ideas nearly 100 years old at least. Critics of Kilpatrick claim that PBL is even older, originating in 17th-century Italy (Knoll, 2012). John Dewey (who taught Kilpatrick) identified experiential and interactive learning as early as 1915 and these share most of the core features of Active Learning definitions today. One reason for this institutional time lag seems to be partially the distances both physical and metaphorical between mainstream education, ELT education, and EFL teaching. Our disciplinary autonomy as ELT teachers gives us greater control so that we can make positive changes to our teaching, but also insulates us from information that might help us make those positive changes. I think there needs to be more collaboration between teachers in different disciplines and from different backgrounds, as Barker argued in his final main point. Anecdotally, I found telling other attendees that I was once a chemistry teacher was a great conversation killer at JALT rather than the beginning of a cross-disciplinary discussion of teaching methods. With more opportunities to experience different methodologies, there would be greater possibility of increasing teacher efficacy.

### Plenary Speaker - Donna Brinton

Continuing this pedagogical approach to the conference theme of teacher efficacy and learner agency, one of the other plenary speakers, [Donna Brinton talked about how ideas about Learner Agency had changed over time in relation to changes in teaching methodology \(JALT, 2019a\)](#). Invoking the pendulum metaphor that has been commonly used in mainstream education to describe the shifts between opposing approaches, Brinton explained how the evolution of

language teaching has swung from the Stimulus-Response operant conditioning of behaviourism and Skinner's Verbal Behavior involving audio-lingual drilling and programmed learning to Affective Humanistic Approaches, swinging again through methods, such as the Silent Way, TPR and Suggestopedia, to the Cognitive Code Approach, Community Language Learning, and Learning Centered Instruction, and recently to Content Based Instruction (CBI), and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Brinton's main point seemed to be that methodology has had a direct impact on what agency was made available to students - in other words, teachers' changing methodological and pedagogical choices affect how much control the students have over their study practices. This is something that has been important in my own teaching. Often some lesson activity or task is described as fostering autonomy even though it actually restricts the acceptable type of student response. One example from my own experience would be the use of some online self-study materials, where the only real choice is over when the student completes a completion monitoring task, such as a multiple choice quiz, to demonstrate that they did the required study, leading to many students completing the quiz in the few minutes between classes. Such activities may just push responsibility onto the student without sufficient scaffolding or teacher assistance.

In order to avoid offloading all responsibility onto unprepared students, Brinton suggested that we as teachers should create a culture of inquiry and creativity both by learning to let go, and by teaching collaboration skills and learning strategies. This seems to be a simple change but might require coordination across faculties and departments within a university setting. In my own situation, I am teaching classes across a number of faculties, so this might be quite challenging as I do not have complete control of what I do in the classroom. Some other university programmes are even more prescriptive with lock-step lesson plans and teaching activities set in stone for each and every lesson period. There are some signs that newer courses are swinging over to this approach of teaching study skills and learning strategies rather than purely focusing on linguistic skills, such as traditional 4-skill ELT courses. Some of the courses that I and other colleagues have been asked to teach in recent years at different universities involve a lot of tasks that are actually teaching study skills through English (an English as Medium of Instruction approach) rather than traditional ELT receptive and productive skills.

Thinking about the creation of a culture of creativity and inquiry in Japan's ELT university education raised some further questions in my mind and I was lucky enough to communicate with Prof. Brinton via email after her plenary talk. Eager to find out from Professor Brinton what she thought about the use of teacher centred teaching in Japan, I emailed her the following question: *"In your talk, you mentioned that the pedagogic pendulum should be stopped or prevented from swinging back to teacher centered methods. There have been some suggestions in Japan that such teacher centered approaches are necessary for students to gain sufficient fluency in the L2 in order to express learner agency. What are your thoughts on that?"* (Author)

Professor Brinton generously replied at length: "I'm not at all sure that we want to totally "stop" the swings of the pendulum. As I believe I mentioned in my talk, there were strengths of those methods that fall on the left-hand side of the pendulum. As a pronunciation specialist, I feel we owe many of our "tried and true" classroom techniques to the Direct Method and to the ALM (Audio Lingual Method). And as someone who studied French under both grammar translation and the ALM, I believe that what I've retained is a semi-decent pronunciation and (after oh so many years) also a knowledge of the verb system. I have neither of these from my attempts to learn Spanish, which was learned in much more communicative contexts. Perhaps what we should say instead is that we should aim at trying to moderate the swings of the pendulum so that they are less extreme and also, as practitioners, aim at being less dogmatic about our implementation of the resulting approaches, allowing teachers more of what Kumaradivelu (2001) refers to as the sense of teacher plausibility."

Here Prof. Brinton was referring to the idea that methods need to be adapted to the teaching context (Prabhu, 1990), the chosen methods should provide practical results, and those methods should support social mobility - in the context of Japan, there are questions about the differences in ELT provision at private and public schools and how that affects social mobility (e.g., Matsuoka, 2010). It is clear that teachers should be careful that the routines they follow in their teaching should be continuously re-examined and that teachers should have a broad repertoire that they utilize flexibly. She continued: "Certainly, in the presentation stages of any lesson (even the most communicatively-oriented lesson) there is still a need for the teacher to assume a teacher-centered stance. It's just that this role needs to be one of many teacher roles (as Harmer suggests) that are assumed over the course of any given lesson. So I'd definitely agree with your last statement. In the early years of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), where Krashen's i+1

(comprehensible input - simple input that could be acquired easily without much cognitive processing) dominated much of the thinking about Second Language Acquisition (SLA), fluency was the only byproduct, and accuracy suffered while teachers everywhere espoused the “all you need is intelligible input at the i+1 level” mantra. And then came Merrill Swain, with her game-changing article claiming that comprehensible input does not equal comprehensible output, and the pendulum began to swing more to a centered position.”

Although I was not able to continue our discussion, Prof. Brinton evidently wanted to argue for a more balanced approach. While she was definitely not in favour of Skinner boxes or the Silent Way, she was putting arguments forward for a much wider pedagogical repertoire. This seems like a more manageable step for a teacher such as myself who does not have the inside institutional clout to suggest major changes to the courses that I teach. By broadening my repertoire, I can help develop my own efficacy and thus my students’ efficacy, which in turn should help remove some of the barriers placed on autonomous student learning by the particular pedagogical choices that we make.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the JALT LDSIG committee for awarding me with a conference grant to attend JALT 2019 in Nagoya. Without that help, I would have been unable to attend the conference and benefit from one of the best annual international teaching conferences in Japan.

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## JALT2019 International Conference Report: How can teachers support learner agency?

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2019 was my first JALT international conference, both as a participant and as a presenter. I talked about learner agency, a featured topic of this year's conference. As I teach part-time without any research funding, I very much appreciated receiving the LD SIG JALT International Conference Grant. While preparing for my own talk, I began to plan which presentations would be most useful in deepening my understanding of the links between theory and practice in both my research and my teaching.

In my research I investigated learner agency in a university prerequisite EFL course through two interviews with a learner who surprised me with his strong initiative in self-directed learning (Kanno, 2020, forthcoming). The initial interview revealed that his self-confidence derived from several multilingual experiences. He had lived in Europe for three years in his childhood and had recent work experience in an English-speaking environment. However, his agency appeared to weaken as the course progressed, which was ongoingly mediated and co-constructed in the immediate sociocultural environment (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). While the results implied that interviewing could facilitate teacher-learner relationship that enhanced a learner's self-esteem and attitude to self-directed learning, it seemed to be insufficient to sustain autonomous learning practices in a classroom where few learners looked fully engaged. This research generally suggested that a more collaborative learning environment, in which learners help and learn with and from each other, could help us enhance learner agency. But how could this be realized?

Some exchanges ahead of JALT2019 with the grant report editors made me want to seek out the links between my research and my teaching practice (Ikeda, 2019). I was aware that my research findings were descriptive rather than prescriptive, which didn't explicitly imply better practice for learner development. According to Smith (1994), learner development aims to help learners "learn how to learn" and to support them to step forward to take greater responsibility for and more control of their own learning. This echoes with the sociocultural approach to language learning that sees learning as a developmental process. I decided to join in some sessions that would help me explore how my investigation into learner agency might feed into classroom practices that could support learner development.

I will report on three sessions that were specifically relevant to my teaching context and research interest. First, Yuka Eto's talk about a Learning Management System (LMS) intrigued me, as I was also using an LMS in my blended-learning course. Next, I was interested in a presentation by John Spiri that focused on engaging learners in classroom "thinking" activities and developing critical thinking skills. Lastly, a presentation by Joseph Falout, Yoshifumi Fukada, Tetsuya Fukuda, and Tim Murphey was of my specific interest, in that they discussed collaborative learner autonomy which would directly address my question: how can we realize learner autonomy both for individuals and for a group of learners?

### Learning management system (LMS)

Yuka Eto's presentation "Building rapport and trust through usage of an LMS" was convincing, as I have used LMSs as a learner and a teacher. She uses an LMS to supplement university EFL coursework—for example, to assign and receive homework, to share classroom materials, and to communicate with learners. I used Moodle when I was working on my master's degree at University College London and am currently using Google Classroom to teach blended-learning courses at University of Fukui. My experiences with LMSs have taught me that people could work collaboratively online. LMSs also allow participants to feel connected with each other anytime anywhere. Therefore, I totally understood what she meant by building rapport and trust in the title of her presentation.

She chose an LMS that was manageable and optimized for smartphone users. Despite previous concerns about the need of special support for smooth implementation of an internet-based learning system (Murakami, 2016), LMSs have become handier and more effective along with the increase of smartphone users (Gromik, 2017). The results of her

student survey suggested that the use of LMS enhanced learners' control over their own learning. The LMS helped them organize classroom materials and keep informed of the coursework deadlines, which implied that the LMS could help enhance autonomous learning.

Her findings also confirmed that an LMS could help build a personal relationship between learners and a teacher, in which learner agency can be co-constructed. Some learners' comments indicated that they felt supported and encouraged through communicating with the teacher outside the classroom. In addition, learners could be aware of their teacher's online presence through progress monitoring and question answering. Reflecting on some exchanges with her students, Eto claimed that the LMS helped learners become more interested in their own learning and hope to be more autonomous learners. These positive findings were in line with part of my research results, the co-construction of learner agency by developing the teacher-learner relationship, which was enabled through an LMS in Eto's case.

### **Critical Thinking (CT)**

John Spiri's presentation about CT activities in an EFL classroom was also relevant to my teaching context, in that I always explore better ways to introduce discussion activities that facilitate EFL learning. According to a general definition, CT is the ability of individuals to take charge of their own thinking, such as analyzing their own thinking, evaluating different perspectives, and solving problems (Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011). Spiri invited the participants to think critically about bullying and introduced some discussion points to get his students think and interact with each other. Learners' active and collaborative participation possibly mediates their agency in a positive way, at the same time, engaging them in well-prepared classroom activities could enhance their CT skills (Kusumoto, 2018).

Though Spiri did not explicitly mention learner development, his workshop convinced me that raising students' awareness of critical thinking might help make language learning experiences more meaningful. There are some cautions for the introduction of CT in EFL, in that it is closely related to cultural ways of thinking that would be hard to teach in classrooms in Japan, and that some skills are so context-dependent that they cannot easily be transferred to other situations (Atkinson, 1997). However, CT can naturally help language learners become aware of different perspectives and begin to think dialogically (Benesch, 1999; Spiri, 2013). These new ways of thinking may include the transfer of skills among subjects, helping learners to metacognitively monitor and evaluate their own learning (Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011). These changes could also be viewed as aligned with Smith's (1994) notion of learner development where learners take more responsibility for their own learning.

### **Critical collaborative autonomy**

Finally, Falout et al.'s presentation helped inspire me with the confidence to further explore the ways to realize a collaborative learning environment. They introduced a concept of critical learner autonomy and demonstrated how a collaborative environment could be facilitated. By letting the participants briefly introduce themselves to their neighbors in the room, they demonstrated the first phase of Murphey and Jacobs's (2000) five steps of agentic development: (a) socialization, (b) dawning metacognition, (c) initiating choice, (d) expanding autonomy, and (e) critical collaborative autonomy. These steps gradually engage learners in participation in their learning communities in more intensive and critical ways. Some classroom activities were introduced, which aimed to help teachers and students facilitate these steps and create a collaborative classroom (Fukada, Fukuda, Falout & Murphey, 2017).

The last step, critical collaborative autonomy, specifically resonated with my sociocultural exploration into learner agency. According to Murphey and Jacobs (2000), critical collaborative autonomy is not achieved by simply handing over the power. Rather, it is empowered by pursuing learners' voices continuously and encouraging them to critically negotiate collaboration and their individual thinking. This could possibly elaborate the sociocultural aspects, "mediation" and "co-construction" of learner agency. If teachers make continuous efforts to create a collaborative classroom while listening to individuals' voices and facilitating their own thinking, that will positively shape and reshape their learners' agency and enhance autonomous learning. This was an eye-opening presentation to me, because it not only linked the theory to practical classroom activities, but also showed the presenters' collaborative teamwork. As Fukada et al. put it:

teacher-researchers observing themselves within their own respective classes can learn well enough, but by expanding their perspectives by collaboration in research groups, they can go more deeply with their observations and reflections so that they can see the wider picture. (2017, p. 91)

Collaboration among teacher researchers would definitely bring about a broader view of the world, from the classroom to wider society.

### Conclusion

I learned a lot from my first JALT International Conference as a participant, a presenter, and a member of the LD SIG. I was an independent researcher who had done most of my research alone or in my classroom, but now I am aware of what sociocultural theory implies about human development through socialization. I felt professionally empowered and encouraged by the informative presentations that suggested practical approaches to socially engage learners in EFL activities in and outside of a classroom. I could share some interests with the presenters and other attendees and gained a little more confidence in my research. I truly appreciated the presenters of these three sessions for kindly replying to my emails and offering helpful resources.

I would like to emphasize here that my experience at the conference was greater than that of simply receiving the financial support the grant provided. It put me in touch with invaluable people. The LD committee warmly welcomed me when I attended their Annual General Meeting and received the grant. I could sense the committee's open and frank atmosphere. Through writing this report, I experienced their approach to visualizing the developmental process of writing (Nicoll & Elliott, 2017). The editors were willing to address any of my questions, even very fundamental ones, and gave me helpful suggestions. This convinced me of the value of sociocultural and collaborative knowledge development.

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## JALT2019 International Conference Report: Learning about Success, Achievability and Positivity and JALT 2019

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JALT 2019 was my very first JALT International Conference. It offered me a wealth of educational knowledge, ideas, and experiences to help me become a better teacher. As the Gifu Chapter President, it was part of my duty to attend the conference. However, with no research funding from my job position, and JALT chapter officers typically receiving no monetary support from their chapter to attend the conference, the financial burden made me contemplate heavily before registering. It was thanks to the LD SIG JALT International Conference Grant that I was able to be a part of the conference for the very first time, both as an attendee and as a presenter.

Prior to the conference, some experienced attendees had prepared me about being overwhelmed by the amount of information and resources on language teaching that would be presented at the conference. Others had warned me about how networking and executive responsibilities might end up consuming a significant amount of my time throughout the three days. Therefore, I had to set my mind clear on one goal: to walk out of the conference as a better educator. Every morning when I walked towards the Nagoya WINC Building, the same thought would reappear in my head: "I am here to learn," and I did learn a lot.

Attending JALT 2019, I was determined to gain a better understanding of Japanese students' perspectives on learning and using English, and how to cultivate a more positive perspective. As someone born in Hong Kong, who then moved to Canada, my identity as an English teacher in Japan is rather mixed. I am viewed as a fluent user of the language (in that no one feels the need to ask for my English test score when I apply for a position), but I also learned English as a foreign language and eventually as a second language. Despite my role now, I struggled with English and viewed it as an obstacle in my everyday life in Canada. It hindered me from making friends, from studying subjects I enjoyed, and from expressing my ideas with people around me. Due to the hardship, from my time in elementary school to university, I was extremely demotivated from learning it, I avoided interacting with it, and I hated it. That negative perspective towards English remained for over a decade, and when my perspective ultimately changed, I finally saw myself as a user of English. My own experiences helped me tremendously in being able to recognize and respect the students' perspectives on their own learning experience, as well as to see how educators could use such understanding to support the learners. That became my guide when navigating through JALT 2019, and I would like to highlight three themes I learned about at the conference: students' feelings of success in English tasks, achievability in goal-setting, and positivity towards English learning.

### Fostering students' sense of success

David Barker, my colleague and one of the plenary speakers of JALT 2019, gave an additional session on learner agency. He mentioned one of his approaches towards education is to allow students to succeed in English. The success can be trivial, but Japanese students are used to struggling and failing, so even a small yet consistent feeling of success can have a huge impact on how they view their relationship with English.

In her additional session, Mari Nakamura demonstrated how her creative projects allowed her students to not only feel, but also to witness their own success that came from their individuality. The audience who attended her plenary session on Sunday saw her demonstrating the "flat-traveler" project, a paper avatar that each student in her class hand-made and mailed alongside their letters to their international penpals. She also presented the shared blog project where two classes from different countries wrote and shared their culture with each other. These projects showed her students how their success in communicating with someone in different countries created physical results in forms of friendly letters, photographs, and occasionally *manju*.

The two Saturday sessions made me reflect on my own teaching and also my own presentation on a method that encourages freer-practice activities to cultivate the students' sense of achievement. Have I been "generous" enough with helping students experience success throughout their journey of English learning? What physical forms of success can I provide my students with? I left the venue on that day reflecting about "success."

### **Achievability in goal-setting**

One of the key elements of success that David Barker mentioned was to set goals that are achievable. This revelation motivated me to seek classroom ideas, and practical workshops with keywords such as achievable, successful, and confidence became even more attractive.

Two Sunday sessions were extra memorable for me. Kio Iwai introduced several simple yet effective information-gap speaking activities. The activities seemed difficult at first, but each one included multiple layers of success. Students would certainly experience a degree of achievement as they negotiate through a communication breakdown.

Roberto Rabbini also shared several activity ideas in his workshop. What made an impression on me was when he had the attendees experience a substitution drill with Italian vocabulary. Although the room initially gasped at the unexpected challenge, the word list provided was so short and precise that the room felt the courage to take a shot at pronouncing Italian. This was presented to be achievable, and the smile and positive feedback from Roberto made us feel even better about ourselves.

In addition to presentations, I also spent some time in the Education Material Exhibition. When discussing the topic of “the biggest challenge teachers face when selecting a textbook,” several publisher representatives replied “level-appropriacy.” One person added that they would rather recommend a book that is too easy rather than too difficult because teachers could bring in supplementary material for an easy book, but difficult books would make learners feel that the goals are simply unachievable and make them give up. I wrapped up day two with extensive thoughts on “achievements.”

### **Positivity towards English learning**

The positive feeling from practicing Italian at Roberto Rabbini’s session reminded me about the importance of creating a positive environment to help students feel at ease, even when they are faced with the challenge of learning a different language, often with the instructions given in the said language.

My final day at the conference began with James Bates’ workshop on how positivity and productivity work hand in hand. The session focused on how to foster a learning environment that helps learners feel encouraged and supported, and the atmosphere of the room itself well represented his ideas. I felt like I was learning about positivity by watching it happen, and this motivated me to try to bring the same mood into my classroom too.

The last presentation I attended relating to my research on Japanese students’ perspectives on English was by Najma Janjua, who presented about the usage of humour in her healthcare classes. All the attendees seemed to enjoy all her activities, despite the fact that we were not necessarily interested in healthcare, and that well demonstrated how humour could help engage students who are less motivated in English. If they could enjoy the lesson itself, they would enjoy the subject more as well. Positivity became my personal theme of the final day of JALT 2019. I left the venue satisfied and motivated, and with a notebook full of activities and teaching approaches to try to implement in my own classes.

### **Final thoughts**

My one regret was that I was not able to attend a few presentations that I was keen on learning from, due to conflicts of schedule with other presentations and with my official duties as a chapter president and as a member of the Diversity and Equity Practice committee. However, I undoubtedly finished the conference with a head full of new ideas that I was looking forward to try out. The presentations that I attended covered a wide range of topics, from grand curriculum design approaches to small activities that could immediately be introduced into classrooms, so I was inspired to re-examine every level of my teaching approach to see how I could apply my new learning. The one difficulty I was still struggling with was whether the positivity and achievability in my lessons could flip the negative perspectives towards English education that some students had built up over the years. There was also the question of whether the new positive perspective would remain in the heads of students who had already given up on interacting with English for the rest of their lives. The only way to find out is to try them, and I also look forward to exploring those questions further in future JALT events. Besides the fantastic presentations, I also had the honour of meeting and connecting with many motivated educators, including many from the LD SIG. The level of energy and motivation at the conference was beyond what my imagination was prior to attending, and I appreciated every moment of it. I would like to end this report by expressing my gratitude to the LD SIG once again for giving me this opportunity to be a part of this year’s conference.

## Learner Development Project Grant Report: Enhancing the affect towards EFL in elementary schools through a storytelling project: Literacy and learner development

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My interest in developing teachers' ability to establish strategies that build, support and sustain students' self-efficacy brought me to initiate a literacy project in Fukui City. I believe that through the support of teachers' familiarity with literacy, in particular children's books and storytelling, students can feel motivated in their pursuit of English language acquisition. Well-informed teachers have the power to change students' attitudes towards their own achievement, bringing about a positive affect towards the English language. By understanding, observing, and assessing the needs of the current learning environment, changes can be made, especially during this critical time given that from April 2020, English is set to become a compulsory subject for fifth and sixth graders in Japan. Learner development aims to support learners in their ability to take more control and greater responsibility for their learning, which can be enhanced by effective skills in learning how to learn. The active nature of a storytelling project assists learners' process towards learning, and in this case, the English language. A socio-constructivist approach to learning was taken for this project, which sees learning as a developmental process, an active one, in which language is developed by using it (Bruner, 1983) in interactive experiences involving social and collaborative exchanges with others (Vygotsky, 1978). In developing the storytelling project at Hoei Elementary School in Fukui City, I kept a monthly journal from October 2019 to March 2020. Keeping track of my learning through the monthly journal enabled me to reflect on the student and teacher-focused developments of the project and see the project through to its culmination. Below, I include the journal entries from October 2019, November 2019, December 2019 & January 2020, and finally February 2020.

### Children's Storytelling Project Journal: October 2019 Update as of November 5th 2019

During my studies as a graduate student at the University of New Brunswick, I became interested in the importance of including storytelling in the EFL classroom. Continuing from the end of 2018, I involved myself in enhancing the inclusion of children's books and storytelling for students on a daily basis. I familiarized myself with the resources available at Hoei Elementary School in Fukui City, including the English language children's books, of which there were only a few. Showcasing the in-house books was one way I felt I could reach a great number of students. With the assistance of the librarian, I began giving book reviews in Japanese for recommended books, most of which were Japanese translations of foreign titles. After some discussions with the school administration and an English teacher, it became clear that homeroom teachers and the staff themselves could best increase awareness of children's books. Additionally, teachers could reach students in their progress of learning English, not only enhancing the means by which learners receive English input, but also influence students' affect and motivations towards English learning, ultimately benefiting students' in-class skills. As a response, I coordinated a summer seminar on effective classroom implementation of children's books for homeroom teachers and the administration of Hoei Elementary School. Specifically, the teachers were made aware of the availability of English resources, methodologies of strategic read-alouds in the classroom, along with pedagogical information regarding English language children's books activities. Adding to the books already at the school, I purchased 10 new children's books through the JALT LD SIG Project Grant and introduced them to the staff. Theoretical and practical methodologies encouraged the staff to familiarize themselves with the books available, which topped 20 total. Additionally, a list was compiled indicating the appropriate grade level and target language to be achieved with each book, a valuable resource for the staff. To foster the teachers' motivation and self-efficacy about using English, the seminar was held in English mostly, building the theme of practical instruction in English into the seminar, with the hope to encouraging teachers to use basic terminology when implementing children's books in the classroom and demonstrate to the students comfortable and positive role-modeling of English.

The aim of the seminar was to create a collaborative atmosphere for engaging with others and initiating interest when introducing children's books in the classroom. As such, at the beginning of the seminar, I distributed a

questionnaire (attached) to each of the 25 or so participants, with the hope of stimulating conversation regarding individual ability to engage students with English language children's books in the classroom. Sitting in discussion groups of 5 or so, teachers were encouraged to share their answers with one another and bring forth any concerns regarding classroom activities, including displaying, reading aloud, or building children's books into lesson plans. Based on the discussions, some participants showed concern for the availability of appropriate variety and quantity of books. Others felt strongly about the impractical nature of using children's books as an educational tool because of the time commitment necessary for planning and implementation. However, as anticipated, the most common discussion surrounded the teachers' lack of confidence in pronouncing English. Many teachers raised concerns that their insufficient pronunciation might in fact hinder the development of some students, influencing the effectiveness of the readings. This led me to understand that many of the participants felt discouraged about implementing the children's books themselves: They mentioned their desire for assistance from either a licensed English teacher or a native speaker. This made me wonder if teachers had a negative experience in the past either performing storytelling in their non-native tongue, or if other reasons could explain teachers' lack of confidence in their pronunciation. I decided that I could come to better understand the issue of participating in this project by conducting a self-assessment of teachers' self-efficacy towards language ability.

It became clear to me that teachers would have to rely on external resources to effectively impact the amount of input students receive from storytelling. Some suggestions included reading aloud over the broadcast system to lessen the burden on one teacher and reach a greater number of students, creating audio or video recordings of the books which could be distributed to all the classrooms, purchasing books with an included audio CD or DVD, among others. While fluency may be seen as a desirable skill to effectively conduct storytelling, at this point teachers themselves had not indicated an explicit desire to improve their English pronunciation skills. If teachers do show in the future an interest in improving their English skills, I would certainly consider investing the necessary resources and time.

Throughout the month of November, I hope to gain a greater understanding of the barriers towards implementation of the children's books in the classroom. Although it may be challenging to necessarily connect English books to English lessons or with the adopted curriculum and Course of Study, I feel that teachers should be encouraged to find time outside of their busy schedules to include a weekly or monthly reading of books. Some of the opportunities suggested include formally during the classroom morning meeting, or at the end of the day, and informally during the scheduled break times throughout the day. Improving access to the books has also been discussed, either placing the books in a devoted English educational resources space in the teacher's office, alongside the current English titles in the library or in a mobile box which can be rotated among the 10 homeroom classes. By rotating the books among the classrooms, teachers can gain a greater understanding of students' interests and inquisitiveness for English books. As such, I intend to have deeper conversations with the staff and distribute a questionnaire inquiring about their participation in the project.

### **Children's Storytelling Project Journal: November 2019 Update as of December 11th 2019**

Two months have passed since the initial summer seminar at Hoen Elementary School. I was interested in knowing how teachers were getting on with implementing storytelling in their classrooms and the success regarding students' learning towards EFL. To understand this in detail, I prepared a 10-question questionnaire, which I distributed to the staff at Hoen Elementary School. Of the eleven questionnaires distributed, one to each staff member with classroom responsibility, ten were collected. The results that most stood out were the two respondents who strongly disagreed with the statement, "I am concerned that my pronunciation is a deterrent to implementation", regarding storytelling. The same two respondents strongly disagreed with the statement, "I do not have confidence to read in English in front of my students", leading me to believe that the respondents had strong teacher self-efficacy and could provide a hospitable atmosphere for learner development through positive modeling. Regarding the statement, "I want to introduce English children's books into the classroom", three respondents strongly agreed; however two of the same respondents, along with three others (5 total) strongly agreed with the statement, "I need help in either the preparation or the implementation of the activity". These results created the impetus to explore the specific areas where help is needed in an effort to bring teachers closer to the aim of increasing students' motivation and positive attitude towards EFL.

Moving forward with the project, I intend to uncover the anxieties teachers have regarding implementation of the activity. I believe the best way to provide necessary assurance of proper structural implementation of the project is through in-class observations. The roles of the teacher and students can be clarified during an observation, taking into consideration who should conduct the storytelling, what resources are needed, and what real-time assistance is available. Through observations, teachers have an opportunity to imagine such a project being undertaken within their own classrooms, a necessary part of learner development. Resources, including a detailed unit plan, in addition to a specific lesson plan outlining the lesson's objectives and aims, may contribute to the enhancement of teacher effectiveness towards learner development. Furthermore, a questionnaire to specifically clarify teachers' apprehension pre- and post-observation may effectively raise teacher awareness of the expectations during such projects.

Besides the aims of the LD SIG project, I was happy to learn that Hoen Elementary School was passionate about storytelling itself, which made the viability of my own project more meaningful. I was asked to observe a storytelling assembly that was held in November, which brought together the entire school body in the gym for a one-time storytelling experience. With the help of the librarian, all homeroom teachers and staff were responsible for selecting and reading a children's book from the school library. Students at Hoen Elementary School are grouped together in clusters, called *niko-niko fureai*, which are made up of a number of students across the six grades. These groups moved together between different stations, participating in a read aloud by a staff member, one being a native English speaker who read English texts to the students. What I was hoping to see was some of the Japanese teachers or staff attempting to read English books to the students. This led me to become interested in uncovering teacher anxiety as it relates to storytelling for specific audiences, and understanding how a familiar audience compared with an unfamiliar one changes one's level of anxiety.

While schools themselves may not have a wide variety of English books, if any, the Fukui City libraries have increased their collections of English books recently. I met with some staff at the City Library who introduced me to several books which are part of the collection. They recommended that I consider using the library books as tools for the schools themselves. Thus, I have been able to match titles at the schools with their English titles from the library, borrowing and using them as a resource for the school during storytelling sessions and book recommendations, answering teachers' concerns about availability of books.