

MEMBERS' VOICES | メンバーの声

Negotiating the complexity of the incomplete and changing architecture of development



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I've read that as people delve further into their studies, we tend to gradually let go of conviction. I am not sure about the generalizability of this claim; however it has been very true in my own experience. I'm in the process of completing a pilot study (Master of Research) for a PhD at Macquarie University, and reflecting on the journey so far and where it has led me, is like strolling through a park and finding a strange tree that has miraculously grown by completely avoiding the guiding frame the gardener has set up for it.

My area of study is foreign/second language development for older, retiree-age learners: a dynamic and varied demographic also referred to as the Third Age. Because of the variation inherent in the subject, as I progress with the research, I'm reminded of a description of the four stages of developing expertise (see for example Underhill, 1992). It is said that we start from unconscious incompetence, progressing to conscious incompetence, then conscious competence, and finally unconscious competence. Often it seems I'm regularly cycling between the first two stages, as with each new concept comes a long history of research to explore and take in. 'Simple' words like *ecology*, or *emergence*, have taken me on a journey from Lamarck to Darwin to Peter Corning, from Chomsky to Larsen-Freeman, van Lier, and Phil Benson (see for example Benson, 2019; Berwick & Chomsky, 2016; Chomsky, 2015; Corning, 2018; Hornstein, 2018; Larsen-Freeman, 2018; van Lier, 2004). Words like *teleological*, *epigenesis*, and *punctuated equilibrium*, have appeared as fundamental landmarks, while in the meantime leaving

me to struggle with how all this relates to second/foreign language development.

When I first considered writing a short piece for Members' Voices, I quite happily trotted out something similar to a short literature review setting up the argument for why my research was necessary and then followed through with defending it with as many references as I could gather, just to be certain. Then I was reminded that I'm not writing this for my examiners, but instead for my colleagues and interested readers of *Learning Learning*. Nor is my current research by any means a complete description of my voice as a member of the Learner Development SIG, or as a researcher, graduate student, teacher, or learner. Perhaps I am gradually becoming more comfortable with letting go of certainty and conviction. This is not about losing ethical and moral conviction—they are always present for me, unchanging, and are a driving force throughout life; it is the loss of conviction that one method, one idea, or one approach is "the right" one, and will give me answers to all my teaching/learning/researching/life problems. The world is beautifully complex and varied. If you picture a garden or a park, it seems only fitting to be able to stroll around it and take in its splendour from as many perspectives as possible—from the microscopic world to the macroscopic. It's in treading the fine balance between not knowing and knowing that I can constantly cycle within the first two stages of expertise. How exciting!

Just recently, after the Creating Community Learning Together (CCLT5) student-teacher conference in December, I had a rather motivating talk with some friends and was prompted to re-read [Autonomy You Ask!](#) (Barfield & Nix, 2003), as learner autonomy is an area I've not read about much. Each time I read through the chapters, I find myself going back to Phil Benson's "[A Bacardi by the Pool](#)" (Benson, 2003), and his thoughts on defining autonomy. That reference point, and a common definition of autonomy, was that autonomy is the capacity to control your own learning. This definition initially triggered way more questions than I was comfortable with, which usually means I've hit a good challenge to whichever stage of understanding or competence that I'm at right now. Questions arose like "What on earth could 'capacity' and 'control' mean?";

followed shortly by “How can we define ‘learning’ without referencing culture?”, and then I even found ‘your’ and ‘your own’ as problematic, adding to the self-inflicted confusion. I didn’t immediately see how this definition included social learning, apprenticing, the variability of capacity over time, or why only individual control should be so important for learning. Back to expertise stage one for me.

On reflection, this questioning gave way to an interesting perspective on my current research into an ecological model of development, and the contrasts present in development stages throughout our lives that Erikson proposes; take for example the contrasts Erikson identifies in the 8th stage (which corresponds most to the Third Age) as Ego Integrity vs Despair (Erikson & Erikson, 1997). This is a psychosocial stage driven by the biological influences of time, environment, and experience. Whatever happens in one will influence the others, and from the perspective of life stages, we can see how development emerges from these complex interactions. As Bronfenbrenner argues, we need to look at development biologically, cognitively, and ecologically (see for example Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Hoare, 2007; Rosa & Tudge, 2013) to consider what we are innately capable of, and how these innate capabilities ‘control’ our development to varying degrees, but also how through the course of our lives, different capacities fluctuate naturally with time and experience, and how the environment and various abstractions of context play a role in our development. This is not about nature vs nurture - this false dichotomy doesn’t reflect the complexity of development. Development emerges from the continuous and changing interaction of organisms in the environment over time. And being social, symbolic organisms, our environment and the abstractions of context (including cultural and social forces) play an important part in the emergent whole.

As for control, in light of insights from research about biological and ecological development, it is an extremely slippery concept. How much can we actually control anything? On the philosophical front, Epictetus, in his handbook (Epictetus & Hard, 2014) states that the only things we can control are our thoughts and actions—everything else is not our problem. However this really depends again on our capacity to control ourselves, whether cognitively or physically. If we look at how people in their later years can use strategies of compensation to overcome a loss of control of a certain cognitive or physical capability (for example, “tip of the

tongue” retrieval or hearing loss—see Burke & Graham, 2012), we can see how our capacities change and fluctuate throughout our life (see for example Hartshorne & Germine, 2015, for the various cognitive peak ages across the lifespan), and if we have the right support, the right setting, the right opportunities, we can continue developing:

“cognitive capacities not only vary as a function of age and genetics, but are influenced in large part by an individual's lifestyle and the extent to which intellectually stimulating exercises are included therein” (Kliesch, Giroud, Pfenninger, & Meyer, loc. 1796, 2018)

Capacity and control are intricately linked with our own development, which emerges from our actions, our experiences, and the affordances around us. In one way, we seem to be back to the stages of expertise—moving on from stage one almost exclusively involves others, or in other words, ecology (environment + active organisms). Progressing through the other stages involves more of our capacity to control our learning, yet this capacity, as mentioned above, is also dependent on our developmental stage. I’m starkly reminded of this in a description of Joan Erikson’s Ninth Stage of Development as a distinct loss of autonomy (Erikson & Erikson, 1997, p. 105). On the other hand, I’m also reminded of the English mentalist, illusionist, author, and despiser of mushrooms, Derren Brown, addressing the same idea in his book “Happy” as this not necessarily a bad thing, and quoting Anne Karpf in her book *How to Age*: “Age doesn’t obliterate our individual traits and identities... it heightens them” (Brown, 2016, p. 498).

So “capacity to control” cannot mean freedom of choice, otherwise we’d never get out of stage one. This makes sense to me at the moment, and sits well with me as a teacher given the positive reaction I’ve seen from students when we get the balance of capacity and control right in a course. It feels good to know that I still have a role to play in developing my students’ autonomy. Also, as a learner myself, I can see how important it is to have friends and mentors around to continuously nudge me out of stage one.

An interesting thought to end on is to restate the idea that capacity changes throughout our lives dynamically, based on experience, character, environment, as well as time. Paul Baltes, the influential German developmental psychologist, describes human

development as “the incomplete and changing architecture of the life span” (Baltes, 1997, p. 377), and calls for us to find ways of making it more robust. In an effort to improve robustness then, I've learned that instead of trying to construct guiding frames and expecting development to take place only because of them, it is important to stroll around the garden taking in the splendour of incomplete architecture, appreciating it for the complex and dynamic system that it is—and remaining open to the next nudge out of stage one.

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A Learner Teaches

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As a first-time writer for this SIG and newsletter, thank you for reading this. I'd like to describe and comment here on some of my experiences as a Japanese learner and their impact on my English teaching.

I started learning Japanese, unusually, with formal lessons at school in the UK when I was 17 years old; it was a short course limited to basic vocabulary and a little Japanese history. We were also required to write a short project on an aspect of Japanese culture. Following this, I had no exposure to Japanese for several years and forgot almost everything linguistic I had learned, yet to this day I can remember details of the project I wrote. It's clear to me that this was because, unlike the Japanese lesson content, I could choose the topic for myself and did research on it by myself. Remembering this, I now require students to research their own presentation or discussion topics several times a term in the expectation that they will absorb and retain the English used for longer.

Starting from when my plans to come to Japan firmed up, I began to study again the language on my own, initially with the goal of passing as many levels of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test as I could. I had had fun with the subject before, but more as an academic exercise; now I knew I would be using it in real-life contexts with native speakers. This gave me plenty of motivation.

An issue I noted was that I could not review vocabulary effectively: by the time I had started to forget recently-learned words, there was already new vocabulary to learn. Reviewing took away from the time and energy required to learn and vice versa, resulting in patchy and unsatisfactory progress. What I was spending too much time on was, as became apparent, work that technology could do for me instead: a "lightning bolt" moment occurred when I discovered a Spaced Repetition System (SRS; Gupta, 2016) in the form of *Anki*, an application used by many long-term learners of Japanese. The application uses an algorithm to decide when the user is likely to forget the meaning of a term and asks for the meaning at that point. Should the user have difficulty recalling it, the application shortens the

interval before it asks again; if they can recall the meaning easily, the interval is lengthened. The great advantage of this is that the technology takes care of the logistics: The user doesn't have to second-guess themselves or spend time on complicated filing methods and can concentrate simply on the language.

I was hamstrung however by the fact that I wasn't choosing vocabulary, but having it chosen for me in the form of JLPT lists. I knew that the words would be useful because they were likely to be in a test, but this did not make them interesting. I knew I *should* learn them without feeling strongly that I *wanted* to. Used every day, the SRS will ensure that you memorize a high percentage of the words you want to learn, but it cannot make you use it: Only motivation and engaging with your own learning will do that.

So, in my recent Japanese learning, I have changed my approach: I now take all the vocabulary I want to learn from authentic L1 sources, looking up the most interesting words and phrases in a dictionary app and adding them as flashcards from that directly to *Anki*, in which I then review them. I find my motivation has increased noticeably. It should be remembered that habit is also a major factor. It took a long time for me to develop the habit of daily vocabulary study; according to one report, sixty-six days is the average point at which a habit is formed (Clear, n.d., para. 15).

All these experiences are substantially impacting how I teach English. Projects in the form of presentations and skits have become key components of my lessons. I was surprised at how motivated many students were to research and create these. A project in which students introduced their own "green" business produced presentations featuring not only detailed research into environmental issues (for example, the effects of plastic straws on marine life) but also highly worked-out and slickly presented business solutions. Projects like this also have the benefit of providing the student audience with authentic L1 input in the form of their peers' research findings.

I also use SRS in and after lessons. Having told students the major benefits I reaped from SRS, I have them sign up (for free) with *Quizlet*, which features flashcard sets that teachers can upload and games that students can play with those flashcards. Games require students to recall a term or meaning against the clock and include the *Space Invaders*-style "Gravity" and "Match," a simple card pairs game. The most popular game is "Live," played in the classroom between student teams using their smartphones to guess the meaning of

terms, and which regularly ends in scenes of high drama.

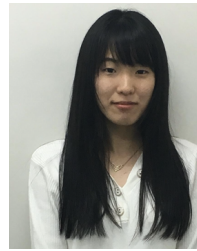
Over the course of a term it is noticeable how many students start to use the Quizlet app to study the vocabulary that they want to; this method demonstrably gives students greater control over their learning. To give students the opportunity to see a measurable result of their vocabulary-learning, improve vocabulary retention, and hopefully demonstrate to them the efficacy of SRS, we have vocabulary tests frequently. To give further practice, I also require students to include a minimum number of recently-studied terms in their skits.

Quizlet allows students to make their own flashcard sets, and so going forward, this seems the natural next step in increasing their autonomy as learners. As with my Japanese learning, a natural way to do this would be for students to take the most interesting words from the most interesting texts they can find. This will require a lot of thought beforehand if it is to be relevant to the course and assessable, but the benefits to be gained would likely make the effort worthwhile. I would be interested in hearing the experiences of Learner Development SIG members who have tried this or other methods of encouraging their students to take ownership of their vocabulary learning.

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My Journey to Become an English Teacher



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I am a student at Gifu University majoring in English education. Before I enrolled in the university, I had no interest in education, and teaching was actually one of the jobs I never wanted to do. In junior high and high school, English was always my favorite subject, and I was good at it. My dream was to work for a company where I would be able to use English, so I wanted to learn more about it in university. I chose English education for my major because I thought it would be good experience for me to learn not only about English itself, but also about language education.

I started studying in university. I expected all of my classes to be about the latest and best ways of teaching, but I was surprised. Instead of simply studying effective teaching methods, I learned how to think about students. It was broader and deeper than I had expected. I learned that every class is different, that within each class there are many different students, and that teachers have to consider the needs of every single one of them. Through studying education, I learned how important and difficult it is to make lessons comprehensible and interesting for the students. Also, I went to teaching practice in elementary school and a junior high school. I observed classes and homeroom and actually taught students English. Through this experience, I learned how much teachers need to think about their students and how they go about putting those thoughts into action. These experiences have been fascinating for me, and it has made me want to learn more about this field.

Even after completing my teaching practice, however, becoming a teacher was still not what I wanted to do. In Japanese elementary and secondary schools, all the full-time teachers have to take care of their students even outside of their lessons. They have dozens of students in their charge, and they are supposed to be a kind of surrogate parent as well as a teacher. I am sure that is an important part of education, but classroom teaching is the part that interests me.

When I talked about this with my supervisor, he suggested the idea of teaching at a university. That appealed to me because it would enable me to focus on

teaching English without having all the extra responsibilities of a school teacher. Since then, becoming a university English teacher has been my dream job.

As a first step on the road to making my dream come true, I was working on my thesis about English education programs in Japanese universities. We do not have any courses about university education in my department, but fortunately, I have been able to learn from the teachers in our English Center. They are very kind and friendly, and they are also very passionate about teaching. Learning from them has made me want to become a teacher even more. I often visit the center to ask them about their perspectives on university English education. I ask them what they think about their work and how they feel about their working environment. It seems like their answers are almost the same. They do not agree with the methods used to teach English in Japan because it puts too much focus on grammar and reading, and they think that the English Center aims to provide students with effective English education that meets the needs of modern-day Japanese society. Having clear goals means that the teachers are able to work together as a team and learn from their students and from each other.

Becoming a university English teacher is not easy. In addition to a high level of English ability, it also requires a knowledge of research methods. Since the Ministry of Education deregulated all the universities in Japan in 1991, each institution has had a lot of freedom to teach whatever they want in whatever way they think best. One result of this has been that some universities seem to be unsure about what they should do with regards to English education. This is not surprising, given that there are no national standards or guidelines for English education at Japanese universities.

For me, English education at the university level is still a mystery. Many people criticize the way English is taught in Japan, and although for most people, university education is a part of this process, it receives relatively little attention compared to English education in elementary, junior high, and high schools. I think it might be interesting to dig a little deeper and investigate the reasons for this. I am also interested to know how English education at the university level can be improved, and I am curious to see how students' language proficiency might develop in a better educational environment.

As I learn more about English education at the tertiary level, I am beginning to see things that I would

not have been able to see in elementary, junior high, or high schools, and I am keen to learn more about this exciting new world. Even though I am about to graduate with a degree in English education and starting my master's program this spring, I feel as though my journey to become an English teacher has only just begun.

Call for Contributions

Deadline for the Autumn issue: August 31st, 2020

Learning Learning is your space for continuing to make the connections that interest you. You are warmly invited and encouraged to contribute to the next issue of *Learning Learning* in either English and/ or Japanese. In order to provide access and opportunities for Learner Development SIG members to take part in the SIG's activities, we welcome writing in different formats and lengths about issues connected with learner and teacher development.

『学習の学習』は会員の皆様に興味ある繋がりを築きつづけるスペースです。次号の『学習の学習』への日本語（もしくは英語、及び二言語で）の投稿を募集しています。メンバーの皆様にSIGの活動にご参加いただきたく、形式や長さを問わず、学習者および教師の成長に関する以下のような原稿をお待ちしております。ターで、年に2回（春と秋）オンライン出版されています（ISSN 1882-1103）。学習者の成長、学習者と教員の自律に関するアイデア、省察、経験や興味に関連したさまざまな形式の原稿を収録しています。SIGの多くのメンバーが『学習の学習』に寄稿し、共同体の意識を築き共に学習しています。どうぞ奮ってご投稿され、SIG内でのまたそれを超えた繋がりを築いてください