

LD SIG 2013 Research Grant Awardees 2013 年度 LD SIG 研究助成金受賞者

LD SIG 20th Anniversary Conference: Opportunities for Career Development and Teacher Development



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As a recipient of one of the LD 20th Anniversary Conference grants, I have been asked to write about my personal experiences at the conference and how it connects with my learning and professional development. First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to the LD SIG and its members for the opportunity to help me attend the conference. Second, I would like to say thank you to the organizers, volunteers and presenters who make such events possible. Without you, these conferences would not be possible and I firmly believe that education in Japan would suffer without the development and discussion these opportunities provide educators.

First impressions of the SIG

As a new member to the LD SIG, the main thing that stands out in my mind when I think of this SIG is emphasis placed on its members to become better educators. I mistakenly thought that the LD SIG was geared towards non-native Japanese speakers learning Japanese. However, at the 2013 Pan SIG conference I realised that the LD SIG was not about studying Japanese and focuses on both native and non-native speakers wanting to become better language facilitators, regardless of the language being taught to. I attended presentations, networked and met some amazing teachers who are doing fascinating things in and out of their classrooms. I was introduced to The Japan Association of Self-Access Learning (JASAL) by a SIG member and joined both the LD SIG and JASAL the week after Pan SIG. I looked forward to attending JALT National and seeing presentations sponsored by this group. I was certainly not let down.

All of the presentations I have attended related to the LD SIG have been about practical teacher development and training. I was able to take something away from every plenary presentation, workshop or colloquium I attended and use it in the classroom the following week. I left the weekend with handouts, memos and suggestions that I have been incorporating into lessons and I've been thinking about how to improve my curriculum for next year based on what I learned over the course of the weekend. In

my opinion, being able to utilize the information from other presenters is my main purpose for attending conferences, seminars and workshops. In less than a year, my perception of the LD SIG has gone from, mistakenly, being a SIG for Japanese language learners, to a SIG that I have great respect for due to the focus on becoming better educators.

Career development and teacher development

Since the conference, I have been thinking about how conferences benefit students, educators and educational institutions. This has led me to question not only my reasons and purposes for attending such events, but also the reasons that fellow educators and students may have. As stated, I attend conferences because I am hoping to find new methods and activities that I can use in the classroom. I want to learn what others are doing to help motivate their students, how they address their students' needs and learn about any new or different activity ideas they may have. However, I would be lying if I said these were the only reasons I attend conferences. These days I feel an enormous amount of pressure to present and publish. Conferences offer opportunities for both, with the added incentive of networking. With this in mind, while thinking about how this conference helped my learning and career development, I'd like to separate and address these as two separate topics. I think we all have our personal beliefs with regards to what career development and teacher development are. To some, they may be the same thing while to others, they maybe seen as two different types of development that overlap at times. I fall into the latter category.

Career development, in my opinion, is focusing on your career, your resume, and your employability factor. It is about improving your resume, increasing the number of research papers published, networking and doing things that many

employers see as important. These are the kinds of qualifications and skills we need to demonstrate if we want to be employed. In recent years, the "publish or perish" pressure seems to have become a very strong motivating factor in attending events. As a teacher on a limited term contract myself, I have certainly felt the need to keep up with others in the field due to the job insecurity that comes with part-time and contract positions. I often question how conferences help me develop my skills as a facilitator and the purpose of those also attending. Presentations and research are highly valued and indeed much needed but often I feel that personally, they don't always necessarily help me in terms of becoming better at addressing my students' needs. In my opinion, the pressure on career development doesn't always lead to becoming a better, more effective and efficient teacher. It does however make us look better on paper and hopefully, will increase our chances of finding stable employment. Career development is all about "us", not our students.

Teacher development on the other hand is about our students; it is when we focus on improving our capabilities as a teacher so we can be more effective for our students. Teacher development is about attending conferences to learn to be a better teacher. Teacher training and certification courses like CELTA, DELTA or an MA related to education are clearly teacher development. Reading books on learning styles, classroom management or ways to become a better communicator, having discussions with coworkers about effective lessons and peer class observations are also other forms of teacher development. At times, I feel that because so many of us are focusing on career development, teacher development tends to be forgotten.

The LD SIG's 20th Anniversary Conference, with the workshops, discussion groups, student

presentations, and focus on what we as teachers can do to help our students, was teacher development at its best, in my opinion. I'd like to focus on how my weekend was teacher development centered and how I have taken many things I learned over the weekend and used them in my classes and my institution in the weeks following the conference.

Learner Identity and Motivation

Mitsuki Kato is currently a first year university student who discussed her English learning history and allowed us, the teachers, to become the students. It was the first student presentation I ever attended at a conference and it was the highlight of my weekend. While I have had my students give numerous presentations over the years as part of their course work, I have never thought of asking my students to attend a conference as participants. The 25-minute presentation was inspiring as Mitsuki talked about her struggles and initial dislike of English, and about how she came to realise that English plays a vital role in her future. I can't imagine how nervous she was standing up in front of a group of English teachers and talking about her struggles with learning English, in English. I was greatly impressed with her maturity and her confidence.

What I took away from her presentation is that I need to create more opportunities for my students to do similar things. I need to raise their awareness about opportunities, such as presenting in English, to help develop their English skills and hopefully help them see that English is a vital part of their future. Having students give presentations at conferences also gives teachers a chance to listen to students' opinions that perhaps many of our students haven't had the opportunity to share with us due to the student/teacher roles and

relationships that we don't usually question in our classes and institutions.

SAC Colloquium

Four different groups described and discussed the roles, goals and challenges that their university self-access center's (SAC) students and staff face. As someone who never had the opportunity of working in a SAC until this year, it was a great chance to compare notes on what is happening in other SACs around the country. I learned about how the four presenting institutions run their centers, and they in turn gave audience members an opportunity to discuss how we could all make improvements to our own centers.

One of the major differences I noted in this presentation was the difference in student needs and the overall design and outlay among the four SACs. The discussion made me reflect on some of the things I personally could do to improve the quality of the SAC that I am involved with. How I utilize the available space in my institution's SAC could be better and it could become a much more positive environment, not only for the students but also for the teachers, if my institution could incorporate some of the suggestions and methods other schools shared. Based on the suggestions and ideas presented, I was able to talk to my boss and we held a staff meeting to discuss ways we can improve and help our students when they attend our SAC. The colloquium ideas and suggestions will hopefully improve my institution's ability to meet student needs.

Exploring Ethical Dimensions of Doing Research

This workshop was a good reminder that while we often ask our students to participate in our research, we have an ethical responsibility to look after their learning and not to inadvertently harm them in the process of our research. In my opinion,

one of the most interesting discussions that came up during this session was the topic of discussing our research with our students. Robert Croker asked how many of us take data from our students but don't inform them of our research, our research process, or our findings. It made me realise that I was being rather unfair to my students to ask them to fill out surveys, but then not inform them of the results or what I am doing with the findings.

I have one particular class that has been very supportive of my self-access classroom research, from filling out surveys to wishing me good luck when I have had to cancel classes to attend a conference. However, I hadn't given much thought to tell them about my findings and results of their class survey. I honestly thought that they probably had very little interest in the topic and that they were often subjected to teacher surveys in other classes without receiving any follow up. It was a rather unfair assumption. The week after the conference, I sat down with my class and informed them about my findings based on their class surveys. I was surprised at how interested they were in the results of the class survey. It seems that many of them had been wondering about the results and how their opinions compared to those of their classmates. They were also very interested in learning about the types of presentation I have given based on their self-access class. Thankfully I had prepared handouts for them and gave each student a copy of the handouts I gave participants at the JALT National Conference and the LD conference.

Giving my class the results of their survey and the handouts resulted in a discussion about how many of them feel towards English education and their experiences studying English. It made me realise that while I wanted their opinions on self-access, I wasn't giving them a platform to discuss other things about my class that perhaps weren't

covered on my survey which they would like to address. Robert's workshop helped me become a more thoughtful teacher when it comes to using my students as research participants. By discussing the results of their class survey, I was able to get more feedback about my program and how I could address some issues to develop and improve the quality of my self-access classes.

Creating a Self-Access Classroom for First Year Non-Major Students

I was given the opportunity to give a workshop on developing self-access classes for first year non-English majors. During the workshop, I was able to share my ideas, methods and concerns with the audience, as well as discuss student survey results with regards to their thoughts and opinions on this style of classroom approach. I received excellent feedback and suggestions from participants and the workshop gave me a chance to meet other teachers who were interested in learner autonomy, self-access classes and self-access centers. Before the conference, I believed that presenting was purely professional development: I would present and add it to my resume. However, after thinking about the workshop, the participants and the outcome, I now feel that I also developed as a teacher because I was able to walk out of my workshop with constructive feedback on how I could improve my classes and make my activities more suitable for my students.

Conclusion

The LD SIG 20th Anniversary Grant gave me the opportunity to attend the conference, meet many other likeminded and inspirational teachers and present on a topic that I hope will help further learner autonomy in Japan. Without the grant, I would simply not have had the opportunity to attend. Non-tenure university teachers certainly

feel the “publish or perish” pressure when calls for conference papers and presentations are posted. Teachers in such positions certainly have the desire and need to attend and present but many do not have the research budget or support that gives them the chance to do so. To have grants available to educators like myself is fantastic grassroots support for the teaching community. Many in the past have benefitted from this grant in terms of professional development and teacher development. I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to be awarded with one this year and hope that the system of grants continues in the future.

Report on LDSIG Conference 2013



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Twenty. To many, it is not just a number: it signifies a major turning point. For many Japanese, for example, this number represents the age –celebrated on Coming of Age Day—from which they are recognized as full-fledged adults. Similarly, in the case of the Learner Development SIG, or LD SIG, this number represents a milestone for the association. As a result, it serves as the right time to look back at what the organization has achieved in the past, what it is doing now, and what the future of the SIG will bring. In this article, I will summarize several sessions that I attended –the plenary talks as well as some of the non-plenary ones (e.g. discussion/workshops, poster presentations, our

share/demonstrations, short papers/talks) –given at the 20th anniversary conference based on this timeline, and then reflect on what these talks have meant to me, my development as a teacher and/or my understanding of (learner/teacher) autonomy.

Looking back at the development of the LD SIG over the last two decades was the main focus of the first plenary talk, given by Richard Smith. As a founder of the SIG, Richard was able to offer firsthand, valuable insights into its growth and importance over the years. This was done by stating what learner development has meant to those within the organization, and by charting the highlights of the SIG from its early beginnings. As for the former, Mr. Smith pointed out that it has always been hard to precisely define the term learner development, but it has come to mean something akin to a sharing of ideas among teachers and empowerment of students to learn for themselves. As for the latter, Richard took time to give an overview of the milestones from its origins in the 1990s, remarking upon noteworthy conferences/workshops that led to the publication of the *Learning Learning* newsletter and an appreciation of learner autonomy in the JALT community, as well as major books on autonomy from the SIG that have since become landmark publications in the field. What resulted from all these departments, he noted, was a group that has become more inclusive and focused on teacher exploration and learner empowerment.

In reflecting on Richard’s talk, what struck me was both a consistent, important message within the SIG over the years and the sense of a continually growing and relevant organization. In terms of the message, Richard pointed out that learner development within the SIG organization has always been seen as an indefinable but empowering process. In a way, this resonated with me. It did so because I have come to believe that by

giving students more responsibility in their learning and allowing them to tackle tasks through trial and error, students will be more willing to improve their language skills and take more control over their learning. In terms of the organization, Richard made an effort to outline the growth and importance of the SIG by pointing out the four anthologies of work by SIG members, and by noting the SIG's ideal of inclusiveness. This was gratifying to me, as it confirmed and legitimized the relevance of learner autonomy in my own classwork. It was further gratifying because it meant that the group has been a forum in which instructors, both Japanese and native English, can share ideas.

Turning to the present, the second plenary speaker, Naoko Aoki, focused on teacher autonomy and the concept of narrative inquiry. In her talk, Naoko indicated that our teaching jobs are full of daily uncertainties, so we outwardly pretend to be certain about things and sometimes make up cover stories for others to hear. As a result, the genuine stories (referred to in this talk as “secret stories”) of teachers and their lives are untold. What Naoko did during the talk, therefore, was to get teachers in small groups to tell their real stories—in a “safe place”, as she put it—where secret stories are usually told. Each member of each group told a secret story, and then the other members were asked to jot down the key points of each story, from which a web or tree showing possible connections was made. By the end of the talk, Naoko suggested that such stories are important in discovering one's identity and in helping to spark insight into the contradictions between “official discourses” about work and the practices that go on there and the way we really feel about them.

Reflecting on her talk made me think about the importance of narrative inquiry, or “the study

of experience as story” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375), in professional development. At first glance, it may seem that when teachers are recounting experiences to each other there may be no links among them. Yet, the point of Naoko's exercise was to make us realize that while we teachers may feel there are difficult or unpleasant experiences that no one else understands the relating of our stories helps spark similar stories in our listeners. But, upon deeper reflection, the question is as follows: Does such inquiry help teacher development? I say yes, as it makes teachers question what they truly know and feel about things, as well as recognize how and what they are teaching to students. Further, teachers can carefully evaluate not only their own teaching style but also the teaching beliefs of other teachers, as well. As a result, this inquiry encourages teachers like me to consider and develop alternative tasks for learners. It may lead through trial and error to failure at times, but it can also foster the personal and professional growth of teachers. Therefore, I see narrative inquiry as a useful tool for teacher empowerment, as it encourages teachers to justify and/or rethink their working practices.

Looking both at the present (and ahead) at the state of English education in Japan was an important aspect of the final plenary talk, given by Professor Kensaku Yoshida. Kensaku's talk focused on the state of English education in Japan at present and looked ahead to the future. He began by explaining that over the past few years there has been a dramatic decrease in student TOEFL scores and in both their attitudes to the usefulness of English and their willingness to study overseas. This led to a discussion on the reexamination of the dominance of the native-speaker model as the ideal for learners and the concept of plurilingualism. He promoted this concept (as well as a set of “can do criteria”) because he felt it allowed Japanese

students, like those in Europe, to have a greater exposure to non-native varieties of English, to develop at their own pace, and to logically express ideas and persuade others. In moving students away from the goal of speaking exactly like a native speaker, Kensaku felt that students would be more encouraged to continue their studies and improve their proficiency.

Yet, is the concept of plurilingualism (plurilingualism?) a viable alternative to the goal of native English-like proficiency by Japanese learners? Perhaps the answer may be found in what the concept means. Plurilingualistic (Plurilingual?) competence “does not mean that students cannot produce standard language for formal production”. (Canagarajah, 2009, p. 20) It may mean, more broadly, that plurilingualistic (plurilingual?) students are able to deal with any task or situation in the moment. In switching from language to language, these students strategically employ a number of strategies that they have developed within those languages in order to negotiate meaning and the exchange between speakers. (Coste, Moore & Zarate, 2009) In the end, then, they get their point across immediately and effectively. So, what can this mean for my own teaching? It would mean that the lesson should perhaps focus less intently on target language and more on open-ended discussion and conversation strategies (e.g. changing topics, developing a logical/persuasive argument). By doing so, students would be steered away from the goal of native English-like proficiency, and instead encouraged to focus on acquiring strategies which give them the linguistic resources they need to deal with a variety of social situations. If this interpretation is correct, it seems to me Ken's approach is a viable alternative, as it directs learners to focus realistically on what they are able

to do and not on what they are supposed to do or achieve.

Now, it could be argued that although the sessions which I attended differed in content, approach and pedagogy, they could be classified into the same three categories as the plenary speeches: looking back, looking at the present and looking ahead. First, in terms of looking back, John Bankier's session spent time examining how writing has been taught over the years to Junior High School and High School students in order to better explain the current views of Japanese university students on academic writing and what is perceived as a good writing style. As for the present, a number of talks that I attended focused on the use of current materials and technology. To give several examples, one discussion/workshop by Helen Hanae and Erina Ogawa dealt with the use of comics and graphic novels in the classroom; another (poster) presentation by Ben Rowlett concentrated on recent films/film themes and the use of tablets for students to make and collaborate on their own films; and finally, there was a talk by Peter Voller which focused on a recently-created online booking system to allow for peer tutoring. Lastly, with regards to looking ahead, there were a number of sessions which concerned language learners and the future of language learning. For instance, one session by Kevin Ryan talked about an upcoming online magazine which aims to explore various multimedia issues and tools to help learners improve their proficiency.

Thinking back on the non-plenary talks that I saw, I was not only impressed by the abundance of ideas presented but also by the way in which the various different talks added depth to the concept of learner autonomy. Indeed, the talks which I attended put the learners in an active role to put forth new, creative ideas or ways so as to reconstruct knowledge from others in order to

better understand the world around them (Barfield, 2012). Let me explain my point with several example sessions. One presentation outlined how students were told to make a short film but it was up to the learners/filmmakers themselves to interpret through film how they perceived or understood a particular theme, language phrase, etc. In another presentation/workshop, learners were given the chance to make their own comics to explain past and present events, cultural situations/language, etc. To me, these talks focused on learner-directed tasks, which force the learner to be more active and critical of their learning process and content (Little, 2007). So, what can I take away from this? Upon reflection, I feel it is important not to impose my views or expectations on how students come to know an idea or language item. I would rather have the students reshape the language to suit them, not me. Therefore, as long as learners understand the meaning and context of particular language items, the tasks incorporating that language should be open-ended to allow for individual interpretation.

In conclusion, the LD-SIG anniversary conference was a success because it represented well, and reflected on, the important milestone of the organization. More importantly, it shed light through various talks, workshops, demonstrations, etc. on the continuing relevance of autonomy (e.g. in or out of the classroom, using technology-led instruction or not), and on how autonomy-led instruction has given learners more flexibility, options and opportunities to direct their own learning. Being a new member of this association and a proponent of learner autonomy, I was happy to learn more about the organization and attend so many interesting and autonomy-related talks, the activities and ideas from which I have been eager to share with my fellow instructors. It is, therefore, my sincere hope that the organization continues to

flourish and promote autonomy in new and interesting ways so that the group's existence remains relevant.

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A student's perspective on JALT 2013



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Participating in the 2013 JALT national conference was a very meaningful experience for me. I am grateful to the LD SIG for giving me the opportunity to go to it. Awarding a grant to a student like me provides someone with the means to attend an event like this and the opportunity to meet and interact with a number of people that I couldn't have otherwise. My initial purpose for attending the conference was to give a poster presentation with my co-presenter, Yuki Ide, at the LD forum; however, the experience was valuable to me in so many other ways. I would like to outline my reflections on the experience and explain what I believe a student can gain from, as well as contribute to a conference like JALT.

Currently, I am a senior student majoring in International Studies at Meisei University in Tokyo. This was my second time for me to attend the JALT national conference. The first time was when I went to the 2012 conference in Hamamatsu as a student volunteer. This time I was there in Kobe as a presenter. Together with Yuki Ide, another Meisei student, I was to give a presentation, titled "From Language Learner to Language User" at the LD SIG forum. Transitioning from student volunteer to presenter was interesting for me since those two roles are

very different. When being a volunteer, being active to support the conference was what was required. I was able to meet and talk to students, who like me, had a passion for learning English. This year, however, I interacted more with other participants. As a participant myself, I could freely go and listen to presentations that I was interested in, which was not possible as a volunteer because I was restricted by my duties. Both experiences were extremely valuable to me in different ways, and I am very proud to have made the big step from volunteer to presenter.

Prior to the conference, I was concentrating mainly on making a successful presentation, but upon reflection, I can see that one of the most significant results of the experience for me was what I gained from interacting with other presenters and attendees. At JALT, there were many situations where I could communicate with people, such as, for example, during question time after our presentation, when we went to listen to other presentations, and when we met participants at lunch.

I was pleased to see that the atmosphere at the LD SIG forum was more relaxed than at some of the more formal presentations that I attended. This created an environment that fostered free and open discussion, which I feel is ideal for sharing ideas. Around ten people came to listen to our presentation--all of them university teachers, including some teachers from my own university. As students, it was a daunting task to present to a group of university teachers, in the language that they teach, but I felt very comfortable and welcomed by them. As Yuki and I were the only students at the forum, some people took an interest in what we had to say. At university, teachers and students have a relationship of teaching and learning. There may not be many chances for students to speak to teachers and express our

thoughts and feelings. Therefore, making a presentation in front of a number of teachers gave them an opportunity to hear students' perspectives, and put us in a position where the teachers listen to what we have to say, rather than the other way around! I thought that the sharing of opinions between teachers and students was good for both sides. The ideas which were exchanged will hopefully be applied at their and our own universities to positively influence other students and teachers.

At the end of the forum, during a reflection session, I got to talk to other participants. One of them was at our presentation. He told me that in the seminar he teaches at his university his students usually have trouble deciding on a theme for their thesis. He asked me for my advice, and I told him about the seminar that I belong to at my university and how we decided the topics. As mentioned above, exchanging opinions between teachers and students is not likely to happen much at university. Nor is there much opportunity for me to talk with teachers from other universities. I hope that our discussion meant something to him which he can take back to his teaching context, and that this in turn will help his students. I believe it is this cycle of student-teacher interaction that makes the inclusion of students at such events so valuable.

At JALT, Yuki and I went to see many presentations. After we finished listening to each presentation, we discussed what we heard and shared our opinions about them. Almost all of the presentations were intended for an audience of teachers. Nevertheless, some presentations were of interest to me, such as one about high frequency collocations that are useful for students to learn, and English as a Lingua Franca, which is the topic of my graduation thesis. On the other hand, my presentation partner, Yuki, was interested in presentations about teaching because he wants to

be an English teacher after he graduates. He and I went to see some presentations such as 'How to Get Your Students to Like Your Class' by Richard Bailey. I learned a lot by watching other people's presentations. In the past I have watched many presentations by my fellow students, but I have not had a lot of opportunities to watch people giving presentations outside of a university context. It was interesting to see a number of presentations with different styles of speech, design, format, and body language. All of this made JALT fascinating, even for students.

Going to JALT as a student was great in terms of learning English because it was an opportunity to practice the language outside university. It is no longer just learning it but using it as well, which is exactly what our presentation was about. Though most students just learn English in class, actually using English for a purpose lets us apply the language to real situations. I personally believe that this is a really important aspect of learning. Also, many students do not get a chance to present their ideas outside university. In our presentation, we highlighted some key experiences that we believe are turning points in terms of learning English. Such experiences allow us to learn something important and even cause a shift in our identities as learners. The JALT conference became one of these key experiences which I may also look back on as a turning point.

I am certain that my experience at JALT will help me a lot going forward. In fact, about one month after I went to JALT in October, I gave a presentation about my graduation research at another conference in Romania. Thanks to the experience in JALT, I felt confident enough to do it well. I am sure that it will help me on other occasions also. Again, I am very thankful to the LD SIG for granting me such a great opportunity.

Different perspectives on JALT2013 national conference



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I was fortunate and honoured to be awarded one of the Learner Development SIG's grants of 40,000 yen to attend the national JALT2013 conference in Kobe. First I'd like to take this opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to the SIG for this crucial support. Including travel, accommodation, food, and membership renewals, the conference weekend cost me close to 60,000 yen. For those of us with no institutional support, these grants really provide much needed assistance to participate in events that may otherwise lie financially out of reach. As readers may know, JALT2013 was soon followed by the Learner Development 20th Anniversary conference, for which I was a member of the organizing committee. The various positions I adopted within these two very different conferences led me to consider this question: *what makes a successful conference?* I would like to share with LD members some of these reflections from the perspective of conference goers, conference organizers, and presenters. I hope that these contemplations may prove useful for both readers and my future self, when it comes to attending, organizing or presenting at conferences.

Conference goers:

To begin with is the element of chance, or the value of *random*, which should not be underestimated. Although I'd *really* planned on having a plan, when the JALT2013 conference kicked off, the only

plan I'd succeeded with was having a two litre bottle of water in my backpack. I didn't know what presentations to watch, or what strategy would help me gain the most out of the conference; perhaps this is a skill that comes with conference experience, perhaps not. But from my experience, chance plays a huge role. For example, I was much more likely to watch a presentation in room 206 at 3:30, if I had just attended a presentation along the corridor in room 203 at 3 o'clock. If a presentation is scheduled in the last time slot of the day, it's highly likely the audience will be dwindling before they even arrive. Consequently they may never arrive at all. This is neither a reflection of the importance of the presentation topic nor the qualities of the presenter, and if I ever deliver a presentation at such a time, I'll be wise to remember that. Next is the chance of *where* you are. You never know who you may find yourself sitting near to, standing in line in front of, walking along with, or listening to a poster presentation next to. Chance knows no boundaries, and offers us these opportunities to connect with a whole array of people from all different backgrounds and from all walks of life. One of my favourite moments in the conference was immediately *after* a plenary speaker, when it was announced that the next presentations were scheduled to start in an hour's time – I breathed an enormous sigh of relief! Free time is of absolute importance in conference planning, as it allows us to visit people or groups who are present at the conference, but do not have a designated time slot. Free time maximizes the chance of chance, and who knows where that may lead us?

Conference organizers

Now let's change to the perspective of organizers and the importance of having a *lure*. At any one time in a conference, there is simply so much going on that strategic use of carrots dangling on sticks

can really pay dividends. For all the talk of higher order thinking skills, we conference participants are ultimately governed by very primal instincts. Therefore, the simplest, most effective, and timeless lure of all is, of course, *food*. Unscientific research (by myself) has proven that within the SIG area of a JALT conference, SIGs who have their table closer to the refreshments have up to eight times more visitors than those SIGs whose tables are situated at the end furthest away from the food. If you have any say in where your table or stand is located, veer towards the food. Those left manning the table will be happy to be conveniently located so close to the option of a cup of coffee and cake. Lures can come in all shapes and sizes, as demonstrated by Nellie's Books, who offered the chance to win an iPad-mini. All you had to do was to complete a slip of paper and give it to them – ingenious! The lure of the odd free book simply doesn't cut it at an event alongside numerous publishers from all over Japan and around the world, and I doubt I'd have visited the lovely people at Nellie's Books were it not for their cunning technology temptation. I attended the opening party on Friday based upon the rumour that food and drink may be provided – they really did ensnare me with a stick of carrot! Lures can be used to great advantage.

Presenters

Moving onto presenters, and importantly, the *quality of presenters* which will clearly have a major impact on participant satisfaction of the conference overall. I was generally very satisfied with the plenary speakers at JALT2013, in particular, Penny Ur and Keith Folse. I tried to think of the reasons why I enjoyed their presentations and felt so inspired by them. Penny Ur had a fantastic presence, warmly strong and clearly in control. She genuinely empathized with her audience, telling us

that her slides would be made available online so there was no need to make notes, clarifying that she was happy to have participants ask questions, and interrupting herself to invite those people standing to come and find a seat. What simple and considerate gestures, yet such a rare occurrence that I found them remarkable! Also, high-quality presentations use personal stories, which are frequently the best way of making a main point unforgettable. I can still clearly remember Keith Folse's story about the "Losing a ticket on the shinkansen" role-play, which he used to highlight the importance of *transference*, and how the activities we do in class should be as close as possible to the activity students will actually have to accomplish. Furthermore, I know I am not alone in preferring presenters who make the audience do a little bit of work but not too much! Asking the audience to complete a simple task, or to discuss a particular question, or share stories is an excellent way to - let's be honest here - make sure they are awake! That said, I believe it is important to strike a balance between audience participation and making the audience feel like they're doing too much work. Ultimately, the audience is hoping to learn something from the presenter, so I prefer presenters who make use of interaction and keep the audience active, but are also considerate and don't require the audience to do all the problem-solving on the presenter's behalf. What's more, conference participants are probably tired and suffering from information overload, with their brain power reduced in direct correlation to the percentage of conference time elapsed. Therefore, a normally simple task may well require the brain power of three or four heads in any presentation late in the day or on a Sunday. Thoughtful presenters take care of their audience, and audiences that feel taken care of are more likely to have a fulfilling conference.

All together

Finally, the most important factor for a successful conference is *people*. The value of a conference is derived solely from all the people involved. From organizers to student volunteers, first-time attendees to featured plenary speakers, the conference becomes greater than the sum of its individual parts. There are numerous opportunities to meet many fantastic people, so we shouldn't hesitate to chat and share a business card or three. Since effective presenters often ask the audience to complete a task with those sitting nearby, the ice is already broken between people who were strangers just a few moments ago. It's also really worth making time to speak to the volunteers, who are always keen to speak with conference participants and are some of the warmest and friendliest people around. One volunteer saw me alone, rehearsing my poem in my head like a mad lady. She asked me what I was doing, and proceeded to offer me countless smiles and positive words of encouragement. Also, as previously discussed, people always congregate near food. Like Omar Khayyam said, "A loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou." Various parties take place during the course of the conference. Not only can we relax and find nourishment, we can also pretend to switch off and imagine that we are no longer a teacher-geek, while clearly continuing to discuss geeky teacher matters in a more informal context. We can talk while walking, speak while sitting, and even converse while eating if deemed appropriate. Conferences and their accompanying social events are unique in their capacity to bring together such a wide range of people and have them share and create experiences together. Ultimately it is each of *us* who make the conference what it is.

To conclude, conferences are subject to the

laws of chance, influenced by basic instincts like hunger and fatigue, and are buoyed by the quality of presenters. Most importantly, it is every single person and their individual contributions that together create a successful conference, and I am extremely grateful that the Learner Development SIG provided me with the support to allow me to be part of JALT2013.

Autonomous learning and intercultural communication: discoveries and perspectives

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"I now realize that being a successful and confident language user means more than being in the right environment. It means being

willing and able to try to construct a new identity and to be able to look at target and native cultures with different eyes." (a student's commentary from Palfreyman, D. & Smith, R., *Learning Autonomy Across Cultures*, 2003, p.36)

I often find myself feeling frustrated in my EFL classes; coaxing Japanese students to try and express their opinions, initiate discussion and debate, and collaborate with fellow students. For my students, I could imagine them feeling very frustrated and discouraged to try to meet the high expectations of their native-English teacher, feeling

inadequate and insecure due to the lack of the 'know-how' and tools to help them accomplish the tasks that are expected of them. As for me, an EFL instructor, I need to remind myself regularly *who* in fact I am teaching in my classroom, and make sure I am striving to teach students the skills they need in order for them to be able to actually do the tasks I set out for them. In doing so, I must teach them how to be learner autonomous, as for some students, they do not know how, nor even know why, it is important for them to be responsible for their own learning. Many instructors of EFL believe that teaching students 21st century skills will help make students autonomous learners. I agree with this; however, I think that is only half of the battle. Not only do our students need to learn 21st century skills, they also need to have opportunities to authentically use these important "soft skills" with people from different countries, cultures and backgrounds. 'The ability to work effectively and creatively with team members and classmates regardless of differences in culture and style is an essential 21st century life skill. Understanding and accommodating cultural and social differences, and using these differences to come up with even more creative ideas and solutions to problems, will be increasingly important throughout our century' (Trilling & Fadel, 2009, p.80).

I believe that it is important for students to know how to be responsible for their own learning, not only inside but outside of the classroom, after the completion of their formal education and throughout the rest of their lives. In this article, I will briefly discuss issues regarding Japanese students' difficulty in acquiring learner autonomy and introduce and briefly analyze some results of my research, which I conducted on students' learning experiences in learning together with international students in the classroom. I will

then conclude by giving suggestions on how to encourage learner autonomy through cross-cultural interaction in the classroom.

Definitions of autonomous learning

Autonomy in learning has been defined and described in a variety of different ways (see Rivers, 1975; Holec, 1981; Benson, 2006; Littlewood, 2009) but have the same fundamental features: taking responsibility for one's own learning; the capacity to communicate without the control and support of a teacher; and a proactive action where learners take charge of their own learning, determine their objectives, select methods and techniques and evaluate what has been acquired. As for my personal definition of autonomy in learning, both for fundamental learning and language learning, it is taking responsibility and control of one's individual learning, and making use of one's present abilities, skills, knowledge and motivation to improve one's communicative competence.

Learner autonomy and Japanese students

The majority of classrooms in Japan still adopt the traditional "teacher-centered approach", where authority belongs to the teacher, the one active entity in the classroom. The role of the student in most cases is a passive one. It is perceived as normal for Japanese students to be "spoon-fed" in the learning process; not speak, but listen and therefore assume that this is their role as a learner. The majority of classrooms in Japanese universities may be criticized as places where most of the students are a homogeneous, unified and collective cultural group; it is difficult to become an individual instead of being part of the collective. The characteristics of the collectivist, passive, teacher-dependent Japanese learner (Littlewood, 1999) may strongly inhibit them from being able to take responsibility for their own individual

learning, or even learning why it is important to be an autonomous learner. Due to traditional methods and attitudes of classroom learning in Japan, students are taught that it is the “teacher” who is solely responsible for their learning, and not the “student”. This attitude is also a result of socio-cultural influences in the traditional learning environment in Japan. Many people believe that autonomous learning is more of a ‘Western’ approach to learning and not usually something practiced in the East.

Many Japanese students are not aware that being autonomous in one’s learning is a vital 21st century skill in itself. Students do not get enough practice in utilizing these skills in the classroom such as problem-solving, critical thinking, collaborative learning, self-initiated knowledge acquisition or decision making. Japanese students lack not only communicative competence (CC) but intercultural communicative competence (ICC), due to lack of exposure to communication opportunities; chances to interact, talk and learn with students from different countries and cultural backgrounds. Most Japanese university classroom environments are not set up to support autonomous learning, as most classroom dynamics do not encourage or invite a venue for debate, argument, disagreement, dispute, or difference. These things may be seen as “taboo” in the traditional classroom in Japan, especially if the student is the instigator of such acts.

Learning together with international students

Learning together with international students can provide Japanese students with the opportunity to observe how students from different countries and cultures learn in the classroom. Students from Western and other English-speaking countries are more accustomed to asking questions, giving their

own individual opinions, questioning the opinions of other students and the teacher, disagreeing with other students and the teacher on their opinions, and taking initiative to speak out and express ideas. Exposure to this type of student-centered, proactive learning may engage Japanese students to take risks and try to become more active in their language learning.

Learning with international students may make some Japanese students feel more comfortable and relaxed, and as a result, making them feel that they have somehow been given permission by their peers to speak freely, disagree and debate in the classroom. The international student dynamic in the classroom can motivate and encourage Japanese students to engage, discuss and share their individual ideas and opinions with their classmates. Having non-Japanese students in the classroom may change classroom dynamics to promote a more positive, interactive and communicative atmosphere in the classroom. Moreover, learning with international students can make Japanese students discover more about the world around them, as well as discover and better understand their own identity and background. They can also come to understand why being responsible for their own learning is so important in order to function outside of a familiar, monocultural environment.

Student views on autonomy and intercultural learning

In order to find out what Japanese students think about autonomy in their learning and their opinions and personal experiences in intercultural learning, I collected students’ views in two different ways: 1) a student questionnaire 2) a short essay. The students from whom I collected my data were undergraduate students studying at a private university located in the Kansai region of Japan.

The students were enrolled in the Faculties of Business Administration, Economics and Engineering.

Student Survey

I conducted a survey on the topic of Japanese university students' attitudes on learning together with international students in the classroom. A total of 90 undergraduate students answered the questionnaire. It asked mainly multiple-choice questions, offering at least four choices of answers per question. Some questions asked for further comments and details regarding the answer that they selected. Some responses in particular which I felt were significant to this study on Japanese students' attitudes towards their learning will be briefly analyzed below.

One question that was asked was, "Do you enjoy learning together with international students"? Most students (73%) who answered the questionnaire replied with "yes". When asked why, students replied with different answers:

"It is easier to say my opinion in class when another student else says theirs first".

"It makes the class more interesting and fun".

"It is more challenging and exciting when international students are in the class".

These replies may suggest that Japanese students enjoy having some sort of interaction with foreign students both in and out of the classroom setting. They become educationally stimulated and are engaged to try learning new and different things. Japanese may be more open and prone to changing themselves and their learning habits if they see it from an "outside" of their own cultural community, where they do not feel threatened or negatively judged as the student who is enacting change or difference. As for the remaining students (27%) who replied with "no", their answers are below:

"I don't feel confident speaking English with international students".

"I would feel uncomfortable learning together with international students in the classroom".

"I don't have the opportunity to take classes with international students".

These comments may be interpreted as suggesting that many Japanese students are not motivated to practice their English, are not confident in communicating with foreign students, and have little exposure and opportunity to interact and speak with non-Japanese students both inside and outside the classroom.

Another question which resulted in some interesting responses was, "How does learning with international students in the classroom make you feel?" The responses were as follows: 40% motivated; 20% happy; 25% excited; 4% stressed and pressured; 2% nervous; 8% other (relaxed, self-conscious, depressed, irritated, don't know)

As you can see from the above percentages, the largest proportion of students (40%) felt motivated when learning with international students in the classroom. With approximately 70% of students feeling positive in some way when learning with international students in the classroom, this may suggest again that students gain increased motivation and positivity when given a chance to learn with a different dynamic, in a different environment.

When students were asked, "Do you try to say your opinion in class?", 63% of the students answered "yes", whereas 37 % who answered "no". When asked the reasons why they responded "no", they replied:

I'm too shy; It's too difficult; I don't think that I'm smart enough; I don't have anything interesting to say; I'm worried how other

students will think of me;

I'm worried how the teacher will think of me; I'm too scared to speak in front of others.

These reasons may suggest that Japanese students lack self-confidence, and they worry too much about what other students think or might think of them if they say their opinion. This also comes back to the Japanese students' traditional way of learning in being used to being passive and not knowing how to be proactive. Many Japanese students may not be given enough opportunities to practice expressing their opinions in the classroom. They may have a fear of being seen as the "other" or "different" and will not take risks. Due to the lack of practicing risk-taking skills in the classroom, many Japanese students lack confidence and are afraid to make mistakes. Since many Japanese students have a fear of being questioned or rejected by the teachers and their peers, in order to avoid this, they remain silent and find comfort and safety in taking on the passive role in their learning.

When students were asked if they agreed with the following statement: "There should be more university courses offered to Japanese students to learn together with international students", a majority of students (87%) agreed, 8% of students disagreed, and another 8 % of students replied with "I don't know". As for the 84 %, this may suggest that Japanese students are realizing why learning with international students is important and as a result, want to continue 21st century learning in the classroom, practicing skills such as communicative competence, collaboration, problem-solving and risk taking.

Course Completion Essay

I taught an undergraduate elective course called "Culture and Comparison", which was a course that focused on discussing different cultures and

current global issues. Topics such as culture and language, nationality and identity, gender and media were discussed, and debated throughout the course. As the class in the particular year and semester that I taught was comprised of approximately 50% Japanese domestic students and 50% international students (comprised of students from France, Sweden, Russia, China and the United States), I had to make sure that I conducted the class both in Japanese and English, as there was no set English proficiency prerequisite for taking the course. In the first class, the Japanese students and international students were sitting on opposite sides of the classroom. While the international students were talking English amongst themselves, the Japanese students sat silent in their seats and waited for me to instruct them. I began the class by introducing myself and then asked each person to briefly introduce themselves, giving them no real instructions as to how go about this task. The international students were quick on their feet to stand up and introduce themselves both in English and Japanese with ease. After directing each Japanese student to do their introduction, many students shyly asked me exactly what they should say and in what order to say it before beginning to speak. After the first class, three Japanese students withdrew from the course, possibly due to a number of reasons. Perhaps they felt their English proficiency was inferior and inadequate to other students, or that they didn't feel comfortable with the style of learning in the course. Their lack of intercultural communication competence might also have been a primary factor in dropping the class. This course was especially challenging for the Japanese students for several reasons. Japanese students had to get used to a student-centered style of learning where each class was focusing on group discussion, debate and presentations. They were

constantly thinking and being asked their opinions by other students. They had to explain reasons for their thinking. Students also had to prepare questions and offer comments on other students' opinions. The course demanded each student to be a proactive member in the class, having no time for passivity. At the end of the course, I asked students to write a short essay about what things that they had learned in this class. Below are some excerpts from some of the Japanese students' essays:

"I frequently hear that Japanese students are shy when doing discussion, and I found this out when I first attended this class. I wanted to take part in discussion, and I thought about it over and over again, but I didn't know what to say. That is why I am disappointed with my attitude when doing discussion, not in my English ability."

"I learned about how to 'really communicate'."

"I feel that I gained a lot more knowledge than my other university lectures, where we listen to the professor who sits down in a chair and talks the whole class. In this class, the teacher and international students encouraged me to join the class and study together actively."

"If I didn't take this class, my thinking would not have changed about English. English is not difficult. It is not so important to speak perfect English fluently. English is a communication tool. Don't be afraid to make mistakes".

"I had the chance to understand who I am as a Japanese and how I behave as a student."

"I learned that the most important thing in class to try to communicate and express your opinion, not about how well you speak English."

"After I had the chance to be the leader of my group, I realized that I had been very passive in doing group work...however, I found that if I join the discussion more positively as a leader, I can gain more meaningful things in class. Since then, I try to speak first and raise a question in group discussion."

The Japanese students who participated

in the intercultural communication course together with international students exhibited the following:

- improved communicative competence (CC)
- acquired intercultural communicative competence (ICC)
- improved and increased cultural awareness and sensitivity
- gained confidence not only linguistically, but built up their self-confidence, self-esteem, and were able to express their opinions to other members of the group, whether they agreed with them or not
- became more aware of their own identity and background
- became risk-takers in their learning

Encouraging learner autonomy in the classroom

As for some suggestions on how to encourage learner autonomy in the classroom, the teacher must first choose culture and language learning tasks where students must:

- think of how to initiate and encourage conversation with other classmates
- interact and communicate with other students (intercultural communication activities as warm ups, group discussion, group presentations)
- express individual and unique opinions, point out differences in opinions and encourage debate (do role play activities, mini-debate activities)
- assign leadership roles for each group (best to have no more than 3-4 students in one group). For example, designate an international student as the group leader who can demonstrate a good example of how to lead a group in discussion, with the Japanese students learning from that student in observing how to lead the group in discussion, etc. Then the next time, get a Japanese student to try leading the group.
- create a classroom environment where students

feel comfortable to disagree, debate and express individuality without fear of exclusion or rejection from the group.

- create a learning environment where students feel comfortable making linguistic mistakes (in speaking and writing) and reinforce that, communication and interaction is the goal, not accuracy in speaking or writing.
- promote and scaffold the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) learning process, with the teacher helping, encouraging discussion, moderating and assisting when needed.
- encourage student-centered autonomous learning approach. Get students to talk and be the center of the learning.

Conclusion

This article attempted to briefly discuss the different perspectives of Japanese students' attitudes towards learning in an international class, and the author's discoveries in encouraging students to develop learner autonomy. Based on the results of the student survey and course feedback, it seems obvious that the majority of Japanese students who had come from a teacher-centered learning environment seem to prefer to learn in an intercultural, student-centered classroom. With an increased demand by both teachers and students in Japan to change the style of learning in the classroom and in order to prepare the next generation of world leaders to be able to function as global citizens, educators in Japan must encourage their institutions to develop curricula where student-centered learning and learner autonomy is strongly encouraged. One way to achieve this is to create more opportunities for domestic and international students to learn together in one classroom. Japanese students are not only able to practice their English skills with international students, but have the chance to use

their newly acquired 21st century skills in a unique classroom environment. This kind of collaborative learning is essential to improve Japanese students' communicative competence, and develop the skills that they require in order to function and succeed wherever they are in the world.

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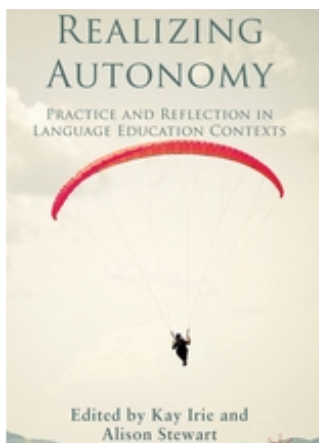
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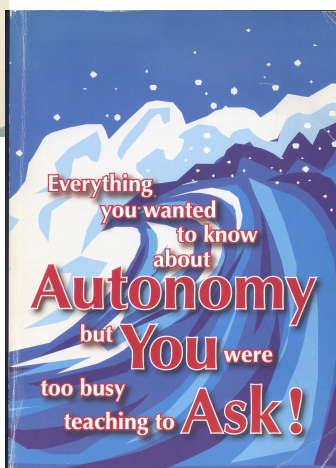


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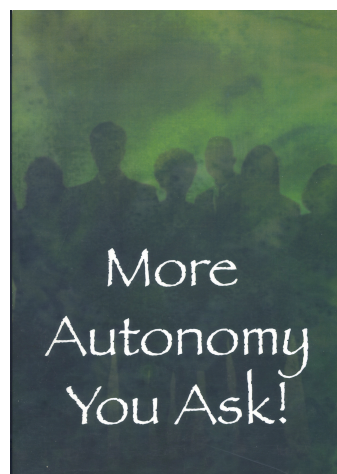
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