Interview
インタビュー

Interview with Alice Chik

Alison Stewart talks to Alice Chik from Macquarie University, Sydney about visualizing language learning, autonomy, multilingualism, and digital gaming.

Alison: As the LD SIG's sponsored Featured Speaker at the JALT2015 conference, you're going to be doing a talk and a workshop on Visualizing Language Learning. I wonder if you could start by telling us what's behind this line of research?

Alice: I guess it started with my PhD. I was interviewing students about their language learning at different stages of their life and I found that the students talked a lot about their lives outside the classroom and that got me interested. If you deconstruct their language learning histories, there is a lot of learner autonomy involved in different aspects at different times and different places. So that got me into learner autonomy.

Alison: So it was language learning histories that got you interested in learner autonomy,

not the other way round?

Alice: Right. Although I was a schoolteacher, I was not particularly interested in classroom-based research! I wanted to know what people do outside of classrooms and that's how I got into digital gaming and that's where some of my interests are now. You still have to convince parents that playing games is really good for their kids' language learning; it's kind of counter-intuitive to how people usually think about playing games. But if you look at how people use visual gaming, you can see their autonomy as a gamer leads them to improve their language, and they can get a lot of support online that parents probably don't know about. So it's quite fascinating.

Then with the idea of visualization, that comes from getting students to present their language learning history online where inevitably they start using visual features. So it's also interesting to look at the visual ideas and what they write.

Alison: I wonder if that means shifting learners' thinking about where learning is occurring. I've asked my students to write language learning histories and to illustrate them, but on the whole my learners tend to think of language learning as something that happens only in school. They don't tend to talk about other kinds of activities, if they do any. It's interesting that you've picked this out of learner histories.

Alice: I guess I was really fortunate because I was working with learners who were learners

of English as a Second Language. I think that's the difference. When students are learning English as a Foreign Language, I think they tend to be very classroom-based, so the kind of resources they look to, it's the teacher and the classroom that provide those. But when they're learning English as a second language, it's a lot more open. It might also have something to do with age. I'm working with a large range of ages. Like right now, I'm working with Primary 1 (6-year-old) students here in Sydney and they have a different view of language learning to Primary 5 (11-year-old) students, for example. Even when we're looking at young learners, whether they are learning it as a foreign language or as a second language immediately changes their perspective about their learning. For young learners it's easier to use the visual aspect to get at their thinking.

Alison: You say that visualizing learning is particularly good for young learners—why is it good for older learners?

Alice: I think it's more intuitive; you come to metaphor more quickly. With text, if you're trying to use an English metaphor you're trying to translate into that. It's very different with computer-mediated visualization. It's less direct and people tend to use cliché or stock photos to form their concept. But if you get them to draw, you come to a more emotional aspect. That's why older students—I've been doing this with Secondary 4 (15-year-old) students—they give you quite raw emotions of what learning a language is like—tortuous and difficult. There's also a movement nowadays to get people to write down their ideas rather than immediately go to tablet or computer to do that. It's based on cognitive science: if you use your motor skills, you can think more clearly and you get thinking more than if you type.

Alison: There's a connection I can see here with the work that our LD SIG member Darren Elliott (2015) has been doing recently on metaphor. He's been looking at the correspondence between learners' metaphor use and measures of autonomy based on Etsuko Shimo's (2008) and Fumiko Murase's (2015) questionnaires for assessing learner autonomy.

Alice: That would be interesting because the analysis part is quite difficult. Vera Menezes (2008) in Brazil has a group of students working on visual imagery or metaphor—how to analyse the image. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) are usually cited as a model for reading images and I find it difficult not to use their framework, especially in analyzing the whole picture. But at the same time, that model may not be appropriate because it assumes that the composition of meaning is very intentional, whereas perhaps that's not the case with learners.

Alison: You mean that some kind of meaning or realization emerges out of the act of composition?

Alice: Yes, that's what Vera says. And it's not just drawing, but in the combination of drawing and talking about your drawing where another layer of understanding can emerge.

Alison: That idea of self-understanding for me touches on the area of identity, something I'm very interested in, and something you've also addressed explicitly in some of your work. I've just reread the chapter by Nunan and Choi (2010) where you talk about being a Shanghainese living in Hong Kong, where you were living up until you moved to Sydney just last year. I wonder how your move to Australia has influenced your thinking about identity, particularly multiculturalism and multilingualism?

Alice: It's something people don't talk about very much in Hong Kong, the fact that there are all these different dialects of Chinese, or how people preserve their heritage languages, or how people feel about having heritage languages that don't equate to the language spoken in those regions. That situation is probably quite applicable here in Sydney too, or in any multilingual city.

One thing that we enjoy doing is visiting different neighborhoods in Sydney—Little Italy, Little Chinatown. When you're in Little Italy, just two blocks of streets, you only hear Italian. If you walk outside those two blocks, it's only English. You have Italian people stopping and talking to each other in Italian and shops selling only Italian goods. But if you grew up in a place like this, if you grew up in Sydney as an Italian, if you go to Italy, you may find it very strange. But here in Sydney, unlike in Hong Kong, it's normal that you are bilingual and that you speak a different dialect.

Alison: This idea of a multilingual society is becoming more relevant or more prominent, isn't it? I noticed an announcement recently for a conference titled "Shaping the Multilingual Society". I wonder what you think that might mean in practice?

Alice: Actually, that's my next project. Looking at multilingual suburbs in Sydney. Officially in New South Wales, we have a multicultural policy, but we don't have a multilingual policy. A multicultural policy is seen as an inclusive thing, like everyone celebrating and enjoying different cultures. But if they start talking about multilingual policy, nobody can agree on it. The NSW government for example doesn't have the resources to support heritage language education. The principals of heritage language schools complain about how hard it is to run their classes. These classes have to be conducted on public school premises at the weekends, but they aren't allowed to use the facilities, sometimes not even the bathroom; there is a whiteboard, but they have to bring their own pens. So what does that mean? It's not really up to the government; it's up to the community to keep it together. So it's these areas, these two blocks like Little Italy where you keep the language alive.

Alison: But it's interesting that it's only two streets, like some kind of ghettoization. And then Italian doesn't have any impact anywhere else. So being bilingual doesn't really give people any particular advantage, does it?

Alice: The most popular foreign languages in Australia are Japanese and French. Only 10% of the people take the language test at the end of secondary school, whereas the biggest language groups are Chinese and Arabic. So the people who already speak those languages aren't taking the tests, and other people aren't studying those languages. So that can be a problem. They tried to introduce Indonesian but it failed miserably. They made several attempts, but there was just no interest, even though Bali is the most popular destination for Australians.

Alison: I guess the Balinese are all speaking English. Thinking about multilingualism in the Japanese context, Japan is still unlike places like Hong Kong or Sydney, even though diversity is increasing. Bringing our conversation back to how all this might relate to JALT members, and to the subject of out-of-class learning that we talked about at first, what lessons are there in your research for language teachers and learners?

Alice: It's interesting because nowadays, to be blunt, a lot of foreign language learning is already moving online. Learning a language is particularly do-able at a beginners level. If

we're looking at online platforms, they're quite well developed and they're quite effective. With two or three months of Duolingo, or Rosetta Stone, you can have a basic idea. But then you get stuck. When you've done three months online and you finish the units, that's where the foreign language teachers will be extremely helpful. A lot of the online resources are still the traditional audiolingual type. That's where human interaction is important. I have a small project with some other language learners using free online resources. Once we get past the beginners level, that's where learner autonomy comes in. I finished my Teach Yourself German book but what do I do next? Like going onto chat groups is a bit daunting. So this is where strategies are useful to help the learner to think how they can apply what they learn in the classroom to real-life situations.

Alison: But that envisages a very particular language class and teaching philosophy. It's not a traditional role, is it? It's more a learning advisor role.

Alice: Language teachers need to be more aware of the advising role. Teaching and advising are often seen as separate roles. Teachers do language work in the classroom, and language advisors focus on out-of-class learning. But if you integrate the two, what are the possibilities? Language teachers have to use their own imagination. Would you consider using video games to learn Japanese? A lot of young people are playing video games, so if teachers want to know more about what learners actually do, then...

Alison: Does that mean I have to go and experience these video games as well?

Alice: Maybe. You may get addicted, be warned! You don't have to play all kinds of games, but nowadays it's difficult to find a person who has never played a video game.

Alison: Yes, but there are lots of games that have a very limited, or very restricted language use, aren't there?

Alice: You mean casual games like Farmville or even Candy Crush where you have very limited language use? Strangely, not necessarily the game itself, but there are lots of language-related activities around the game. With Candy Crush, the most annoying thing is you get stuck at a level, and you need a walk-through, you need someone to help you past that level. It could be just searching for those posts in different languages. So the game itself is very restrictive, but activities around the games can involve a lot of language use.

Alison: I guess that comes back to the mind shift, seeing games as much more than something that's just time-wasting, seeing where there can be a connection with language learning?

Alice: Particularly if we teachers are open to letting students teach us. The students know how to do it in some way but may not be doing it the most efficient way. They need some advice, so if language teachers hear what they are doing, if they hear their story, they can suggest new things. That's where teachers can help students to develop their autonomy.

References

Elliott, D. (2015). My teacher is a watering can: Metaphors and autonomous learning. Presented at the 48th annual meeting of the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL), Aston University, Birmingham, UK, September 4th, 2015. Accessed from http://www.livesofteachers.com/

Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Menezes, V. (2008). Multimedia language learning histories. In P. Kalaja, V. Menezes, & A.M.F. Barcelos (Eds.). *Narratives of learning and teaching EFL* (pp. 199-213). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Murase, F. (2015). Measuring language learner autonomy: Problems and possibilities. .In C.J. Everhard, & L. Murphy (Eds.), *Assessment and autonomy in language learning (pp. 35-63)*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Shimo, E. (2008). Learner autonomy and English language proficiency: An exploration among non-English majors at a Japanese university. 近畿大学語学教育部紀要 (Kinki University Department of Language Education bulletin),.*8* (2), 153-178
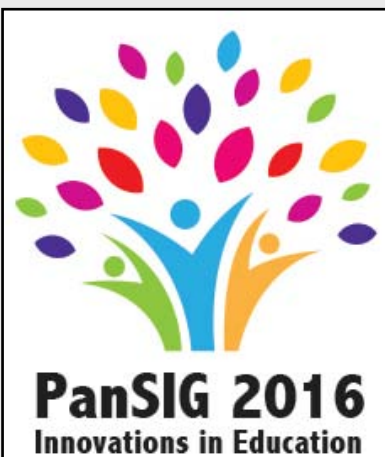
Alice Chik at JALT 2015

Visualizing Language Learning (Practice-Oriented Long Workshop)
Nov 21 (Saturday) 4:40 PM - 5:40 PM
Room 1001-2

Visualizing Language Learning: Draw and Tell (Featured Speaker Workshop)
Nov 22 (Sunday) 11:00 AM - 12:30 PM
Room 1001-1

Meio University, Nago, Okinawa

Friday, 20th – Monday, 23rd May

Call for Papers: coming soon!