

LD SIG Research Grant Reports

LD SIG 研究助成金受賞報告

JALT 2014: Bringing about active participation through ELF and collaborative learning



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I start my JALT International Conference Report with a big thank you to the Learner Development Special Interest Group (LD SIG) for their support in awarding me one of the 2014 LD SIG International Conference Grants. I am grateful to the Grants Committee for giving me the opportunity to attend this conference, for without their assistance I would not have been able to gain the important lessons I learned there. Hopefully the grant system of the SIG can continue, so that other teachers who do not have institutional support to attend such

conferences can also benefit from the SIG's generosity.

The 2014 conference in Tsukuba was my sixth JALT international conference. It was another great experience of learning and sharing. The presentations gave me valuable insight into the latest trends in language education as well as helpful hints of how to improve my classroom practices. I learned valuable theoretical perspectives and practical ideas that I have been able to implement in my classes as well as in the staff room, such as the negative impact our EFL grading has on our students and how to maximize efficiency in committee work. Moreover, reflecting on what I observed at the conference overall, I have come to question some of my previous assumptions about English speaker identity and reinforced my beliefs about individual versus collaborative learning.

ELF vs EFL

As English is my second language, I am always conscious of my status as a speaker of English. French is my first language, so I feel a sense of commonality with the large number of JALT International conference presenters who use English as their second or additional language. This view is not shared by all. There are many English speakers who place a great importance on the difference between ESL speakers such as myself, and EFL learners of English. This,

despite our equally high level of fluency. This essentially forms the growing debate between the English as a Foreign Language camp and the more inclusive school of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).

EFL is a deficit model that uses the “native speaker” as the standard of English (Cook, 1999). Speakers of English are measured in relation to their proximity to inner-circle countries (Kachru, 1992), the de facto standard. So, English speakers from the countries in the outer circle and the expanding circle are seen as *learners* of English, simply based on their nationality (Firth, 1996). This positions them as *deficient* or lacking in ability, without ever being able to ascend to the goal of being “native-like” (Han, 2004). However, the discriminatory attitude inherent in the EFL model is now giving way to a new attitude based on the realization that the large majority of English speakers are not “native” and use English as a lingua franca.

Following this precept of using English as the medium of communication between speakers of different first languages, ELF proponents maintain that ownership of English should not be limited to Kachru’s inner circle countries. Rather, according to some ELF academics, it is to be expanded to wherever English is used (Shibata, 2011). The fact that ELF proponents consider all speakers of English *users* of the language distinguishes it from the EFL model still predominantly in use in Japan (Firth, 1996). From this perspective, speakers of English such as myself should also be regarded as *owners* of English, further empowering not only ourselves, but also the students we teach. Effective communication is thus more than simply a matter of sounding

like a native speaker.

It was empowering to see this new view of English in action in Tsukuba. Throughout the conference, I heard English being used by speakers of other languages. There were slight variations in the way some people used and positioned adverbs. Others could be noticed to use the auxiliary verbs “make” and “take” more frequently than others. In no situation was intelligibility impeded. With their confident and effective communication skills, these JALT presenters lay their claim to ownership of a type of English used in their particular surroundings. So it was that I came to see that, as English teachers, adopting an EFL native-like standard to measure performance robs our students of confidence they might otherwise gain if we accepted and promoted a lingua franca approach. As a result, I have begun to call myself a *user* of English to properly describe my identity, rather than comparing myself to native speakers. I hope that this will give my students the confidence to call themselves users too. One thing I noticed about the most effective presentations by non-native speakers was that they were all using techniques that I teach in my English for Academic Purposes classes—things like circumlocution, negotiating meaning, accurately and naturally using discourse markers. If students develop these techniques, they can take ownership of English too. Promoting student participation at conferences such as JALT, a position the LD SIG actively promotes, would go a long way in fulfilling this goal.

Collaborative learning

The second assumption that was reinforced at

JALT was that learning can be more successfully achieved through collaboration. It was refreshing to see that many conference participants were applying innovative collaborative practices beyond the confines of the classroom. The LD SIG's Annual General Meeting (AGM) in particular displayed a strong emphasis on collaboration to effectively and efficiently conduct its meeting. I was impressed to see practices that we try to inculcate in our students could be successfully adopted by teachers too.

Having taught at the primary, junior high school and university levels in Japan, I have witnessed an excessive emphasis on individual performance. From students jockeying for position in the highest level schools to the preference given by some university hiring committees to single author publications over co-authored ones, the education system has a competitive element in its design. However, as with education systems in other parts of the world, the field of education in Japan is increasingly gravitating toward teamwork as a successful teaching practice. While social interaction might enhance learning, it also has the potential of making less able students rely on more competent students to do the lion's share of the work. As the less able students participate less, the education gap between the weakest and the strongest students could widen. Collaborative learning (CL), however, can be used to close the gap and enhance the learning of all.

Collaboration is “the mutual engagement of participants in a coordinated effort to solve a problem together” (Roschelle & Teasley, 1991). Building upon the concept of

teamwork with a focus, collaboration brings together people with a similar purpose so that they can all benefit from each other's work while reducing the amount of tasks each member must accomplish. In education, this concept is the foundation upon which CL is built. The goal of CL is to use this engagement to build a safe environment that properly supports students in their learning. It is further used to “achieve other goals such as the development of social and teamwork skills and to foster citizenship” (Ashwell et al., 2014, p. 6). The responsibilities each student has in collaborative work CL is a great form of preparation for the real world, as it divests students of the scaffolding provided in the classroom and it constructs knowledge in a way that most closely resembles the workplace environment. As collaboration arises out of a jointly-felt need by members of a community to pool their resources to mutual benefit, the emphasis on communication naturally encourages teachers to introduce groupings that have collaborative characteristics in any context.

This principled belief in CL was in evidence at the LD SIG AGM. Each of the committees reported to the group at large, a reflection of the importance the SIG places on the democratic principles of collaboration. It was the dynamic between the members that was most striking to me. I could clearly see the interdependence between committee members as they each gave their individual part of committee reports to the assembly. The peer-interaction between all members showcased a collaborative effort that worked because it ensured that a wide range of members' views were represented and each

opinion was respected. There were reports by committee teams, rather than individuals, and those members responsible for submitting the report were careful to include every member's thoughts. While it was stated that this teamwork approach was a new system in the group, the collaborative approach clearly succeeded in involving the greatest amount of members' participation. The AGM had an ambitiously long agenda but each committee was represented and each item was discussed openly, a testament to the SIG's principles of democracy and collaborative participation. This environment made me comfortable enough to speak up myself in the AGM by offering a theme for the new SIG publication and volunteering to write in it.

Conclusion

Thanks to receiving a grant to attend the JALT International conference, I was able to see some of my beliefs in a new light and this gave me the confidence and motivation to become more active in JALT by volunteering for positions on the LD SIG's events team and JALT's *The Language Teacher*. I had long been thinking about giving more of my time to JALT since I have greatly benefitted from the professional development, the networking, and the friendships I had been involved in through organization since joining in 2011. The perfect opportunity had never jumped out at me. One of my biggest reasons for joining the LD SIG was to extend my knowledge of learning approaches and the methods and resources to effectively achieve better results in my teaching and learning environment. It wasn't until Alison Stewart asked me to play a bigger part in the team that I realized that I

could really contribute. Or rather, that I *should* contribute. I look forward to helping the LD SIG team continue to grow even more as a collaborative organization.

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JALTCALL 2015 Conference Report: New perspectives on engaging learners through technology



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Teach different. I think this message, to put a new spin on an old Apple Computer slogan—*think different*—best encapsulates what I gleaned during the JALTCALL conference in June 2015 at Kyushu Sangyo University in Fukuoka. As the theme of the conference was language learning technologies and learner autonomy, the focus of many presentations was on how language educators can transform programs and syllabuses or at least modify their lessons with new technologies to empower learners and prepare them for the global workplace. This conference report will give an overview of the presentations that I attended as well as my reflections on how these talks have influenced me as a business English teacher, and how the information has broadened my understanding of learner autonomy and the role of technology in and out of the classroom.

To begin with, I was fortunate to hear

the plenary talk given by the renowned Dr. Ema Ushioda. She did not talk about any particular technological device or app; rather, she referred to two different types of autonomy, and the distinction between them in the case of technology use in language learning. These two concepts can be defined as follows: autonomy 1 represents a learner's motivation to behave in a way that is consistent with their attitudes and values; autonomy 2 can be perceived as the willingness of a student to be active in—and in charge of—their own learning. While an autonomy 1 learner may freely engage in language learning technologies that are pedagogically designed and sound, they may not have the capacity to exploit the technology to enhance their learning, which is an important characteristic of the autonomy 2 learner. So, what does this mean for my own classroom situation? First, in creating a kind of technological culture in the classroom, I feel that I should consider and assess my students' motivations and assumptions about technology. Second, with the aim of fostering autonomy 2 learners, my role as an instructor should be to help facilitate the students' use of technology in strategic, creative ways to meet their language learning goals. This is a key point, as I have noticed in the past that my students are quick to use some technologies outside class that are user-friendly but not particularly helpful in the development of language and metacognitive skills. To that end, I share Ema's contention that learning is more effective when it is strategic and purposeful than when it is informal and incidental.

Similarly, an emphasis on creative and lateral thinking alongside technology in the

classroom was at the heart of the talk given by Rab Peterson, the second plenary speaker at the conference. The reason behind this focus was not only the mounting concern that today's students are technologically unprepared for the global workplace (Daggett, 2010), but also that in this "age of creation", as Rab put it, Japanese classrooms are in the digital doldrums. He therefore recommends that these schools aim to produce more right-brain thinkers (e.g., creative, empathetic learners) who spend time reacting, doing, problem-solving and inventing, not just thinking about the task at hand. So, how do we go about doing this? Rab suggests a number of projects that involve technology, like the student-led Youtube/Go Pro mini-movie projects, and hands-on and/or collaborative projects such as the Marshmallow Challenge, in which students are asked to build a tower from marshmallows and the Island Fire activity, in which learners consider what to do when they are trapped on an island consumed by fire. But, could this work in my own business English classroom? The short answer is yes and no. On the plus side, my students relish the chance to be involved in hands-on, group activities within the classroom; on the other hand, due to their company status and responsibilities, they may lack the time, means and resources to engage in larger (e.g. movie) projects using technology. As a solution, then, my students could work on such collaborative projects so long as the resources are in the classroom and the task at hand could be completed within the classroom period.

In addition to the plenary talks, I had the opportunity to attend the LD-SIG forum.

There were three talks which focused on social networking and/or intercultural digital exchanges among students. First, Richard Pinner's talk focused on his ongoing experiences of using social networking sites (SNS) so as to line up his Japanese students with overseas partners, and the potential risks/drawbacks of out-of-class communication, such as oversharing information to others and producing inauthentic language (e.g., learner resistance or silence). In another talk, Simeon Flowers looked at digital pen pal exchanges as a way of developing intercultural sensitivity among students, negotiating meaning, focusing less on copying native English forms and boosting learner confidence in their use of the language. Last, Alison Stewart discussed what students gain from intercultural Facebook exchanges, such as new communication strategies and critical insights into how they react to and process information from others, and that through this kind of active, digital exchange they learn because it is an interaction that involves socializing and perception.

I see both pros and cons in conducting such online pen pal exchanges in my own classroom. On the one hand, I believe that such media sites like Facebook can allow for friendly, casual information exchanges between my students, and that the computer can serve as a social, interactive medium for learners to express themselves (Wang & Coleman, p.114) in a timely way. Communication on Facebook, for example, is written with a time stamp, so each of my students could be encouraged to respond relatively quickly to the pen pal using clear

and appropriate language. In doing so, my students would further learn to develop some communication strategies to best convey their message and negotiate meaning. On the flip side, however, I am reluctant to carry out these types of exchanges in my own classroom situation. As I teach businesspeople who can be particularly sensitive to the release of any work-related information, I would be wary of having them share information with relative strangers. Furthermore, it may take some time to find an appropriate match for my students, many of whom range in age from thirty to fifty and tend to be more family-focused and less outgoing. Nevertheless, an online exchange among my business-focused students has potential value and could proceed as long as the information shared is limited to those in the class and is not confidential.

Other presentations I attended over the course of the conference also dealt with learner autonomy as well as engagement, implementation and assessment of online/multimedia training. Two presentations were of particular interest to me. The first one, by Glenn Stockwell and Philip Hubbard, surveyed the use and popularity of mobile phones and PCs and discussed ways they have been incorporated in the language classroom/syllabus. Reflecting on this talk, I found it useful as it helped me grasp, with the help of their data, which devices and training were most useful in keeping students engaged in the long run. For example, a combination of technical, strategic and pedagogical training by the instructor was shown to be effective in engaging learners using devices. As I teach many on-the-go professionals in class who are keenly interested in both self-study learning

and mobile language learning, I have since used the information from the talk to direct my students to appropriate online activities and explain how they can provide support for each other (e.g., in collaborative debriefings on each other's use of language). In this way, my roles as a moderator and facilitator and the students' role as autonomous learners have become more clearly defined.

The second presentation of note, given by Simeon Flowers and Brett Milliner, focused on the use of Google Forms and Survey Monkey in the classroom. The talk was particularly useful as it showed how to put the mobile phone to good pedagogical use and encourage student autonomy. Although the free versions of both of these mobile-friendly applications are limited in features, they allow students to not only answer basic grammar/vocabulary/reading quizzes (with or without video) and do peer assessment/review but also do student-conducted research from their phone, the results of which could be relayed back to the instructor on a spreadsheet or in a report. Reflecting on my own classes, I question if my students with their hectic work schedules would continue doing these online tasks (e.g., quizzes and polls) by themselves over an extended period of time. However, by scheduling both periodic sessions between the teacher and learner and sessions between peers to check up on their progress, this mobile self-study practice could be a valuable extension of classroom lessons and language points.

In conclusion, the JALTCALL conference was a worthwhile experience, as it showcased in several ways how technology/technologically-minded tasks can transform

our classrooms and stimulate learners. Yet thankfully, it also stressed the importance of the teacher's role when students are presented with a multitude of technological resources. That is to say, there are many technological tools (e.g. QR codes, particular vocabulary apps and online testing resources) the student can use freely; it is up to the teacher to guide learners to choose technologies that are pedagogically sound, promote the right kind of learner autonomy and encourage learners to think outside the box so as to meet their language goals.

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Learning Through Participation: An ALT perspective on JALT PanSIG in Kobe



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Last year I had the pleasure of attending and presenting at the JALT PanSIG, my first ever JALT conference, which was held at Miyazaki Municipal University in May 2014. Since I was based in Kumamoto it was quite easy for me to drive there. Being able to get there on a budget was probably one of the key deciding factors for my attendance because, as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, I did not have access to funding for attending conferences, putting most academic conferences out of reach. This year with the financial support of the LD PanSIG Conference Grant, I was able to fly to Kobe to attend and present at the PanSIG2015 conference. I really appreciate the generous support and I think these kinds of grants are an excellent way to make JALT conferences more accessible to those educators and students who do not have

access to conference funding. As a new member to the LD SIG and JALT, coming to Kobe was a great opportunity for me to become better acquainted with the various SIGs and people who make up JALT. Furthermore, part of the experience that came with receiving the LD conference grant has been becoming acquainted with the Learner Development SIG. I had the opportunity to attend the LD SIG Forum on the first day, meeting and talking with other presenters and members of the SIG. In this article, I will reflect on what I have experienced and learnt from the conference and how it has influenced my outlook on teaching and research.

While attending the conference, I was impressed with the sheer volume of learning and dialogue converging at one place. Over the two days, I was exposed to many new ideas and had the opportunity to meet new people, evidenced by the pile of business cards I amassed. At any conference like this, there was some scheduled learning, and some incidental learning, learning that arose unplanned, both of which shaped my experience of the conference. This year's PanSIG took place at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies from May 16-17, 2015, with the theme, "Narratives: Raising the Happiness Quotient". The organizers created a positive, playful conference atmosphere by handing out candy, arranging a dream interpretation service, and setting up special areas with names like Narrative Café and Happy Room which made for a fun and engaging social environment.

The themes of story and happiness were carried into the presentations of the

plenary speakers. These ideas are interesting for me to reflect on as a language teacher, as I believe teachers always need to consider how to make classes more learner-centered and inspiring to connect with learners in a more personally meaningful way. On the first day of the conference, Curtis Kelly gave an impressive and cleverly executed plenary speech entitled, “Why Our Brains Like Stories”. He presented an argument for harnessing the human brain’s affinity for stories in order to advance classroom learning. The concept of *embodied cognition*; the idea that human thought depends on the way we experience the environment through the physical aspect of ourselves, suggests that stories can influence our minds more effectively than other forms of communication because they refer to things that we value - human events, experience and emotion. When we listen and empathize with a story, neurotransmitters responsible for regulating our moods like dopamine, cortisol, and oxytocin are released from receptors having a direct effect on our mental state. Kelly argued that when the details of events and situations are presented in a storyline, individuals remember them much better than when presented as a list of information. Kelly showed us a Google search bar commercial played during the 2010 Super Bowl in order to demonstrate the powerful effect that stories have on structuring and ordering facts into a synthesized memory. After watching the protagonist search for several pieces of information on Google over the course of his travels to Paris (where he met a woman, pursued her, and fell in love), Kelly asked us to recall what he had searched for, and then

why we had remembered it. It seemed that we could remember what he had searched for based on how it was associated with the larger narrative of the protagonist’s own experience in Paris.

As an ALT teaching at senior high schools, I think that students respond well to storytelling activities. For example, I have done storyboard activities with high school students in the past where they drew several scenes in order to tell stories about things that happened during their summer vacations. I have also had them write and perform television cooking shows, commercials, or short dramas. From these experiences in the classroom, I feel that using narratives can be the basis for creating meaningful learner-centred activities and potentially make it easier for learners to remember and order large quantities of language at one time. I think Kelly’s plenary was able to clearly articulate some possible reasons why these narratives can be an effective basis for classroom language activities.

On the morning of the second day, Kim Horne delivered an inspiring talk on teaching virtue to our students called “The Virtues of Character Education—Simple Ways to Bring Joy, Meaning & Purpose into Your Classroom”. Horne took us through her own story of creating a personal teaching philosophy that aims to reach the lives of her young learners through teaching virtue within her English lessons. On a visit to the Hendrix IB World School, in Boiling Springs, South Carolina, several years ago, she noticed that the walls of each class had posters with inspirational and encouraging phrases, unlike what she was used to in Japan. This experience influenced her to

expand the scope of what she does in the classroom. For example, she teaches the alphabet with a picture storybook and song, where each letter of the alphabet is associated with a virtue. She recounted many inspired episodes from her own classes, shedding tears after retelling a story of one boy's realization of his own conduct. As many EFL educators often sacrifice topic content for a focus on language, it was refreshing to see her passion for creating goals for her language class that focus on her students' behavior and attitudes. In the discussion that followed Horne's presentation, one member of the audience asked whether virtues as a kind of moral education should be taught in the classroom, as the history of moral education (*dotoku kyouiku*) in Japan is associated with an oppressive social control which was instituted under the Imperial Rescript on Education prior to World War II. She quickly dismissed this concern as irrelevant, expressing her own confidence and belief in her own teaching approach and beliefs. I was personally moved by her passion and felt that her commitment to what she was doing was something all teachers should aspire to. It was easy to see that Kim Horne is one of those rare educators who can inspire many of her students through her character. I look forward to learning more from her in the future.

Kim Horne and her plenary provide a good example of the effectiveness of a carefully developed teaching philosophy and the importance of teacher involvement on student's lives. As a young educator this plenary both provided a great example and important lesson about great teaching. In many language contexts, it seems teachers are

given few opportunities to develop a personal teaching philosophy and are encouraged to focus on language in the classroom, in other words teaching language content and skills. However, in the ALT context, we are often encouraged to act as role models for students and share stories from our personal lives as a way to both encourage cultural exchange and interest in English. For example, we always have to provide self-introduction lessons for every group of students and share information about our likes and dislikes, family, cultural and personal background. While ALTs are often positioned as only assistant teachers, in some cases, depending on the placement and school context, we are put in positions where we have more flexibility to develop our own teaching approach, and can try out new ideas in the classroom. For example, I was given a lot of freedom to design the semester syllabus and lesson plans for my high school classes according to my preferences. This flexibility gives ALTs valuable opportunities for experimentation with ideas and approaches, and can provide a good environment for an ALT interested in a career in education to work on developing their own personal teaching philosophy. To such ALTs, Horne's presentation is particularly relevant as she provided a great prototype for how each of us could personalize our classrooms.

Probably the most important experience for me was getting an opportunity to present on my own research. I gave a poster presentation on the topic of senior high school English teachers' beliefs on teaching English in English on the afternoon of the second day. I was interested in investigating how high school teachers in Japan are adjusting their teaching

practices in light of the new Course of Study that came into effect in April 2013. In this presentation, I showcased interview research conducted with four high school teachers in Kumamoto Prefecture in the spring. I inquired about their beliefs and practices in their current English classes, specifically looking at what they use English and Japanese for within their classes and their reasons for doing so. I also asked them what they found challenging about using more English in the classroom. I found that the teachers still felt restrained by perceptions of university examinations, and the reform process of their own classroom practices was related to the teaching culture and expectations of their particular school, with some teachers feeling more able to adapt the new curriculum guidelines than others. During the presentation, I spent the allotted time talking with various educators working at both universities and high schools, and could meet people who were interested in either the topic of high school English reform or teacher beliefs. I received a lot of good feedback and suggestions for further research and improvement. It seemed that many people felt that the improvement of high school English education is still tied to issues of test reform, whether those issues are real or perceived falsely by high school teachers. I was able to establish new contacts and encouragement to publish from this presentation making this time an invaluable stimulus of my own future research.

For the remainder of the conference, I tried to attend as many workshops as I could and find opportunities to engage with the other people present. One of the most pleasantly unpredictable things that happened

to me at the conference was learning about the various Model UN competitions organized in Japan from some of the university student volunteers who were present in the Narrative Café. While taking some downtime, I started to chat with some of the student volunteers who were running the refreshment and snack booth. One of them was involved with the Model UN at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies and he told me how great of an experience they had being involved with writing position papers and joining competitions. He explained to me in detail about the benefits of Model UN, which requires the participants to focus on consensus building, and mutual understanding and have them manage the whole competition. I was really interested in the participatory nature of the activity and hope that I can be involved with the competition as an educator in the future.

Although there are few ALTs or students present, I think the conference is a worthwhile experience for younger or less experienced educators. Since some JET ALTs are interested in continuing to work in Japan after they finish their contracts, it provides a glimpse into the broader language teaching profession that exists in Japan. Personally, the conference exposed me to the breadth and range of the field, as well as provided valuable opportunities to meet and discuss ideas with other conference participants. Overall, the conference increased my motivation to try out new ideas and challenge myself as a teacher and as a researcher. I am glad I went and hope to go to many more JALT conferences in the future.