The 2016 JALTCALL Conference:
A personal reflection

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If anyone … is teaching the same thing they were teaching five years ago, either the field is dead, or they haven't been thinking.
– Noam Chomsky –

In many ways, teaching English in Japan can be an individualistic and isolating endeavor. A large number of English as a foreign language (EFL) instructors have long commutes, busy schedules, and are often segregated from one another in their own classrooms. Cuban, Kirkpatrick, and Peck (2001) argued that the "cellular organization" of the teaching profession as well as various other constraints reduced the "cross-fertilization of ideas" and sharing of technical expertise amongst the educators they researched (p. 827). Although there will always be an element of seclusion in the EFL educational arena, attending conferences and participating in a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) such as the JALT Learner Development SIG can help to alleviate the isolation, frustration, and sense of 'burn-out' teachers might experience working with large classes of reluctant English-language learners. Added to that, they are fantastic forums that foster the sharing of knowledge (i.e., technological tips) and effective teaching strategies.

Keeping these ideas in mind, I decided to attend the 2016 JALT CALL conference. I felt it was the ideal professional development opportunity for me as I have been studying technology enhanced learning for the last few years through a distance education graduate studies program. The JALT CALL 2016 conference, which was cohosted by the JALT CALL and Mind, Brain, and Education SIGs, took place from June 3rd to 5th at Tamagawa University in Tokyo. Although it was a jam-packed hectic weekend, I left Tokyo feeling inspired and reenergized. The next section will highlight some

of the more memorable events from the conference.

Day 1: Saturday

When I arrived at the venue early Saturday morning, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the conference timetable had a total of 114 presentations/workshops that covered a diverse array of topics. Needless to say, it was difficult to create a personalized schedule of the sessions I wanted to attend. I decided to sidestep the more abstract or theoretically dense presentations, and instead focus on practical ones that had the potential to help frontline educators improve their students' learning and communicative competencies.

The first order of business was to meet up with my colleague and co-presenter, Daniel Mills, in order to put the finishing touches on our slides and have one final practice before our presentation. Afterwards, I wandered around the poster sessions and talked with Oliver Rose about PhraseBot, an online mobile game app he developed that can help students learn words, phrases, and sentences. This conversation was the first of many that I would have over the weekend, which focused on the value of mobile device vocabulary apps to enhance students' learning. The online flashcard program Quizlet appeared to be a popular choice among many EFL instructors, and it was featured in ten different presentations. After lunch, Daniel and I delivered the findings from our action research project on the use of mobile-video recordings to enhance Japanese university students' English language presentation skills.

Unfortunately, two of the sessions I really wanted to attend, one on Pecha Kucha[1] presentations and the other on student-generated podcasts, were scheduled at the exact same time as our talk. Thankfully, there were still a number of stimulating presentations to see on my afternoon agenda. I listened to Paul McKenna discuss how he scrutinized 1,499 TED Talks using a genre

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[1] A Pecha Kucha is a visual presentation format whereby the presenter shows 20 images and speaks for 20 seconds per image. The total time of the presentation is under 6 minutes and 40 seconds. (20 images X 20 seconds = 6:40)

analysis. For me, the most interesting part of his presentation emerged during the 'Q & A' period when various audience members shared how they utilized TED Talks in their lessons. Immediately after the session, I had a brief conversation with Darren Elliot regarding his blog ['The lives of teachers: Teaching and learning languages'](). This site is definitely worth checking out, especially the impressive archive of interviews he has conducted over the years with renowned researchers in the field of English language learning.

My next stop was to see Robert Cochrane's enthusiastic presentation on his experiences using Google Apps for Education in a collaborative learning project with Japanese university students. Cochrane noted that the participants in his study were highly proficient at playing games and accessing social networking sites on their smartphones. However, many learners still lacked basic digital skills when it came time to using technology in an educational context. This presentation appeared to resonate with the audience and one instructor commented: " … *they are iPhone geniuses … but have a hard time using* [Microsoft] *word to format their essays."*

After this session, I decided to mix things up a bit by attending a workshop. Rab Paterson's 'Unleash your inner Tarantino with iMovie' had piqued my interest with a catchy title as well as the desire to improve my mediocre video editing skills. In addition to being highly entertaining and informative, Paterson provided the participants with a blueprint on how to organize and conduct an effective information and communication technology (ICT) workshop. I filled my notebook with numerous practical pointers and a variety of websites where I could obtain high quality images for my future video projects. The seventy minutes flew by and then it was time for the keynote address.

Mark Pegrum's plenary speech 'Beyond traditional language and literacy: The rise of mobile literacy' was fascinating and provided the

audience with a tremendous amount of food for thought. Pegrum started his talk by highlighting various types of digital literacies such as

information, multimodal, network, and code, as well as providing examples for each one. He then defined 'critical mobile literacy' and emphasized its significance in our technologically-charged world. Without question, this notion reverberated the most with me because it underscores the importance of incorporating critical thinking into lessons that revolve around ICT tools. The keynote address also tied in nicely with an article I had recently read urging educators not to become trapped in a technologically deterministic mindset. Selywn (2012) argued that technologies are constantly undergoing "… a series of complex interactions and negotiations with the social, economic, political and cultural contexts into which they emerge" (p. 84). Clearly, effectively integrating ICTs into an EFL classroom is something that requires a tremendous amount of thought and careful consideration.

After Pegrum's plenary address, the conference attendees reconvened at a nearby building for a networking reception. This event was notable on a couple of different fronts. First, everyone appeared to thoroughly enjoy the great food, cold drinks (especially the frothy ones), and friendly service. Next, it was an excellent opportunity to mingle with new people and reconnect with old friends. I had a number of interesting conversations during the two-hour gathering, including one with Stephen Ryan about the connection of the mind and brain to language learning.

Day 2: Sunday

The second day of the conference started out significantly slower for me than the first one. I decided to kick start my morning by grabbing a cup of coffee before venturing off to any sessions. In retrospect, this proved to be a wise choice as I found myself immersed in a series of thought-provoking discussions with John Blake, Philip Norton, and Gary Ross. Blake highlighted his presentation 'Ten hacks for academic writing' and made some helpful suggestions for my own university writing classes. He also talked about living, working, and studying martial arts in

Thailand and Hong Kong. Likewise, Philip Norton outlined his workshop 'Creating animated storyboards with Web 2.0' and provided some practical pointers on using the online video editing software [WeVideo] in an EFL setting. Norton also shared an inspiring story of transforming himself physically via kettle bell workouts and a healthy lifestyle. Gary Ross's technological acumen was equally impressive. Ross talked about a computer program he developed that allows students to have practice conversations with their computers. The most obvious benefit of this software is that EFL educators can grade hundreds of assignments in a short time.

However, Ross's words also made me consider the negative impact that ICTs can have on the post-secondary EFL teaching sector in Japan. More specifically, I started to wonder if voice recognition programs, massive open online courses (MOOCs), the Skypefication of English lessons (i.e., online language tutors from the Philippines), as well as the seemingly never-ending quest of many university administrators to find ways to cut costs (i.e., larger class sizes; using outsourcing agencies) will eventually make many jobs redundant. It is likely that my feeling of trepidation is rooted in an article I read a few years ago that discussed the possibility of interactive robotic avatars eliminating the need for EFL instructors. In 2010, the South Korean government spent $45 million (USD) developing robotic English language teaching assistants (Hsu, 2010). Undoubtedly, many educators will find the idea of a robot taking their jobs to be utterly ridiculous. However, economist Kim Shin-Hwan predicted that these machines would eventually replace more than 30,000 native English teachers working in Korea, especially those employed by private language institutions (Kim, 2010). More recently, Sherman (2015) reported that new types of technology have had a detrimental effect on a number of white-collar occupations such as financial analysts and sports reporters. These professions had "previously seemed invulnerable" whereas now there is a strong possibility that they will be eradicated in the near future (par. 4).

Having said all that, I was nevertheless intrigued to find out how voice recognition software could enrich the language learning process. Thus, I found myself attending the 'speaking with your computer' 'unconference' session. Before venturing on, it is probably a good idea to pause for a moment to define this concept. The 'unconference' presentation format is a unique "free-form, bottom-up" type of talk whereby the participants set their own topics (JALTCALL & the Brain, 2016). Added to that, it is perfectly acceptable for a person to parachute into a conversation and leave the room once she/he has acquired enough information about a topic or lost interest in the discussion. Needless to say, I was curious to see how the unconference sessions would actually unfold. In addition to the aforementioned voice recognition program, attendees could chat about the following topics: physiology and wellness with technology, active learning and neuroscience, and mobile device apps. I was able to observe a hands-on demonstration of Gary Ross speaking with his PC as well as listen to other instructors discuss the trials and tribulations of using speech recognition software in their EFL classrooms. Initially, I had planned on attending three unconference sessions. Unfortunately, the allocated time slot of thirty minutes evaporated before I could wander into any other rooms. Even though I really enjoyed the informal climate of the unconference presentation format, I felt that the time should have been extended to an hour or more to prevent the participants from feeling overly rushed.

The final event on my agenda was the LD SIG forum. On one hand, the session shared some similarities with many of the presentations and workshops at the conference. For example, the majority of the presenters believed they could foster a more interactive learning environment by weaving ICTs into their EFL lessons. However, the LD forum's unique flavor could be found in the fact that it also emphasized the students' voices in regard to the effectiveness of these technological tools. There were a total of five presenters on hand to discuss the findings of three action research projects. I decided to first stop at Robert Morel's

poster to learn how he deployed the learning management system (LMS) Schoology in his teaching context. A Venn diagram highlighted the 'online resources used at three levels of interaction' in his project. Thus, it was easy for the audience to see the interconnectedness of information and file sharing, regular study, and messaging. I thought Morel's presentation would have been especially valuable for a teacher who works at several institutions or someone not overly familiar with how a LMS works.

My second pit stop at the LD forum was highly useful and informative. As I noted previously, discussions about the online flashcard program Quizlet were prevalent at the conference. Although I had a basic understanding of how it worked, I was fortunate that Blair Barr could shed more light on this educational software. Barr discussed the student feedback he received as well as the highlights from his earlier presentation 'Is Quizlet an effective tool for learning how to use vocabulary?' Not only that, he patiently answered my barrage of questions, including '*What do you do if a student has an antiquated cellphone?*' and '*Do privacy concerns ever prevent learners from participating in a task?*' Barr, like many good teachers, came up with a variety of innovative solutions that helped him overcome unexpected technological barriers. This conversation made me realize that Quizlet could breathe new life into my reading class and add some spice to painfully tedious TOEIC courses.

The third and final presentation that was featured at the LD forum was titled 'Students voices: Evaluating an app for promoting self-directed language learning'. My first observation was the research triumvirate of Jo Mynard, Elizabeth Lammons, and Kie Yamamoto produced an amazing poster (see Figure 1) that was quite self-explanatory. Fortunately, I was able to have an interesting chat with Kie about the 'Self-Access Learning Centre' (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies, and the benefits of the mobile device app her team created. Without question, this was another worthwhile session for me because my institution is currently in the process of introducing a new 'Self-Access Learning Support Area' (SALSA).

Conclusion

The 2016 JALTCALL conference was a resounding success thanks to the hard work of a large group of dedicated volunteers and the organizational efforts of the site coordinators. Over the course of two hectic days, I learned a tremendous amount and felt like I was hit by a jolt of renewed inspiration that will hopefully help me to improve my teaching performance. My positive conference experience would not have been possible without the 2016 LD SIG JALTCALL bursary. I would like to express my gratitude to the LD team for not only the grant, but also their warm hospitality during my visit to the LD forum session. Finally, I would like to say thanks to Yoko Sakurai for her patience and assistance with this article.
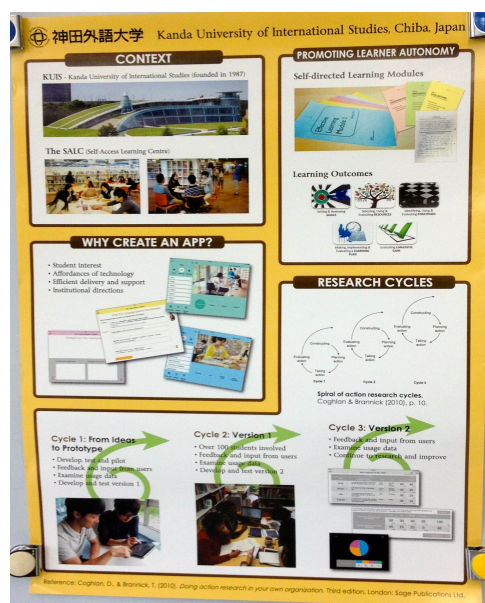

Figure 1. Poster from the LD SIG forum (Mynard, Lammons, & Yamamoto, 2016)

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The Learner Development (LD) SIG is offering one ¥20,000 Project Grant to LD SIG members conducting or leading education-related projects or volunteer activities as individuals or in groups who are willing to write an article (approx. 1500 words / 3000 Japanese characters) about their project for *Learning Learning*. Application may include but are not limited to the following examples (if you are unsure whether our project qualifies or not, please contact the Grants Team):

- Teachers and/or students engaging with and/or helping communities or groups of people outside of their educational context, at either a local, national or international level;
- Encouraging student development through supporting student participation in conferences, LD SIG forums, LD SIG get together, etc.

Recipient/s can use the grant in any way within reason that will support their project. Please indicate in your application how the grant will be used to support the successful completion of the project.

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