

Kansai To the World: Promoting learner engagement about international issues through a student conference

Sponsored by: JALT LD SIG Kansai Get Together

Anita Aden, Ann Flanagan, Yoshio Nakai, Shuji Narita, Agnes Patko, Jennifer Teeter and Katherine Thornton

Learners of English and other languages across Japan are regularly faced with the same problem: a lack of opportunity to use the language they are learning. This can influence their language learning experiences in multiple ways including never engaging in language learning due to a lack of perceived need, struggling with low motivation, or possessing low communicative proficiency due to a lack of opportunity for interaction. The social turn in language learning research, which has taken place over the last 20 years, emphasizes the importance of interaction with others, not just in terms of proficiency gains made through language practice, but in the effect that it can have on motivation, engagement and learner autonomy. Murphey (1996) has long advocated for the power of peer interaction on motivation, with his concept of *near peer role models* (Murphey, 1996). More recently, Murray (2014) emphasised the importance of the social dimension in fostering autonomy.

University students in Japan may have few opportunities to meet other learners outside their immediate peer groups (classes, club activities); as a result, they may have limited chances to engage in discussion about the social issues that face Japan in the 21st century.

The Kansai Get Together group of the JALT Learner Development SIG, revived in December 2015, decided to organise a forum for students from our institutions to use English to engage in discussion of social issues in the form of a student conference. This paper will describe the event itself and how it was organised, investigate the impact

on the student participants by examining their feedback, and offer some advice and suggestions for those interested in holding similar events in their own contexts.

The *Kansai To The World* (K2W) student conference, held in November 2016, engaged local and international students from Kansai area universities in discussions about current globally related issues facing Japan. Within this student-centered event, participants actively employed their communication skills, empathy, and cross-cultural understanding. Through poster presentations, discussion and reflection activities, we saw students engage in discussions about topics generated by their peers. While the focus was primarily on the Kansai region, students addressed the challenges of globalization in the areas of education, tourism, technology, and the workplace.

Literature Review

There is a history of student involvement in academic conferences in Japan, but the research in this area has tended to focus more on students in supportive roles at professional conferences, rather than as presenters themselves at events organised especially for students. In one study, Matsuoka (2015) investigated the impact on willingness to communicate and the language anxiety of interns at a JALT conference. In another, Taylor (2012) cited numerous benefits for students who worked as interns, including opportunities to use English in a local environment compared to an expensive study abroad programme, which increased student motivation and contributed to developing students' intercultural competence.

Despite this minimal research conducted on the impact on students as they take part in conferences as presenters, more student conferences have taken place in Japan in recent years. The Asia Community Engagement (ACE) student conference has taken place in the Kansai area since 2014. At this conference, groups of participating students are assigned a current problem in

business in Japan and asked to develop possible solutions. These solutions are then presented and discussed in English on the day of the conference. The Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL) has held three student events since 2013: the Student Involvement in Self-Access Centers Conference, was organised by students from Sugiyama Jogakuen University in Nagoya in 2013 (Ssali, 2013); a Self-Access Show and Tell event at Okayama University in 2015 (Fujishima & Ronald, 2015); and the Engaging Students in Self-Access Centres conference at Kanda University of International Studies in Chiba in 2016. In each of these JASAL events, student users and student staff of self-access centres shared observations and talked about their experiences and research at their facilities.

Though similar to ACE, which focused on engaging students in problem-solving activities, the student conference described in this article differs from the previous events. One distinct difference of the K2W conference was the *personalization*, where students developed their own ideas as they prepared posters prior to the event.

Organising K2W

Discussions about the K2W event started in April 2015; however, due to varying school calendars and previous research engagements, the date of the event was decided relatively late, in September. Once the date was finalized and the venue was booked, we created a to-do-list and allocated tasks among the members.

Table 1. Tasks for conference planning

Create a call for posters handout (include application method, deadline, notice of acceptance etc.)
Decide the target group at each institution Appeal to international students
Start advertising the event to students
Application deadline (get informal numbers

of posters & students interested in attending)
Make an online registration form for participants (Google forms)
Site visit to OIC (Ritsumeikan University, Osaka, Ibaraki Campus), decide what equipment to reserve
Make a conference website: https://k2w2016.wordpress.com
Make a conference booklet
Decide the order of presentations/ poster sessions/ tasks that students will do at the event
Decide the final format of the event
Divide the teacher responsibilities (who leads which activity, etc)
Finalise the tasks
On the day: - arrive early to set up the conference room and prepare for registration - set up the room, put up signs to help participants find the room, set up the refreshment area, technology support, etc.

The *K2W: Kansai to the World* conference held at Ritsumeikan University, Ibaraki campus was organized by Katherine Thornton, Richard Silver, Agnes Patko, Shuji Narita, Yoshio Nakai, Anita Aden, and Ann Flanagan (with support from Jennifer Teeter). Since students, both Japanese and international students were participating from different universities, the event started with Agnes Patko and Katherine Thornton leading an introduction activity to encourage students to get acquainted with each other. Soon the room was buzzing with energy, and laughter could be heard from every corner of the room.

The conference was divided into two poster sessions. Poster Session 1 focused on the themes of Tourism and Technology. The

participants rotated every 8 minutes to new posters, allowing them time to listen to all the presenters. After presenters were finished, students were given a 10-minute break to read the posters in more depth and get some refreshments. Next, students paired up in a reflective discussion activity to discuss the topics. Using colorful sticky notes, they wrote their possible solutions or questions for the presenter and stuck them on the whiteboard near the posters. Members of the LD SIG then grouped the comments into categories. This led to the next activity, a “Gallery Walk”, where students walked around the room to read other students’ comments and further stimulate follow up conversations. Once students had read all the notes, they chose one poster’s theme to talk about in small groups. Following their discussion time, a self-chosen leader of the group gave a short summary of what was discussed with the rest of the participants. After this activity, students were given another short break as presenter set up the second poster session. The themes for this session were “Education” and “Workplace & Employment”.

The second session proceeded more quickly due to the students’ familiarity with the activities and the increased level of confidence in sharing their thoughts and opinions. Following the second poster summaries, students were given feedback forms to fill out anonymously. The conference received very positive feedback about the variety of topics presented and the style of conference. Many students were keen to participate in another event like this again.

To conclude the conference, presenters were given certificates of achievement and the afternoon event ended with a group photo.

Students’ voices

Students filled in a seven-item questionnaire about the event, which included demographic data (see Appendix). We considered using an online form; however,

the idea was discarded as we anticipated that some students may not have a smartphone and some might have restrictions on their internet usage. Because we were not expecting more than 30 participants, we decided that using a paper-based survey and entering the answers into an online form seemed manageable.

Throughout the event, the 20 participants were actively engaged and seemed to enjoy the various activities, reflected by the results of the survey. We received very positive feedback. From the 18 respondents, 15 said they were “extremely likely” to recommend the event to a classmate, and 3 were “likely” to recommend the event to a classmate. Almost all participants rated the event as “excellent” or “very good.” They felt that the warm up activities helped to create a friendly atmosphere.

In their comments, many of them mentioned that they enjoyed discussing the variety of topics and sharing opinions about the issues in English with people from other universities and international students. One point that needed to be improved was the time allocated for each activity. They wanted to spend more time on their discussions and needed more time to think. All in all, students felt the event was well organised and each activity fostered communication. They were happy to have participated in this conference and many of them expressed interest in participating and/or presenting at a similar event in the future.

Reflections and Conclusion

Conference organizers reflected on the success of this student-centered event in light of reaching the target audience, achieving the conference aims and evaluating the outcome for future events. In the preparation stage, emphasis was put on adequately planning the components for a half-day conference (Segar, 2010) and defining the tasks that each contributing Kansai Get-Together member would do in the three months leading up to the November 2016 conference. The prior conferencing-making

expertise of Katherine Thornton, Ann Flanagan, Rich Silver, and Agnes Patko added to the smooth process of creating checklists, making fliers and commenting on or editing each other's tasks. Our communication was primarily done via email and the conference files were accessible to all members on Google Drive. From the tasks listed on our conference planning checklist, it was possible to stay focused on completing each item and then respond to details that came up as the conference day approached. Some of the challenges of preparing for this conference included the limited time we had to prepare for it, finding enough student presenters, the uncertainty of the number of participants, and concerns about participants' understanding of this conference's style of activities. Feedback from participants confirmed that our efforts to make an engaging student-focused event were worthwhile and that planning a second K2W conference would be well received by participants in the future.



Figure 1. Celebrating a great K2W Conference.

Photos and video taken during the conference by Shuji Narita reflected the active participation and dynamic interactions of participants with each other and conference organizers. These photos were uploaded immediately following the conference website and the link was sent to all participants the following month, along with an online follow up survey made by Ann Flanagan. Overall, we rated the conference a success, based on the pre- and post-conference agenda, accomplished through the dedication of the LD SIG Kansai Get Together members! This year, the *K2W2: Kansai to the World 2* will take place on June 11th at Kyoto University. We

look forward to applying our knowledge from the last conference, as we prepare for the next student-centered conference.

K2W PHOTO GALLERY



Figure 2. Presenters at the K2W conference Nov 2016.



Figure 3. Participants and presenters at K2W Nov 2016.



Figure 4. Participants adding comments to presenters' posters.

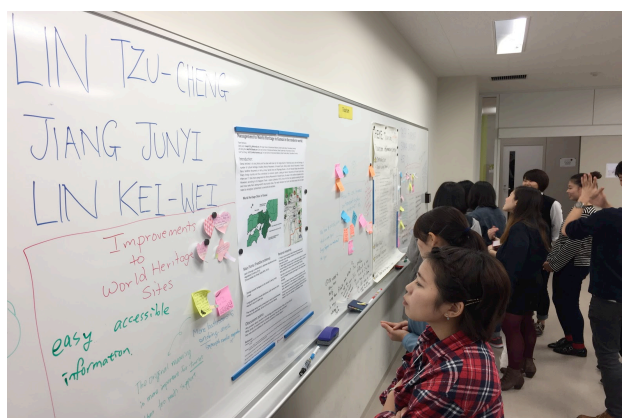


Figure 5. Participants adding comments to presenters' posters.

References

- Fujishima, N., & Ronald, J. (2015, August 2). Talking Points August 2015: JASAL Show & Tell @ Okayama University's L-cafe. Retrieved from <http://ld-sig.org/talking-points-august-2015/>
- Matsuoka, R. (2015). Willingness to communicate: The effect of conference participation on students L2 apprehension. In S. Horiguchi, Y. Imoto, & G.S. Poole, (Eds.). *Foreign Language Education in Japan: Exploring Qualitative Approaches*. (pp. 133 – 146). Boston: Sense Publishers
- Murphey, T. (1996). Near peer role models. *Teachers Talking to Teachers* 4(3), 21-22.
- Murray, G. (2014). Exploring the social dimensions of autonomy in language learning. In G. Murray (Ed.), *Social dimensions of autonomy in language learning* (pp. 3-11). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.
- Segar, A. (2010). *Pre-conference preparation. Conferences that work: Creating events that people love*. Marlboro, VT: Booklocker, Inc.
- Ssali, V. (2013) (Ed.) *Student involvement in self-access centers conference reports. Of the students, for the students*. Retrieved from <https://jasalorg.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/sisac-conference-reports.pdf>
- Taylor, C. (2012). Student experiences on a short internship program. *Bulletin of Toyo Gakuen University* 20, 129-147. Retrieved from <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/naid/110008915171/en>



K2W: KANSAI TO THE WORLD

Useful links:

Kansai to the World website:

<https://k2wconference.wordpress.com>

Kansai get-togethers are open to language instructors to share together ideas and enjoy discussing current topics and trends happening in education in Japan.

<http://ld-sig.org/get-togethers/kansai-get-togethers/>

Facebook :

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/126518854184011/>

Where: Kyoto University

When: June 11th (Sunday)

Appendix: (not the original form)**K2W Conference Feedback Survey****Dear Participants,**

Thank you very much for participating in the **Kansai to the World Conference**.
We appreciate all your hard work for making this a successful event. Your feedback is very important to us. Please fill out the form below.

Circle: Male Female

Year: 1st Year 2nd Year 3rd Year 4th Year Graduate Exchange
Student Student

1. How likely would you recommend this event to a classmate?
2. Overall, how would you rate the quality of the conference?

- Excellent
- Very Good
- Fairly Good
- Mildly Good
- Not good at all

3. What did you like about the event?
4. What did you dislike about the event?
5. How organized was the event?
 - Extremely organized
 - Very Organized
 - Somewhat Organized
 - Slightly Organized
 - Not at all Organized

6. Were the following activities helpful in encouraging communication among participants?

Extremely	Very	Somewhat	Slightly	Not at all
Icebreaking Activities				
Poster and Discussion Session #1				
Poster and Discussion Session #2				

7. Please write any additional comments or feedback that you would like to give us.

Thank you very much for participating in the Kansai to the World Conference.
We greatly appreciate your feedback. It will be very helpful when we plan next year's event.

The K2W Conference Organizers