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Learners about Learning Student Conference

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In conjunction with the 8th Independent Learning Association Conference, “Whose Autonomy? Voices and Agency in Language Learning held at Konan Women’s University in Kobe, Japan, the Kansai Get Together group of the JALT Learner Development SIG, held the 3rd Annual Student Conference entitled Learners about Learning. In this short review, we describe and reflect on the event, share student feedback and offer suggestions for those interested in holding similar events simultaneously with teacher conferences.

The JALT LD SIG Kansai Get Together Group has previously held two student conferences called the Kansai to the World Conference (K2W) (Aden et al., 2017). They were aimed more towards university students focusing on global related issues facing Japan.

This year’s conference, Learners about Learning, held at Konan Women’s University in Kobe, Japan was organized by Agnes Patko, Ann Flanagan and Katherine Thornton. It aimed at providing an opportunity to local and international senior high school and university students to discuss issues of and share experiences and ideas about their language learning. In preparation for the poster conference, students were asked to think about their language learning experience and what made it meaningful to them. They were

encouraged to include ways that helped them to study language like:

- study resources (YouTube, movies, music, Apps, online resources, chats ...)
- language opportunities (English conversations, activities with international students, events at school or your self-access center ...)
- study abroad experiences
- projects in class
- any other activities or projects or ways of studying English.

Before the conference began, students had lunch together which gave them the opportunity to get to know each other in an informal situation as well as calm those presentation jitters. After lunch, Agnes Patko and Katherine Thornton lead fun ice-breaking activities to get students to learn more about each other since they were from different schools in Japan.

At the beginning of the conference, students placed their posters on tables or hung them on the wall. They then did a 20-minute “Gallery Walk” where students toured the room to read the posters and write questions on Post-It notes which presenters could include when they gave their presentation. This was led by Ann Flanagan. This was very effective because it gave weaker students the time needed to engage with text and have the

chance to ask questions without feeling overwhelmed. It also helped support the presenters when they were giving their presentations.

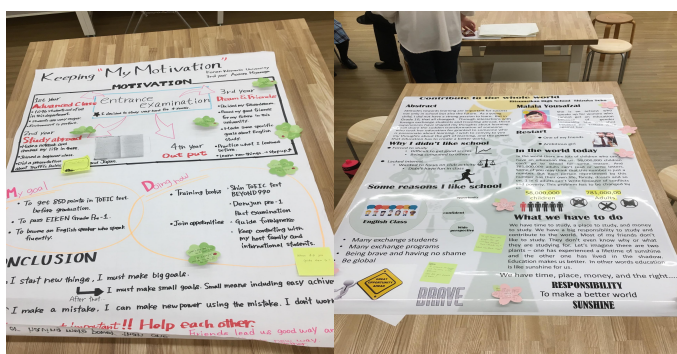


Gallery Walk

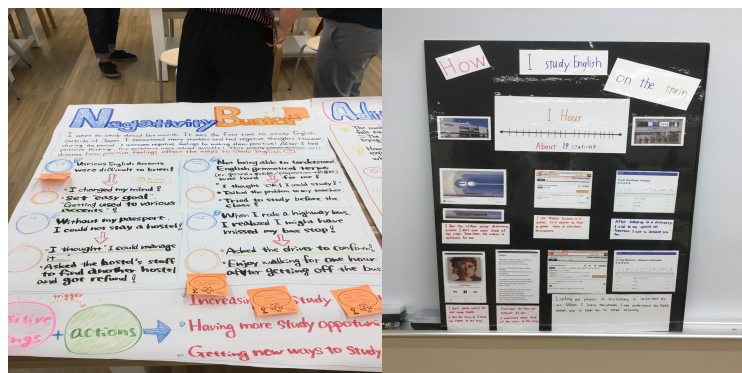
The conference was divided into three poster sessions. The participants rotated every 6 minutes to new posters, allowing them time to listen to most of the presenters. At the end of each rotation, participants were able to ask questions. Next, students formed groups in a reflective activity to discuss what they learned or what they found was the most helpful or most interesting.



Participants engaged in the poster session



Posters designed by students



After the poster session activity, students had a chance to enjoy cake and relax before doing a one-minute Pecha Kucha about their poster in the Main Auditorium in front of the participants at the ILA Conference. Sharing the students' voices with all the attendees at the ILA conference gave everyone the chance to listen and reflect on learners' diverse perspectives on language learning.

To conclude the conference, student presenters were given certificates of achievement and a group photo was taken at the end. ILA participants were invited to look at the posters and have further discussions with the students. Also, student presenters were asked to write a 500 to 2500 word paper for the ILA Conference Proceedings.



Presenters at the Learners about Learning Conference
September 2018

Student voices

After taking part, students filled out an online questionnaire (see Appendix A). However, in the future, it would be better to do a paper-based questionnaire to ensure that we get everyone's response after the conference. The survey results confirmed our sense at the time that the participants rated the conference as excellent and

very good. In addition, they were extremely likely to recommend a friend to participate in a future conference held by the LD Kansai Get-together Group.

Many students said that they were inspired by other participants. Many university students commented how they enjoyed having the high school students participate because they learned a lot from them and they wished that they had had the same chance when they were that age.

As always, students offered some good advice for the next conference. They would like to have more time to give the presentation. They would also like to have more non-presenting students to participate in the event. Furthermore, they would like to encourage more university students to present about their projects and research. Overall, the results were positive and gave the organizers some food for thought when they plan the next event.

Reflections

The student conference organizers as well as the ILA Conference organizers reflected on the success of the student-centered event by email. Everyone was impressed by the quality of work presented and the level of engagement the participants had throughout the conference. Since the students were able to share their personal experience with language learning, the interaction between students and teachers seemed more relaxed and meaningful.

Some of the challenges of the conference were finding participants. Since the conference was held during the summer vacation, many university students were not able to participate. In the future, we need to publicize the event better by using Facebook or contacting the publicity chairs of the Kansai Area JALT Chapters so that more students can take part.

The Kansai Get-Together Group is also exploring the possibility of having a student-led conference. This would give students the occasion to plan and

give a conference. The teachers involved would give support with the facilitation of the event.

Our closing thoughts and looking to the future

The Learners about Learning Student Conference was a great way for students to strengthen presentation skills, build confidence and form new friendships. They had an opportunity to inspire and connect with other students as well as get feedback about the work they presented.

It is the hope that we can hold the conference again from next year and find other schools at both the secondary and tertiary level to participate. They would like to increase the number of participants and get more teachers involved. It is clear that the conference offered a rich learning experience for all participants. In addition, having a joint conference was very beneficial to all participants.

Overall, this year's conference could not have happened without the tireless efforts of Steve Brown, Ann Mayeda, Hisako Yamashita, Agnes Patko, Katherine Thornton and Ann Flanagan and the hard work of all the participants. We look forward to using the feedback we received and applying it to the next student-centered conference in 2019.

Reference

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Appendix A

Learners about Learning Student Conference at Konan Women's University Feedback Survey

Dear Participants,

Thank you very much for participating in the Learners about Learning Student 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 Gender Neutral

High School 1st Year / 2nd Year 3rd Year / 4th Year

University 1st Year / 2nd Year / 3rd Year / 4th Year

Graduate Student Exchange Student

How likely would you recommend this event to a classmate?

not all likely -----* -----* -----* -----* extremely likely

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 could be improved 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?

	extrem ely	very	somew hat	slightly	not at all
lunch	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
ice-breaking activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
gallery walk	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
poster and discussion session #1	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
poster and discussion session #2	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
poster and discussion session #3	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
pecha kucha	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. Did the conference fulfill your reason for coming?

☐ Yes, absolutely

☐ Yes, but not to my full expectation

☐ No

8. Which topics would you be interested in learning about or presenting about at a future conference (Learning Languages, Global Education, Global Issues, Local Issues, Human Rights Issues, and so on)?

9. Which month(s) would be the best for you to join a future Student Conference?

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

Thank you very much for participating in the Learners about Learning Student Conference.

We greatly appreciate your feedback. It will be very helpful when we plan next year's event.

The Learners about Learning Conference Organizers