

# Reflections on the Independent Learning Association (ILA) Conference 2018, September 5th – September 8th, 2018, Kobe, Japan



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Academics attend conferences for many different reasons: to meet like-minded colleagues from all over the world, build a professional network, or present their ideas and work; the main reasons for us to go to conferences are to expand our knowledge and keep up with the latest research. Furthermore, as (language) teachers, high quality teaching is important for us to grow as professionals and individuals and to be reflective and informed is also vital for the success of our students. The *ILA2018* conference, *Whose Autonomy? Voices and Agency in Language Learning*, tackled exactly these issues by urging us to critically reflect on the collaborative and dialogic nature of learning and teaching, and think about the different voices engaged in autonomous learning environments from the classroom and self-access centres to virtual learning environments. The conference organisers, Steve Brown, Ann Mayeda, and Hisako Yamashita from Konan Women's University, Kobe, did a tremendous job in putting together a varied and inspiring programme, encouraging us to appreciate others' voices and, at the same time, making our voices heard.

The three-day conference offered everything from the academic programme, including symposia, workshops, talks, and plenaries as well as sharing and poster sessions. For those who already arrived on the day before the conference, three annual JASAL SAC tours provided a unique opportunity to visit local self-access centers in the Kobe area. In addition, the two parallel pre-conference workshops by Joseph Tomei, Kumamoto Gakuen University, *Towards an L2 metaphor pedagogy:*

*multimodality and the EFL writer* and Maria de la Paz Adelia Peña Clavel, School of Language, Linguistics and Translation-UNAM, *Teletandem language learning right out of the box*, were a stimulating way to get started with the conference. This successful day was concluded by the official welcome reception on the premises of the university.

The following days offered a diverse conference programme, including a broad range of topics related to the conference theme. To mention a few, presentations on learner dialogues, flipped classroom environments, effective discourse, collaborative professional development through digital media, such as video games, in foreign language learning, were only some of the many aspects touched upon during the conference. The sheer number of presentations would make it impossible to review each contribution to the programme individually and in great detail. In the following, we will therefore concentrate on two of the plenaries, the student conference, one workshop as well as one individual presentation held at the conference, pinpointing the general direction of the event.

In their joint plenary, *A Collaborative Reflection on Our Professional Journeys with Learners' Voices*, Leena Karlsson and Chika Hayashi gave an insightful example of how they promote the development of their learners as teachers and counsellors. Opening an authentic dialogue with learners and sharing their own personal stories, they encourage learners to find their own (inner) voices (Hayashi & Karlsson, 2018, p. 33) both as

language learners and as individuals. In this respect, learner development means supporting learners to start a reflective journey in a creative and personal way, for example, through life stories, creative writing or art work, enhancing awareness of their unique individuality in a “parallel process” and mutual relationship between learners and teachers as co-learners (ibid.). Leena and Chicka’s preparation of their talk is a unique example of such a reflective journey as the “textual friendship” (ibid.) they developed through their virtual and textual communication illustrates.

While engaging in this kind of learner development, Leena Karlsson and Chika Hayashi also pursue research, drawing on narrative inquiry to shed light on how language learning can become transformative. Their plenary was much more than passing on knowledge and raising questions as they let the audience participate in their very personal “process of re-storying [their] professional pasts as practitioners, researchers and persons” (ibid.: p. 34).

In the last plenary of the conference, *Hearing Voices: Collectivoids and Agency in the Language Classroom*, James Lantolf introduced the audience to recent developments in sociocultural theory and to preliminary considerations on how these developments offer new approaches to language teaching and learning. Starting with the assumption that autonomy and agency can be considered as synonymous, Lantolf stressed that individual agency is inseparably connected with the sociocultural environment in which it occurs. As individuals, we are all formed by the sociocultural rules we learn to identify from our childhood onwards. In this indivisible dynamic construct of individual activity and society, the sociocultural environment is the source of our development as individuals. Drawing on these premises, Lantolf advocates promoting L2 agency in the language classroom through developmental education. From this point of view, learning and teaching are inseparably linked in a dialectical continuum, aiming at a balance between mediating conceptual knowledge and promoting use of this knowledge to act as authentic individuals in the L2.

For the first time, JASAL included a student conference “Learners about Learning”, organised by Ann Flanagan and Agnes Patko, with the support of Katherine Thornton, which gave local and international students the opportunity to talk about their own individual learning experiences. The posters prepared by the students showed a variety of learning pathways and strategies and stimulated a fruitful discussion. The innovative structure of the conference as well as the dedication of both the organisers and students turned it into a unique experience.

One of the workshops we would like to describe here in more detail is the workshop by Satoko Kato and Jo Mynard, who was also the third plenary speaker of the conference. Language advising is a powerful tool for learner development. Taking up the topic, their workshop *Practical advising strategies for promoting reflective dialogue*, illustrated the principle of their approach to Transformational Advising. Drawing on their long experience as language learning advisors at the SALC of Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), they introduced the principles of their approach to advising and let the participants practice some of the strategies to promote learners’ reflection and metacognition. To support the learner trajectory from getting started to becoming aware towards transformation, they identified four essential steps in the advising process: 1) prompting action, 2) broadening perspectives, 3) translating awareness into action, and 4) assisting transformation. Thus, the learner is at the heart of the advising process, experiencing that their voice is important in a personal and professional relationship of mutual respect and trust. Although specific to the advising context, some of these strategies can also be adopted in the L2 classroom, promoting transformation in learning.

The presentation by Yoshio Nakai (Doshisha University), *Learner autonomy as socially constructed agency: Eva’s language learning history*, focussed on tracing the Japanese language history of a student from Hong Kong. The presenter showed in a very hands-on way how social

interaction is conducive to the development of learner autonomy and how the learner herself attempted to become aware of what Nakai referred to as her “ideal L2 self” through social interaction. The digital media, such as the video game *Doko Roko*, used by the student during her learning process, illustrated the multifaceted role that digital media can nowadays play in the language learning process.

In addition to the theoretical and luckily often very practical as well as interactive events, the conference offered a varied social programme, including a Sake tasting and a dinner at a traditional Japanese *Izakaya*. During the final sharing session, one of the student assistants said that she had lately experienced a lack of

motivation during her studies but that interacting with some of the participants and experiencing the vivid atmosphere at the conference has given her a new push. It is comments like this which show us how important it is to listen carefully to each other’s voices. We can only say that we deeply enjoyed attending such a great event. It was great to hear so many new voices and to listen to our own voices from a new and fresh perspective.

## References

Hayashi, C., & Karlsson, L. (2018). A meeting of hearts and minds. *Learning Learning*, 25(1), 32-35. Retrieved from <http://ld-sig.org/learning-learning-25-1/>

## Reflections on ILA 2018

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This was my first time to go to an ILA conference, and I thoroughly enjoyed the experience. In April this year I started a new teaching job, and going to Kobe for ILA2018 was a refreshing break for me ahead of the Autumn semester. The thought-provoking title of the conference—*Whose Autonomy? Voice and Agency in Language Learning*—had me thinking long and hard about the meaning of **voice** and **agency** and how important they are within the development of autonomous learning processes. The way the conference was organised also led me to reflect on individual learners and how I can help them make choices and take responsibility for their learning. I felt encouraged to find new ways in my work to promote autonomous learning inside and beyond the classroom.

One of the main takeaways from ILA2018 for me was the importance of advising and reflective dialogue to help learners develop autonomously. In her plenary titled *Supporting Learning Through Dialogue Within and Beyond the Classroom*, Jo

Mynard talked about the importance of advising which she emphasized is the most powerful tool for helping students as it can facilitate meaningful learning beyond the classroom. She touched on Kato and Mynard’s (2016, pp. 9-18; see also Mynard 2018, p. 28) *transformational advising* approach that goes beyond simply giving learners hints and tips: It supports them through a process of intentional reflective dialogue that aims to promote deeper critical reflection on learning and lead to major shifts in thinking, improvements in learning, and learner autonomy. Later on in the conference, I attended Kato and Mynard’s workshop on *Practical Advising Strategies for Promoting Reflective Dialogue*, where participants had an opportunity to do some face-to-face practice advising sessions. Working in pairs, we enjoyed trying out various basic yet very practical strategies such as **repeating** and **summarizing** what a learner has said, focusing on the learner’s **tone of voice** and **words expressing emotions**.