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Building learner resilience in the classroom: A conversation with Judith O'Loughlin, plenary speaker at JALT2018

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Judith B. O'Loughlin has taught in K-12, adult education, and graduate university TESOL endorsement programs. She has also consulted and taught for U.S. federal and state grants to train ESL and Special Education teachers. As a consultant, her focus is on standards-based differentiated curriculum, collaborative teaching, and newcomers with interrupted education. She is the author of the Academic Language Accelerator (Oxford) and co-author of Students with Interrupted Formal Education: Where They Are and What They Need (Corwin).



On the Monday morning of the JALT 2018 conference in Shizuoka this past November, I was fortunate that plenary speaker, Judith O'Loughlin, was willing to chat with me about resilience and how to nurture it in the classroom. We touched on several topics but the most meaningful to me are included in the short excerpt below.

Listening to Judith's plenary at the JALT International Conference in Shizuoka, it was apparent to me that two powerful factors in the promotion of resilience in any context, both the personal and educational, may be: first, having a positive attitude and second, having a safe environment in which to grow. In her many years as a teacher mentor/ educator in the ESL context, Judy has worked with several students who come from tough communities or unstable home lives and others who have linguistic challenges learning English as a second language. Confronted with a variety of stressors such as these, practicing resilience becomes very important for her students if they are to succeed both in the classroom and in life itself.

I am interested in how resilience might come into play in my context: the tertiary level EFL classroom at a private university in Japan. While my students may or may not have adverse personal lives, I feel Judy's ideas about resilience could be explored in the classroom and prove to be helpful for university students both as learners of English and also on the personal front. For example, Judy spoke of several classroom models used to promote resilience. Grotberg's (1995) 'I have / I am / I can' framework can be used by educators to help each individual learner pinpoint support in their immediate community ('I have~'), inner strengths ('I am~'), and abilities ('I can~'). She also mentioned Soto's version: the 'I have~' / 'I will have~' model, which she describes below:

Judith O'Loughlin (JO): Mary Soto of the Department of Teacher Education at Cal State East Bay University, California did it when she was teaching high school. She uses a lot of her ideas from when she taught high school to work with pre-service teachers. So that they can visually see what the strengths are that they have right now and how they will move the things they don't have yet into the 'I will have' area. Using visuals is important. It's not just cerebral but seeing things. So in your life you think about all these things you need to do. For me, making lists of things I have to do and moving them from what I have to do to I've done them, that visual helps me a lot.

Gretchen Clark (GC): I like the way you frame it so it's positive. There's nothing 'I can't' do. It is 'I will' be able to do this and it implies that I can't do it right now, but there's a hope when you frame it that way.

JO: Yes and you want to do that. I mean you do that with your own children, your spouse or your significant other. You're always encouraging them. You're praising them for what they've done and you're looking forward to being able to do, their being able to do more.

GC: Right. So at the end of the day to be resilient you can't really focus on what you can't do. You just have to push forward.

Later in the interview, after recounting a personal story about how she handled her father's hospitalization and struggle with heart disease, we discussed the stressors she experienced with balancing her desire to be by his side but also care for her children. Armed with coloring books and crayons, she took her children to the hospital and accomplished both: Her children participated in his care by drawing him pictures. It was then she realized that a potentially negative situation had seamlessly turned into a positive for everyone involved. She remarked, "The positive is what makes you become resilient. Not looking at something from the negatives." This personal story helped me understand the powerful connection between positive thinking and resilience.

Using Soto's model, it would be easy for a classroom EFL teacher to encourage students to think positively about their L2 learning by having them reflect on and pinpoint strengths skills or abilities they already possess. Drawing attention to these positives and providing opportunities to practice and excel, with guided reflection included, could be integral to the promotion of resilience. It could be a useful reflective tool to use at the beginning and end of the term as a way for learners to track changes in their development. I like how the model forces students to consider what they already have in their life that is a support ('I have ~'), but also invites them to envision their future support system ('I will have~').

In my classroom, I might change the model to 'Now' / 'At the end of the term' and have students focus on abilities. I feel the 'Now'/'At the end of the term' phrasing would still capture the essence of the model but also make the meaning more concrete for my lower proficiency students. It also seems fitting to keep the model centered on learning topics rather than any personal issues as some students may not want to share information with classmates about their home lives.

For example, at the beginning of a course, my students could make a poster outlining their current perceptions of their English abilities ('Now'). They might note the skills they are most

Now...

proud of, highlight recent episodes of language learning success, or describe any abilities on the 'Now' side. On the 'At the end of the term' side, they might write any language learning goals or abilities they hope to hone. The students could share their ideas with each other as a relationship building activity. Then, the poster could be revisited midway through the

term and again at the end to help each student track her/his language learning progress. As part of a portfolio, this activity may prove to be a simple, concrete, yet effective, way for students and teacher to get at the heart of who each student is and who they want to be. In the end, the poster created during activity might well serve as an excellent multimodal account of L2 progress and help foster resilience should any learning stumbling blocks occur.

Another way teachers could cultivate resilience is by providing emotional support. Judy spoke at length about the importance of teachers getting to know students and their families. Cultivating trust with all members of a learner's support system helps build communities where young people feel safe to grow. Here she related a story of a primary school age Korean child and her family that had immigrated to her community in California and the obstacles she faced as the girl's ESL teacher:

JO: They lived across the street from the school. The mother was the chief caretaker. The father was very busy with business. Their daughter was literally afraid to speak and she did not talk for almost three years. She didn't talk in the classroom. She didn't answer questions. By the middle of the second year it was apparent that she had gained a lot of receptive language and that she really understood what was going on in the classroom.

And observed on the playground, the young girl could interact with minimal language with other kids. The mother also was so worried about her and that made this cycle of 'the mom's worried and so the kid was anxious and then she didn't speak'. In that situation I went with the mother to a social worker and talked about how we can help the mother stop enabling her daughter to be silent.

GC: So as a teacher what were you doing in your classroom to make, to try to get her to speak?

JO: I paired her with another student when we had activities and so they worked together.

GC: Yes, at least in the university I find that all of the onus is not on me to make my students resilient. I think they get a lot of support from their classmates. It's what they say to each other. In my discussion classes we practice "Oh that's a good idea", which gives the other person confidence to speak up more.

JO: I think they do that in elementary school too. Of course, it depends on the classroom teacher and also the ESL teacher but if you can create the idea of a community, a community together, I think it's a really big thing.

While I don't have contact with my students' families, classroom community building is possible and could promote resilience. To me, honoring both the successes and failures of a learner in a safe atmosphere is a practice that would benefit learners. Connected to this, Judy described a 'morning meeting' activity in which both teacher and students begin the day by conversing with each other about any worries or stresses they may be feeling. This activity could humanize classroom relationships and thereby create a safe classroom environment where students cultivate confidence. I recently tried this simple activity with a small upper intermediate Speaking class at a women's university. I participated as well, relating some stressors I had experienced that morning getting my five-year old to daycare on time. We all had a good laugh and I felt better equipped to start a long day of teaching. I remember feeling how wonderful it was to connect on a personal level with the students before any serious language learning tasks had begun.

In sum, as I revisit my discussion with Judy, I am struck with how important resilience is for our daily lives both in and out of the classroom. While sometimes hard to practice, with support from others and a positive attitude, we can and will succeed in some capacity. The end result may not materialize as one imagines, but in the end we are stronger and better equipped to handle any kind of hurdle. Finally, as a main adult figure in a student's life, it is important for teachers to provide a place for exploration of the self, help learners learn from mistakes and ultimately cultivate a sense of resilience and drive to tackle any obstacle, be it connected with learning or otherwise.

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Reference

Grotberg, E. (1995). *A guide to promoting resilience in children: Strengthening the human spirit*. The Hague, Netherlands: Bernard van Leer Foundation. Retrieved from <https://bibalex.org/baifa/Attachment/Documents/115519.pdf> What I learned from my first conference