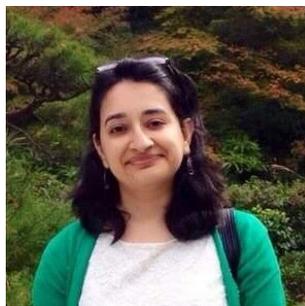# LD SIG GRANT AWARDEE REPORTS | LD SIG 研究助成金受

Exploring Learners' Abilities to Improve Their Language Learning:
An Interview with Anubhuti Chauhan

Andy Barfield, Anubhuti Chauhan, & Hugh Nicoll

Anubhuti Chauhan (University of Tsukuba, Center for Education of Global Communication; email: <anubhuti.chauhan@gmail.com>) was awarded a Learner Development Research Grant in 2019 to investigate the learnability of the Japanese case particle *wo*, as a basis for formulating learner strategies for effective acquisition of grammatical items, and for creating effective study materials as well as support for learners to develop their own strategies for effective language acquisition.

Anubthuti sees a key area of learner development as providing learners with insights into language use that may be used when they monitor their language production from a meta-linguistic perspective. In discussing ideas for her research grant report for *Learning Learning*, Anubhuti mentioned that her research project had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and that she had faced difficulties and delays in gathering data for her proposed study. How might we explore connections between Anubhuti's research focus and individual learner development practices and experiences? Andy suggested doing a Google doc interview in which Anubhuti might share some of the dilemmas that she was experiencing with getting her research done, as well as talk through how she saw this kind of research relating to learner development—and what she makes of learner development itself.

Here we take up the dialogue with Anubhuti at the point where it moved towards becoming an interview in Google docs ...

... Anubhuti: Thank you so much for your input and suggestions. An exploratory dialogue sounds promising. To be honest, I have more questions than answers at this stage!

Andy: Great! A possible starting point could be your own linguistic repertoire—your own range of linguistic resources, and significant experiences you have had with learning and using language yourself?

Anubhuti: I come from a multilingual country where people often speak three languages and are adept at code switching. At school, I was taught Hindi, English, Sanskrit and Bengali and some of my friends even elected to learn Spanish. My major at university was Japanese language ... but having said that I should confess that I am not someone who would be considered "a natural" when it comes to picking up languages. I struggled with Sanskrit and Bengali at school and learning Japanese didn't come easily.

Andy: I am fascinated by how you grew up multilingually with Hindi, English, Sanskrit and Bengali. Would you share with us how you experienced that language diversity in your life? Within your family and home environment what were the main languages, and in which one (or ones) did you first become literate?

Anubhuti: I think it would be fair to say that I was essentially a monolingual Hindi speaker with limited exposure to English until primary/junior school. I recall being asked by my parents' colleague once about why I couldn't speak English even though my parents were both English news editors. The reason was simply that they always spoke Hindi at home. Not only did I communicate with family and friends in Hindi, I also went to a Hindi-medium school where English was taught as a separate subject. However, this shifted when the medium of instruction changed to English in junior high/middle school. Cable television made inroads in India around the same time, bringing increased exposure to English programs and films. English slowly became the language I thought in and engaged with my peers in. By the third year of high school, I was no longer taught Hindi in school and had little to no reason to read or write in Hindi. I still communicated with my family in Hindi but the repertoire of words shrank and was replaced with English vocabulary. In other words, my language shifted. From being a Hindi speaker with a limited understanding of basic English, I became an English speaker whose mother tongue was Hindi.

Andy: It's interesting that English eventually came to displace Hindi as your main language. What stands out for you about this shift? Did it, for example, involve code-switching or translanguaging for you?

Anubhuti: Well, it was only towards the end of High school that I became conscious of the shift, perhaps because it took place over a number of years. Another reason can be that urban Hindi speakers (including me) freely use English words in everyday speech, and expressions created from a fusion of the two languages are quite common, especially in popular culture. For this reason, it is difficult to clearly tell whether L1 or L2 is dominant in a Hindi-English bilingual speaker. The basic rule I followed when code switching was to use the language I felt the other person was most comfortable in. What was interesting was that predominantly monolingual Hindi speakers would respond back in Hindi, but bilinguals would respond back in English, even if they preferred Hindi. This may have been out of consideration for my language preference. Another pattern I noticed over the years was that I tried to use Hindi as much as possible with family and close friends, often to express a sense of closeness, but switched to English when making an argument or chatting about shared interests of a global nature. Even though my dominant language is English, Hindi triggers a stronger emotional response, which is typical in the case of a L1 dominant bilingual.

Andy: Interesting … you also learnt Sanskrit and Bengali at school?

Anubhuti: Yes, in Junior high/middle school as part of the "Three-language formula" recommended under the National Education Policy (see Gupta & Bhaskar Sharma, 2019, for a recent discussion of this). Unlike Hindi and English where we read different texts and explored our understanding of the content, the focus of Bengali was learning to read and write and that of Sanskrit was grammar. Both relied heavily on memory, and opportunities to speak these languages was limited to intra school recitation and elocution competitions. As can be expected, I never reached a level where I could carry out conversations in either language, and the experience left me with the belief that I wasn't good at learning new languages.

Andy: And you later moved on from believing that you were a poor language learner in deciding to study Japanese as your major at university?

Anubhuti: Strangely, yes. I suppose it was because even though I didn't see myself as a natural at learning new languages, I believed it to be a skill anyone could acquire and that it would open doors to new fields. As I progressed along the course, I became increasingly aware that a number of skills go into learning a language and it is possible to

lean on one's strengths to overcome the weak areas. Since I process written language better than spoken words, I relied on analyzing strings into processable chunks and self monitoring to compensate for not being good at learning by ear. Abandoning the notion of a "perfect language learner" and figuring out what works for me helped.

This also helped me choose my major. Not knowing what to specialize in, learning a language allowed me to study culture, history, linguistics, literature and current affairs (though with a narrower scope of Japan). I have changed my research field thrice (from Japanese society to Japanese literature and finally to linguistics and Japanese language education), which was possible because of my language background. So I feel like I have made the decision to study Japanese not just when I first began but on many occasions since.

Andy: That's such a fascinating journey that you have been on in learning and studying Japanese. Thank you for sharing your personal story of language development. I wonder if we could also talk about your story of learning to do/doing research…

Anubhuti: In many ways, I am still learning to do research, but the first research paper I wrote was when I was enrolled in the Japan Studies Student Program (日本語・日本文化研修留学生) program at Nagoya University. The program focused on developing language skills, one such skill being academic writing. Useful as learning this technical skill was, I feel I learnt just as much by seeing how my classmates approached their projects. What made the biggest impression was that many of the questions being explored stemmed from personal experiences and it helped me see research as a dynamic activity sustained by the researcher's engagement with their environment.

Over the years, I have also come to realize the importance of autonomy in research. By autonomy I mean freedom to work in one's area of interest as well as being able to manage or direct one's research. Though both refer to having personal agency, I feel the former is often influenced by factors external to the researcher whereas the latter is to do with internal factors.

Andy: Could you share an example or story from doing your own research here of the kinds of questions that you have found engaging to research—as well as perhaps some puzzles or dilemmas that doing research with learners/for learners poses for you?

Anubhuti: I guess if I had to boil it down to one sentence, I would say my main interest lies in exploring how language learners' ability to learn a language may be improved. There can be different approaches to this and I feel an important step towards this goal is to study learner language.

Andy: This may seem rather impolite of me, but I'd like to bring in Hugh at this point to take over the interview with you, as we had agreed at the start. Many thanks, Anubhuti, for sharing so much of your own life story up to this point.

Anubhuti: Many thanks, Andy. This was a great opportunity for me to reflect on my experience. I will continue thinking about how it connects to my research even after our interview is complete.

Andy: Pleasure—I've also learnt a great deal with you and from you—thank you so much. Over to Hugh, now, to continue the dialogue with you. Hugh welcome!

Hugh: Thank you! Anubhuti, hello—the concept of "learner language" does indeed get us closer to the questions I see as central to learner development research. The first thing I want to know is "Who are/were these learners?" I look forward to reading more about the particular learner language puzzles you were inspired to study and research.

Anubhuti:. Hello, Hugh. It is interesting that you asked "who *are/were* these learners?" because this group has expanded with time. I first became interested in this topic when I began teaching Japanese language in India. So the

learners were predominantly undergraduate students ranging from basic to intermediate level and extremely motivated as they believed learning Japanese would lead to a better future. Being highly motivated, they were active learners both inside and outside the classroom but often struggled with how to study effectively. For this reason I tried to figure out what learners found easy to learn and therefore did not require as much class time, and what they struggled with and therefore required special attention. For example, the *toritate* particle '*made*' which is usually introduced at the intermediate level was relatively easy for Indian learners who not only understood it without explicit grammar explanation but correctly used it in written production tasks. On the other hand, learners struggled with the genitive case particle '*no*' and often overused it. Knowing such usage patterns equipped me to provide feedback which in turn helped learners to monitor their Japanese more efficiently and catch their mistakes. However, useful as this information was, learning it through experience takes time and though I have since found multiple sources that shed light on this very question for Japanese language learners, I found almost no data on Indian learners. This made me curious about whether Indian learners had similar usage patterns as other Japanese language learners or whether there were any patterns unique to Indian learners. Up until my PhD, I only focused on L1 Hindi speakers as this was the dominant language group in India, but in order to be able to answer these questions, I also need to explore usage patterns of speakers of other languages.

Hugh: Could you share your research plan, goals, etc. including the time frame of what you have done, are doing, plan to do in exploring your puzzles? The more narrative in form, the more our readers can learn from and share in your explorations.

Anubhuti: My study focuses on the usage of particle '*wo*' that marks the object of transitive sentences in Japanese. Indian learners had often voiced their difficulty with particles in class, and I found this was supported by the data on Indian learners in the Teramura database on learner misusages (https://db4.ninjal.ac.jp/teramuradb/). I selected '*wo*' out of theoretical considerations. The use or absence of '*wo*' is an indicator of how learners perceive the meaning of the verbal phrase. If learners use '*wo*' then they see the noun it is attached to as an object acted upon by an agent who performs an action out of their own volition; this object typically undergoes some form of a change. The absence of '*wo*' means they judged the verbal phrase to lack any of the aforementioned properties characteristic of a transitive sentence. I approached the problem from a cognitive perspective based on prototype theory. The prediction is that learners would be more likely to correctly use 'wo' for prototypically transitive sentences, that is sentences that included all the properties mentioned above, and increasingly less likely to select it for sentences that were further away from the prototype. The degree of transitivity (how transitive a verb is) is the key factor but I also took familiarity, proficiency level and mother tongue influence into account.

Hugh: Wow—researching "how learners perceive the meaning of the verbal phrase" strikes me as highly abstract and highly challenging. Could you also include any of your learners' or research subjects' voices as you develop such a narrative? One of the main aspects of our focus on learner development (and associated modes of research writing— action research, exploratory practice, critical pedagogies, etc.) is focusing on learners' experiences, puzzles, questions, and reflections on those experiences, whether the narrower focus on the research topic itself is on a more humanist-framed theme such as learner identity or on a more technical aspect of linguistic competence that might be categorized as more familiar to language acquisition researcher/practitioners.

Anubhuti: Broadly speaking, I have conducted two surveys that mainly targeted Japanese language majors in the undergraduate or graduate program at an Indian university; all of them being L1 Hindi speakers. The first one was a grammar test designed to measure the learners' knowledge of particle '*wo*', and the second was a survey of their written compositions. Though neither of the two surveys were conducted with the express intention of exploring learner experiences, I would like to share some of the responses which I received from the participants during a follow-up interview where they described their thought process while selecting particles.

When asked the reasons for their particle selection, many participants reported that they "thought in Hindi, and translated it to Japanese" because "in most of the cases it shows the same nuance or meanings as Japanese". There were two points that interested me here. Firstly, the participants were Hindi-English bilinguals but none of them reported using English when thinking about particles. This may be because of explicit classroom instruction where they are often taught Japanese grammar in comparison with Hindi, making this strategy familiar and hence easy to fall back on. Or because they were thinking about the problem in their dominant language and didn't code switch while deliberating. Secondly, the selected particle matched its Hindi equivalent only in cases where the learners were consciously zeroing in on the Hindi marking. They did not use this strategy when translating a test question either partially or whole in order to explain how they interpreted its meaning. In such instances, participants indirectly deliberated about the transitivity of the sentence by considering aspects such as whether they saw the noun as an object or not, what kind of an action it was (possessive verb, reciprocal action etc.) or the intentionality of the agent. However, this strategy was not as frequent and less developed. Participants were thinking about the features related to transitivity but not sufficiently enough to lead them to the appropriate particle. Given the fact that transitivity was a strong factor that influenced grammar test results for all proficiency groups, and that errors related to L1 diminish as the proficiency increased, I feel that providing information about transitivity would prove useful in supporting learners formulate strategies and monitor their language use. I should also add that, though not as frequent as the above two strategies, participants also gave reasons such as "I learned it as a fixed expression", "I read a sentence using this verb in a Japanese novel", "I considered (similar) expressions such as XXX"*, which shows the importance of familiarity or input. (*As mentioned, Indians are prolific code-switchers, and quoted responses have been translated from a combination of English, Hindi, and Japanese, often within the same sentence.)

For my current research project, I conducted a similar grammar test with Persian L1 learners of Japanese in order to answer whether universal or language specific factors are at play. I collaborated with a faculty member in the University of Tehran as we surveyed over 700 Japanese verbs from the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) and their corresponding Persian equivalents, and created a grammar test that took both JLPT vocabulary level and Persian influence into account. We were hoping to conduct the test in March 2020, but this was when the pandemic caused a nation-wide lockdown in Iran and we were forced to postpone our plans. We eventually carried out the tests online in September and are currently conducting a statistical analysis of the results. Though the number of participants was smaller than we had initially planned, the University of Tehran is the only institution in the country where Iranians can learn Japanese which makes this data of particular interest. What I can say from just the raw data is that Persian learners responded very similarly to Indian learners, which in this case may indicate that learners are more sensitive to transitivity as a factor over mother tongue. I am hopeful that the final results will help shed light on this issue, and I plan to continue collecting data from other L1 users, in particular of languages that are linguistically distant from both Hindi and Persian.

Hugh: Anubhuti, Andy joins me in thanking you for sharing the fascinating story of your journey from multilingual language learner to language teacher and researcher. Even though we don't have space in this interview to explore your learners' points of view in more detail, we are grateful for the ways you have shared your detailed forensic focus on the Japanese language itself, as well as what I can only describe as the deep puzzles of how learners perceive meanings in their grammatical contexts. We will conclude by wishing you the best of luck in your ongoing and future research efforts.

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Learner Development Project Grant Report.
Enhancing the affect towards EFL in elementary schools through a storytelling project: Literacy and learner development (Part II)

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Overview

In Part I of this Project Grant Report, published in the previous issue of *Learning Learning,* I shared my research journal entries documenting the development of a storytelling project at Hoei Elementary School in Fukui City during October and November 2019. I highlighted elements of the project's foundation, exploring the then current learning environment with a focus on needs assessment through surveys and observations. In Part II, which documents the final months of the project, I transition towards the project's implementation, sharing with you how storytelling can take shape in the elementary school classroom with a focus on collaboration with staff and reflection.

Children's Storytelling Project Journal: December 2019 and January 2020
(Update as of February 20, 2020)

With the final storytelling projected for February, I spent December and January focused on preparations. I wanted to find an appropriate text to use for the storytelling, so I found myself exploring other opportunities for storytelling to provide me with concrete evidence for the best approach. To highlight, I introduced *Tomorrow's Alphabet* by George Shannon in a 4th grade storytelling session to deepen students' understanding of the alphabet, while also creating an interactive opportunity for students to engage with the text collaboratively with their peers through a quiz activity. Familiar words were chosen and divided among 8 groups, with one letter each, and each group worked eagerly to answer and discover the appropriate vocabulary. Not only did this activity pique students' curiosity about the remaining letters, but also the book was used as a vehicle to create natural communication among students as they built their vocabulary together. These observations were critical to my choice of an effective and appropriate text.

The particulars of choosing an appropriate text

The children's books purchased for the project were based on their applicability of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) approved Course of Study at elementary schools, which spans the 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th grades (MEXT, 2017). Depending on the purpose of the activity, whether that be the introduction of a set of vocabulary, or familiarization of English sentence order, the texts would ideally need to be adaptable across various grades and skill levels. For instance, a text that seems appropriate for a 3rd grade classroom speaking level may very well benefit the reading level of a 6th grade classroom.
In deciding which text to use, it was important to keep in mind who the text would be read to and by whom. Furthermore, would the project be conducted with the children in one class or between students from multiple classes? It is also worth mentioning I explored the possibility of senior students reading to students

in lower grades with the aim of showcasing the students' improved English proficiency. This would give younger students a glimpse at the learning and expectations of English class.

Another crucial consideration about which text to choose was its availability outside school, either at the library or the bookstore. As part of this storytelling project, the book, *Shh! We Have a Plan* by Chris Haughton, was purchased. The title was recommended to me by staff at the local library for its repetitive narrative, short sentences and interactive language. Because of the positive reaction to the book, I considered choosing a title by the same author. *A Bit Lost*, also by Chris Haughton, was not familiar to the students, but includes natural and meaningful dialogue, and according to one member of staff at Hoei who read the book to her own children (pre-elementary), the content could be easily understood. In this book, Haughton continues with his animal theme and exposes students to adjectives describing size, shape, look, and so on. Currently, it is only available in local bookstores (with an accompanying CD); however, I am hopeful this title will soon find its way into the public libraries in Fukui.

Determining the right audience

After some consultations with teachers, it was decided that the 6th grade classes would read to one another. Until the end of March 2019, the current 6th graders had been studying in one classroom as one class. It was only in April 2019 that the class was divided into two sections, 6-1 and 6-2. Throughout the year there has already been several examples of the students performing together as a unit, and this reading project would serve as another opportunity for such collaborative work. The intention was to encourage multimodal learning, with a heightened emphasis on metacognitive and socio-affective skills. The project would also hopefully serve as a good memory prior to completing their term as elementary school students. Neither class is taught by a licensed English teacher; however, one has developed skills in English, showing strong signs of teacher self-efficacy. This aside, 6-2 was chosen as the focus group for the activity where a licensed English teacher conducts their English classes. An English language teacher can provide specialized assistance in pronunciation and analysis of the content that another teacher may find burdensome on top of executing the project. This was ultimately the deciding factor for choosing this group of students to conduct the storytelling.

Framing the details of the storytelling implementation

Once we decided that 6-2 would provide the storytelling to 6-1, we needed to formulate a timeline outlining the progression of the project. Teacher responsibilities and student outcomes were specified. The English teacher and I determined that four weeks would be given to adequately analyze the text and support the students before the final storytelling. Ideally, the roles would be reversed, and students from the control group would complete a storytelling to the other students in a similar four-week project. This would require, however, more time and funds for further reading materials. In addition to a collaborative project within grades, the value of 6th graders imparting their knowledge to younger grades, as mentioned earlier, should also be considered as a future project.

According to the questionnaire conducted in November 2019, many teachers expressed a desire for assistance when implementing a storytelling project in the classroom. Half of the 10 teachers surveyed expressed a strong need for "help in either the preparation or the implementation of the activity." I decided that using Reflective Practice Records (RPR) could provide support for teachers who may be willing but unsure of the process involved in creating such a project and have the potential for enhancing future projects. This

project was not conceived in isolation, but with the intent of future, regular implementation, either in a similar context, or across various grades. Therefore, I suggested that both RPRs and in-class observations would provide clear feedback about the project to other teachers. At times, two teachers would be observing the students' progress through their own observational documentation, in addition to receiving feedback from the students directly. Student progress can and was attained through a reflective report, which is completed at the end of each English lesson, documenting self-reflection on one's learning, describing in detail what was learned and what skills are required to move forward in one's learning. Furthermore, the project has considerable advantages for teacher learning as well, encouraging staff members to observe the progress of students. In any case, a record of the students' learning and the specific implementation details of the project would support teachers' needs and prepare teachers for their own projects.

Implementing storytelling in various contexts

A project of this scale serves to benefit both the teachers and students involved in the 6th grade curriculum. Moving ahead, the project could also serve well to reach a greater number of students through a school assembly or school play. At the beginning of each school year, students are assigned to cross-grade groups, called *niko-niko fureai* at Hoei elementary school. I would recommend students connecting in such groups, working alongside others with various skills, knowledge and experience, encouraging collaborative work rather than simply top-down learning, which has been the focus of other previous research projects (see Mourão, 2017; Waddington, 2020). The individuals within the groups are familiar with one another and would certainly benefit from storytelling, conducted either by the school staff members, as I mentioned earlier, or by the 6th graders themselves. As an extension to developing literacy skills among students, finding the appropriate platform to support their learning can, in effect, contribute to the support of metacognitive and socio-affective skills, not only through individual reading, but also by collaborating among others, adapting the stories into plays or contributing to students' positive experiences with reading.

The teachers were interested in knowing the potential of the effectiveness of their practice within the project. Thus, a further questionnaire aiming to identify five factors of self-efficacy towards English language education was developed, which identified the individual mastering of EFL, their experience in modeling from others, self-modeling experience, the influence of their learning environment, and finally the individual physical experience within the classroom (adapted from Zheng, Liang & Tsai, 2017). Disseminating the questionnaire periodically throughout the project would compliment students' *Good Job Card* reflections and their learning through structured self-assessment.

Children's Storytelling Project Journal: February 2020 Update March 6, 2020

I distributed the developed student questionnaire regarding self-efficacy towards EFL prior to the start of the storytelling project, with a follow-up planned for post-storytelling. Furthermore, the teacher in charge of conducting the project was encouraged to self-evaluate and reflect throughout the process, bearing in mind the sustainability of the project and for the development of teacher learning associated with implementing storytelling projects within the classroom. To assist with this process, a reflection card was developed, which was submitted by the English teacher after each storytelling project lesson. Three lessons were conducted in the storytelling project before the schools were required to close due to the concerns regarding the spread of the Corona Virus causing the COVID-19 disease. Unfortunately, the students were unable to conduct the final stage of the storytelling and as such the follow-up student questionnaire was not distributed.

While I believe the evidence of implementing effective storytelling in elementary schools was achieved through this project, I am left with several thoughts regarding the greater development of literacy and learner development in early language learning. As an assistant language teacher, I had a unique perspective on this project, which could not have been achieved were it not for the willing collaboration between the homeroom teachers and staff at Hoei elementary school. I was given a lot of freedom in conducting this project, which may not be possible at other schools or at the municipal or prefectural level. While concerns regarding literacy are a common discussion among teachers, I have found that the incorporation of English literacy in the MEXT approved Course of Study is inconsistent with this view and may still be in its emerging stages. However, I am confident that teachers' awareness towards storytelling has been greatly enhanced and that this project has successfully contributed to diversifying students' literacy and language development.

With every large project there is always a team working behind the scenes making sure everything is going ahead as planned, keeping the project on schedule and assisting in the fine-tuning of the details. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the LD SIG Grants Team for approving and accepting my project proposal back in the Spring of 2019. Since then, I worked closely with the editorial team who offered me invaluable assistance in writing thanks to their diligent and meticulous work. Their support has given me confidence in my writing and has reminded me that writing itself is an ever-improving process, which I will continue to strive for in my future endeavours with the LD SIG. Thank you all very much!

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