

STORIES OF LEARNING AND TEACHING PRACTICES |

学習・教育実践の成功談・失敗談

Mini-interview on Learner Development and SIG Membership Matters

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Andy writes: Inviting SIG members to take part in different LD activities has been part of my role as SIG membership chair the last two years. Recently I started asking some LD members if they would be interested in doing a mini-interview for *Learning Learning*, around their learner development interests. The idea is that such mini-interviews could be written, video-recorded, or both. Emily replied that she would like to do a mini-interview, and towards the end of October she generously wrote about her work and different learner development practices that she has been exploring.

In what follows I include some of the possible prompts for such a mini-interview. Emily then takes up some of those questions around her experiences of working as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) for Niigata City Board of Education in elementary and junior high schools in Niigata City.

Andy: *Emily, thank you for stepping up to help with LD SIG membership. I think you know all the ropes pretty well already as you have been doing membership for Niigata chapter and also assisting Melodie Cook (JALT Director for Membership) as membership liaison for JALT, and I hope we have a chance to talk another time about membership ideas. I also wanted to ask you whether you'd like to do a kind of guided mini-interview or reflection in writing for the 2023 autumn issue of Learning Learning. This would be a chance to explore such themes and topics as:*

1. *Where you work*
2. *What kind of learners you work with*
3. *Something interesting or puzzling about your learners*
4. *A small story of surprise or change for you about learner development*
5. *What interests you about learner development in your work*
6. *Some enduring questions or puzzles you have to do with learner development*
7. *Who (past teachers, different learners, particular writers, ...) or what (certain incidents or experiences, particular classes, certain pieces of writing or discussions with others, ...) have been particularly important for you in developing your (learner development) practices and/or your understanding of learner development*
8. *Particular discourses or theories of learning that you are interested in, and how they help you in thinking about and developing your practice*

9. An (incomplete?) reflection that you'd like to share about something to do with learning and learner development

and so on ...

The idea is simply for you to write a little, and then I'll respond, and then write a little, and so on. It would be great if you wanted to (and no problem at all if you'd prefer not to!).]

Emily: *No worries! I'm sorry to hear that you're stepping down. I'm glad you're still in the team so I can ask you about publications! I'm also happy to contribute to the mini interview. Let me know if you have time for a Zoom call next week ...*

Emily writes:

1. Where you work

I am an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) at Niigata City Board of Education working in elementary and junior high schools in Niigata City.

2. What kind of learners you work with

I work with younger learners aged from 9 to 15 years old. I sometimes do volunteer teaching online with undergraduate students.

3. Something interesting or puzzling about your learners

Students have a very different way of learning these days. They have the internet with all the answers at their fingertips, but not everyone takes charge of their learning the same way. For example, most of the students that I teach are totally reliant on information in the textbooks and rarely elaborate or expand on the topic at their own time. In a unit on the civil rights movement in the USA in the 1950s and 1960s, the textbook would touch on coloured people being black, and present race in terms of white people and black people only. How racism is portrayed is so much more than that such as the "Stop Asian Hate" movement that emerged in the USA as a response to Asian American discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I try to bring a different perspective to the classroom if the teachers allow me to do so. A good activity idea that worked with some classes was to show students black and white pictures of famous black people and ask them to guess what their jobs were. They got them completely wrong (e.g., some of my students thought Louis Armstrong was an optometrist just because he wore glasses in the picture). The point of the lesson is to let students become aware that you cannot judge someone by how they look. That kind of activity carries a lot more impact than being dependent on information in the textbook as it connects students with more real-life situations. While the topic is heavy for my students who do not come across foreigners outside school very often, giving them that fuel to start their own fire of curiosity is so important—something I feel that many teachers have the ability to do in their classrooms in order to encourage their students to take charge of their learning.

4. A small story of surprise or change for you about learner development

I am new to this field of ELT, which is why I joined this SIG. I got interested in learner autonomy and how much I can foster this in the classroom as an ALT. When you do not visit your schools as regularly as the Japanese teachers, you have to find different ways to let learners set goals for their learning,

understand the time frame you have in order to achieve those goals, and find out how to encourage habits like doing your own research.

I see my students typically for one class a week, so it is a challenge to follow up on their progress. It even came to a point where I would not touch the textbook when I was asked to prepare any activities. Relying solely on the tablets¹, using guided writing, and encouraging students to express their opinions then became my style of teaching.

Some teachers who are comfortable with creating reflection sheets digitally would use tables that track progress every unit, while others still rely on the traditional paper-writing method and compilation of reflection sheets in files. I learned a lot from my teachers in terms of how they set the goals for their students as every school has different levels of English proficiency. In a way, these differences were a surprise for me as a new teacher at that time.

5. What interests you about learner development in your work

How learner development also co-exists or is influenced by culture is something I find interesting. From working in different schools and teaching students of many ages, it is normal to not want to raise your hand in class to volunteer answers. Being communicative is a skill that needs to be taught during lessons that have speaking components. This also includes non-verbal skills like body language, eye contact, and using gestures which students do not usually think about when speaking English because it is a classroom activity rather than a life skill. What drives me in my work about constantly encouraging students to express themselves, reflect on their progress, and how they felt after challenging themselves in speaking tasks is seeing how much they have grown from Day 1.

6. Who (past teachers, different learners, particular writers, ...) or what (certain incidents or experiences, particular classes, certain pieces of writing or discussions with others, ...) have been particularly important for you in developing your (learner development) practices and/or your understanding of learner development

I work well with teachers who provide me with opportunities to experiment to discover more about students. For example, how they respond to a different kind of reflection sheet (e.g. moving from ones written on paper versus digital ones that they can easily access as long as they have their devices with them) or when they are given new tools to practice the vocabulary they already know. It takes a while to gain this kind of trust, which is why I believe in the importance of building rapport as you understand how your learners learn.

Sometimes it takes doing an activity to understand your students' opinions. Another idea that came up was during one of the lessons where upper elementary students were learning about jobs. The students seemed to have the idea that a certain role is attached to a particular gender. For instance, police officers are males and nurses are female. This taught me a lot about my students' exposure and their community they belong in. The police officers that visit the school are normally males, and the school nurses are females.

Prior to making the activity, I interviewed around eight teachers asking them what their dream jobs were when they were in elementary school. I found illustrated pictures of all the jobs but in order to avoid gender bias, I found male representatives for them. The students were asked to match the names of the teachers to the pictures to what they thought would be the teachers' dream jobs. After reviewing the answers, many students matched the more male-dominated jobs to the male teachers,

¹ Elementary and junior high school students across Japan have started using tablets in school from early 2021. This is an initiative under the Global and Innovation Gateway for All (GIGA) school project by MEXT to digitalize education.

and the female jobs for female teachers. They were surprised at some answers, such as how female teachers wanted to be a tax collector and adventure guides, which they thought were jobs for males.

Ever since then, I have been inspired to include more of these activities beyond the textbook wherever possible.

7. Particular discourses or theories of learning that you are interested in, and how they help you in thinking about and developing your practice

I have always been interested in multiple intelligences and implementing 21st century skills in classrooms. Given that the multiple intelligences theory proposes that every person has different modalities of intelligence at varying degrees rather than identifying intelligence as a single ability, I want my students to know that they have options to explore, simply because the curriculum that they rely on does not contain the latest information. As we know, textbooks date easily and even more so in these digital times. There is no one right answer to everything. Therefore, having the right skills to develop those intelligences is also important. Some students enjoy drawing, while others prefer to talk about games using English. Building skills such as presentation skills and communication are also what I think are not explored as much as they should. As a millennial, I value the digital aspect of learning and how to put yourself out there in the world.

8. An (incomplete?) reflection that you'd like to share about something to do with learning and learner development ...

Prior to joining the LD SIG and doing research, I did not know how to phrase my experiences from a learner development point of view. I am glad that volunteer opportunities within JALT and attending conferences, workshops, and sharing sessions have given me more insight to the work that I do. This is something I have spoken to you before—recognising that the English I grew up with is a part of a variety of Englishes and is local to Malaysia. For example, we Malaysians tend to ignore the “th” sound (ð) in “this” and use “lah” in our sentences to emphasise a point. It has been so rewarding to learn about the English that I speak and my roots in the process. As a teacher guiding her learners throughout the academic year, while it is my duty to guide them on their path of success, my own learning journey as a teacher is equally important and relevant.

Emily: Thank you so much for the opportunity to be a part of this mini interview. It was a pleasure talking with you!

Andy: Thank you, Emily, for being so generous with your time and with sharing your practices and interests to do with learner development. It has been a great pleasure talking with you too!