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Reflections of JALT 2022: The Case of a Deer in a Village A Post-Conference Report for Learner Development (LD) SIG

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“*Bagai rusa masuk kampung*”¹ is a Malay proverb which translates to “Like a deer entering a village.” The proverb is used in my country, Malaysia, to describe the feeling of being surprised or amazed when you enter a new place, as deer are almost never seen in residential areas. One can only imagine how it feels to walk into an unfamiliar environment until they actually experience it. For example, moving to a new country or joining an event for the first time where you know no one. I was like that deer at my first and last in-person JALT International Conference in Nagoya 2019 before the pandemic hit. At that time, I was a new Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) who knew little about what such a language teaching conference would entail. I remember being mostly alone, struggling to make decisions on which sessions to attend, wondering what all the academic jargon meant, and deciphering the abbreviations of the JALT SIGs’ names (I still do not know more than half of them).

Not long after the 2019 conference, news of a highly infectious virus sparked the pandemic. You may remember that many institutions scrambled to move their curriculum online. The following two JALT international conferences (2020 and 2021) had the same fate. During that virtual period, I volunteered as a Zoom room host and plenary team member. This was where I got to know more JALT members and had opportunities to present and attend events from the comfort of my workspace. Although it was not all a bed of roses because of the inevitable technical difficulties, I gained a wealth of knowledge from the JALT community and the different practices in language teaching. Then, I got to know about the LD SIG and became a member.

Fast forward to November 2022 when I attended the 2022 conference at the Fukuoka International Congress Center. Thanks to the financial support provided by the LD SIG and the grants committee, this trip marked my second time visiting Fukuoka. I was thrilled to be back knowing that the bustling port city is also home to Dazaifu Tenmangu—the shrine of learning, culture, and the arts. It is an especially fitting location for a language teaching conference. Meeting people whom I have collaborated with online but have not met face-to-face yet was quite an experience—one that established a unique way of networking given that we have gone past the barriers of being strangers beforehand virtually. Upon reflecting on the conference, referring to the Malay proverb, I am relieved to say that I am no longer as lost as that poor deer in the village. Instead, it is thrilling to be in a community where I am continuously learning new things while sharpening the skills that I possess.

Among the sessions that I attended, Karen Hill Anton’s plenary truly struck a chord. When the LD SIG editors first briefed me about this conference report, I was not sure where to begin writing, despite having read some of the previous reports in their publication, *Learning Learning*. However, Karen’s storytelling skills about her cross-cultural personal journey not only stimulated writing ideas, but also moved many in the room with her authenticity, and received a standing ovation at the end. The following day, she told us at her memoir writing workshop that even the little details

1 Pronunciation: /bəɡaɪ ruːsə məsəʊk kɑmpŋŋ/ or バガイ・ルーサ・マソック・カンポング.

have the ability to bring a story to life, and identity is what makes someone's story a story. She reminded me of Elaine Horwitz², a researcher in language anxiety who “wanted to encourage teachers to be their authentic selves in the classroom” (Gregerson & MacIntyre, 2022). Even though Karen is not a language teacher herself, there were a great deal of takeaways from her life's journey as a writer and coach which can be applied to language learning. For example, the power of storytelling and utilizing aspects of memoir writing in developing writing skills like structure, themes, giving your story authority through your voice, and sharing meaningful experiences. These are the essential ingredients that I would love to use to guide my students in writing not to pass their exams, but to write for themselves.

If you know anything about my country Malaysia, you should expect food references to be brought up at some point in this report. This year's conference theme “Learning from Students, Educating Teachers—Research and Practice” reminds me so much about food. This reminiscence came from Dr. Jim McKinley's plenary session on supporting the teaching-research nexus, highlighting the growing divide between researchers and teachers. The light that shines upon real classroom learning is being dimmed by present innovations and the enterprise, amplified by emergency remote teaching solutions from the pandemic. Another example is how journal reports written by researchers are not an entire reflection of the real classroom. My interpretation of his session is about two different kinds of cooks. Firstly, researchers are like people who cook from recipes—following specific techniques written by various sources. These days, there are online recipes in which there are people who have tried the recipes and alternatives they have found. One can gain an abundance of knowledge from this interaction and scanning through multiple recipes before actually making the dish. This sounds strangely like literature reviews and methodology, does it not? On the other hand, teachers are similar to mothers and grandmothers who cook according to how they feel. Instead of relying on measuring cups and weighing scales, they are aware of the process of cooking itself—the experience, the aroma-filled kitchen, and the ability to adjust flavors as they go. It is from the heart and instincts in the moment. That is how the classroom is. Teachers listen to their students and adjust lessons according to their goals. It is not to say that one is better than the other, but rather that they are complementary if their roles could inform each other and create meaningful relationships.

Other than ensuring their students' success, teachers also strive to establish their own paths in education. Like the harmony of spices in a pot of curry, it is important to engage in discussion with other teachers, even ones who do not teach the same level of students. That is what I received when I visited the LD SIG forum. There were many presentations with posters, various teaching contexts, and new ideas shared. I particularly remember Katherine Song's presentation on using Scrabble Go with her students. Scrabble is a game that you can play with your family and friends to pass the time. How Katherine turned it into a classroom activity involving teamwork to support autonomy was intriguing. This is not only a meaningful way to involve learners through simple games, but also to allow them to engage with the language that they are learning. Teachers, as Katherine shared, can guide students in the game and apply the words learned in another activity such as making sentences. It is also possible to add additional rules such as only playing words that you know the meaning of. I thought this was a good opportunity to introduce pronunciation to add another layer of speaking skill development. During the reflection before the end of the session, my group discussed other games that we can bring to the classroom such as Boggle, a word game with lettered dice. It brought back a lot of memories from my school days, making me realize that it is essential that we remember the basics and where we started. Now, with fun board games, we can involve our learners and support them in paving their own language learning journey.

Besides plenary sessions, forums and official JALT meetings, I also attended some regular presentation sessions. One of them was Aaron Chao's who shared about Foreign Language

Anxiety (FLA) and online learning. Coincidentally, this is what my Master's research is on, although speaking anxiety is my focus. Given that the pandemic put face-to-face learning on hold for some time, institutions like Aaron's took their exchange programs online. It was interesting to see how his participants felt in terms of their anxiety levels after they had experienced the program considering FLA has been widely researched in in-person classrooms and its online sector is still limited (Resnik, Dewaele, & Knechtelsdorfer, 2022). There were other factors to consider as sources of anxiety such as being in a cross-cultural environment and the variances between the class structures. To measure the participants' anxiety levels, he used the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), which has been modified for his research context. In FLA, this scale is popularly used among other language anxiety researchers and has been modified and translated into more languages over the years (Russell, 2020). At the end of the session, I had a short discussion with those in the room about how the scale needs to be modified to fit more current teaching contexts. Teachers move with the times, and even faster when the obstacle comes in the form of a global pandemic. It is through this discussion that I realize that we are not alone in our fields and that we have support for not only our students, but ourselves as educators.

After the 2022 conference, I felt a certain fullness that I had been looking forward to since the end of 2019. With that, I would like to thank the LD SIG grants team again for the financial support that allowed me to attend the conference in-person in Fukuoka. The grant also allowed me to prepare myself for the conference by purchasing two books that I will forever treasure: *The View from Breast Pocket Mountain* by Karen Hill Anton, and *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* by John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth. My heartfelt appreciation also goes to Ken Ikeda and Hugh Nicoll from the LD editorial team for their guidance in writing this report. I would like to acknowledge Gretchen Clark, Namiko Tsuruta and Robert Dykes for providing their valued feedback during the report writing process. Finally, a big thank you to the conference committee and all the other attendees I have had the pleasure of becoming acquainted with for your enthusiasm, likemindedness, and friendship. I conclude with two quotes from Karen's book, which perfectly sum up the whole experience.

Gatherings of friends and family around the table are my happiest and most satisfying moments. Good appetites enhance the experience. (Anton, 2020, p. 282)

At some point in my journey, on a day I never noticed, I found a golden thread, a thing of beauty that, though it cannot be seen, connects us all. (Anton, 2020, p. 283).

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Reflecting on PanSIG 2022

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During the train ride to Nagano after work, where PanSIG 2022 was to be held, I started to think about the conference theme - “Reimagining Language Education.” Looking at the conference introduction in the handbook and on the conference website, I saw that the words “eco-(friendly),” “inclusivity/diversity,” and “mindset” appeared alongside “hybrid,” which made me think that this “reimagining” would be multi-faceted and went beyond the new way of delivering conferences and lessons. Extending education to include awareness of how our actions impacted the environment was necessary because of climate change. Inclusivity while recognising diversity was also essential, I thought, in light of the tensions of the last few years. Lastly, I thought teaching learners to persevere is needed to ensure their success. With these things in mind, I attended the conference, interested in learning more. Looking back at my notes from the conference, three sessions on Saturday and the LDSIG forum on Sunday stood out.

The first was “Building an EMI Course: strategies for Critical Thinking and Student Efficacy” by Adrienne Johnson and Cecilia Smith. In this, they explained how to create a positive learning community, which they thought was essential in fostering group work. One of the ways they did so was to ask questions such as “What are you looking forward to this year?” and “What is something you want to challenge?” which their students first shared, then compared the similarities and differences between their answers and the groups as a whole. Cecilia and Andrienne also used dialogic feedback, which took the form of validation, encouragement and advice, which was a good model for the students to follow. I learnt a lot from this presentation and was reminded to spend some time creating a learning community from the start instead of rushing into the content.

The second presentation I chose was “Teacher Reflections on a Student-led Group Seminar Project” by Anna Belobrov, Ian Hurrell and Travis West. In this presentation, they described how their students worked autonomously in small groups to create a seminar that presented the for and against arguments for a world issue. After the seminar, leaders will gather the participants’ opinions in the small group discussion, summarising them in a report. What interested me about the course was that after they had conducted the seminar in class, the students could participate in an online mini-conference that was open to 3 classes in different departments. Although I had had success with the students presenting in class, I had not ever had them do so outside, so it was refreshing to see.

The third presentation was “Reframing Mindsets/Attitudes to English Use in Japan” by Ann Mayeda, which argued that an “English-user” identity could be encouraged in Japan if there was a shift in perspectives. In her talk, she shared contrasts between Nepalese and Japanese children in their willingness to communicate in English. She observed that while children in Nepal and Bhutan often came to her to ask questions to practice their English, this was rare in Japan. She thought that perhaps this was because the Japanese children did not identify as English users and, as a result, were worried too much about making mistakes. She felt it important that English learners in Japan become more involved in their learning, shift their perspectives of their identity from English learners to English users, and use English to share Japanese culture and values and collaborate with all English speakers, not just native speakers of English. It was interesting to see the contrasts between Nepal, Bhutan and Japan in her pictures of the educational environments. Although classrooms in both Bhutan and Nepal were quite resource poor when compared to Japan, the students made up for this with their enthusiasm to communicate in English. She argued that one of

the reasons for these countries' passion for English was its connections to upward mobility, which led to its use being normalised. In Japan, in contrast, English ability did not guarantee progression, and English learners found it hard to develop a clear identity as English users.

The main focus on the next day was the LDSIG forum “Challenging Conventions: Opening up New Spaces in Learner Development. The forum had a simultaneous in-person and online element. Unfortunately, as I was attending in person, my attention was drawn naturally to the presenters in the room, and I missed all the online presentations. As I was presenting in the second round, I, unfortunately, also missed Gretchen Clark’s and Greg Roualt’s presentations, which were happening simultaneously.

Dominique Vola Ambinintsoa Razafindratsimba, with the help of Fanaperana Haingo Rajaonaritiana and Volatiana Olivia Rasoanindrina via video recording, started the first round of presentations with an enlightening report on how they, as student teachers, sought to overcome the challenges they faced as they extended their English studies outside their classroom in Madagascar. Jenny Morgan followed this with her session on “Co-Creating Inclusive Classroom Spaces to Help Students Envision Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Communities They Belong to.” In this presentation, she showed how she created inclusivity in her classrooms by first recognising how diverse her students could be due to their differing funds of knowledge (Gonzales, Moll, et al., 2006), which she then used as a resource in various sharing activities. As a summation activity, the students presented how they could take action and encourage diversity and quality in the contexts and communities they belonged. Through this presentation, I saw how important it was to respect the identit(ies) each student brought to the classroom and encourage them to think about how they could each take action to promote inclusivity in their communities; it was then time for my contribution to the forum, which focused on one of the courses I taught.

My presentation described how I used the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) as the focus of an intermediate-level academic Listening and Speaking course. In this listening and speaking class, 24 intermediate-level students worked to improve academic and language skills through notetaking, sharing research and combined presentation and discussions. Over two seven-week cycles, my students would each choose an SDG to research. When they decided which SDG to investigate, I encouraged them to choose one that they felt was relevant to their studies and local communities. During each seven-week cycle, the students would first build their background knowledge, then research the SDG in their local area, interview two people they knew, and then finally investigate how local actors were helping to realise the SDG.

To build their background knowledge, I would have the students brainstorm about what they knew about the SDG. After this, they would use combinations of the words from their brainstorm as search terms in Google images; and then make a slideshow. In the next class, they would share this slideshow in pairs, which helped them to build fluency and confidence. After this, I would hold a tutorial session on notetaking skills and show the students various examples of notetaking which they would then assess and comment on in groups. Finally, I would gather feedback from the class about what they had noticed and comment with the help of a projected image of the shared example of notes. The students would then make notes on the background information from the “Why it Matters” and “Infographics” available on the [United Nations website](#), which they would then share in the next class. After making notes, I encouraged them to write short reflections about what they had read and then think about what they would research next.

In the next class, I sat the students in groups of four which I engineered to ensure that each member researched a different SDG. In two pair-sharing rounds, they would share their notes to build fluency, confidence and ownership of their SDG as the “expert” on the table. After the sharing, I would teach the students about collocations and have them select three unknown words from their notes which they would then make collocation maps with the help of an online

collocation dictionary. At the end of class, I had the students think about their local area concerning their chosen SDG and brainstorm a list of questions they had. They would then use their questions to research and make notes for homework, which they would again share in the next class.

In the fifth week, I would hold a tutorial on interview skills, where I would get the students to think about the objective of their interview, the types of questions they could ask, who they could interview, and how they would record the information. After brainstorming a list of questions, they would practice in pairs in English in the classroom and then reflect on improving the interview process. They would then be ready to interview people for homework. For this, I asked them to interview two people from different backgrounds, to get a variety of perspectives. I recommend that, for example, they could ask their mother or father and also one of their part-time job colleagues. I also stressed that even if they interviewed in Japanese, they must write an English interview summary.

Over the next week, the students would research what action in their local area was being taken. In the final week, the students got ready for their presentation. I would hold a tutorial on presentation skills, slide design and referencing to aid this. The students would brainstorm in small groups about what makes a “good” presentation regarding performance, content and slide design. They could then see examples of previous students’ slides and work together to note down the good points in terms of design and how they would improve them. They would then select the information they would include on their slides. As I wanted the presentation to be interactive, I would require the students to think of five discussion questions they would ask their small group. In the final week of the cycle, the students would work in small groups to present their findings and then lead a discussion on their topic. Each round of presentation and meeting would last 15 to 20 minutes, after which they would complete google forms to give peer feedback on each other’s presentations.

When designing the poster for the LDSIG forum, I found it hard to design one that maintained a balance between telling my story and learning and sharing it with others. In the end, rather than a single sheet, I used a set of posters that explored different course elements, which I would then use as a launching pad to learn from others. The poster can be found [here](#).

During the forum, people came up to comment and share what they had done with similar content-based courses. Many of us were working with students on global issues and thought it important for students to use English to learn about the issues in society and create a space for them to share their perspectives, which they would not normally do. We also thought it important for the students to think about what they could do to improve the situation rather than only find out about the various actors involved.

Although I had participated in online conferences during the pandemic, it did not compare to being able to participate in person. There is certainly a different kind of energy given off by many face-to-face conference attendees. And it was great to catch up with colleagues and other members of the LDSIG. As a part-time lecturer without institutional funding, the downside to attending a conference is the costs involved, which soon mount up. I thank the LD SIG and the Grants team for funding my participation.

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