

Kayo Ozawa

Kyoritsu Women's College

kozawa[at]kyoritsu-wu[dot]ac[dot]jp



## Questioning Monolingualism and Native-Speakerism through Students' Action

What can I offer as an educator, when students can come in prepared with all the “right answers” if I were to offer students access to the links to their textbook? How can students embrace the information that is in the textbook and make it their own? These questions have come to my mind as I taught a class called *Kokusai Eigo A* at a women's college. There were 25 women in this class of freshmen, and they belonged to L2 (Level 2), L1 being the highest and L3 being the lowest level, after taking a Placement Test offered by the school upon entry. In the past few years, with the spread of Chat GPT and online textbooks that promote flipped learning (Gerstein, 2013), and a new type of visual learning instead of regular reading of texts, I have come to question my role as a teacher. For their textbook, I selected National Geographic Learning's, *World English 2 (Third Edition)*, and taught a unit on Endangered Languages. In the textbook, there is a passage that deals with their [Enduring Voices Project](#), mentioning how 7,099 languages were lost in the world when the textbook was first created. Students also watched a video journal of Marie Wilcox, the last fluent speaker of the Wukchumni language. The situation has worsened with COVID-19, as shown in articles like [Losing elders to Covid-19 endangers Indigenous languages](#).

The students were asked to do short presentations on the topic of languages. The majority of the women picked lost languages, such as the Hawaiian and Ainu languages in Japan. However, there was also variety: the Yahghan language in Patagonia, the King's English in the United Kingdom, Ethiopian language, the Jeju language in Korea, and the Bo language of India. They also mentioned endangered languages in the Japanese peninsula: the Amami language, the Hachijogo (Japan), and dead languages (languages that are obsolete in Japan). I was interested in why many students chose Ainu and Hawaiian in particular, and what students wrote opened me to wide horizons in their learning.

As part of their final exam for the semester, I had students write about why they chose particular topics, and what they discovered through their research. They wrote about this as an essay in their final exams. The prompts were given beforehand so that students could prepare over the winter break (December 2023~January 2024).

[Drops: Language Learning Games](#) makes me aware of how accessible language, even the dying ones, has become to everyone through technology. To make this action research more formal, further qualitative analysis of why they chose particular samples and quantitative analysis of the distribution of languages is necessary. In their essays, there were simple answers such as “I like the animation [Golden Kamuy](#) so I was interested in Ainu Culture.” *Golden Kamuy* is one of the best-selling and award-winning Japanese manga series. The story is basically about a veteran named Saichi Sugimoto, of the early twentieth-century Russo-Japanese War, and the waning years of the Tokugawa Bakufu era (Oliveros, 2018). The manga series is about the quest to find a huge fortune of gold for the Ainu people, helped by a young Ainu girl named Asirpa. Specific focus is given to the Ainu people, their language, and natural resources given by the Kamuy, a spirit that originated

in the Ainu myth. This has shown me how manga truly is part of the younger Japanese culture, and how it can be an impetus or window to learn new languages and to see beyond our limited worlds. However, some essays were more sophisticated. Although I provide students with links to their textbooks which give them the “right answers,” I have come to realize that as their teacher I can help them with critical thinking and analytical skills. They can reflect on why a particular language is important to them. They can also see their use of English from a different perspective; they need not shy away from mastering a foreign language because of the obstacle of “native-speakerism.” These essays helped me to think of Prof. Ellen Head and Prof. Chie Tsurii’s fascinating review of Patrick Heinrich’s seminal book, “The Making of Monolingual Japan: Language Ideology and Japanese Modernity” in [The Learner Development Journal](#). Chapter 7 specifically focuses on “details of the linguistic and cultural losses in relation to Ryukyu and Ainu languages” (Head & Tsurii, 2021, p. 127). They discuss how the idea of a monolingual identity through the *Genbunitchi Undo* connects with the idea of “native-speakerism.” Students of minority cultures were sometimes punished for being different, and forced to assimilate since the Japanese governors could not communicate with the local population (p. 130). The two authors further discuss how the belief in the monolingual identity ties in with the ambivalence that the Japanese have in learning a foreign language in general. In sum, through the action research, the students seem to have moved beyond the comprehension of English passages in their textbooks to foster their awareness of other languages and cultures. Furthermore, this action research will help them question monolingualism. I hope that such action research will foster students’ awareness of other languages and cultures and that it will help them question monolingualism in Japan as well as native-speakerism, and take a positive attitude toward mastering English as a tool in the globalized world. One student mentioned how during the Meiji era, the Ainu language was prohibited by the government since “there was no merit” other than to speak Japanese to get jobs and to assimilate. Another student mentioned that the Jeju language needs to be protected since the 8,000 people killed in the Jeju uprising in Korea would be forgotten. Finally, a student mentioned how endangered languages are important because “it has the memory and the wisdom of the people who have taken root there.” It is part of our world heritage, and like other bits of memory, if it is not recognized, it will be obliterated from history. I would like to end this article with an insightful quote from Head and Tsurii that we need to keep thinking about as educators.

I see a connection between learner autonomy and a way of teaching that is orientated towards noticing and valuing diversity. On the other hand, a monolingual ideal will always tend to promote control by a central authority. If there is only one right way, students must listen to the teacher. Of course, you can get trapped in a paradox where students say “I want you to teach me the one right way.” So, I suppose the question is, how do we talk to students who have been raised with these assumptions that Japan is monolingual, and perhaps with accompanying insecurities about the possibility of learning English? (p. 131)

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**Shannon Saruwatashi**

Nagasaki Junshin Catholic University  
saruwatashi[at]g[dot]n-junshin[dot]ac[dot]jp



**Ivan Lombardi**

*Learning Learning* editorial team  
ivan[at]u-fukui[dot]ac[dot]jp



## Mini-interview on Learner Development with Shannon Saruwatashi

**Ivan writes:** Shannon joined the LD SIG recently and kindly volunteered for a mini-interview early this year. This was my first time interviewing someone for *Learning Learning*; I was nervous and my first email to her took very long to craft as a result. Little did I know that I was in for a treat. Shannon wrote back with precise and engaging answers to all of my questions and responses. Through this process, which ran from late February to mid-March 2024, we discovered common research interests and experiences that I am sure many readers of this newsletter will relate to. I hope you will have the same pleasure learning about Shannon through this mini-interview as I had!

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**Ivan:** Hi Shannon, my name is Ivan, and I am a member of the *Learning Learning* editorial team. Thank you so much for your interest in doing a mini-interview for our publication! I am excited to initiate a dialogue that will be shared with other members of the LD SIG through our newsletter. If that is OK with you, I would like to use the nine talking points below to begin our conversation.

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. A reflection (incomplete, even) that you'd like to share about something to do with learning and learner development

**Shannon:** Hi Ivan, thank you for reaching out to me. This sounds like an interesting project, and I'm happy to participate. Following are my answers to your questions.

**Ivan:** Before we begin the interview, would you mind me asking you a bit about yourself?

**Shannon:** I'm originally from the States. I first came to Japan as an exchange student, and found it hard to stay away after that. I did part-time *eikaiwa* work until I decided it was time to do my master's degree online in Applied Linguistics. At the same time I was studying for my master's, I started teaching part-time at Nagasaki Junshin Catholic University, a small private university in the hilly outskirts of Nagasaki City.

**Ivan:** Where do you work now, and what do you do there?

**Shannon:** I currently work full-time at the same institution, for the Department of Language, Culture, and Digital Studies with English Communication majors. Specifically, I teach a freshman communication class, seminar classes (4-skills, Cambridge test preparation), academic writing, graduation seminar (so I have advisees for 2 years who gear up for writing their theses in English and also learn presentation skills), Global Project (online group work with overseas students – more on this later), English Reading, Teaching English to children, and Practical English Interpretation.

**Ivan:** What kind of learners do you work with?

**Shannon:** I work mostly with university students. At our institution, we use the CEFR levels to place our students into high-beginner or low-intermediate classes. Our majors usually fall somewhere in the A2-B1 CEFR range, with a few A1 learners and B2 learners. We only have 15-20 students in each grade, most of whom are motivated to work in English or overseas; about half of our graduates go on to work in a career that will utilize English to some extent. Every year we also have a handful of students who lack motivation, struggle, and graduate at an A2 level (which is not ideal).

**Ivan:** What is something interesting or puzzling about your learners?

**Shannon:** Something interesting or puzzling is that our learners run the gamut when it comes to motivation. We are a smaller school and sometimes not our students' first choice. This naturally seems to be one reason why some study with us but lack the motivation. Then again, I do think with COVID the newer generation's general motivation and work ethic seem to have changed over the years. These students often skip class, fail to turn in homework, resort to using Japanese in class instead of English, are not as active in discussion or feedback, and just generally don't participate as much. In a lot of my classes I tailor content to students' interests in order to get them more active. Sometimes it works really well, and sometimes even with my extra effort the less-motivated students still don't take to the learning process, which makes it frustrating when I've put so much time and effort into it. Here are some examples of times it went both well and poorly. The first example is where naturally motivated students really benefited from the tailored learning, and the second example is where the less-motivated students still didn't benefit from it.

I once taught a first-year general communication class. One student asked me if I could prepare some special lessons focused on suprasegmental features such as stress and pronunciation patterns. I created a 5-week prosody course in conjunction with the vocabulary and grammar we were using

in the textbook. After that semester two of the students in my class transferred into the English department, and one even went on to become a high school English teacher. Success!

I had a four-skills class of the lowest level learners. I created lessons based on their requests (reading and pronunciation practice, specifically focusing on blending sounds), and even got them into online conversation practice with a friend of mine back home, yet they rarely did their homework and often skipped class.

**Ivan:** Is there a small story of surprise or change for you about learner development that you would like to share with us?

**Shannon:** The story about the students who switched over into the English department is still my best and happiest story. I like to think it was partly due to that five-week course, but those students, and especially the one who became an English teacher, were just incredible go-getters. In other examples, one of our strongest students to date became our first official B2 proficiency level student this winter and will go on to be a high school English teacher this April. It makes my colleagues and I so pleased. Two of my graduate seminar students last year both went on to graduate school, one in English and one in child rights, but which requires a lot of English knowledge. I'm tremendously proud of them both.

As for learner development specifically, everything about this field is a surprise at this point as I've just joined the LD SIG and have decided I need to focus more on this particular area. I should mention that I have a class every semester called Global Project. This class is an online collaboration with professors and their preservice teaching students at several universities around the world. My students take the class just for the language practice and experience, as it's one of the few classes where they are connected to other people using English as the lingua franca. The Global Project course is where I find myself focusing most of my energy. It's an amazing, yet difficult, opportunity for our students. It's a rare chance for them to use English in real conversation to work toward a common goal with peers, but the level is pretty high as the overseas students are often almost fluent.

**Ivan:** What interests you about learner development in your work?

**Shannon:** I recently joined the LD SIG because I'm curious about how I can better help my learners learn, and as such want to learn more about how to help motivate my students and give them interesting activities and tasks in which they'll want to become more involved. I really want to foster better learner autonomy and give them more power over their own learning, so that they motivate themselves and start to feel that learning is just part of their natural daily routine. To achieve this, I need to learn much more. Up to this point I have commonly used task-based learning activities and international telecollaboration in my classes, and have been trying to incorporate more digital tools as well (Canva for everything from presentations to posters to lesson plans, Google Classroom, YouTube and YouGlish for listening practice and specific examples of vocabulary in real-life, and Padlet.)

**Ivan:** What are some enduring questions or puzzles you have to do with learner development?

**Shannon:** I guess a big puzzler for me is always motivation. Learner development relies heavily on autonomy (or so it seems) and so the never-ending question is how to help my students find intrinsic motivation and unlock that "spark," and how to maintain that motivation. I would say that a third of my majors in any given grade refuse to regularly do homework or study outside of class. I can't blame them as "homework" is usually not that fun. I guess in writing this I've realized one way to motivate students would be to develop more interesting homework tasks that are more interactive and less one-sided. Another problem is that they get little exposure to language outside of school and even fewer chances to practice it.

**Ivan:** 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?

**Shannon:** Having just completed my master's degree in 2020, I would say a lot of modern "methods" inform my teaching style. I use ideas from active learning, blended learning, and flipped classroom, for example, together with task-based learning. A better understanding of learner motivation, and subsequently autonomy, has also been at the top of my to-do list. The online international collaboration I previously wrote about has also become an integral part of my research base, and in conjunction with this teacher training in general has as well. In addition, my colleagues and I are very close and work off each others' ideas quite a bit. If something is working well in their class, I might borrow it for one of my classes. I am also often inspired by my daughters' parent-observation classes at elementary school. Sometimes some of their simple, fun activities can be adapted for use at university, too. For example, I once watched my daughter and her classmates (in the first grade) prepare a self-introduction worksheet at the beginning of the school year. They then had to walk around with their worksheet, introduce themselves with the material prepared, and get a sticker from a classmate who listened to them. I now use this with my students at the beginning of each year in communication classes!

**Ivan:** Are there any particular discourses or theories of learning that you are interested in, and how do they help you think about and develop your practice?

**Shannon:** I started reading up on Mezirow's transformative learning theory through the Global Project class. Other than that, I am new to the learner development field. I would gladly take suggestions and advice!

**Ivan:** Is there a reflection (incomplete, even) that you'd like to share about something to do with learning and learner development?

**Shannon:** Last year I did a course on Exploratory Action Research, which is action research plus a reflection component. This means identifying a problem that needs to be addressed among the learners, reflecting on why it's happening, and then introducing a solution or making a change. Then, this is repeated as long as necessary, perhaps even never-ending. I think I felt connected to this concept because it not only looks at learner development, but teacher development. I feel I can't help my students with their own development unless I'm working on my own at the same time. I hope that this conversation helps me jumpstart some tasks for myself as well as my students so that we can all grow in the process!

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**Ivan:** Thank you, Shannon, for providing such good, well-thought-out answers to each point. Having this dialogue together was supremely enjoyable, and I look forward to meeting you at one of the many LD and JALT events in the near future!

**Shannon:** It was my pleasure. At first I wasn't sure what would come out of this interview, but was intrigued by the idea and am now so glad I participated. I can look back at this to reflect on my own goals and struggles as well as to inform my upcoming class preparations. This is such a fun, informative, and creative way to approach learner development. I look forward to meeting you and other members at future events, too.