

- i. Greetings and News Updates
- ii. Members' Voices**
- iii. Stories of Learning and Teaching Practices
- iv. LD SIG Grant Awardee Reports
- v. Research & Reviews
- vi. Free Space
- vii. Looking Back
- viii. Looking Forward
- ix. SIG Matters

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## Looking Back and Moving Forward: Navigating My Passion for Autonomous Language Teaching through Self-Reflection

Learning English has been something that I have been truly passionate about; however, without a supportive environment and the people, my learning journey would have stopped earlier in my life. Now, as a person who is getting ready to start a teaching career in English education, in this writing piece, I would like to share my self-reflection on English learning experiences, highlighting the challenges and opportunities to become autonomous and take the initiative in my journey.

I am currently pursuing a Master's degree in English education at Wayo Women's University in Japan, where I completed my undergraduate program this past March. My research interests include L2 motivation, learner autonomy, and self-esteem in L2 learning. I would like to explore the question: What kind of classroom environment supports students' language learning from the perspective of language learners' psychology? In addition to learning various theories, I have had multiple opportunities to observe the teaching practices in college English language classrooms as part of my coursework. I have been particularly inspired by various readings on social and emotional theories including the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2015) and Willingness to Communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998). These theories resonate with my beliefs that meaningful interactions within a supportive environment are the key for language learners to acquire their target languages effectively. Aside from my graduate program study, I recently started organizing English learning activities in a self-access learning space called the Global Lounge at Wayo Women's University. By providing a social and comfortable environment with undergraduate students outside the classroom, I aim to create active peer learning opportunities. Not only do I enjoy these opportunities, but planning and implementing collaborative learning activities gives me ample chances to apply the theories and methodologies that I have been learning in my graduate courses. I am truly motivated to gain more knowledge and experience in creating engaging learning environments for English learners in Japan.

Looking back, it is clear that my own English learning experience had a significant impact on my passion for pursuing learner-centered language education. However, the beginning of my journey as an English learner was rather challenging. When I was a junior high school student, I had never thought of becoming a language teacher. In the classroom, I was exposed to grammar-translation methods. As various researchers point out, the old-style teacher-centered teaching approach and non-communicative methods demotivate students (Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009; Morimoto, 2020). Not surprisingly, I struggled to actively participate in my English classes because there were few opportunities to work with other students and receive feedback from my teacher. I still remember the feeling of helplessness and frustration while listening to the teacher's instruction quietly, like everyone else in the classroom. Eventually, I became demotivated to learn English. Reflecting on this experience, the lack of opportunities to seek support from teachers and friends negatively affected my motivation towards English learning. At the same time, I believe, my experience is not an exceptional one; the feeling of anxiety and isolation in English classrooms has been reported in

multiple studies (Apple et al., 2013; Fujii, 2020). Even though it has been more than a decade since I was in junior high school, I believe many English learners still face those challenges in Japanese secondary education. Luckily, I could overcome my difficulties in learning English by getting support when I felt the pain of learning. When I became a second-grade student at junior high school, there was a big change thanks to my private tutor at home. She was patient, encouraging, and willing to understand my struggles. Taking her lessons, I started seeing how I might be able to use English in the future and started envisioning my ideal L2 self (Dörnyei, 2015). At the end of my graduation from high school, I decided to focus on brushing up my English skills to become an English teacher and gain sufficient knowledge as well as practical experience in English education.

Just when I was getting excited about starting a new chapter in my life, I faced difficulties that I had never experienced – the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, I had never imagined we would be forced to stay home and avoid seeing our friends. Everything shifted to remote learning, which gave me no choice but to adopt new study methods, despite the interaction limitations and unprecedented challenges. I suffered from the gap between distance learning and the aspirations that I had imagined before starting my studies at college – going abroad, making friends, and actively interacting with classmates and my teachers every day. Working alone in silence to finish on-demand tasks was far from engaging and I wanted to communicate with others and feel connections in my learning process. There were no friends or teachers whom I could trust, and I felt strongly isolated and unmotivated to learn English. I needed social connections in learning English where I could share what I had learned, receive feedback, acknowledge my existence, and an environment where we could help each other achieve our goals. Through experiencing social distancing, I realized the importance of learning environments to sustain my motivation.

While I was struggling and losing my aspirations toward English learning, luckily, I found information about an online language exchange program called teletandem on our school portal. Teletandem learning is a collaborative learning practice for language learners by helping each other through online conversation. The very first session I joined was full of nervousness and anxiety; however, it became one of the memorable moments in my English learning journey. By the end of the first term, I learned that teletandem learning is not about aiming to speak our target languages without mistakes; rather, it is about helping each other to get to know each other in-depth and help motivate each other. Moreover, teletandem learning motivated me to learn English to learn more about what my partners would like to talk about, which brought me tremendous enjoyment. This experience led me to a mindset shift from being an isolated learner to actively connecting with foreign learners overseas. I learned how important it is for language learners to surround themselves with people who encourage them to develop their language skills and pursue their goals. Every time I joined the program, I always found new perspectives from my partners and the feeling of positive emotions helped me stay motivated. By the time I completed the first term, I regained my passion for learning English by meeting people through these activities.

Not only did the experience in teletandem learning make profound changes in my mindset toward English language learning, but it even empowered me to make connections with others and take initiative in my learning community. In 2022, when we started being allowed to take classes in person, I decided to take a position as the Student Assistant (SA) in my department, aiming to encourage freshmen students to enjoy English learning. My experience as an SA was the first step in my teaching career which taught me the joys and difficulties of supporting language learners in real English classrooms. I also realized that engaging with a diverse range of students was really challenging. Some students had no confidence and others appeared slower to understand what their teacher said, compared to others. However, as I tried to have a chat with each student every week before and after the class, I gradually developed an understanding of their characteristics and needs, which allowed me to understand their struggles and the support they would need. This experience reminded me of myself, who was looking for someone who could help me with

loneliness and anxiety in learning English. Furthermore, it empowered me to proactively have a conversation with those freshmen, asking if they would like to share any problems with me and my partner SA. By doing so, the atmosphere of the classroom became much more vibrant towards the end of the academic year. I felt a great sense of achievement throughout this experience. At the same time, I felt the joy of interacting with students, building trusting relationships, and teaching English. Working as a pair, I was lucky to have a buddy SA who was also passionate about becoming an English teacher. Every week, we shared our ideas and developed effective approaches to support the group of students we were assigned to. Since we were given opportunities to run a series of workshops, we reflected on the challenges we faced in our first and second years at college and shared how to overcome the difficulties in learning English. It was a delightful moment whenever students told me they were encouraged to engage in their classrooms more positively owing to our SA activities.

Although the first half of the journey in my college life was quite different from what I had imagined, the experiences I have shared above became the solid foundation of my aspiration to pursue my future career in English education. In fact, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I could get autonomous learning opportunities through Teletandem and SA which kept me motivated and even empowered me to pursue my ideal self as a foreign language learner. Simultaneously, without the cooperative teacher and peers in and outside the school, I would not have been able to immerse myself in such an autonomy-supportive environment.

Now, I am grateful to have plentiful opportunities to think about what kind of teacher I want to be and how I want to create environments for learners. In particular, participating in the workshops provided by various JALT SIGs has been an eye-opening experience for me. Even though I am a new member of the community, I've met inspiring teachers who never hesitate to share the joy of teaching and their endeavor to create engaging classrooms. Their recommendations and teaching ideas have been truly helpful especially when I run English activities in the Global Lounge in my school. They allow me to create learning environments where students feel relaxed and can actively express their opinions and ideas in English without anxiety. I also intend to be actively involved in the Learner Development SIG as a graduate student and cultivate skills as well as mindsets through exchanges of opinions with other members. While I participated in the JALT National Conference as a student intern for the last few years, I am excited to attend the SIG forum and learn a lot of new ideas from everyone.

Although my journey as a teacher has just begun, I hope that by reflecting on my own English learning experiences, I will be able to focus on developing the necessary knowledge, skills, and mindset to pursue the best support I can provide for my future students in their learning journey. Like those who gave me positivity without any hesitation, it is now my turn to take the initiative to create autonomous learning environments and empower language learners.

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#1: a short personal profile of yourself as a learner and teacher and your interest in learner development (about 500 to 1,000 words)

学習者・教員としての自身のプロフィールと学習者の成長に関する興味 (約 2,000 字-4,000 字)

#2: a story of your ongoing interest in, and engagement with, particular learner development (and/or learner autonomy) issues (about 500 to 1,000 words)

学習者の成長や学習者の自律に関する興味や取り組み (約 2,000 字4,000 字)

#3: a short profile of your learner development research interests and how you hope to develop your research (about 500 to 1,000 words)

学習者の成長に関する研究内容と今後の研究の展望(約 2,000 字-4,000 字)

#4: a short profile of your working context and the focus on learner development/learner autonomy that a particular institution takes and/or is trying to develop in a particular curriculum (about 500 to 1,000 words)

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