LEARNING LEARNING 『学習の学習』32(I)

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Influences into Learner Development: Exploring the Gap between Proficiency and Autonomy through Language Learning Strategies

My name is Bobby and I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce myself to the Learner Development SIG. After joining JALT I was looking for a SIG that I could call home. Learner Development is something that all SIGs mention to some degree. However I chose this SIG in particular because of how accessible and personable the publications and members were. *Learning Learning* in particular resonated with me because it showcases learner development in a variety of teaching contexts. I am humbled to be able to contribute to this publication and to give some more insight on what learner development has meant to me.

Entering my undergraduate studies I never put much thought into *what* I would be doing, I was more interested in *where* I would be after my studies. That was ten years ago and the world seemed much simpler then. I simply wanted to answer the questions I had about the world. Teaching English as a means to satisfy my curiosity seemed to make sense to me at the time. I think for many people teaching English, the path just appears in the midst of too many interests and too many questions. What does sea urchin taste like? What is a copula verb? Can I learn Italian and Spanish at the same time?

The beautiful part about teaching English is that there are opportunities to explore and answer questions like these. I recently received my MA TESOL from San Francisco State University and even more recently relocated to the northernmost region of Aomori, Japan this past August with the JET Program. The small fishing town of Oma has a population of about 5,000 and adjusting to life on the tip of Honshu has been a slow process. After this seemingly backwards chain of events I predictably questioned the trajectory of my new life. In the span of a month I went from presenting my Master's thesis on *Strategy Based Instruction for Promoting Autonomy* to desperately trying to explain why the word "beach" shouldn't be pronounced with a certain short vowel sound to rowdy high school students. Nonetheless, I am certainly happy to be here and if I were to take inventory on where my interest in learner development came from I would say there were two major influences: My community college experience and the YouTube polyglot community.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND MEETING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Going back in time a bit, I was never academically gifted or considered particularly smart by most metrics. I enjoyed reading, creative writing and sports but those interests were not going to fulfill my parents dreams of me becoming a lawyer or doctor. So I found myself at the local community college with a mild interest in International Studies thanks to NHK *Taiga* dramas and a few years of competitive Karate. Community College can be academic purgatory for students. Running the gauntlet of prerequisite classes and the general slog of compulsory general education courses can be a challenge. However it serves as an important transitory space especially for English learners. In California in particular, there were students from a multitude of different countries. They were trying to get their English to a level where they could eventually transfer and tackle upper division material at four year universities. I was interested in meeting culturally diverse people so I volunteered to

tutor at the English department. This is when I realized there was a gap in transitional education for language learners. Many of these students despite having great IELTS scores and passing all the prerequisite English courses simply didn't have the skills to compose essays or decipher language used in textbooks and lectures. This observation was later confirmed through my graduate research into student autonomy.

> A major problem faced by the students in the higher education context is presenting their ideas and thoughts cohesively and meaningfully in English. The reason behind the problem is they are not aware of the strategies and the sub skills in writing. (Hartina et al., 2018, p. 2)

These strategies and sub skills involve the cognitive, metacognitive and affective aspects of learning. Teaching these skills can involve the use of cognitive strategies such as brainstorming, outlining, and elaborating. Metacognitive strategies can include exercises such as planning and self-evaluation. Examples of affective strategies include anxiety lowering exercises, self encouragement, and self monitoring.

Introducing these sub skills earlier in the English learning journey can help students become more independent. I believe that these subskills can be integrated with language teaching within the classroom. These skills I find correlate well with Language Learning Strategies.

> "Learning strategies are defined as "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques —such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task— used by students to enhance their own learning" (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, p. 63)

I believe these strategies taught explicitly can help transitioning students develop and be autonomous.

SELF DIRECTED LEARNING IN THE YOUTUBE POLYGLOT COMMUNITY

Another one of my inspirations to delve into learner development came from my own journey in language learning. Within the YouTube polyglot space I noticed a trend of polyglots sharing their strategies in depth about how to learn various aspects of languages. You may have seen these videos, some of them gimmicky, some of them advertising products, however there are some really brilliant polyglots who found methods that work for them. Many of these methods I have used myself. Applying and experimenting with these strategies has made me confident enough to speak a few languages at a conversational level. After refining my own learning process, I have used these strategies in my own academic ventures as I have seen crossover and benefits. However when I started teaching English I noticed a top-down trend where knowledge, not necessarily skills were being transferred. The explicit teaching of strategies I encountered in the polyglot community were almost nowhere to be found in textbooks or courses I've aided in.

INTRODUCING METACOGNITIVE AND AFFECTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES WITHIN THE JAPANESE CLASSROOM

Within the context of English education in Japan, I feel there is little attention paid to the metacognitive and affective aspects of learning. I feel metacognitive strategies would be easier to implement than affective strategies. There is already a consciousness around self reflection and preparation within the students. However it stems from a sort of self consciousness and their desire not to stand out in the classroom. This self reflection of their learning and behavior needs to be slightly reframed so that they recognize that their individual differences are worth exploring. Within the constraints of the top-down model there are ways to help students start to think metacognitively. Teachers can model metacognitive thinking by verbalizing their thought process or TAP (Think-Aloud Protocols) (Demet, 2010). I will share an example from my own Think-Alouds that I have done recently. This example pertains to reading dense textbook passages. I would verbalize that I am having difficulty

focusing and retaining information. During this verbalization I also convey a sense of nervousness to help identify with some of the students. I would then consider what strategies I can use to help me. Examples include reviewing the previous reading to better contextualize the current reading or writing out a list of questions that could possibly be answered in the passage to give a purpose to my reading. During this verbalization I would write the questions and strategies down and show them that organizing my own learning and thinking about my own thinking can help me overcome gaps in understanding and manage my anxiety. This is one example but I often approach a TAP from varied perspectives and learning styles. The think-aloud examples should be varied as well to demonstrate different learning styles and thought patterns. In doing this I am introducing the possibility that students can learn differently but equally effectively if they think critically about their learning.

Introducing affective strategies in the classroom also needs ample scaffolding. The pressure to excel academically in Japan is felt by many students. It is not uncommon to see students more and more fatigued the closer testing periods come. I have found success scaffolding affective strategies by providing plenty of low-stakes assignments and classroom activities. These low- stakes activities provide an opportunity for the student to compare their performance and mental clarity with high-stakes activities. An example of one of these low stakes activities includes the use of ungraded weekly quizzes. These quizzes would review the previous classes content in addition to open-ended questions to help them connect their previous learning with upcoming material. Questions such as "How do you feel today?" "What do you think we will learn about today?" "What is difficult for you?" "How can we make it easier?" The goal is for students to become aware of the link between emotional wellbeing, performance and retention. Students have the opportunity to reflect and identify gaps in their learning, then plan solutions with the teacher. This teacher-student collaboration is where specific strategies can be introduced to the student. This routine self-assessment provides opportunities for students to analyze their emotional state over time in tandem with their learning performance. Overall, I have found that in the Japanese context there are not enough low-stakes activities and assignments and therefore the opportunities to practice learning strategically are limited. I want my students to be confident and autonomous learners. Equipping them with skills to manage their learning and tolerate ambiguity is something I am passionate about.

Throughout my community college experience and subsequent teaching ventures, I have seen students become disheartened making the transition from lower division English courses and standardized tests to higher education. The qualifications and knowledge acquired while useful, often does not equip them with strategies to overcome the jump in difficulty.

I am still working on the specifics of my research focus but I would say it leans towards the "Implementation of Strategy based Instruction for Promoting Autonomy in Pre-Academic ESL/EFL Students". I believe that there is value (qualitatively and quantitatively) in explicitly teaching Language Learning strategies within ESL/EFL contexts. While there is research in the field of Language learning strategies, I would like to bring attention to the lack of long term research devoted to promoting autonomy in ESL/EFL students specifically for academic contexts.To accomplish this, it would require access to learners early in their language learning journey and similarly pedagogically oriented educators. Students should have the tools to self-regulate their language learning so that they are able to manage their future academic learning. It's important to recognize that while the level of English is higher in academic texts, that is not necessarily the barrier of entry. The barrier of entry is the lack of tangible skills needed to interact with higher level language.

INSPIRATIONS AND MOTIVATIONS

Finally, I want to mention this quote by Dr. Barry Zimmerman, a prominent scholar in the field of learner autonomy that resonates with me.

> "Self-regulation is not a mental ability or an academic performance skill; rather it is the self-directed process by which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skills" (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 65).

Learner development is a field I am interested in because there is a sort of miraculous element to it. Every learner develops uniquely and it is rewarding to be a part of that development. In my short time so far in Japan, I have had the opportunity to present at two conferences including JALT Hiroshima. I am so grateful that the JALT community is so welcoming to newcomers like myself. It is quite easy to feel a bit of imposter syndrome in the midst of these packed conferences and brilliant publications. I will say sometimes I feel as if I missed the boat to a successful career in Japan but I think I am slowly realizing that all good things take time. My future aspirations after JET are to continue teaching and researching in Japan, learn more languages and of course, see what sea urchin tastes like.

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Call for Contributions to Members' Voices | メンバーの声

Send to lleditorialteam[at]gmail[dot]com by August 31st, 2025

#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)
教育環境の紹介、所属機関やカリキュラムにおける学習者の成長や自律に関する取り組み (約 2,000 字 4,000 字)

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My name is Mark Johnson. I appreciate this opportunity to introduce myself and my interests regarding learner development. It is an area I feel strongly about personally, professionally, and academically.

I am currently studying for an MA in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) through the University of Birmingham while also teaching English at Kochi University and advising and assisting elementary school teachers in my locality. I live and teach in rural Japan, where English is not really necessary for many people's daily lives and yet is a deep preoccupation in school life. While I am employed because of this integration of English into the national educational curriculum, I am cognizant of the disinterest that many of my students have. As a result, I try to use my position as an educator to create a love of learning and a passion for inquiry and making connections. I think that language connects all things in human society, so it's an easy spot to be in.

As a language learner, I began studying Japanese as an adult in university. It started off well, with excellent teachers and a feeling of steady progression through intermediate level courses. As with most journeys, though, I experienced some challenges and frustrations along the way. The most salient was my study abroad experience, where things did not go as I hoped in many ways. I had hoped to follow in the footsteps of my Japanese TA (and language learning role-model) and take a year in Kanazawa. Unfortunately, to graduate on time, my only feasible study abroad option was to go to Tokyo for one semester. Then, when I arrived, I made the mistake of taking the school's placement test cold, without prepping or studying. The result was my being placed in an elementary level class and repeating the same content I had already studied at my home university. Furthermore, I was a country boy from Appalachian Virginia thrown into one of the largest urban concrete jungles in the world, without a mountain or cow pasture in sight.

Studying abroad in Tokyo was both a major setback in terms of motivation and learning progression, but it also gave me a reason to revisit Japan in a different environment, one with more of the natural scenery I had learned that I needed to feel comfortable. So, after returning to my university and graduating on time with a degree in linguistics and having taken a single class in teaching ESL, I joined the JET program as an ALT and moved to a place as statistically different from Tokyo as I could find, Kochi. There, immersed in a bewildering dialect and feeling like a complete novice once again, I built many relationships with local people and expatriates alike and continued my language studies, mostly on my own but with social support and camaraderie. Twenty years after starting that journey, after good and bad classroom experiences, a brief and mostly negative study abroad, and extensive and intensive self study, I consider myself to be an advanced user of Japanese. The students I teach are, in many ways, in a similar boat as I was when I started studying Japanese at university. The linguistic differences we face are the same as well, but reversed, the other side of the coin, if you will. The primary difference I think is the presence or absence of interest and motivation.

In the past five years that I have taught university level learners, I have tried to explore the patterns and tendencies of my learners' interests, approaches, and difficulties in studying English, so that I might improve their learning experiences and outcomes. During my MA TESOL studies I encountered a long list of research informed pedagogical approaches and techniques that caught my attention as potentially valuable in my context. Among these were many related to learner development: Task-based language teaching incorporating reflection and planning, language learning strategies and strategies-based instruction, formative self-assessment, collaborative learning, peer-feedback,

and peer-assessment. When thinking about learner development, I do not see learners in isolation, but rather as a community. Thus my view is of learners developing collaboratively, through interaction with each other, me, and their environment locally and, if they have an opportunity like I did, abroad. Furthermore, since the pandemic and a widespread shift towards online and hybrid learning situations, I have also become concerned about learner wellbeing, especially socially situated wellbeing, partly because this post-pandemic university learning situation might negatively impact students' capacity to develop diverse social connections, which have been connected with wellbeing in the context of Japan (Tanaka and Tokimatsu, 2020). Over the past two years, alongside my studies, I have been investigating all of these things through iterative reflective practice and surveys and follow-up interviews with my students.

I have seen some learners adopt more proactive approaches to communication and make use of communicative strategies I introduced, like asking for clarification and asking follow-up questions. On the other hand, I have also seen a few learners react quite negatively to some of my approaches. For example, I asked learners to make groups with peers of different levels. Thanks to a few vocal students' reactions in class, I realized that if I want to create asymmetric groups in terms of English level, I probably should do it more covertly to preserve students' face. Finding the balance between what works best for my students in terms of learning outcomes and wellbeing is an ongoing process. I am grateful for the feedback my students have given me and hope to keep the communication channels open, so that I too can continue to develop as a learner-researcher-practitioner.

A few questions related to learner development that I have been thinking about while reading and iterating my course design are:

* How does formative self-assessment relate to attitudes toward learning English?
* How can planning and reflection be most effectively integrated into a speaking task cycle?
* How can peer-interaction improve English learning outcomes?
* What kinds of interventions can improve peer-interaction for language learning?
* What leads to learners giving constructive peer feedback for language learning?
* What is the relationship between peer-assessment and metalanguage awareness?
* How can collaborative language learning improve socially situated wellbeing?
* How do storytelling, analog games, and storytelling games relate to classroom climate?
* How can (collaborative) storytelling games be used to foster language learning?

I have many other questions as well, especially related to my other interests such as storytelling, analog games, peer interaction, and place-based education. My dissertation topic, for example, is about the language used in and interaction surrounding collaborative storytelling games. I accept that not all of my students will love English or share the fascination with language in general that I have as a linguist. Nevertheless, I hope that I can engage them in the love of learning and making connections with each other and the world.

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Although I am not new to JALT, I am fairly new to the LD SIG and, as a new member, I have been invited to introduce myself by writing something for the Members' Voices column of Learning Learning. I work as an English teacher and researcher at the University of Electro-Communications in Chofu, Tokyo. I am a former (Associate) Editor of JALT Journal and am currently a member of JALT's Research and Ethics Committee. I am also an Associate Editor of Linguistics and Education. I joined the LD SIG partly because I already knew some SIG members and because other people from this SIG that I've met in the past seemed dedicated to such things as quality education and learner autonomy, as well as making a contribution to improving language education, so I thought I would join to see what learner development was all about. I'm hoping that my reasons for joining will become clearer with the passage of time.

My research is in conversation analysis, mostly in relation to interaction involving second language users of English, in both classroom and non-classroom contexts. The best way to explain my research is to give an example, so I would therefore like to introduce one of the research projects that I have been working on for the last few years.

In collaboration with Daniel O. Jackson and Phillip A. Bennett, I have been working with data that we video-recorded at a SALC (Self-Access Learning Center) at a university in the Kanto region. As a SALC, part of its mission is to promote learner autonomy. The data were recorded at two locations within the SALC—a coffee shop and a service counter. The coffee shop is staffed by non-student employees and sells the sort of things that coffee shops usually sell. The service counter is staffed by student employees and is a place where SALC users can do things such as borrowing study materials and gaining access to reserved study rooms.

One thing of interest that we noticed in the recorded data was that, even though English is stipulated (at least at the time that the recordings were made) as the language to be used in both locations, the default language in the coffee shop is Japanese, but at the service counter it is English. The three of us gave a talk at the JALT conference in 2023 related to this—published in the post-conference publication (English-Speaking Spaces)—in which we considered possible reasons for this, but one thing this situation illustrates is that it is the SALC users who make the language policy a reality (or not). In another publication (Sociability and Joint Attention at the SALC Service Counter), we looked at the use of small talk at the service counter. Another thing that we noticed in the data at the service counter was that, when a student user provides his or her name at the counter in order to gain access to a study room, the name is provided either as personal-name-only (e.g., "Ichiro") or personal-name-followed-by-surname (e.g., "Ichiro Tanaka"). In May of this year, Daniel O. Jackson and I will be giving a talk related to this practice of name use and the constitution of the local lingua-culture of the service counter at the CAN-Asia Symposium on L2 Interaction, to be held at Pusan National University in Busan.