

- i. Greetings and News Updates
- ii. Members' Voices
- iii. Stories of Learning and Teaching Practices
- iv. CCLT9 Reflections
- v. **Free Space**
- vi. SIG Matters

Mark Johnson, Bobby Nawbary,
Mika Osaki, Ken Ikeda, Tim Ashwell



What “Learner Development” Means to Me

INTRODUCTION – TIM ASHWELL

In this article, five LD SIG members share their ideas about “Learner Development” and what this term means to them. Given that it is the name of the SIG we belong to, one would assume we all have a clear sense of what LD refers to, but on reading Richard Smith’s article, “[Some Thoughts on the Formation of the JALT Learner Development N-SIG](#)” (1994), it becomes apparent that the term was intentionally chosen to be hard to pin down. Richard and the other co-founders of the SIG wanted a name that was not already an established term that might restrict what could be considered relevant, or exclude people who might not “fit”. Thus, Richard’s article tends to be more about what the SIG co-founders were trying to avoid as much as what they were seeking to include under this broad designation. Nevertheless, the article does mention many areas that are certainly part of LD, so by way of introduction, I have attempted to extract some of the key areas that Richard mentions in order to give some sense of what he envisaged for LD. This introduction is followed by the views of 4 current SIG members who express what LD means for them. The article concludes with my personal take on LD which includes some other key areas not mentioned or emphasized in Richard’s article. The aim of the article is to stimulate discussion around what LD is or might be, and to help people new to the SIG or people considering contributing an article to *Learning Learning* to get some rough sense of the territory covered by the term “Learner Development”. Parts that have been **underlined in bold text** are seen as some of the key terms relating to LD.

REFERRING TO RICHARD SMITH’S (1994) ARTICLE

As explained above, in his 1994 article, Richard Smith is mainly explaining why he and other founding members chose “Learner Development” (LD) as the name of the then new SIG. Essentially, they were trying to avoid something too specific and narrow that would stymie exploration. However, LD must stand for something and must either include or have similarities with other terms and areas of interest. What follows, therefore, is a brief summary of the article with key terms highlighted.

According to the article, LD isn’t only about **learner strategy training**. LD connects with **autonomous** or **self-directed learning** and it has similarities to “**learner training**”, but the term “learner development” is preferred because it assigns the learner **agency**, whereas casting learners as “trainees” tends to treat them as blank slates or empty vessels. LD therefore has similarities to the concept of “**learner independence**” and its promotion.

“**Learner autonomy**” is undoubtedly a central concern within the field of LD, but it is by no means the only area of interest. In simple terms, helping students to “**learn how to learn**” and **weaning students away from teacher-dependence** are, roughly speaking, the goals of LD. We can **empower** learners by encouraging them to take **control** of their own learning.

While LD can focus on **learning strategies**, **learning styles** and **learner beliefs**, it can also be concerned with **syllabus negotiation**, **self-instruction**, **self-access** (centres), and **project work**. Importantly, LD is seen as **embodied practice** – it is something teachers and students do; it isn’t something we just talk about!

4 VIEWS ON LD FROM SIG MEMBERS

In this section, four SIG members share their personal interpretations of the term “Learner Development”.

MARK JOHNSON’S VIEW

To me, learner development is the process of becoming a more effective learner. Since we continue to learn throughout life, growing as a learner is central to being an engaged human being. What this development entails depends on the individual’s context in time, space, and society. I will illustrate with anecdotes from my own experience. For my youngest learners in nurseries, this has entailed experiencing the joy of learning and braving the unknown. In elementary school, some concrete developments have included learning to listen for a particular goal, using and making mnemonic devices for remembering vocabulary, and learning to ask for help. For junior high school students, this often involves managing the socio-affective challenges involved with group work and also beginning to keep track of their own learning goals and progress. With my university students all of the above are still relevant, but more formalized and involving more self-awareness. As for myself as well, ever developing self-awareness and finding my own deep interests which I truly want to explore through research and inquiry have been key developments as a learner. One of these interests is the sociocultural aspect of learner development itself. That is, how the social interactions learners engage in, whether with peers, teachers, or others, affect their capacity for developing further as a learner through impact on their wellbeing, perspectives, and goals and through cultural tools such as learning and communication strategies. It seems that learner centered approaches tend to dominate this domain of inquiry, however through the sociocultural lens of Vygotsky (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978), I see learner development as inextricable from the social context it occurs in.

BOBBY H. NAWBARY’S VIEW

What learner development means to me has changed quite a bit this past year. Within my own learning journey I have found that small instances of human interaction have made a substantial impact on how I view learner development. Since moving to Japan last year and attempting to improve my Japanese, I encountered many obstacles that I did not consider as thoughtfully as I should have – obstacles that my students have faced, which were difficult to relate to until recently. I am beginning to realize how a student’s ability to frame their learning as positive or negative can have a profound effect on their future development.

I believe learner development is something we have to challenge our own beliefs about in order to, as the term describes, develop. Learner development is especially unique because it asks you to consider things you thought insignificant as significant and vice versa. One example of this is addressing learner assumptions. When I began learning Japanese I would assume I was being a burden to the native speaker I was interacting with due to my low proficiency. I was unknowingly rushing my speech and trying to save the listener their most valuable resource, time. In this way I viewed their interaction with me as insignificant from their point of view. I realized that my students may have felt similarly when interacting with me or other English speakers. There are many assumptions learners can make unknowingly that can often hinder performance and learning. I have now started to address some of these speaker and listener assumptions in the classroom. Redefining my role as a teacher, it means that part of my work should be to help students make sense of their experiences, as messy as they may be. Being able to intervene, even with the humble amount I know about learner development has been rewarding.

MIKA OSAKI’S VIEW

For me, learner development begins with motivation—the desire to learn—and the determination to keep learning over time. It is about how actively and independently learners engage in their own learning.

This belief was shaped by my experience teaching Japanese at a high school in the United States. On graduation day, one mother gave me a thank-you note. She wrote that although her son had taken my class for only one year, in his senior year, he decided to continue studying Japanese at university because he had enjoyed the class and felt inspired. That moment made me realize how much influence teachers have on students' learning journeys.

To sustain motivation, learners need both **long-term goals** and clear, achievable **short-term goals**, along with a plan to reach them. **Reflection** and **adjustment** are also essential for effective learning.

This principle applies not only to learners but also to teachers. The thank-you note from my student's mother pleased me; at the same time, it encouraged and inspired me to continue refining my teaching practice. Just as learners sustain their motivation through reflection and purposeful goals, teachers, too, need opportunities for reflection and growth to maintain their professional motivation.

Teachers play a crucial role by providing support, guidance, and—most importantly—by inspiring learners. **Helping students discover joy and purpose in learning** is, for me, the heart of learner development.

KEN IKEDA'S VIEW

Learner development to me is a student's **self-understanding** as both learner and user of a language. My primary interest is not in equipping learners with techniques. Rather, I am interested in how the learners' social environment influences and impacts their English language learning. My concern has stemmed from my upbringing and my love for history.

As the firstborn of Japanese immigrants in California and having lived there until I was 25 years old, I view language learning as loaded with social capital and positionality. I saw how much my parents agonized over their use of English. My father remained illiterate and unable to meaningfully converse in the language, therefore barred from most jobs except as a gardener. My mother could use English but was obsessed to attain ideal pronunciation throughout her life. In Japan, I view myself as a functionally literate user of the native language, adequately able to carry on my university responsibilities (now happily aided by AI tools). When I muse on these, I marvel how much students try to make the use of English their own.

An earlier discussion within the LD-SIG on **active learning** (Ikeda et al., 2019) led me to the 2019 European University Association (EUA) recommendations. These principles changed my viewpoint from being instructor to facilitator, and strengthened my regard for learners who can give me instructive insights.

I am in a position to work with students at the tertiary level which often involves thesis writing. I strive to help improve not only their English language skills and use of professional-level tools, but also become conscious of their social identities, positionality, and their audiences. I hope they will continue to carry these mindsets and practices that will strengthen their self-esteem and position in society.

OTHER INTERPRETATIONS – TIM ASHWELL

To end, I would like to add things not mentioned or emphasized by Richard Smith in his article that I think can be included within a very broad definition of LD. While it is true that LD is undoubtedly based on a **humanistic approach** to education and on **learner centredness**, one can argue that ultimately it is based on Freire's "**critical pedagogy**" and on principles of **emancipation**, **social justice**, and **empowerment**. One might even go as far as to say it is based on the recently maligned principles of **diversity**, **equity**, and **inclusion** (DEI).

Motivation and **engagement** are, of course, extremely significant in LD as are related concepts such as "**the ideal L2 self**", **second language identity**, **goal setting**, **self-regulation**, and **reflection**. Ways of enhancing motivation and autonomous learning through self-access and how to establish **self-directed learning** (SDL) are clearly also central themes. Another strand that relates to the principle

of empowerment is the development of critical thinking, academic literacy, and critical language awareness (CLA) to equip students with knowledge and skills they need to progress in society. Certain pedagogical approaches such as collaborative learning, dialogic learning, content-based learning (CBL and CLIL), and project-based learning (PBL), and certain theories of learning such as the sociocultural approach, seem to align naturally with LD's aims. In more recent years, concerns about the emotional and psychological wellbeing of students and teachers have risen to prominence in LD inquiries and the concept of "quality of life" in the classroom (QOL) has become more of an LD focus as practitioner research, in particular exploratory practice, has become part of how LD is lived and explored by more and more teachers and students. The concept of fully-inclusive practitioner research (FIPR) carries these forms of embodied practice to the next level. It follows that the links between teacher development and learner development and between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are other areas those interested in LD can explore.

Most recently the emergence of widely available GenAI tools has created a whole new frontier for LD inquiry and practice with calls to help learners develop critical AI literacy (CAIL) while preserving learning integrity.

Lastly, and by no means least, LD also tends to include the use of teaching techniques and procedures such as scaffolding and the use of learning journals to promote reflection. These techniques and procedures can, of course, themselves become the focus of LD inquiries.

Naturally, the above views about LD are personal and selective. However, it is hoped that by highlighting some key terms and areas of interest, the concept of LD comes a little more into focus and gives readers some hints about the kinds of inquiry and practice that LD practitioners often discuss and explore.

REFERENCES

- European University Association (2019, January). *Promoting active learning in universities: Thematic peer group report*. <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/814:promoting-active-learning-inuniversities-thematic-peer-group-report.html>
- Ikeda, K., Underwood, J., & Ashwell, T. (2019). Ensemble: Extended reflections on active learning. *Learning Learning*, 26(2), 43–50. <https://ld-sig.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/activeLearning.pdf>
- Smith, R. (1994). Some thoughts on the formation of the JALT Learner Development N-SIG. *Learning Learning*, 1(1), 2–4. <https://ld-sig.org/some-thoughts-on-the-formation-of-the-jalt-learner-development-n-sig/>
- Vygotsky, L. S., & Cole, M. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.