Review

2007 CUE Mini-Conference Report

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The 2007 CUE Conference, held on the 23rd and 24th of June at Sugiyama Jogakuen University, Nagoya, Aichi, offered attendees an excellent opportunity to expand their knowledge of recent theoretical and practical issues in the TEFL field. This two-day event lived up to its statement of "Promoting Lifelong Learning," drawing a capacity crowd of around 100 people with two invited speakers and nearly forty participants delivering presentations. Based around key themes such as "increasing learner motivation," "promoting lifelong learning," and "developing critical thinking," the content of the conference focused on topics that are highly relevant to the work of the majority of college and university educators today. Due to the excellent program, attendees were able to attend presentations that met and stimulated their interests. Also, Special Interest Groups (SIGS) such as LD, CUE, and GILE promoted their upcoming events and distributed recent journals, while several publishers displayed a large number of their latest books and assisted book authors with their presentations.

Day 1

On both days, two to four 45-minute sessions ran concurrently, so it was always difficult to decide which presentation to attend. John Spiri's (Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology) presentation entitled "The World at Work" attracted my attention. To start off, the speaker

engaged the audience by asking them to brainstorm the difference in meaning between the words *vocation*, *job* and *occupation*, and then he introduced his main argument that "most Japanese learners do not see the connection between education and the reality of work." To overcome this problem he has developed several teaching materials, composed of *readers* – stories of different people from several countries in Asia (Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese and other Southeast Asian states) talking about their "world at work," – and also *handouts* to help students prepare for job interviews, including suggestions for personal appropriateness, tips for interviews, and self-evaluation sheets. With comprehensible text at a conversational level and abundant information, students are given confidence in finding the kind of job appropriate to their personality. Through assignments that get students to interview people, John believes in developing students' communicative skills. In addition, this project helps learners to have big hopes for their futures, and to focus on their future professional careers.

The workshop entitled "First Steps Towards Lifelong Learning" featured talks by Suzanne Bonn, Shannon Kiyokawa, and Donovan Clarke from Sugiyama Jogakuen University. Talking about motivation, Suzanne stated that it would be useful for university language programs to consider motivating teachers in addition to motivating students. To encourage both full-time and part-time instructors to work more enthusiastically, Sugiyama has a policy of supporting new teachers, empowering them, recognizing and rewarding them, asking for their input, establishing a good network through professional dialogue and peer observations. While Shannon reported on her findings in stimulating learning, Donovan shared a classroom experience on the development of critical thinking among his students. By conducting constant self-evaluation and providing opportunities for peer observation, Shannon's teaching strategies definitely fill what formerly was an unmet need. In his short talk, Donovan gave some practical tips for getting students to interact in his class: restricting the usage of

long monologues was one of them. The variety of discussion topics and in-class activities also serve as key factors. It was surprising for me to hear that government and environment are the least popular discussion topics among university students.

The presentation by the invited speaker Professor Deryn Verity (Osaka Jogakuin College) was very informative and mainly focused on "Neo-Vygotskian Psycholinguistics: Putting Theory into Practice." The focal points in her talk were the controversial questions of "what learners can do alone" and "what becomes feasible with others." She spoke about a common episode in language teaching, where "the teacher knows what the goal of an activity is and the student doesn't." Drawing on the scheme of *teaching through interaction*, Professor Verity persuaded teachers to constantly dig into the existing knowledge in their students' brains. With this technique, learners can move from "no hope" towards "big hope" in accomplishing any language task. Having the role of facilitator, teachers need to work to get students to perform better in groups. Professor Verity highlighted that the goal of any learning process should be self-regulation, where the ultimate result is the ability to act autonomously, in the process having been challenged countless times. Any portion of new information needs to be repeated several times, until it becomes a part of the learner's automatic knowledge. She also spoke on the importance of training our students to seek help, as this is one of the well-known learning strategies. She concluded her speech by noting that "second language acquisition is a second chance to symbolize the world."

Mark Rebuck of Nagoya City University conveyed his thoughts of "motivating by authentic materials" by presenting his idea of "LEAL (level excessive authentic listening) lesson." In LEAL classes the following are privileged: comprehension levels are constantly checked; repeated playing is preferred; and students are given a good deal of time to reproduce the language they have heard. The questionnaire response showed that students find the following the

most difficult aspects of authentic materials: fast speech; unknown vocabulary; interruptions/stopping and omissions; and different accents with muffled sounds. The presenter generally used listening materials from accessible media, especially BBC Radio talks. He has also highlighted that the use of the term *authentic* compared to the one of *advanced* generates a more neutral attitude among learners and therefore, naming the course as he did builds students' perceptions on what to expect from it. In their feedback, students have also pointed to the usefulness of having a script and playing a recording several times. However, making no script available can shape another way of dealing with unexpected language. Bearing in mind the significance of minimal pre-teaching, Mark has the objective of demonstrating to learners the "achievement gap," a journey from "unable to understand anything" to "able to understand everything." He recommended that teachers conduct LEAL lessons once or twice a semester in order to add some tension to the general course.

Tetsuya Fukuda, from Dokkyo University, in his short talk "University Presentation Class: Developing a Lifelong Skill", described a recent shift at Japanese high schools and universities in the appreciation of the value of teaching presentation skills. Although the *Joho* (Information Studies) class is not a part of entrance exams, lately around 50 books have been released on *Joho Japan*. According to Tetsuya, it is a sad reality that only 40% of high school students actually take this course and, moreover, they just learn how to make beautiful power-point slides. Tetsuya's teaching method is intended to improve this situation by encouraging his students to talk clearly, to maintain eye contact, be able to use other types of visuals, and lastly, discouraging them from memorizing notes during their presentations in his class. He inspires learners to handle unexpected problems during staging.

Day 2

On the second day of the conference, being responsible for the LD SIG table and also preparing for our own presentation, I could only manage to listen to the presentation of the invited speaker, Heidi Nachi Evans. Heidi addressed the topic of "Self-assessment and Learner Development: Instrument Design and Implementation" in her talk. The goals of the workshop were to discuss the challenges of self-assessment (SA) while analyzing its forms and model instruments, in addition to applying certain frameworks to create these instruments, while at the same time, considering the support that SA offers for lifelong learning. The workshop kicked off with warm-up questions asking, "What kind of SA instruments do you use?" and "How does SA aid your instruction and/or student learning?" Rather than throwing the audience directly into the less-familiar world of terminology, Heidi prompted it to come up with personal definitions for terms such as *assessment*, *alternative assessment*, *evaluation*, *non-referenced evaluation*, *reliability*, *rubric*, and *validity*. Then the numerous purposes of using SA in academic contexts were considered. As with any aspect of the teaching process, SA faces challenges and limitations: in groups we discussed the effectiveness of SA and some shared their opinions on the challenges of designing their own SA instruments and /or using the guiding principles. At the end, Heidi introduced a very constructive idea, that of collaborative student-instructor SA style, and concluded her talk by highlighting the consequence of implementing SA in promoting lifelong learning.

Overview

The event provided an informal environment for sharing ideas and experiences. All the sessions were worthwhile attending, with speakers ranging from good to great. At the close, participants were invited to join round-up sessions and reflect on the workshops. With

several coffee breaks and a lively pizza party, this gathering helped newcomers like me get to know colleagues outside the work place and so build a sense of community.

A big round of applause should go to the organizers for their thoughtfulness on scheduling the workshops only for the first half of the second day. This might have given a chance for the attendees to have a relaxing afternoon before the start of the regular working week.

I'm sure you have many more questions about the Conference! Please look for answers in the up-coming "2007 CUE Conference Proceedings."