

Conference Review

Review of “Creativity: Think Outside the Box”, JALT 2010 International Conference

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The 36th Annual International Conference on Language Teaching and Learning & Educational Materials Exhibition was held in Nagoya’s downtown Aichi Industry and Labor Center (WINC) from November 19 to 22, 2010. This annual conference is, in my opinion, a must attend event on the language teachers’ conference calendar. The decision to hold the conference in Nagoya proved to be a good one. Everyone I spoke to found the city easy to get to by either rail or air, and the conference site was conveniently located near Nagoya station and the conference designated hotels. The venue itself is very modern and located in the heart of Nagoya city. The conference theme of “Creativity: Think Outside The Box” was inspirational as it encouraged presenters to present on topics that go beyond traditional second language teaching assumptions and to consider new techniques and methodologies.

My positive first impression from the conference location was quickly reinforced when I registered early on Friday evening. Registering the evening before the conference meant that there were no crowds to deal with. This made registration itself a breeze and gave me the opportunity to get to know some of the nice and helpful staff who were eager to provide assistance. No crowds also meant it was easy to wander around looking at what the publishers displayed or just to stop by and chat. Later in the evening, people interested in socializing before the conference officially started could attend the welcome

reception sponsored by Oxford University Press. This gave everyone a great opportunity to meet up with old friends and to make new ones.

Saturday saw the conference begin at 10:00 a.m. with Dr. Tim Murphey's plenary session "Creating Language Agencing." As usual, he inspired the audience with his optimism and clear reasoning. He discussed the need to scaffold and structure lessons when using new materials and provided examples from his classes. Murphey explained that scaffolding is important, as it enables students to build up to the point where they are "languageing"—in other words, actually creating language for real communicative purposes.

After the plenary, attendees had no shortage of presentations to choose from, with 31 concurrent presentations going on. A presentation that was particularly popular and enlightening was that by Tom Robb and Sandra Healy from Kyoto Sangyo University. They discussed the benefits, supported by two years of data, of Extensive Reading when done with MoodleReader. Robb began the presentation by briefly explaining that MoodleReader is an online reading progress tracking system that awards and tallies students' word counts for graded readers that they have read. Students receive a word count sum for each book after passing a randomly generated 10-question quiz based upon that book. Students are given a word count goal that they can meet only by reading many graded readers and passing the corresponding tests. The presenters showed that MoodleReader was successful in getting students to read more books and, as a result, improve their English test score more than students who didn't use the MoodleReader module. In fact, students not only improved their test scores, but also student surveys indicated that the increased reading fostered through MoodleReader led to significant improvement in their confidence, desire to read and enjoyment of reading.

Immediately after lunch, Niigata University's John Adamson and Howard Brown gave an interesting presentation titled, "Re-envisioning English for Academic Purposes." They discussed results of their survey

that interviewed Japanese *kiso semi* (fundamental seminar) teachers about their beliefs on what students should be learning in order to participate in the academic community. The *kiso semi* teachers largely hold similar beliefs to most native English EAP teachers, particularly in the areas of key skills development. The survey results also indicated that *kiso semi* teachers tend to make use of the same type of assignments and activities as native English speaking teachers. The presenters stated that further research is needed to discover if students are able to transfer the skills they learn from EAP to their *kiso semi* classes (and vice versa). Adamson and Brown also want to explore if such a transfer can be facilitated within a coordinated curriculum where the *kiso semi* teachers and native English EAP teachers work more closely together.

Michael Swan's presentation on the changes that have occurred in the English language over the past 50 years was very popular and quickly became standing room only. While the talk itself was not particularly useful in a practical sense, it is an interesting topic for discussion, and Swan's wit, facts and anecdotes made for an eye-opening and enjoyable presentation. Perhaps a few English language purists were not satisfied with Swan, since his purpose was to discuss how English has changed and is changing rather than to suggest a method of dealing with the change.

For me, one of the most entertaining presentations of the day was "Getting creative: Pecha-kucha," given by Aichi University's Rory Davies and Jack Ryan. Davies began by explaining what is meant by a Pecha-kucha presentation (rough translation is "unstoppable chat") by giving the audience a lively and enjoyable demonstration. Pecha-kucha presentations are simple in scope; they are 20 slides long, and each slide is shown for only 20 seconds (although they can be of any length and time duration). This 20-20 format forces presenters to quickly and clearly state their message in an interesting manner, thereby avoiding the dreaded scourge of "death by PowerPoint." Davies even said that he has his students make Pecha-kucha presentations. Ryan followed with

his own Pecha-kucha by illustrating how teachers can use the format in the language classroom to develop skimming and scanning skills in TOEIC and TOEFL classes. The only criticism of this presentation is that there really wasn't enough time, and the presenters would have made an even larger impact had they done an hour-long workshop instead.

The end of Saturday saw many of the presentations dealing with the business of JALT (and therefore most of the Special Interest Group [SIG] forums), followed by SIG annual general meetings (AGM). This actually was one of the few criticisms I had of the conference, because scheduling most of the SIG forums in the same time slot made it difficult for SIG members to go to more than one forum or another presentation. As a result, I could only attend the CUE SIG forum, which was informative and focused on providing information and ideas to CUE members who might be interested in submitting articles for the OnCUE Journal. Each section editor of the journal was there, and they discussed what they were looking for regarding their particular section.

On Sunday, presentations started at 9:15 with a surprising number of people coming to the conference venue despite the clouded heads and dry mouths from Saturday evening's revelries. Keita Kikuchi's presentation "Exploring demotivators in CLT in Japan" attracted many people, with the audience spilling out into the hallway. While most teachers are concerned with factors leading to increased student motivation, Kikuchi reminded us not to overlook factors leading to demotivation in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). His presentation discussed his research on the causes of student demotivation among high school and university students studying English. Kikuchi's results, both quantitative and qualitative, showed that student demotivation is a problem and is most often caused by the personality of the individual teacher and the lack of meaningful English that connects English with students' interests and lives.

Later in the day Maggie Lieb also presented to a full room regarding the use of music in the classroom. Lieb started by briefly discussing

the literature that shows both language and music are processed in the same areas of the brain. She suggested that elements of music such as verse, dance, and melody could roughly be equated with that of vocabulary, body language, and intonation in speech. By analyzing the lexical frequency results of the top 10 English songs in Japan, Lieb also convincingly argued that popular music has a constructive place in the language classroom. She suggests that results indicate that using such songs in the classroom can help students acquire essential vocabulary for daily communication.

Overall the 36th annual JALT conference was a great success. Presentation rooms were easy to find and spacious, and they allowed for both large and more intimate smaller audiences. Placing all the SIGs in one room on the 10th floor was a nice touch, and that made it convenient for JALT members who belong to more than one SIG to quickly touch base with each SIG. Having all the SIGs in the same room as the poster presentations gave the room a collegiate atmosphere and ensured that the posters were well looked at by the attendees. Also, holding the sake-tasting event on Saturday afternoon and the wine and cheese on Sunday evening in the same room made it a central “rest” place for attendees. The use of the 8th floor for registration and the publishers was more than large enough for the conference and allowed attendees to browse materials without overcrowding, which often happens at other conferences. A much used and highly praised booth on this floor was the Books-Doing-Good booth, where people could buy a used novel for only ¥100 and know that proceeds go to the charity NPO-Lesa.

However, along with the inconvenient scheduling of SIG forums on Saturday, another criticism was the difficulty of meeting up with people. While I felt the conference facilities were modern and the rooms nicely sized, the layout of the building was problematic from a socializing perspective. It was hard to just “run into” people which often happens at good conferences because the cafeterias were in the

basement, a coffee shop and convenience store were on the main floor, the publishers and conference registration were on the 8th floor, and the SIG tables were on the 10th floor. This meant that at any given time someone who wasn't attending a presentation could be on one of four floors. A final criticism would have to be access to the elevators. Between presentations lineups were long, though cordial, leading many people to elect to use the stairs. Still, despite these minor points the conference proved to be very well planned and executed, which made attending the conference again next year a must.