
Conference Review

Pan-SIG 2012 Literacy: SIGnals of Emergence, Hiroshima

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In June 2012, on a weekend mid-month, language educators from across Japan descended upon the Higashi Hiroshima campus of Hiroshima University for the 11th JALT Pan-Special Interest Group (Pan-SIG) conference. Attendees were able to see presentations from 22 different SIGs, each sharing unique approaches or research related to teaching.

The opening plenary on Saturday, sponsored by the Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) SIG, was Dr. Thomas Cobb, creator of The Compleat Lexical Tutor (Lextutor) web site. His talk “Literacy: SIGnals of emergence” addressed the current redefining of literacy in the 21st century. The core of his presentation was the idea that second language (L2) learners must now be able to deconstruct multimedia documents that, while informative to first language learners, may overwhelm L2 readers with so much detail that comprehension is impeded or impossible. Normal contextual cues only add to the burden of a language learner, rather than open up the content for deeper understanding. Cobb introduced and demonstrated new elements of Lextutor that help to address these challenges. One such improvement is the inclusion of videos or audio files to combine reading and listening exercises. By uploading video or audio and creating a transcript, students can improve core literacy skills while developing the new literacy skills.

Dr. Toshihiko Shiotsu, whose presentation was sponsored by the Testing and Evaluation (TEVAL) SIG spoke later in the day about his research into the component skills that L2 readers use to understand written texts. Findings

included making a connection between high listening comprehension skills and better reading ability.

On Sunday, the plenary sponsored by the Global Issues in Language Education (GILE) SIG, was Dr. Hiromi Nagao, who gave a somewhat impassioned plea for standardization in the field of judicial interpreting in Japan. At the moment, there are currently no official qualifications for this role, and ambiguity could impact someone's life forever. Both language ability (English as well as Japanese) and cultural understanding are crucial for effective testimony, as it will not be the defendant's words that are recorded, but the interpreter's. Nagao described one situation where sentencing hinged on the translation of the word *interesting*. A Thai woman who was on trial for shoplifting a cake had her reason interpreted as *omoshiroi*, however, it was not until further questioning, that her full meaning became clear. It was not the act of stealing that was interesting, but the unusual shape of the cake, which she had never seen and wanted to share with her daughter. If not for the interpreter's diligence, a much harsher outcome could have resulted due to unclear translation. It is these types of situations that Nagao believes needs standardization the most urgently.

Two other presentations I particularly enjoyed were on Saturday afternoon. James York from Tokyo Denki University walked participants through a way in which he teaches students about emotions through the understanding of online memes and creation of online comics. York moderates a thread (sub-Reddit) on the social media site Reddit that allows his students to explore the Internet while engaging in real, natural communication with English speakers around the world. He shared several pieces of student work that have reached the front page of Reddit because of their popularity within the online global community. It left me inspired to explore how I might introduce this to my media studies students.

Mayumi Fujioka presented on pragmatically appropriate language for peer feedback activities. She introduced materials based on Brown & Levinson's (1987) concept of "from praise to critique" for promoting peer feedback in the university writing classroom. She shared an extensive review of research before inviting those in the audience to brainstorm possible ways to use or adapt the techniques of peer feedback in their contexts.

The break room conveniently doubled as the poster presentation room, so attendees were able to casually peruse the posters over a cup of coffee or piece of chocolate. As with the overall structure of the conference, the poster session mirrored the variety of topics. Yuko Sugiyama displayed activities for teaching about Japan's impact on the great world as a result of globalization, while Andy Boon laid out an extensive reading program with a student-purchased library at its core. David Williams shared the experiences of student participants in the Disney World College internship program at DisneyWorld in the United States.

The conference was highly enjoyable, much like the previous year, so in general, there were few issues. The location was a bit remote from the nearest station, and bus service was limited. While not a major problem, the rainy weather on Saturday made it a bit of a hassle. Perhaps next year's conference could be at a facility more easily accessible by train, bus and taxi. The conference booklet also proved to be a bit challenging to navigate. Clear side labels suggested it was sorted by SIG, but it was actually organized by room, which was noted in the top corner of each page and rather difficult to see. The master schedule was printed on an insert that I misplaced a few times. This separation of the schedule and abstracts led me to take several looks to find what I was looking for in the booklet. I think simply sorting by SIGs with a master schedule printed in the booklet would have been a better approach.

These small issues notwithstanding, Pan-SIG 2012 was a wonderful experience, and it continues to be one of my favorite conferences to attend in Japan. It is highly recommended to those who want to focus on one or two specific sub-fields as well as those who wish to explore a variety of themes within the field of language teaching in Japan.

References

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Author's bio

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