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## Conference Reviews

# The Nagoya University of Foreign Studies 2025 Symposium Review

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The Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS) 2025 Teacher Development Symposium was held online on Saturday, January 18, 2025, under the tagline “Teachers Helping Teachers.” The conference has grown from small beginnings to a broader scope, featuring speakers from several countries and covering a range of educational contexts. This expansion has made the event increasingly appealing to a wider audience. I am currently employed at NUFS and attended with the aim of improving learning outcomes for my students. The symposium featured three online rooms: a main room for the two keynote speakers and two additional rooms for concurrent presentations. It was therefore not possible to attend all the presentations, but what follows is an overview of the sessions that I was able to attend.

The first keynote speaker, Becky Alp, delivered a talk titled “Shifting the Focus: Cognitive Neuroscience in Learning and Teaching”, in which she emphasized the importance of understanding how the brain prepares for and adapts to learning. Drawing on the works of Dehaene (2020), she highlighted the need to consider both emotional and cognitive factors in education, as these are often overlooked. She discussed the brain’s predictive capability, which helps learners filter relevant information, and stressed the role of emotions in memory retention and motivation. One of several suggestions made was to incorporate storytelling into lessons, as it helps learners to form emotional connections, thereby making learning more meaningful. Her talk prompted me to reflect on my teaching by highlighting the impact of emotions and brain function on

learning.

Given my growing interest in student goal-setting and self-directed learning, I was interested in Daniel Hooper's presentation on building educational partnerships between students and teachers using action logs (Hooper, 2020) and near-peer role modeling (Hooper et al., 2025). He explained how recognizing students' perspectives and emotions can enhance their autonomy, competence, and sense of belonging. He discussed how the use of action logs, where students track their learning and reflect on their efforts, allows for a dialogue between teacher and student, thus enhancing co-constructed learning. Near-peer role modeling, where slightly more advanced learners serve as relatable examples, was discussed with practical activities to support collaboration, such as peer teaching, group newsletters, and the sharing of learning histories. Having used both action logging and near-peer role modeling in my own teaching, I was reassured that these strategies are effective, and I plan to continue refining them.

Marjorie Resuello's presentation focused on integrating Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) into English language learning at NUFS. She provided a historical background on ESD, linking it to environmental movements and global action plans such as Agenda 21 (United Nations, 1992). Her research indicated that while many NUFS students had encountered sustainable development goals (SDGs) in high school, few had done so at university. To address this, she had introduced Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), an inquiry-based approach developed by Housen and Yenawine (2000), where students analyze images and discuss social issues related to SDGs. In one activity, students had examined campus sustainability issues, such as waste and had proposed solutions. The speaker explained that this activity supports language learning by encouraging students to practice English communication skills related to issues that directly affect them. As I am always seeking ways to help my students think more critically and deeply, I could see how these VTS techniques could be beneficial in my own classroom.

As a university instructor, understanding the Japanese school curriculum helps gauge students' prior knowledge and abilities. As such, I was interested to attend Etienne Marceau's presentation which examined the Ministry of

Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's 2020 English Education Reform Plan and its impact on English teaching. He described how the reform plan had precipitated a shift in junior high schools from grammar-based to more communication-focused curricula, with higher vocabulary expectations, a greater amount of classroom English, and an improved skills balance. Despite such changes, continued poor test results suggest systemic issues, including overloaded curricula, lack of teacher training, and the dominant influence of university entrance exams. He noted that while steps toward communication and autonomy have been made, ongoing instability in reforms hampers progress. I found his presentation valuable, as early educational changes directly influence students' abilities at the tertiary level, thereby impacting on the approaches I need to take in my own classroom.

I have taught debate classes at the university level before and find them challenging for Japanese students due to the high language demands and need for spontaneous rebuttals. This led me to attend Brianna Cosenza's presentation, "Using Debate in the Critical Thinking Classroom", wherein she outlined a scaffolded approach that gradually introduced key debate skills over two semesters. In the first semester, students focused on critical thinking through moral dilemmas, learned to support their positions with clear supporting reasons, and participated in pair discussions. The second semester built on this foundation, introducing key debate terms such as opening statements and refutations, culminating in a full debate. I saw considerable value in this sequenced learning strategy and believe it could help address some of the challenges I had previously faced teaching debate classes in Japan.

The second keynote speaker, Helen Spencer-Oatey, Emeritus Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick, gave a presentation on achieving mutual understanding across languages and cultures. She contrasted two models of communication: the message model, in which meaning is simply encoded and decoded in language, and the contextual model, which highlights how interpretation depends on both linguistic knowledge and cultural background. She argued that meaning is co-constructed, making misunderstandings likely. To analyze such misunderstandings, she introduced

the TRIPS framework, which examines Triggers, Reactions, Interactions, People, and Settings (Spencer-Oatey & Lazidou, 2024). She stressed the importance of managing emotions, checking interpretations, and considering factors such as communication styles, hierarchy, and cultural expectations. I found her talk insightful, as it highlighted the complexities of intercultural communication and offered teachers practical strategies for dealing with such challenges.

I teach in a university department where students, though not English majors, engage in significant English study. Many aim to study abroad, and TOEFL scores are required to receive university funding for these programmes. Although Nick Boyes' presentation primarily focused on TOEIC, I was keen to gain insights into free vocabulary tests that could help my students improve their TOEFL scores. He highlighted the direct correlation between vocabulary knowledge and test performance, emphasizing that teaching and testing students on high-frequency words allows for measurable gains in both vocabulary and fluency. Boyes stressed the importance of first diagnosing students' vocabulary knowledge before exposing them to high-frequency words at an appropriate level of challenge. To this end, he introduced three vocabulary tests: The Vocabulary Size Test (VST), The Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT), and The New General Service List Test (NGSLT). He discussed the strengths and weaknesses of each and recommended the NGSLT as the most effective, noting that it is quick to complete, easy to score, and straightforward to interpret. His presentation helped me to understand how using such tests could help measure learners' vocabulary levels and help them towards reaching their testing goals.

The final talk I attended was by Camilo Villanueva from NUFFS, who examined students' perceptions of using short stories in a creative writing class. For his course, he selected eleven short stories from various cultures and styles, employing a language-based approach to explore fiction genre elements. He focused on craft elements, such as character description, with students practicing these techniques in their own writing. To illustrate his process, he shared examples of student work that demonstrated their improved ability to describe characters. His research aimed to assess whether studying short stories enhanced learners' language skills, cultural awareness, and enjoyment of literature in both

English and Japanese. The results described how the study of literature had helped improve speaking, writing, reading, and listening skills while increasing awareness of other cultures. Villanueva concluded that literature may play a key role in second-language learning and that students' attitudes toward literature can become more positive through exposure to short stories. His talk helped me better understand how engaging with short stories can be both motivational and beneficial for language learners at the tertiary level.

In conclusion, the NUFSS 2025 Teacher Development Symposium was a valuable event, offering diverse perspectives on language education and practical strategies for improving student learning. The variety of topics, from cognitive neuroscience to intercultural communication and debate strategies, provided me with innovative ideas to enhance my teaching. I particularly appreciated the opportunity to reflect on my own methods and consider novel approaches, such as integrating neuroscience-informed strategies and vocabulary testing tools. I would like to extend my gratitude to the organizers for hosting such a well-structured and engaging symposium, and I look forward to applying what I have learnt in my future classes.

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