Learner Development Forum: Empowering Learners for Class and Beyond

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Reference Data:

Nachi, H. E., Stephenson, J., et al. (2005). Learner Development Forum: Empowering Learners for Class and Beyond. In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2004 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

The Learner Development Forum has been a part of the JALT National Conference for the last several years. This year's 85-minute Forum brought together teachers from primary to tertiary contexts exploring how learner autonomy can be fostered across the curriculum, both inside and outside of class. Seven presenters shared their experiences and research in a poster format. After brief introductions from each presenter, participants had a chance to view posters and talk directly with presenters, after which they had small group discussions to process themes that emerged from the Forum. This session ended with a brief whole group discussion. This paper summarizes the presenters' poster content and reflections on participating in the Forum.

学習者ディベロップメントは過去数年間JALT国際会議の一役を担って来ました。今年度の85分間にわたるフォーラムでは、学習者の自律性が教室内外でのカリキュラムの中でどの様に促進され得るかを専門的に研究している、小等教育をはじめ民間教育機関も含むあらゆる場所で教鞭をとる教師達が集まりました。7人の発表者達たちが、ポスターを用いて自身の経験や研究を発表しました。各発表者たちによる簡単な紹介の後、参加者達はポスターを見て回り発表者達と直接話し合うチャンスを持ちました。その後フォーラムで浮上したテーマについて少人数に分かれ、最後には全体で、簡単な議論が行われました。をしました。この文書は発表者達のポスターの内容及びフォーラムの参加後の考察をまとめたものです。

Since the forum format was introduced at the JALT National Conference in 1998, the Learner Development Forum has been an annual event for sharing current autonomy-related research and work in Japan and abroad. The Forum typically features four to seven presenters, who present their content in a poster display or short lecture, along with the audience participants, who have opportunities to speak directly with the presenters. While the format of the Learner Development Forum has changed over the years, the presenters continue to bring to the event a keen interest in sharing and discussing autonomy-related issues. This year, Forum co-facilitators Heidi Evans Nachi and Jodie Stephenson were very pleased to bring together presenters from seven different contexts to share their research, projects, and ideas at the Learner Development Forum.

In this paper, the Forum participants share in their own words the various techniques and approaches to foster autonomy, along with their thoughts and experiences on participating in the Forum. Amy Fenning shows how challenging students to keep their own gradebooks empowers students and encourages good organization skills. Marlen Harrison outlines a framework for introducing Internet penpals to increase proficiency and confidence. Lawrence Metzger shows how he used personality typology to raise learner awareness and scaffold learning processes. Ellen Head demonstrates how

combining multiple methods of evaluation provides a richer picture of self-evaluation processes and outcomes. Yoko Morimoto's research analyzes the role of group work in promoting autonomy. Stacey Vye's look at young learners' studying English reveals not only their motivation to learn English, but their autonomous behavior as well. Finally, through three case studies, Yoko Wakui, Fumiko Yui, and Masayo Yada examine how monitoring learner development enhances motivation and autonomy.

Presenters' Voices: Sharing Their Forum Experiences

Amy Fenning—Students as Keepers of the Grades

Poster Summary

My poster at the JALT 2004 Learner Development Forum was titled, "Students as Keepers of the Grades." My content was based on a strategy I used to lessen my grade recording in two teaching situations—one at a university outside of Istanbul and one with an at-risk youth group in the bridge program of a Seattle-area community college. Based on readings in student-centered learning and learner empowerment, I gave up my grade book for these courses. I gave the students a "logbook" and told them that when they received any points, be it from me, from a self- or peer evaluation, from attendance or any source, they would have to log into their logbook filling in the following line items: date assigned, date due, date handed in, homework "slug"—a journalistic reference to a short name of something—and points gained out of points possible. If they lost the logbook, they lost the points because I would have no record.

Reaction/Reflection

First and most importantly on my poster, I made sure that visitors to my presentation understood that it was a strategy for record-keeping, not peer-evaluation or self-evaluation. Self-evaluation was indeed used at both institutions, but self-evaluation points were logged in as any other points. Second, I clearly and simply displayed the steps to take in setting up and implementing student logbooks. Additionally I shared the advantages and disadvantages. Finally, I included a "sample logbook" on my poster so that visitors could actually see what I was talking about. As I do not have any of the past student logbooks, I simply created one from some old homework I had burned on a CD in Turkey.

During the poster session, the questions were not directed at me so much as I directed one question at the visitors to my poster: Would this method work in Japan? Could we trust Japanese students not to lose anything and to organize their returned school work into one book? Several lively discussions ensued about the issue of trust. My visitors were keen to share their experiences with grade keeping in Japan. I felt it was an excellent experience for me to learn more about university life in Japan, about students and trust and learner responsibility. I learned that a poster presentation is not just talking, as had been my past experiences, it is truly asking and listening. It is an exchange of information, not a one-sided presentation of ideas.

Marlen Elliot Harrison—Keypal Assignments in English Language Classes: Interpersonal and Pedagogical Aspects

Poster Summary

In this presentation I discussed pedagogical and interpersonal aspects of keypal email exchange projects currently in development in English language classes at two universities. Pedagogical aspects included the implementation, perceived benefits, and development of such projects. Interpersonal aspects such as the quality of the relationships formed and their influences on learner development were also discussed. Additionally, I reported on a two-stage pilot study and ongoing research project examining these aspects.

My research partner, Dr. Kathleen Kitao, at Doshisha Women's College, and I have been interested in the quality of friendships initiated via email as compared with those initiated face-to-face. Additionally, we have explored how keypal email exchange projects affect learners' feelings about their abilities, attitudes and beliefs regarding English as a foreign language. More importantly, these projects have been designed to accentuate independent learning both during the school year and thereafter.

The Assignment

Students were instructed to use an internet search engine to find websites where they could locate and contact pen-pals, or where they could post personal information about themselves so that others could contact them. Students reported communicating with a variety of individuals and were asked to submit at least five typed and printed emails (at least ten sentences each), and at least five typed and printed email responses from their keypals.

This project was undertaken by students working autonomously. Students were not given topics to write about, nor were students' emails edited or corrected unless specifically requested by the student. Though non-response was an issue early in the semester due to computer problems, website errors or busy schedules, all but three students from Stage 1 (N=71) and all students in Stage 2 (N=19) completed the assignment. By giving students the freedom to choose their own keypals and allowing them to be completely responsible for email content, autonomy was emphasized. Overall, students reported that though the project was challenging, they enjoyed the opportunity to use their English skills and foster new relationships.

The Study

We surveyed two groups of students on their relationships and experiences with a keypal they were corresponding with as part of course assignments. The questionnaire used in Study 1 included mainly short-answer questions about four of Parks and Floyd's (1996) dimensions of friendship, as well as demographic questions and questions about how long they had been corresponding with their partner. The questionnaire for Study 2 was adapted from the questionnaire for Study 1, but used a Likert scale to measure the dimensions, and included new questions related to demographics, students' English skills and skill development, motivation, opinion of the assignment, etc. Results indicate that after an average of 5.8 months of contact, students felt committed to their relationships (as

evidenced by their statements that they would continue the relationship after the class had finished), and that they had discussed a wide range of topics. Additionally students reported perceived improvement in their reading, writing and vocabulary skills along with comfort level in communication with foreigners.

Future research will include case studies with students who have participated in this project, the addition of a control group of students who do not undertake the project, a longitudinal study of the friendships created, as well as a comparison of students' attitudes towards their Japanese friends and their internet keypals.

Reaction/Reflection

Presenting at the JALT Forum allowed me the opportunity to reflect on my research and future goals by discussing the project with colleagues. Suggestions for additional research were offered and recommendations on how to begin email exchange projects were shared. Overall, the presentation process and the supportive remarks and enthusiastic responses helped me gain focus as how to best proceed in the future.

Ellen Head—Self-Evaluation: Illusions and Realities

Poster Summary

This presentation focused on the divergence between students' self-evaluations and one teacher's evaluation of them. The students in the study were second year English majors in an intermediate level oral communication class. Before and after the course the students were tested using a test similar to TOEIC. Various methods of continuous assessment were used during the course, such as, learning journals, self- and peer-assessed speaking tasks and recorded conversations assessed by the teacher. The students' final grades were based on a holistic self-evaluation which students were asked to write in their journals. I decided to explore how my criteria for assessment were affected by interaction with the students, the extent to which the students internalized my criteria, and the long term effects on the students' confidence and motivation in cases where I challenged the students' self-evaluation.

The data for the poster was drawn from my observations, students' learning journals, and a questionnaire which was sent to the students one year after the end of the course, asking about their current level of confidence in relation to English.

Reaction/Reflection

In the first semester not all students completed the self-evaluation, but of those that did, two graded themselves lower and one higher than the teacher did. One student (whom I'll call Hiroko) wrote: "I think writing is so-so but speaking is difficult for me. I'm not good at to express my opinion or feeling by speaking. There fore I can't decide what grade do I deserve up to now, but I want to score A."

In the second semester all students carried out the evaluation. The students' evaluations concurred with the teacher's assessment in 22 out of 28 cases. Four students graded themselves lower than the teacher did, and two graded themselves higher. The students' comments from

their learning journals showed that they saw the grade as being primarily concerned with fulfillment of their obligations as members of the class: "I tried to behave exactly and have lessons regularly. Unfortunately I couldn't have a good response. It's an only thing that I understood clearly. I will give myself grade B, because I was not enough to talk in English."

These quotes show how covert participation came to be an issue as a classroom dynamic developed in which three students dominated whole-class activities and two others spoke only after a wait-time of a minute of more, although they showed great commitment in terms of journal writing and preparation for class. Responding to the follow-up questionnaire, Hiroko wrote: "I gave a hang about those evaluation so I tried to talk more. As a result I could talk in English better than before…I tried harder to get good evaluation. I didn't want to regret, so I studied harder." Another student wrote: "If I received praise for the work I did, though I didn't think it really good, when the teacher said it was good, I was happy. (And also the opposite happened sometimes too.)"

Disturbingly, the latter comment suggests respect for, rather than understanding of, the teacher's criteria. I hope that more studies will focus on the long-term effects of various kinds of evaluation and assessment, and on ways of "reconciling [self-assessment as a pedagogical tool] with the administrative, grade-generating function [of assessment]" (Brown, 2001, p. 174).

At the Forum, the discussion in my corner revolved around issues related to continuous assessment, performance-based assessment and self-evaluation. One particularly helpful suggestion was the use of video-taped performances and 'Think Aloud Protocol,' where students watch their video later and comment on what they were thinking at the time.

Lawrence Metzger—MBTI Personality Typology and Learner Autonomy

Poster Summary

My "Personality Shoji Matrix" was interspersed with the artwork of Peter Max, representing a symbolic abstraction of diversity integrated with harmony. The poster consisted of adapting four old wooden cedar shoji panels to serve as a self-standing display of eight panels divided into 16 sections. In viewing my poster, participants could take a zig-zag journey from theory to practice, following diverse aspects of cognitive development according to a truly learner-centered index focused upon lifelong learner autonomy and meta-cognition.

Implications for classroom use were based upon research conducted over four years of administering the MBTI (in Japanese) to 433 students. The MBTI (Myer-Briggs Type Indicator—a widely used personality test) has served to separate students into groups to optimize collaborative learning in composition and speech classes of diverse proficiency levels. The results further informed lesson plan and curriculum design research, and assisted with the creation of learner-centered sub-groups within large classrooms taking into account students' individual personalities.

After taking the MBTI, each student received a four-letter code indicating their personality type. The Jung-

Myers-Briggs framework identifies four basic dichotomous pairs: Energy Flow (Extrovert and Introvert), Information Gathering (Sensing and Intuition), Decision-Making (Thinking and Feeling), and Lifestyle Planning (Judging and Perceiving). Bilingual content-based reading handouts supported students' understanding of their type, and critical thinking activities encouraged students to agree or disagree with their "personality profile" as they constructed their own approach to learner autonomy.

Reaction/Reflection

Both the positive and negative comments and questions posed by participants were interesting and thought provoking. Participants at the JALT LD SIG mini conference in October reacted positively to my application of the MBTI to the ESL classroom. In contrast, I felt that only a few participants attending the Forum at the national JALT conference in Nara were interested in the MBTI as a useful tool to be implemented in facilitating learner autonomy. Several people seemed genuinely interested in how this was used in the classroom and how intermediate to advanced students reacted to the content.

Questions which arose touched upon how one could truly measure the MBTI as enhancing meta-cognitive/meta-linguistic awareness and critical thinking. I could only answer in terms of how interested and intrinsically motivated the students appeared to be, learning hundreds of new words and text-marking the English and Japanese handouts which they had received pertaining to the material. In the future, I would like to develop and administer a pre-test and post-test of new vocabulary items to try and measure some extent of language learning through this content-based approach. I am in the process of developing a qualitative survey for students to self-assess the effectiveness of their small type-specific learning groups to my in-class observations of an apparent similarity and compatibility of styles within groups.

Negative reactions existed among a few participants who dismissed the MBTI as just another type of "blood typing" generalization or stereotyping of people that simplistically reduced the complexity of human cognition and diversity. In talking with these rather skeptical participants, I appreciated their being candid, but realized that they were operating out of their own biases without much, if any background knowledge of the extent with which the MBTI has been used and accepted within professional, educational, and international corporate sectors.

I accept those whose reactions against the MBTI and similar "tests" stem from critical thinking and a healthy fear of reductivism. Yet, ironically the testing validity and consistency research done with the MBTI rivals that of ETS in the design of the TOEIC and TOEFL tests which so many seem to accept as a definitive indicator of proficiency. I would argue that all such tests, flawed as they are, provide some degree of insight into how far our learning development concerning languages has advanced so far and how much more needs to be done to develop tests as tools for learning in the future. In the complex task of striving to construct learner-centered EFL classrooms, I would recommend the MBTI as a scaffold to construct intrapersonal/interpersonal lexicons worthy of consideration.

I plan to conduct more research on integrating the MBTI with other surveys of learning styles in the EFL classroom as

a continuation of my own learning development. I enjoyed participating in this forum and learned from so many other presenters in the process of tracking effective means of fostering the learning development of our students who accompany us along this interesting journey.

Yoko Morimoto—Looking Back and Then Forward: Students Report on How They Got "Hooked" and How It Changed Their Lives

Poster Summary

This was a quite unique presentation in which nine of my former students and I collaborated in presenting in the forms of posters, a video, and a group oral presentation. All 14 of the senior students I had taught previously for two years and I collaborated in analyzing what helped make this particular English "class" called EPC (English Proficiency Course) into a "cohesive and autonomous learning group," within which students became so autonomous that they themselves started initiating and executing numerous English projects, such as a mock trial play, a film, and a debate tournament, without requiring much teacher intervention. One of the most important conclusions we drew based on a student-written questionnaire and several discussions was that the "class" needed to become a "cohesive group" for autonomous learning to take place.

Based on our analysis of the group formation process using some of the "group dynamics" principles, the most significant event was getting involved in the EPC selection process. They interviewed each applicant in Japanese and later got into emotionally loaded debates over whom to select, lasting more than 20 hours, and resulting in confronting their teachers on the conclusion. This required each student in the group to express their opinions and understand and respect others on a profound level, and consequently led them to become a cohesive group.

Some of our other findings and recommendations focused on group work and trust. For example, a paradigm shift in learning attitudes was necessary to become functional in group work. We also found that group work which took place outside class increased autonomy and motivation. Another interesting finding was that the feelings of trust and freedom given by teachers increased their sense of responsibility. Finally, cultivating personal relationships between the teachers and students enhanced communication and promoted mutual respect, leading students to overcome cross-cultural barriers they had felt with foreign teachers.

The benefits of the EPC were numerous as well. The EPC helped them not only improve their English, but also maintain their future goals in terms of their English and career development. Moreover, constant opportunities to present varieties of group projects to others in and outside class (i.e. English camps and semi-public presentations) kept their motivation high in maintaining short-term goals. Lastly, division of roles and rotating the role of the leader fostered a sense of responsibility and motivation to support one another.

To maximize these experiences, group formation, especially in the first year, should take place in classes held before lunch or dinner as it is easier to socialize after those classes. Moreover, students should be informed by the teacher where they are at within their long range goals.

Students who have used English to achieve their career goals early in their university life are able to set their long range career and English goals much earlier than usual.

Reaction/Reflection

The most frequently asked questions from the audience to the students seemed to be about the roles of the teachers. We also had many comments saying it was helpful for them to listen to the voices of the students "live" and to engage in discussion with them. Although we very much want to do this again next year, most of the students will have graduated. If possible, I would like to present on this topic with the help of some graduate students.

Stacey Vye—Primary School Aged Students' English Language Learning Quest

Poster Summary

My poster examined factors that have motivated a group of five primary school third-graders to learn English for the past three to six years at a community center once a week. I displayed and highlighted the children's English learning experiences using learner self-reflection drawings and two interviews—a clarification of the drawing and a questionnaire. By coincidence, I felt fortunate that all five learners drew pictures of themselves, so I could display these self-portraits along with color-coded caption bubbles of the transcribed interviews in Japanese translated to English, which helped to exemplify and bring out the children's voices about their learning.

Reaction/Reflection

I felt my poster was one of a kind at the Learner Development forum because it focused on younger learners. I didn't get a swarm of participants like some of the other posters did, but it allowed me to enjoy communicating with several people one-on-one about the children and teaching children in general. The people who visited my poster commented that they teach at the tertiary level, and shared either their present or past experiences working with children. I got the impression that although teaching children wasn't their primary occupation, they had a real soft spot in their heart for teaching and being around children. One participant said, "Teaching kids is great!" and highlighted that he wished he could have the opportunity to teach kids more often. Speaking with participants about children gave me the opportunity to question if there are many teachers in Japan who would like to teach children, but feel they cannot in their current situation.

Before participating in this forum, I felt I had overlooked these young learners' experiences that have motivated them to study English both in and out-of-class, because I concentrated on my duties as a university lecturer. So I decided to try to shed light on whether, and to what extent my students are showing signs of learning English autonomously. Subsequently, by working on the project, I was surprised to discover the three boys revealed they are learning English for communication during their travels in foreign countries, while the two girls and one of the boys confessed they are learning English to communicate with foreign people.

In addition, I illustrated another revelation by comparing and contrasting the self-reflection drawings of a boy and a girl who started learning English at the age of two who did not remember when they started learning English, with the three children who started learning English at the age of five. The two early learners drew pictures outside of class of themselves and their relationship with English, while the three later learners drew pictures of how they imagined themselves learning English in the classroom. This was striking to me because the two groups drew very different pictures. I agreed with the feedback I got from two participants who commented that it might be constructive for me to look into comparing different types of young learners on a larger research scale, based on the self-reflection drawings and interviews.

I think because of the support I received from the LD forum coordinators to set up the framework to help contribute to the development of my poster, and comments made by the participants, I am now ready to start a larger scale research project in 2005. I have collected questionnaires and self-reflection drawings from five junior high school students, and five first year university students who started learning English at a young age. I hope to compare what these two groups of learners express with the group of the primary school students of this study.

Yoko Wakui, Masayo Yada, and Fumiko Yui—Turning Our Unmotivated Students On to Autonomy

Poster Summary

Our poster discussed how learner autonomy was fostered, and summarized the results of applying cooperative work, content-based teaching, reflection, and self-assessment. We prepared six-page handouts and put up a large paper on the wall, outlining our theory and showing pictures of our classes. The data results for each of us were hung beside the big poster. We also explained how students took the initiative (Williams, 2001) in discussion, and where they acquired knowledge according to their interests (Gardner, 1993). We described the importance of self-assessment (Dickinson, 1987), which develops self-awareness and skills in learning techniques (Nunan, 1988; Oscarson, 1989), and the significance of reflection, which involves students in taking responsibility for their own learning (Leki, 1991).

Students chose topics we prepared, because we thought students would get confused if teachers set them free suddenly. Besides, even small choices can increase the amount or "degree" of autonomy (Nunan, 1997). Students discussed in pairs or groups, through which they learned collaboration and responsibility. We gave students chances to assess themselves, which let them realize what learners are and what they should do, and stimulated them to work harder for their own goals. In addition, students wrote whatever they wanted at the end of every class: Questions, requests, problems, their thoughts about the teacher and methodology, and other comments about the whole course.

Reaction/Reflection

It was the very first time for us to work together on a project, and we surprisingly learned a lot. At first, we had to negotiate, which occasionally led to confusion. In the second stage, we had to learn to cooperate to work for the common goal. We needed to get consensus to work it out. Though we

were struggling in the first stage: "orientation, negotiation and adaptation" (Barfield, 1998) and the second stage: "perception of inner and outer processes" (Barfield, 1998), we began to realize our development as teachers and thanked each other for the support and understanding we received. We shared our reflections in the third stage: "dynamic of experimentation" (Barfield, 1998). In the fourth stage of "increased awareness" and "cyclical growth" (Barfield, 1998), we became aware of things we would not have noticed if we had done it alone, and felt that we had grown through this challenge.

Because we had been working at totally different institutions, we had to teach each other our different approaches by clear articulation. We had to open up to each other to negotiate what we should do for our research. We were forced to know our own characters more than before and we also had to talk about the methods we each had already established as teachers in order to adopt something unfamiliar to each of us. A little later, we began to try new things, which might have stimulated our students, too. In the later stages, we realized we had different perspectives and interpretations, through which we found those things that were important to us, which we may not have noticed otherwise. Thus we have grown, even though it was strenuous.

We are going to continue our study on researching student's inner voices in the future. We are grateful to the participants for sharing a wonderful day with us. All in all, it was an event that was filled with warmth, enthusiasm, and the spirit of sharing.

Conclusion: A Learning Experience for Presenters and Audience Members

In spite of the various time and room constraints and last minute hiccups, the feedback from presenters and participants at the 2004 LD Forum was very positive. In particular, audience members were impressed with the breadth and variety of topics, along with the casual atmosphere that encouraged discussion, and helped foster new ties among participants.

This year's Forum also boasted two new features: multimedia presentations and student presenters. Presenters engaged audience members through a variety of content and presentation formats: Posters, video, and art displays stimulated the senses, stirred the imagination, and fueled discussion. Moreover, for the first time at the Forum, students from one of the studies accompanied their teacher (Morimoto) to share their own experiences as autonomous learners, a special attraction that will hopefully continue at future conferences.

In many ways, this year's Forum was a truly interactive experience. The participants gained information and perspectives from the posters, provided the presenters with feedback and insights, and had chances to consider how such ideas might be adapted in their own contexts. Through preparing and presenting their posters, the presenters could learn much about themselves as teachers and researchers, and come away with new questions and new directions for their research. Like learners in a classroom, the presenters and audience members in the Forum became a community—one committed to sharing and discussing ways to empower our learners for class and beyond.

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