Lifelong Teacher Learning through a Collaborative Study Group

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Language Learning for Life

Networks as informal study groups support isolated teachers, stimulate and enhance professional development, and provide a reality-based start to change their practices in many school settings. Recently, teacher learning is a catchy word, and the importance of networks has been addressed. However, little is known about how such networks are formed, what they focus on, and how they are sustained. We will introduce two study groups—CLT *Kenkyukai* and PIGATE. After a short introduction by a coordinator, two members from each group will tell their stories. This forum will encourage other teachers to form and participate in a similar study group, which will engage them in lifelong learning.

　研究会などの自主的なネットワークは、学校の中で孤立しがちな教師達を支え、鼓舞し、教師達が自らの授業を改善するために学ぶ機会を継続的に提供する。最近、教師の継続的な学習の大切さやネットワークの意義が強調されている。しかしながら、このようなネットワークがどのようにして生まれたのか、何を目的としてどのように発展してきたのかは、ほとんど知られていない。この討論会では、CLT研究会とPIGATEという2つの研究会について報告する。初めに、各代表者が研究会を紹介した後、それぞれ2人のメンバーが詳細を報告する。この討論会は、こうした研究会に参加して生涯にわたり継続的に学びたいと考えている教師を励まし、また新たに研究会を創設しようと考えている教師に多大なヒントを与える。

Although the importance of networks has been addressed, "little is known about how such networks are formed, what they focus on, and how they are sustained" (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1999, p. 292). In particular, in the area of foreign language teacher education, there is little research on them. Networks as informal study groups support isolated teachers, stimulate and enhance professional development, and provide a reality-based start to change their practices in many school settings. We will describe how our two different study groups were established, how they have developed, and what challenges they have faced.

The two study groups we introduce are PIGATE and CLT *Kenkyukai*. PIGATE, founded in 1993, now involves 120 members, while CLT *Kenkyukai,* established in 2000, has 45 members. In both groups the participants share their ideas, materials, and teaching issues in regular meetings, creating continuous collaborative learning opportunities. Thus, these study groups are in sharp contrast with formal inservice training programs which basically force teachers to attend and provide prescriptive knowledge about teaching. Many studies have indicated that one-shop workshops do not work, because teachers do not learn by being told to do what to do. Instead, they need continuous learning opportunities to adapt new ideas and try them out in their schools (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin,1995; Lieberman, 1995; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004).

First, each group coordinator will describe the development of his study group. Then, two members from each group will tell their stories, including how and why they are participating in the group, what they have learned, and how they have actually used ideas to change their practices in their schools. Finally, we will conclude our paper with implications and future issues.

CLT *Kenkyukai*

CLT *Kenkyukai* (Communicative Language Teaching Study Group) started in 2000 as an informal study group for six teachers in the Nagoya area of Japan. We have a monthly meeting, which lasts two and a half hours. We share our ideas and materials, and discuss teaching issues. During a summer vacation, we attend a three-day workshop. The workshop is sponsored by Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, for which I work. It is a good opportunity to advertise this study group to workshop participants. The numbers of members increased from 6 to 20 in 2002 and to 45 as of today (see Sato, 2003 for more details). In the following sections, Chieko and Keiko, two of our active members tell their stories. Both teachers stress the significance of continuous learning and of developing teaching skills needed to adapt activities to their classes in order to expand their teaching repertoire.

Chieko's Story

How I Used toTeach

Before I joined the study group, my lessons had been miserable. I asked students questions, but nobody answered. So I answered myself. I asked students to repeat after me, but only a few students did so. I asked them to make some creative English sentences, but nobody could. Therefore, I did it myself. I had to do everything by myself in my classes. All my students did was to sit at their desks. I wanted to get out of the classroom as soon as possible.

Workshops

Then I started going to several workshops. They were interesting and exciting to me. However, in my school other teachers had never tried anything new. They didn't believe the innovative ideas I learnt would work in our school. I felt isolated in my workplace. The workshops were only once or twice a year. Then Mr. Sato started this study group four years ago, and I began to attend the monthly meetings.

CLT Kenkyukai

I found that most of our members also felt isolated in their workplaces though they tried to improve their practices by themselves. I had a lot in common with them. If it wasn't for this study group, I would have given up changing my practices and I would still be teaching English in a boring way now. During these four years we came to know each other's background, which helped me adapt some activities that the other teachers told me about. Finally, my students began to react better to some of the activities I tried. I'm not

sure if they have learnt more English, but at least they seem to enjoy my classes more. This was the most powerful factor in changing myself and my way of teaching.

New Ideas

Now I'd like to give you two examples. These are my students' favorite games. The purpose of the first game (Appendix A) is to make my students use classroom English. After studying classroom English with this handout, they play this "*Sugoroku*" game. In a group of three or four, one of the students becomes a referee. The referee has an answer sheet so that he or she can judge whether the other students' answers are correct or not. If the answer is wrong, they have to go back three squares. After I tried this game, I encouraged them to use classroom English in my class. To my great joy, they began to do so.

The second game (Appendix B) comes from "Grammar games and activities" written by Peter Watcyn-Jones (1995). In this game, students practice irregular verbs. Two students in the group compete against each other while the third student is a referee. Students take turns choosing a square, and then give three different verb conjugations in each of three squares (e.g. freeze—froze—frozen). The game continues until one student gets a row of four squares (either vertically, diagonally or horizontally). Once the game starts, I don't have to do anything. Students teach one another! After this game, some of my students told me that they learned a lot of irregular verbs unconsciously.

In my class, winners of the games earn stamps. At the end of the term I count the number of stamps and give them participation points. Generally speaking, most Japanese English teachers believe that it's very important to teach grammar explicitly. I also believe that grammar is important for Japanese learners, but my students did not learn from explicit grammar teaching. Instead, they enjoyed learning grammar in a communicative way.

My Change

After I learned some communicative ways of teaching grammar, I began to realize that I should change my way of teaching it. Although I was scared of my students' reaction, I realized that students would like learning grammar, if we would change the way of teaching it. While I was adopting specific activities I learnt in the study group, I began to discover how to adapt them to my class. I began to enjoy doing this. During these four years I found out the following four things.

First, I need to know my students well. Second, for maximum student enjoyment, games should include both luck and English skills. Third, every member has to be equally responsible for the group task. This means that the teacher has to think of activities which require each student to be responsible for some aspect of the task. Fourth, I have found that when students work together in my class, they can learn how to cooperate with one another. I feel happiest when I see my students smiling and laughing as they study English. I'd like my students not only to learn communication skills but also to experience real communication in my class.

As a final word, I would like to say that I should be a model learner. People around me sometimes say that I don't need to study any more, because I'm old and also I'm a part-time

teacher. However, I want to offer the best lesson possible until the day I retire. Furthermore, I'd like to be a model of someone who does lifelong learning. I have a lot to do in order to reach my goals, but my favorite word is "challenge."

Keiko's Story

Teaching Experience at Different Levels of Schools

While working at different levels of public high schools as an English teacher, I had chances to attend many kinds of workshops and finally this study group. The first school I worked at was a highly academic school. The students enjoyed learning English even if I taught based on the traditional grammar-translation method. When I occasionally introduced some communicative activities in class, the students actively participated in the activities. I didn't realize that I should teach English more communicatively.

Then I was transferred five years ago to the school where many students didn't like English. Since my teaching style was still traditional and teacher-centered, the class was boring for them. They didn't enjoy my class at all because they didn't like doing grammar-translation drills or reading aloud in class. Many of them didn't have any purpose in studying English, let alone studying English for university entrance examinations. This made me rethink how I could teach English more communicatively. Although I knew I had to change my teaching style, I didn't know what to do. I asked other teachers for advice, but they had already given up trying out new ideas. I couldn't share the problems with my colleagues and felt isolated at the school. Thus I started to look for some solutions outside the school.

Attending Workshops

At first I attended many workshops to get new teaching ideas. I tried them out in my classes after each workshop. Sometimes they worked well, and sometimes they didn't work at all. However, attending these workshops didn't change my teaching style. At the workshop, I was just shown some impressive achievements or success stories. Therefore, I didn't figure out what processes and what problems were involved in making the class more communicative and how I could deal with those problems. I was just given new ideas from each workshop. There was no quick and easy solution to improve my English classes, because the workshops didn't teach me how to adapt their teaching ideas to my classes. As a result, I soon went back to my routine traditional ways. I didn't realize why I always went back to my routine traditional patterns, and I continued to look for solutions in workshops for the next two years.

Joining CLT Study Group

In 2000, I met Mr. Sato at one of those workshops. I learned the word "Communicative Language Teaching" there, and I really liked the activities he showed us. For instance, he used English songs to teach the rhythm of English. He introduced some activities to teach grammar inductively. He demonstrated what tasks we could give and how we could integrate four skills in one textbook lesson. His workshop was a lot of fun. He also announced that he was leading a study group. Although I didn't understand what a study group was, I really wanted to learn how to make a class more communicative. This is why I started to participated in his study group.

In the beginning, my intentions were to learn as many communicative activities as I could. I did learn many practical ideas from Mr. Sato and other members, and my classes became more student-centered and more communicative. I stopped giving grammar-translation practices. As I introduced songs, many kinds of pair-activities, and group projects to my classes, more students enjoyed learning English.

Gradually I learned how to overcome the problems and how to modify the activities.In the meeting, we share our teaching experiences. That is, we report: 1) what activity we tried in a class, 2) what the results were, 3) what we learned, and 4) how we can modify those activities.

I started to observe my students carefully and to think how I could modify the activities. Even when they were not successful in my first trial, I didn't give up on them. In our monthly meetings I can report what happened, how I failed, and how I can modify the activities. The feedback from Mr. Sato and other members is very helpful and powerful. Then I go back to school with the feedback I received and I continue to take risks. After each meeting, I have made a small change and taken a small risk in class. Eventually these small changes have made a big difference.

Networking

By joining CLT study group, I met many teachers from different schools such as universities, high schools, and junior high schools. Although each teacher is from a different academic level of school, together we can share our ideas, interests, problems, and the goals of teaching English. Five years ago I felt very isolated in my workplace, but now I'm strongly supported by the members of this study group. I'm always encouraged and inspired by them. This helps me form a strong belief in teaching English communicatively.

This kind of networking also helps me develop relationships with other high school teachers and university teachers. Three years ago our school was assigned by the Gifu Prefectural Board of Education to promote a two-year project to develop the students' communicative abilities. Mr. Sato visited our school as an advisor during that period. With his support and advice, we started to give Oral Communication class for the first-year students systematically. In the end of the school year, the students enjoyed skit performance and using English. In the following year, for the second-year students, we introduced an innovative approach to Writing class, in which speaking and writing activities were integrated through topics related to students' lives. In the end of the second year, the students could maintain three-minute conversations and write 15-sentence compositions about the topics. Some students could have more spontaneous conversations for four minutes. I was very glad to get to know Mr. Sato by joining CLT study group. Without the support of this university teacher, we couldn't have carried out the project. We had no ideas about how to make a curriculum reform and how to connect theory and practice.

I'm now beginning to share the ideas I have learned from this study group with my colleagues. I've learned how important it is to share goals, ideas, and problems with my colleagues. This year again, Mr. Sato visits our school. With his help, we started to have a weekly meeting and to develop a learning community in our school. CLT study group has changed not only me but also our school.

PIGATE

PIGATE whimsically denotes a group of learner-teachers (piglets) working together at the gate leading to the world of professional teachers of EFL (see Takaki, 2002 for more details). It is a self-governed study group founded in 1993 originally as a follow-up program for local college graduates, later aiming to support the professional development of pre-/in-service EFL teachers and teacher educators in and around Kumamoto, Japan. PIGATE was already discussed three times at annual JALT international conferences and also once at the TESOL World Convention in Vancouver in 2000. Unfortunately, however, no PIGATE participants except its director, Nobuyuki Takaki, were included in the presentations. Thus, the conference participants never had an opportunity to listen to the members' own voices. PIGATE believes that "a small change will make a big difference," and for this presentation a small but significant change was made; two PIGATE members told their stories about their learning experiences through the PIGATE grassroots program.

First, Ms. Rie Yamashita, one of the founding members of PIGATE and an EFL teacher of young learners, described how PIGATE has been managed for as long as twelve years, which is rare in Japan (Natsuhara, 2000), and how PIGATE has made things happen. Rie told her PIGATE story focusing on how the PIGATE network such as monthly newsletters and mailing list has contributed to the effective management of monthly/summer sessions. She also discussed some problems PIGATE has faced so far as well as its prospects.

Second, Mr. Hirofumi Serikawa, a junior high school EFL teacher, talked about some differences between a typical government-run seminar and that of PIGATE based on his observation during his two-year learning experience at PIGATE. He also told a story about his dilemma in which he was caught between attending PIGATE's Saturday sessions and fulfilling his Saturday responsibility as his school tennis club advisor.

Rie's Story

Challenge to Japanese Teachers' Isolationism

I am one of the seven founding members of PIGATE, and I have learned to teach and learn EFL in various PIGATE activities for twelve years. In my slot PIGATE will be discussed in terms of its network system and regular session management. Japanese teachers are relatively collaborative in their non-academic guidance of students, but little friendly sharing among them is found when it comes to teaching their subjects, a fact which has not been known much to outsiders (Takaki & Laskowski, 2002). This tradition has created professional isolationism in teacher development as well. In other words, teachers not only live apart geographically, but also psychologically in terms of subject matter teaching. It is for this reason that connecting members on a day-to-day basis is difficult but extremely important. I would like to emphasize at this point that PIGATE is participant-led, by which I mean that our activities are initiated by the Steering Committee, which is like a hub in a wheel, and the Committee members act as sub-committee leaders as shown in Appendix C. The success of PIGATE activities depends largely on the Steering Committee's activism.

The Monthly Newsletter Is Our Lifeline!

A five-hour monthly session is PIGATE's central activity, but that is not everything. *PIGATE Newsletter* and the PIGATE Mailing List have connected members more closely and effectively. *PIGATE Newsletter No. 1* published in June, 1993 had only two pages, but the recent issues have well over forty pages. The newsletters are edited by the Public Relations Committee, and four editors-in-chief take turns being responsible for each issue. They start editing one right after each monthly session, a process which normally lasts three weeks, since they collect various articles contributed by the members in and outside Kumamoto including those living in four foreign countries. Each issue carries essays, columns, reports, stories, book reviews, information and announcements, etc. The most time-consuming and challenging part of newsletter editing is to report in detail descriptions of what happened, who said what, etc. in each session. They always make the most of video/audio tapes, written records and participants' reports etc. of each monthly session. We do so basically for the benefit of the members who did not make it to the session, and also for those who like to review their learning. Every second Tuesday, four days before each monthly session, copies (120 are sent off and 30 are kept in PIGATE Library) are mailed to members by the General Affairs Committee and student volunteers. This basically reminds them of the coming session, encouraging them to get ready for it, and also helps them to review what they learned in the previous session.

The Mailing List Is Indispensable!

The PIGATE Mailing List started in 1999 using Yahoo e-groups free ML service, and managed by the General Affairs Committee. On the ML, ideas, suggestions, and Q's and A's concerning mainly session preparation/management and newsletter editing are shared. ML was not as popular as we expected for a while, but particularly after new projects began in October, 2004, as many as 180 e-mails were exchanged on the ML in a month. We need to promote our ML much further because it is now indispensable in communicating with other members, and also because it records for us all information of each session's preparation and evaluation. The only sad fact about the use of ML is that some teachers are too exhausted because of their harsh everyday life at school to even turn on their computers. We give such members a phone call once in a while to see how they are doing.

The Monthly Session Chief System Works!

The monthly session (including a summer special session) is PIGATE's central activity. It is made possible by our "session chief" system, in addition to the newsletter and ML. The Steering Committee members take turns acting as monthly session chief. The chief drafts the session program based on PIGATE's two-year syllabus prepared and approved at the Annual General Meeting every September in consultation with Professor Takaki, PIGATE director-coordinator, and other coordinators. The rough draft will be on the ML for open discussion and suggestions before it is finalized. The chief also emcees the session in collaboration with the director and six managers in charge of various

sections as shown in Appendix C. At a reflection session, which follows immediately after every monthly session, the chief asks for evaluation and suggestions about the session s/he has emceed in order to further improve session management. The chief system is one of the most important changes we have made to vitalize monthly sessions.

PIGATE Faces Problems, But….

On the other hand, we have had a difficult time regularly updating the PIGATE Homepage, created in 2000, due to the lack of enough volunteers to take care of it. But, the greatest problem we have faced is the fact that many school teachers are kept too overloaded and seem lost in their job as EFL teachers. In any case, PIGATE is a fun group of teachers, students and teacher educators working together in harmony as it is described in an illustration in Appendix C.

Hirofumi's Story

My Dilemma

Figure 1 shows one aspect of Japanese junior high school (JHS) teachers' reality. The teacher with a PIGATE file in a cold sweat is myself two years ago. As you may know, in Japanese schools both teachers and students are busy at school with sports/culture club activities even on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays, while PIGATE monthly sessions are held every second Saturday afternoon. Thus, it is not easy to attend PIGATE regularly. However, I now appreciate how important my struggle to participate in PIGATE is for me, and for my students as well, in the long run despite my Saturday school responsibility.
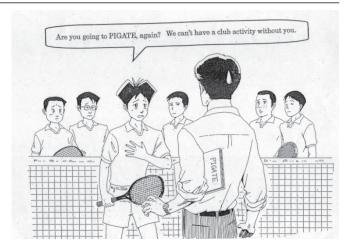

Figure 1

How PIGATE Is Different from A Government-Run Seminar

Table 1 describes some differences I have experienced between government-run teacher seminars (GS) and PIGATE activities. First, while GS are mostly one-shot and mandatory, PIGATE is on-going and spontaneous. Second, in GS the teacher learning content is decided by "them" and therefore inflexible, and the seminar is organized and implemented by the local board of education. In PIGATE, sessions are planned and administered by ourselves and they are normally flexible depending on the participants' needs. What usually bothers GS attendees is that although they are required to submit very official reports, no feedback is provided, but in PIGATE friendly feedback on our presentations, discussions, beliefs and methodologies is

usually given by colleagues and coordinators. Third, it is surely beneficial to be informed about the government's policies at GS, but they normally demand drastic changes in our teaching without considering much about the school and teacher reality. This eventually makes us go back to traditional ways of teaching at the end of the day. At the same time model lesson demonstrations at GS are too ideal to be implemented in our classes. In PIGATE, discussions

Table 1

are based on our daily classes, and we basically aim at making small but practical and continuous changes in our classes, without necessarily following a prescribed method.

"Why-Not-Join-Us" Project Makes A Difference
PIGATE was founded with seven members participating in 1993, and as of November 2004, it has 120 members in all: 5 coordinators (university teacher educators), 23 college and university students including graduate students, 4 elementary school teachers, 44 public and 2 private JHS teachers, 11 public and 4 private SHS teachers, 3 college teachers, 3 ALT's and 10 English conversation or *juku* school teachers, 4 post-service teachers overseas, and 7 special members who are teacher educators in other prefectures and board of education people and principals in Kumamoto. Although PIGATE has no sponsors the number of participants is constantly increasing perhaps partly due to the "*Kitemiran* (Why-not-join-us) Plan" we have conducted during the monthly sessions. We have included in the monthly program a five-minute slot where we exchange information about those who have not attended PIGATE yet and also those who used to come to PIGATE but have become reluctant about coming back. We then encourage ourselves to take whatever action to invite such people to join us. This is a challenging job, but seems to work relatively well. In my case, for instance, the relationship with my colleagues before my participation in PIGATE was based on complaining about the school system, curriculum, and some students, but thanks to PIGATE, our relationship has been changing toward being colleagues who keep on learning together, which has contributed to our getting rid of routines and ruts we otherwise easily get into.

PIGATE's Latest Projects Activate Our Learning

Lastly, let me tell you about our two-year syllabus which started in October 2000. Under this syllabus two major tasks are promoted. In Task 1 each member contributes to *PIGATE Journal* which is compiled annually. This is a challenge for most classroom teachers and students since they are not familiar with writing papers and essays to a journal, but we believe that we will learn a lot more by reflecting on our practice and verbalizing our thoughts. In fact, as of September 2004, eleven issues of *PIGATE Journal* were compiled but not many members contributed to them. Task 2 is that each member belongs to at least one of the four special interest groups: CRE (using more English in the classroom), RGT (revisiting grammar teaching), 4ES (4-minute English song use in the classroom), and FST (fun storytelling). The current syllabus is a process syllabus, and each group decides their learning goals, procedures and methodologies basically on their own through negotiations on the ML and in meetings. In two years each group is compiling a group report.

Conclusion

Perhaps the only thing we can say for sure after listening to the two groups' presentations is that both groups are in the professional development process, and that process itself means much to the members' development. After all, teacher learning takes time and it surely is a lifelong work. It is like water dripping on a stone. Expert participation and grassroots activism work in harmony!

The two groups are slightly different from each other in that CLT *Kenkyukai* is technically a part of a local university program, and Dr. Kazuyoshi Sato's regular visits to the board of education designated schools to help with their teaching and curriculum reform (which PIGATE has not done much yet) is promoted by the local government. PIGATE activities are much more grassroots and are not directly involved in such official reforms. However, the study groups resemble each other in that they demonstrate how expert participants and grassroots activism work together in harmony. In other words, in-service teachers and pre-service teachers as well as teacher educators complement each other and enhance their teacher learning on comparatively informal, non-threatening, problem-solving, cooperative, self-help, self-discovery, on-going, day-to-day basis, in a reflective, heuristic and developmental fashion. Moreover, the members from both groups strongly feel that the participation of university teacher educators is the key to success.

In both groups the participants relatively freely share their teaching and learning experiences, released from rigid formality and most importantly without losing face. It seems that they have learned that no teacher is an island by regularly verbalizing their thoughts and exchanging various kinds of information about teaching in their meetings. Local college based collaboration works!

The concept of "follow-up program for local college graduate-teachers" has made it easier, at least psychologically, for those teachers to attend monthly meetings because they are held at their alma mater. PIGATE in twelve years has gradually spread to other teachers who have graduated from other universities as well by word of

mouth. It would not be too difficult, then, for teachers and teacher educators in other areas to start a teacher study group if they follow a PIGATE approach. CLT *Kenkyukai* is also a local college-based group, and it is expected that more universities and experts can contribute to the local community in terms of lifelong teacher education.

Finally, we would like to point out that school teachers' right to develop themselves professionally, especially in the subject matter teaching, should be guaranteed by all means as described in Japanese *Kyoiku-komuin Tokureiho*, laws that apply to civil servants in the field of education. *Mombukagakusho*, the Japanese Ministry of Education, recently brought into effect a five-year action plan "Japanese people who can use English," and a two-week intensive training program has become mandatory for all JHS and SHS English teachers in the country (with some exceptions). However, such a government-led program will need to be supplemented by on-going, collaborative teacher learning opportunities as discussed in this colloquium because we feel that such grassroots teacher development organizations are vital in a country like Japan, where the hierarchical, top-down teacher education approach is inadequate in helping teachers to make necessary changes in themselves. All this implies that we must not wait for the government and other formal institutions to take the lead in teacher training and development reform.

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Appendix 1

Balloons and slides

Appendix 2

FOUR-IN-A-ROW: VERBS

1 be	2 begin	3 bite	4 blow	5 break
6 bring	7 build	8 buy	9 catch	10 choose
11 come	12 cost	13 cut	14 do	15 draw
16 drink	17 drive	18 eat	19 fall	20 find
21 fly	22 forget	23 freeze	24 get	25 give
26 go	27 grow	28 hear	29 hide	30 hit
31 know	32 lay	33 leave	34 lie	35 make
36 meet	37 pay	38 read	39 ride	40 rise
41 run	42 say	43 sell	44 show	45 shrink
46 sing	47 speak	48 stand	49 steal	50 write

Appendix 3