These are our stories: Language learning histories for JALT2005

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Reference data:

Clark Cummings, M., et al. (2006). These are our stories: Language learning histories for JALT2005.
In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2005 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

In this paper, an instructor and her students in a graduate course on TESOL classroom practices at Teachers College Japan share their stories of language learning, including how the insights obtained from the writing and sharing of them changed their views of language teaching.

この論文では、Teachers College Japan大学院のTESOL授業の教官と学生がライティングから得たものを共有することによって、それが言語指導にどのような影響を与えたかも含めてそれぞれの言語学習の話しを分かち合う。

Much has been said about the value of language learners writing their language learning histories. Language teachers, too, benefit from the raised awareness and insights gained from the process of writing these stories. About a year ago, we all participated in a collaborative language learning history writing workshop together. At JALT 2005, we shared excerpts of what we wrote and insights we gained from hearing each others' stories.

Emiko Matsui

From my language learning experience, I'd like to share the importance of the teacher's support towards the students. I learned English when I was an elementary student in the U.S., in a natural way. Since children absorb language more easily than adults, I did not have difficulty in learning English.

However, I experienced an unforgettable thing. On the first day at a new school, I was bullied by one of my classmates. She said to me, "Why can't you speak English? Are you stupid?" Can you imagine what kind of a student she was? She was a Japanese girl! I was really shocked. I still remember her face and the situations.

Fortunately, this horrible negative stimulus changed to a great power and I tried really hard to improve my English because I wanted to beat her. So, now I am a teacher, a learner, and a returnee.

As a returnee, I'd like to mention that teachers need to know that so many returnees suffered in their new schools and are suffering in their schools back in Japan. To maintain English is much more difficult than to learn English. Physically, it's hard because what they hear most of the time is Japanese. Mentally, many returnees are suffering from culture shock as well as bullying and teasing from their classmates. One of my friends tried not to speak English even in her English class because she was bullied by her classmates.

Since I wasn't bullied back in Japan, and also because the teachers knew the importance and understood the difficulty of maintaining English, I was really lucky and could maintain what I gained in the U.S. So, please keep in mind that your support is really important.

Gordon Myskow

The administration of my elementary school in Canada may have had quite progressive ideas about education. But in the case of my French class, the notions of learner autonomy were interpreted quite literally, I'm afraid. Due to cutbacks in public education, our school actually did not have a French teacher! However, because of Canada's official policy of bilingualism, we were still required to attend French "class". Now I use the word "class" very loosely here because even as a child, I was certain that any class had to include a teacher. So when we were seated for an hour in front of a TV and video player we knew it was French "class" and for us that meant free time!

As everyone involved in language education agrees, children are exceptionally keen learners; this must be true because the connection I made at a young age between French class and free time stuck with me right through middle and high school—despite the fact that I actually had teachers during those times! In fact, this association between French class and free time seems to be the only thing I learned from those elementary school French "classes".

I would be lying if I said that reflecting on this terrifically unsuccessful experience led me to any profound insights about language teaching. Instead, one thing I did take from this process of sharing with my classmates is something so simple I tend to forget it in the mad rush from class to class: that is, students remember their lessons—even lessons in which there is no teacher, as I found out! Ideally, of course, students remember the content of their lessons, but even when they don't, they remember how they felt during the lessons. Through sharing with my classmates, I was reminded once again of the tremendous responsibilities we educators have.

Janell Pekkain

Mrs. Beltz was the mom of the high school football coach. She was also my French teacher. All I remember learning in her class was how to make crepes. My college French teacher had just arrived from Paris. All I remember about her class was the way she dressed - tight jeans, high heels, and dangling bracelets.

When I came to Japan I thought, "Finally, I'm living in the country, I'll learn the language!" After two years, all I remembered in Japanese is… well… I don't actually remember. But I kept at it for years. I made a commitment, I studied hard, I made sacrifices, I tried and I made progress. There were some successes. Then I left Japan and didn't use much Japanese for nearly seven years.

Reflecting on my language learning history, I realized how much ego was involved. I felt like a failure, embarrassed, stupid. My self-esteem and identity seriously bruised. Then an amazing thing happened. I returned to Japan and all of this language came flooding back to my brain and out of my mouth. I was communicating—almost effortlessly—in a foreign language! What I realized is that I needed to accept my baby steps. Language learning is a lifetime process. There is no end in sight. It takes effort, perseverance, a positive attitude and a forgiving spirit. No one ever won a battle by beating themselves up.

Kana Gordon

From the time I was born, my communicative environments were predominantly Japanese, as I spent most of my time with my mother, her Japanese friends and their bilingual children. When I started kindergarten, I was very shy and spent most of my time observing, rather than interacting. My teachers associated this behavior with my bilingualness and convinced my mother that she should stop using Japanese with me. Within a short time, my Japanese ability was reduced to only a few words and phrases. I then had to spend time in high school, university and years in Japan struggling to re-acquire the language. I don't think I could ever forgive my kindergarten teacher. I will always encourage parents to raise their children bilingually if they can and I would advocate to any administration to create and provide a supportive environment for their multilingual students. I have never heard a grown person say that they regret being multilingual.

Kazufumi Endo

Looking back upon my language learning history, I remember that I have, luckily, met a large number of inspiring language teachers. However the person who inspired me most was my father. As he was born into a poverty-stricken family, he had no chance to learn English or any other foreign language. However, his curiosity about foreign languages was insatiable. As English was stigmatized as an enemy language, his deep interest in English ran contrary to the practice of the time. However he boldly opened a small English dictionary behind a Japanese Imperial army barracks. Furthermore he picked up some local languages, in particular Malay, during his service period as a soldier in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia from 1943 to 1945.

Pointing to some food on the table at supper during my childhood, he often told my family what those foods were called in other languages, especially Malay. Although I have not learned English or any foreign language from my father, his attitude toward foreign languages has inspired me most.

Martha Clark Cummings

Eva Hoffman, in her beautifully written memoir about immigrating from Poland to America, states: "Linguistic dispossession is sufficient motive for violence, for it is close to the dispossession of one's self. Blind rage, helpless rage is rage without words – rage that overwhelms one with darkness. And if one is perpetually without words – that condition itself is bound to be an enraging frustration." (1989, p.124)

In the summer of 2002, I would not have said I was in a state of rage over my inability to learn Japanese. I would have said I was mildly irritated by several dozen features of my life in Japan. When I look back at my journals, however, I find page after page of sentences beginning with the words, "I hate...", a litany in an undeniably enraged voice. This hate, very slowly, resolved itself into something milder, a feeling of incompetence, ineptitude, and low expectations leading to low motivation leading to further frustration.

And then, miraculously, I entered the first stage of recovery. Pavlenko & Lantolf (2000) say, "The initial step toward recovery and reconstruction of a self is the appropriation of others' voices..." (p.167). Why? How? I have a new teacher, a kind, generous and unassuming woman from the village of Inawashiro, who has given me encouragement, support, and a voice in Japanese that I can accept as my own.

Mary Kong

Language learning is a confusing journey of meanings and sounds. I've still a long way to go with learning Japanese after stumbling onto it almost 5 years ago. My most earnest attempt at learning Japanese took place 2 years ago. I enrolled in a language school for three months in Tokyo. Classes were good but speaking practice was lacking. I excelled in those classes and was told that my pronunciation and grammar knowledge were great. I thought I was good but in the real world, my confidence left me. To this day, I still can't carry on a basic Japanese conversation without sometimes feeling flustered and confused at some point. Sometimes I still feel like a lost traveler in some foreign land. But I guess that is what many of us feel at times.

What does this all mean to me as a teacher? One of the most important things I was able to learn through reflecting back on my language learning history was that my students must feel the same things I do. This has led me to a greater understanding of what my own students might have experienced or be going through now. So next time a student, or someone who is trying to communicate with me in a tongue nonnative to themselves, looks at me with lost exasperated eyes and is stumbling for words, I know enough to be patient, sensitive, and hopefully more supportive as a teacher who was, is, and always will be, a language learner herself.

Matt Sparling

There was something seriously wrong with my Spanish professor in college. First, he always wore dark mirrored sunglasses in class. It gave him an untouchable mystique like a dictator lording it over the masses. Plus, he spoke lightening-quick Spanish and no one except the other native Spanish speakers in the class could understand a word he said. I remember him having long casual conversations the Spanish speakers and then with a quick snicker we would go back to some grammar point made in the textbook. He mumbled a lot, too. By the end of the semester I failed the class. It was the only time in my academic experience, and it was quite a shock.

Recently I bought one of those do-it-at-home CD language learning packages: German flavor. I thought the idea of learning from a CD seemed like a long shot. But, I have to admit I really liked it. Not exactly sure how much I learned but it did my soul good to enjoy another language. I listened attentively to the adventures of Boris and Frau Beckman. It was great to go at my own pace, too. If I didn't want to learn German on a particular day, then I didn't pick up the CD. Boris and Frau Beckman waited patiently and when I was ready, they were ready. It is amazing how the low stress approach improved my listening enjoyment. I loved listening. It was quite a change from my experience in college.

If there is any point to be made in this confession, then I guess it could be this. The deeply personal nature of language learning means that many individuals, myself included, need to enjoy language learning activities in order to connect with the target language. It sounds cliché, but it's true.

Michiko Sato

I would often stay in the bathroom alone. I don't remember the exact reason but that was the only place I could relax. I went to England for a year to study. I stayed with a family in Yorkshire. I hardly spoke any English. It was not only fun but also a bitter experience. I wished I could have been a better speaker while I was there. I became a better learner after I came home.

In college, I learned more things through life in a dormitory, where one third of the residents were exchange students, one fourth returnees, and the rest Japanese. The environment was almost completely bilingual. Speakers of Japanese, English, and some other languages all felt similar inferiority and constraint in using both languages. Daily life included the inevitable pressure of learning English, but it was fun. It was also a great experience for building relationships.

What I learned from those experiences is that what is generally thought of as fun is not necessarily fun for the learners. It can build a feeling of inferiority. But a negative experience can turn to better results, too. Flexibility and readiness toward students' negative feelings are useful in pacing our teaching according to the pace of students' learning.

Nami Sawamura

My bitter language experience started when I had to attend a regular English class in a Japanese junior high school after I came back from spending 6 years in America. The English class started with learning the alphabet. The class for me

was nothing but boredom, and after a few classes it became painful to attend. The lessons were taught in Japanese, explaining mainly about grammar. Students would recite the key sentences, take notes and do some drills to practice the patterns and forms. I was wondering how this learning would be useful in practical situations. But many students devoted many hours to learning English in this style. I believe that many of the teachers and students studied English for one particular reason: to pass the entrance exam for universities. Therefore, the grammatical teaching style was pretty much reasonable for their needs.

Although my stress became stronger after I noticed that my friends were focusing too much on trivial things and being picky about grammar, I wanted to expand and learn useful, meaningful English: English as a tool to communicate.

Through my experience I reflect that I wanted the teacher to be aware of students' proficiency levels and their backgrounds in language learning. More and more students have experiences with foreign learning environments at an early age. Not only those who are returnees, but also students who have been exposed to English tend to have high proficiency in listening and speaking. Also teaching style and content could vary to attract individual students. Teachers need to understand students' ability, give challenging goals for language learning, inspire the students that language could open new doors to one's perspective, and broaden the chances to realize one's goal.

Yoshie Ochi

I've never reflected on my life through language learning. My life is as if I were walking a tightrope, taking care of three children and doing housework while working as a full time teacher and being a language learner. Then where does my motivation come from? Calm but deep reflection on my language learning history has given me three answers to these questions.

The first answer is to seek my identity. It seems that I have engaged in the activities for my own sake and not for extrinsic tangible reward. I have been motivated to achieve self-actualization. So far I have been asking myself who I am and how I should lead my life. Language learning has always been a key to this challenge. The positive feedback, like passing the First Grade of the Eiken Step Test and getting a high TOEIC score, can be perceived as a boost to my feelings of competence and self-determination, which has energized my life.

Another answer is to have fun. Language learning has provided me with a new way of thinking, feeling, and acting, life long friends and good instructors, and refreshment like after playing sports. "Sports English!" I like to use this term for the fulfillment and energy I can get through English study. The faster I read passages, the bigger map I can grasp. It is the fun moments of brain storming.

The last answer is economical and psychological independence. I am studying a language in order to further a career or academic goal, which leads to economic as well as psychological independence.

Yuko Kobayashi

I encountered my first foreign language at a private protestant junior high school in Yokohama. In spite of my nervousness, the English class proceeded in an unthreatening way at a moderate speed with traditional approaches such as explanations about grammar and translation. The teacher gave us quizzes and homework, which reinforced my knowledge. However, other students' attitude of complete confidence in English made me feel very uneasy about further study.

Besides the regular class, we learned about the Bible in English from an American missionary. Attentively listening to her English, we were fascinated with the stories of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, God, and the Holy Spirit. It wasn't very communicative, but more like a Content-Based-Approach. The American teacher's gentle personality and a good classroom atmosphere were a great help to lessen my anxiety, and to feel willing to learn more.

In my senior high school days, my interest in English gained momentum, and I engaged myself in learning it even outside of class. The fear I felt in junior high was completely superseded by a true joy. And I had already determined that I would become an English teacher, though I actually remember very little, almost zero, about all the English teachers I met.

One Georgetown University professor, Mori (1999), claims in an article that "learners' beliefs cannot be reduced to a single dimension but are composed of multiple, autonomous dimensions, each of which has unique effects on learning" (p.382).

One important lesson from my language learning history is that, if you keep on learning steadily and find enjoyment in your language learning journey, and if you have a crystal-clear and attainable goal, you can accomplish it eventually. Keep reaching for the stars, don't be over-worried, and never, never, never surrender!!!

Conclusion

After sharing our language learning histories, we were surprised to discover that we all had so many negative memories. This was a common thread, but we also realized there were quite a few successes as well. Through considering these positive and negative experiences, we were able to better appreciate the challenges our students are facing. The questions in the Appendix were generated from insights that we gleaned from the process of sharing our stories. We invite you to use these questions as a guide to write your own language learning history.

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Appendix: JALT 2005: Language learning history handout

"*Then he threw on the deck before us whole handfuls of frozen words, which looked like crystallized sweets of different colours .... When we warmed them a little between our hands, they melted like snow, and we actually heard them though we did not understand them, for they were in a barbarous language."* --Francois Rabelais

1. Identity

- How do you see yourself as a learner? (e.g., confident, risk-taker, inter/intra personal, leader, visual, kinesthetic)
- What motivates you as a language learner?

2. Goal/purpose

- What are your language goals?
- Was there a clear and meaningful purpose and objective for your studies?

3. Respect/understanding

- As a learner, did you feel respect and understanding from your teacher?

4. Support

- What kind of support did you receive in your language learning experience?

5. Anxiety

- Describe any anxiety you may have experienced as a language learner.
- What did your teacher do to reduce anxiety in the class?

6. Method/approach

- What approach/methods did your teachers use?
- Do you feel that the approaches/methods your teachers used matched your language learning style?
- What classroom practices did you like?

7. Atmosphere

- Was your environment conducive to your language learning experience?
- Was your learning environment more collaborative or competitive?

8. Empathy

- Do you feel that your teachers empathized with your language learning struggles?

9. Assessment

- How do you assess your own language learning achievements?
- Do you think this assessment had positive or negative outcomes for you?