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Davey Young is a Program Manager at Rikkyo University's Center for English Discussion Class. Davey holds an MA in TESOL and has worked in various ESL and EFL contexts in the United States, China, and Japan. His current research interests include interactional competence and turn-taking, topic interest, and special education needs.



[JALT PRAXIS] TLT INTERVIEWS



Torrin Shimono & James Nobis

TLT Interviews brings you direct insights from leaders in the field of language learning, teaching, and education—and you are invited to be an interviewer! If you have a pertinent issue you would like to explore and have access to an expert or specialist, please make a submission of 2,000 words or less.

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Welcome to the May/June edition of *TLT Interviews*! For this issue we are happy to bring you two separate conversations, one on teacher development and the other on artificial intelligence in the classroom. Our first interview is with Gabriel Díaz-Maggioli. Dr. Díaz-Maggioli is Director of the LUDUS Center, the professional development node of the Catholic University of Uruguay. He was interviewed by Matthew Turner, a Teacher Development SIG officer, and co-creator of *The TEF-Lology Podcast*. Matthew asked questions to Gabriel about his research interests of Continuing Professional Development (CPD), Teacher Education, and the Teaching of Teachers (ToT).

were very few resources and where being a language teacher was not considered a profession. It was mostly a quest to support my colleagues and myself in procuring new ways of doing things. Also, living somewhere where there were no graduate programs in education, how would we grow as a nation if we didn't do research and get into more professionally sound practices?

So to what extent is a country's political upheaval and the situation of teachers as workers intertwined?

An Interview with Gabriel Díaz-Maggioli

Matthew Turner: *What got you interested in teacher development as a research discipline?*

Gabriel Díaz-Maggioli: It was mostly from having worked for many years in a country where there



Teachers are principally political workers because we espouse certain ideologies of teaching which sometimes may or may not be in-line with commonly held political views of the country or the majority of the population. Nevertheless, teachers are always there at the forefront of either answering the questions or posing the questions and making change happen. I see myself as a cultural worker, acting as a broker between students' particular learning needs and the society in which they will work. I help them to read the profession within the political context or our society, while allowing them to develop personally. As teachers, we are always reading the context and making decisions on behalf of our students. As teacher educators, we are not just responsible for the teachers we train or educate, but are ultimately responsible for the opportunities that their students, who are invisible to us, are going to have in the future.

During your plenary speech you talked about CPD issues in institutions. To what extent could CPD be problematic?

In any other profession, there is absolutely no question that employers need to invest in their profession in order to get better. In education, I see a reticence on the part of many school systems, governments, and school owners who don't see this as an investment in the future of their institutions. However, in our profession, everything comes in cycles. There was a cycle of professional development (PD) in the 1990s and we're now having another cycle. So why is it raising interest now? I have to confess that our profession is also a huge industry, with materials being produced for a world where teachers aren't properly qualified, so I think the industry is now moving towards PD. Is it because people are convinced that teachers deserve this, or is it because it is an economically-wise move? Teachers are trained to use the materials of new paradigms, and support is withdrawn once there is a critical mass of teachers who can do it. What I advocate is completely different: I advocate for teachers to work in communities of like-minded individuals, learning together and from one another.

How about teachers who want to do CPD within their institutions?

I often ask people, "Would managers hire someone who asks what PD opportunities and budget they have, and says they are going to be away three times yearly because they are presenting at conferences?" The answer is no. However, a teacher who is concerned about their own PD or pursues PD is an invaluable asset to any institution. So why are

teachers not perceived as assets but rather perceived as problems? On the level of individual institutions, more awareness raising needs to be done.

How can teachers be kept motivated to engage in CPD when working for institutions that impose pedagogical restrictions or offer limited contracts for example?

That is where the roles of professional associations become paramount. They provide forums to continue growing and to voice professional concerns. You immediately develop personal bonds with different colleagues, so there is an element of personal development there, too. Professional associations need to gain a rightful place in discussions of professionalism because they are generally run by volunteers. So we need to professionalize the association as well.

In your plenary speech you showed the Teacher's Choice Framework, could you explain that?

It is the intersection of two variables—one concerning knowledge and the other with awareness. By crossing the two variables, we can see how aware a professional is of their own knowledge and how up-to-date or outdated their knowledge is. This creates four quadrants, and as a professional, I'm in all four quadrants. However, PD will be contingent upon particular learning needs. For example, many teachers around the world become teacher educators because they are great classroom teachers but are unprepared for their new role and are thus novices. So, they are aware that their knowledge base for the new job is faulty and will need particular forms of PD to be able to do their job well. However, what happens most of the time is that institutions look at what's available with PD opportunities being offered in a decontextualized manner, with decisions being made top-down by managers, and teachers seldom asked what they need. I have just finished writing a white paper with Silvana Richardson on this framework, and she made an observation that we are all for the teacher, but how about the institution? Institutions also have development plans, so there are two layers—a layer that is designed for the teacher to fulfil the goals of the institution, and one that is selected and built on choice. That is the one that the teacher can pursue to satisfy personal professional development needs. For this, huge resources are not needed. There are lots of resources online, and once they are well-selected, then you can access them and have your own system. If people are then allowed time to meet and work together and be compensated for it, they will be fully invested.

You talked about a code of practice for using Web 2.0 materials.

Yes, there has to be some control given by peers and curation by peers for peer refereeing. For example, if you have a good blog or podcast, have peers comment and review it. As teachers, we deserve quality materials. If you buy an electronic item that has been poorly designed, you wouldn't buy it. Why should teachers also consume information that is not of quality?

Should we as teachers be reflecting on what we use and be critical of online resources?

Not every society is a society that fosters reflection, particularly when countries have been through protracted periods of dictatorship or totalitarianism. Reflection is not something that comes to you second nature. Reflection is like learning to swim—you learn to swim if there is a body of water nearby, and similarly, you reflect if there is a reflective culture around you. I come from a region where people are suspicious of reflection, so, one of the things I do is I teach my students to reflect by giving them rhetorical organisation tasks. You first describe the event, then you analyse it, and in analysing it, you gauge the impact on yourself and on your students. Then the last thing is a commitment to the future and asking about what you're going to do with it. So, it is not just speculation, but you are going to grow in the future. This is what ties reflection together.

Some make the transition from being a teacher to a ToT. What are some the reasons behind educators wishing to take such a step?

Sometimes you wish to take it; sometimes someone wishes for you to take it. There are many different situations, but what I have found is many teacher educators get there because they are people who have a passion for improving the field of education. If you're enhancing the education of new teachers, you are a forward-looking person in that sense. There are also those who get tired of students, and there are others who have been very successful language teachers and because of an institutional situation, are made heads of internal teacher training.

Roles of ToT include mediating teachers' knowledge and scaffolding ongoing learning. How can ToT get the best out of their students and cultivate adaptive teachers?

To me, everything is about building community. If we understand our profession as the coming together of people who like teaching English, that makes us a very specific community of practice. If we understand teacher education as the welcoming into the community of practice of new members,

then by definition, teacher educators need to shift their practices from a focus on theories of teaching to a host of activities aimed at welcoming new members into the community. Therefore, my role is not a teaching role or directly transmitting a said body of knowledge. It is a matter of helping a person's enculturation into the community and helping them gain more participation space. In this view, learning is perceived as being able to participate—with the more you participate, the more you learn. Once you have learnt, you start developing. The ToT is there to mediate and to provide the tools necessary for that new educator to be able to get a grasp on their job. ToT helps with scaffolding, too. When you scaffold, you don't simply find things for the other person—you give them information, support, resources, or tools that will allow them to independently do what they cannot do independently yet. You are doing an intervention today, so that the person can become the teacher they are going to be tomorrow.

And what is the role of ToT in bringing research to trainee teachers?

As a teacher educator, you need to keep abreast of research development. However, you also embody a certain perspective and are going to do readings of research that is within your area of interest. That's another political element because in giving my students access to that theory, I may be underplaying the influence of other theories. One role as a teacher educator is to present all the options you are aware of and not skew or leave anything out. Another role is to translate or do summaries of the research and test learners on their understanding through having them write and make use of their summaries. This is pure scaffolding in action. I start from what the students know of a topic, which is generally folk theories, and then present the main tenets of the research. They then read the article, and finally, summarize and apply it.

Finally, the core question that we should keep asking ourselves is how can we continue to best serve our learners. How can educators maintain this focus?

It is not easy, but I think having your own personal learning network (PLN) is the answer. I have a PLN on Facebook, and we are all like-minded individuals who obsess about sociocultural learning theory, and all university professors who are doing teacher education along those lines. We run ideas through each other, share manuscripts that we've written for criticism, and this way we keep engaged and learn a lot from other people and come up with new ideas.

Thank you very much.

Thank you, I'm very glad to be here in Japan for JALT, and I hope the dialogue that starts today will continue.

Further Reading

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For our second interview, we share a discussion with Nick Saville. Dr. Saville is Director of Research & Thought Leadership in Cambridge Assessment, English (University of Cambridge) and Secretary-General of ALTE. He has a PhD in Language Assessment, and before moving to Cambridge, he worked in Italy and in Tokyo. He is co-author of the volume *Learning Oriented Assessment* (Jones & Saville, 2016). He was interviewed by Aeris Wong, the Management Course English Program Coordinator at Konan University's School of Management. He has a Masters from Temple University Japan and is currently a doctoral candidate.

An Interview with Dr. Nick Saville

Aeris Wong: *What led you to your work in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning?*

Nick Saville: Well, about 10 years ago, I became interested in automated assessment of learners' writing. This led me into the world of AI. Over the past decade, I have been working on a number of projects to assess not only writing, but also speech using automated systems that incorporate AI.

When I first got involved, not many people were talking about it outside the specialist areas of computer science and machine learning. Nowadays, everywhere you look, whether on the TV or when you open a newspaper, somebody is talking about AI. People are talking about how it can solve numerous problems, but there is also concern about the potential problems it may create. In thinking about these issues, the whole question of ethics

also comes into the discussion. If we are socially-minded, we should be predicting the impacts of technology and thinking about how we adjust society and not simply let the economic impetus of the technology impact negatively on a whole load of people. I hope that, in our field at least, we will be thinking about the impact on people like teachers and learners.

Did you have any specific research questions in mind that you were trying to answer?

We were trying to understand what learner language is like and what distinguishes the language of learners at different stages of their developing proficiency. Through using learner data, we can figure out how to train a tool to be able to use the same information to automatically assign people to proficiency categories or levels. So, if we can understand what it is that characterizes a proficiency level, we can train a machine to do it and, therefore, use an automated rating system alongside humans in order to rate samples of writing. We can also do the same for speech, although it is a bit trickier due to the nature of speech data.

Automated rating systems are important because they can help increase the reliability of assessment by enabling a “virtuous combination” between machines and humans. It also becomes possible to provide better and timelier feedback. Rather than simply saying, “You are (CEFR level) B1,” the feedback can be more diagnostic and targeted, such as “You are B1, and this is what your language looks like. These are the features that make it B1, and here are some things you could do to improve.” Write and Improve (a free, CEFR-based online writing assessment) is an example of this line of thinking (<writeandimprove.com>).

The Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) is used at many universities in Japan. However, some argue that a majority of language learners fall within levels A1-A2 and, therefore, the CEFR is not sensitive enough to discriminate between these learners.

That's correct. However, the six CEFR levels are not designed as finely-grained stepping stones on the proficiency continuum. The CEFR is designed for identifying appropriate learning goals and developing them into the smaller steps that can take you through the level or band. It is usual for publishers to have two course books to take you through each of the B bands because within that, they will be setting the smaller steps that will be measured as progress points against a more finely developed