Exploring limited opportunities in language education: Pan-SIG interview with JD Brown and Deryn Verity

DERYN Verity and JD Brown are the plenary speakers at the 8th Annual Pan-SIG Conference May 23-24, at Toyo Gakuen University, in Chiba. They are interviewed by Folake Abass and Andrew Atkins.

James Dean ("JD") Brown is a professor on the graduate faculty of the Department of Second Language Studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. He specializes in the areas of language testing, curriculum design, program evaluation, and research methods. He has published a number of articles and books on these topics.

Deryn Verity is a professor in the Department of International & English Interdisciplinary Studies at Osaka Jogakuin College in Osaka. She is also a lecturer in the Columbia University/Teachers College Tokyo MATESOL program and Instructor in the new online MATESOL program offered by the New School in New York City. Her interests include sociocultural theory, pedagogy and methodology, online education, and language awareness.

Folake: Thank you both for doing this interview with us. To begin, can you tell us about your research interests?

Deryn: I'm interested in what Vygotskyan theory has to tell us about teachers and teaching and by implication, learners and learning. I'm also interested in language awareness and how teachers can support learners in developing a sense of active engagement with their second language. The most fundamental interest I have is in how we as teachers can help learners come to know new things, particularly in the ways that we use language.

JD: At the moment, I am working on two books: a collection of modules for teaching various aspects of connected speech, and a teacher training book giving detailed explanations of various aspects of connected speech. I'm also working on a number of papers: one reflects on my three decades of cloze testing research, another looks back at all the mistakes I've made in language testing and what I have learned from them, and I just published a paper in *Language Assessment Quarterly* on language testing context analysis. In terms of outside consulting, I am currently doing a qualitative and quantitative evaluation for the STEP organization of their Eiken tests and testing program, as well as an oral-proficiency test-development project for kids in Hawaiian language immersion programs all over the state of Hawaii.

Andrew: How did you become involved in these areas?

JD: Back in 1980, when I was teaching in China, I found my students could understand me if I spoke using dictionary pronunciation, but they were completely lost when they encountered natural North American English my colleagues and I produced when we spoke together. The search for ways to bridge that gap eventually led me to what I now call *connected speech*. Over the years, I have found some research about connected speech, but with the sole exception of Shockey's (2003) linguistic treatment of related topics, I have found nothing that focuses exclusively on it. Seeing a need and corresponding gap, I set out to remedy the situation. I began by editing a collection of articles on connected speech with my wife (Brown & Kondo-Brown, 2006). I then edited modules (Brown, forthcoming a) and wrote a book (Brown, forthcoming b) for teaching connected speech. I've tried to make all of these resources practical and useful in both ESL and EFL contexts.

Deryn: Going from a MATESOL program to a PhD program where several professors were actively engaged in developing their understanding of socio-cultural theory (SCT) and its application to second language acquisition influenced me a lot. I came to understand that what you can't see in the classroom is maybe more important than what you can see. A more recent interest of mine is in online education and what it has to show us about dialogic interaction and the possibilities of scaffolding learning. I was skeptical at first that the teaching would be as satisfying as face-to-face teaching, but that concern soon disappeared. The internet was, and continues to be, an intensive, truly dialogic medium for teaching and learning.

Folake: For those not familiar with SCT, could you tell us about it and how it applies to second language acquisition (SLA)?

Deryn: The basic premise of SCT is that language acquisition is a process of social and cultural construction of self and knowledge. Rather than seeing the learner as a processor, and SLA as a mostly internal, private process, SCT views SLA as a socially-situated process. By learning a second language, we learn to participate in the conventions of that language. Language acquisition is a two-way street. SCT allows learners a lot more agency than some other models of SLA, yet it does not marginalize the role of instruction. Indeed, for SCT, learning only happens when the learner interacts with others, and often the most significant "other" is the teacher.

Andrew: JD, in recent years, some of your publications have been about the suprasegmental properties of connected speech you mention. Could you tell us more about what this involves?

JD: To me, connected speech is the speech used in all native speaker talk. Returnees and other advanced-level EFL learners also use connected speech, which I suspect, is one important feature that marks them as high-level learners of English. Connected speech is a fairly complex, rules-based pronunciation system that makes words easier to pronounce in natural speech and connects the words into a smooth flow of language. These rules involve word and utterance stress, strong and weak forms of words, vowel and consonant reduction, syllable and word linking, dropping of sounds, inserting sounds, assimilating sounds, and so on.

Folake: What are some of the challenges of SLA, especially teaching in Japan? How can we as teachers introduce a more holistic approach?

Deryn: SLA is a psycholinguistic, culturally situated, highly complex process, and language teaching is another, separate culturally constructed and situated, highly complex process. As language teachers know, they do not always converge!

Second language fluency in Japan is constrained by a variety of factors. There is a strong tradition of making language a book subject instead of a practical one. The challenge is to break through to more holistic, aware language use with students. What is whole or context-rich for one learner (or teacher) is not for another; so perhaps we should be offering more opportunities to make choices. This not only provides more potential match-ups between learners and techniques/goals/activities, but it also directly builds learner agency into the curriculum. By helping learners recognize and commit themselves to new choices, we may be serving them well and indirectly removing some of the barriers that exist between them and language.

Andrew: You have both been asked to give a plenary lecture at the Pan-SIG conference in May and given the conference theme, how do you interpret *limited opportunities in language education,* and how does what you do relate to this theme?

JD: In these times, we tend to think of financial limitations, at least in the US. But I prefer to think the theme of this conference has to do with limitations Japanese students face while studying English. These are not financial but rather cultural limitations, about which we *gaijin* should probably remain silent. Nonetheless, since I have a secure job in Hawaii, I can pose some questions which indirectly point to some of the limitations I have observed over my two decades of being in and out of Japan:

- Why is English a required subject for all Japanese? Should it be required?

- Why do those Japanese students who like English feel that way?

- Are the entrance examinations and other admissions systems developed in recent years (e.g., the recommendation system and special admissions tests/practices for returnees) reliable, valid, and fair?

- Why don't Japanese students have more opportunities to interact with native speakers and to study abroad? And when they do get a chance, why are they stigmatized as returnees?

While being an outsider to Japan may mean I don't really understand (as suggested in no uncertain terms by Yoshida-sensei, 1996a, 1996b), I may have the advantage of perspective in that I have other baselines in Hawaii and around the world to compare my Japan experiences to. In any case, the questions I raise above did not come to my mind in a vacuum. I learned about them from people living, working, and struggling with these issues on a daily basis.

Even though I've spent a total of six years teaching graduate courses in Japan (spread over the past 25 years), it is clear to me that the only effect I could possibly have had was an indirect one. That's as it should be. I have taught hundreds of Japanese and *gaijin* graduate students in Japan and Hawaii, given public presentations to literally thousands of people at conferences and other venues in Japan, and of course written articles to the many readers of *JALT Journal* and *The Language Teacher* and various JALT SIG newsletters. In many of those contacts with language teachers in Japan I addressed the issues raised above. I can only hope I have indirectly made some people think about them, perhaps in new ways. It is the people of Japan who must bring these issues up as problems in real Japanese settings, suggest changes with a chance of being accepted, and create reforms that will have any real importance to language teaching in Japan.

Deryn: English teaching in Japan is a mature industry. It has undergone many stages of development. We enjoy the benefits of high level facilities, resources, and technology. So what is the relevance of the term limited opportunities here? Even with all the privileges we enjoy as teachers and learners enjoy, there are many ways in which the potential for good teaching and successful learning is overlooked, deflected, or even thrown away completely.

Partly because it is so comfortable to teach here in many ways, I think there is always a danger of becoming somewhat complacent about the language classroom. Although we may not be consciously aware of them, there are limits of time, proficiency levels, money, and energy. Part of our professional development should be in practicing various ways of coping with these limits. That's one of the great strengths of JALT. Simply by attending a chapter meeting or conference, you are stimulated into looking afresh at your own teaching practice. So expanding could just mean doing something new; it broadens the mind.

I am very aware of the legitimate gripes many language teachers have here in Japan. Students can be under-motivated (even while expressing great interest in learning English), tired, overworked, and generally distracted. Materials can be inappropriate and boring. So another sense of expanding limited opportunities could be seeking ways of not letting these negative aspects wear you down and redefining their limits as opportunities for growth! What is most important and interesting about the conference theme is that it encourages us to seek what the limits are, because boundaries are as socially constructed as anything else.

Folake: Your point about complacency in the classroom is an interesting one. As teachers and students often feed off each other, it can be a struggle not only to motivate our students but to keep them motivated. How can we move beyond the negativity we sometimes face?

Deryn: I'm not sure there is a single or all-purpose answer to the question. One thing is understanding what the source of the negativity is. Sometimes it seems to come from the students, but at other times it surely comes from us, even if it is unexamined and unrecognized. An experienced teacher can often dip into a toolkit of experience and make a small change that can tip a class or a group dynamic from negative to positive. Even a less experienced teacher can do something similar, and that's how you learn what works-by experimenting in different ways.

How important is the negativity? Depending on the surrounding culture and the institutional culture of the school, some groups of learners can appear to be more resistant than they are. I wrote about a situation I had some years ago, after I taught my first semester in Japan (Verity, 2000). I found the students incredibly resistant until I looked more closely at how I was acting with them. It took most of the first semester, but by mid-year I was much more aware of how to read the students, and they ended up being exactly the same mix of resistant, cooperative, enthusiastic, and uninterested kids that I was used to teaching. But I had to allow the sense of failure I felt at first to exist, look at it, then finally experiment my way out of it.

Andrew: Thank you again for doing this interview with us. Can you give us some insight in to what you will be talking about in your plenary at the Pan-SIG conference?

JD: I plan to reflect on assessment and curriculum development mistakes I've made over the years and the lessons I've learned. For example, at UCLA (1976-1980), I learned the importance of a priori standards setting, the value of matching placement tests with curriculum, and the immovability of curriculum. In China (1980-1982), I discovered the importance of listening to people and the value of multiple sources of information. At FSU (1982-1985), I discovered the importance of including all stakeholders in curriculum development and the dangers of territoriality. At UHM (1986-1991), I learned how to combine CRT and NRT principles for placement testing, the value of including both discrete-point and integrative tests, the usefulness of quantitative research methods as a weapon, and the impermanence of curriculum development. In a number of other large-scale curriculum projects around the world, I have learned how using the same research methods can produce different results.

Deryn: I'm going to be looking at the online discourse that occurs in online teaching from an SCT perspective. Considering the reservations I had about the potential for real teaching to happen online, it was exciting to see the ways in which online teaching allows for more and deeper interaction with learners. Teaching online opened up an important window onto what I think of as the fractal problem of teacher education. How can we help novice teachers learn to teach in transformative ways when the standard MA-level teaching/training context tends to force us into a very instructor-centered, transmission-based mode?

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