

The Language Teacher

The Language Teacher (TLT) is the bimonthly publication of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT). It publishes articles and other material related to language teaching, particularly in an Asian context. *TLT* also serves the important role of publicizing information about the organization and its many events.. As a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting excellence in language learning, teaching, and research, JALT has a rich tradition of publishing relevant material in its many publications.



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to consider not only the level of the students, but also the real objective of the activity. If the objective is to have students speak purely in English, perhaps to help them learn to find ways to express what they want to say in a simplified manner, or to learn to deal with the frustration of not being able to say exactly what they want in a second language, then certainly using L1 would be inappropriate. However, if the objective is to propagate a sense of meaningfulness associated with reading in English and promote a shared sense of enjoyment, both of which are especially useful early in the ER program, then I highly recommend giving L1 a chance to contribute its fair share in your ER program.

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ment, student productivity and prolificacy, and is a big fan of extensive reading, listening, and speaking. He has also been a proofreader for various publications, including the Journal of the Extensive Reading SIG of JALT. <simon.obrien@me.com>

Disclaimer

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Viewing low motivation and competence through a learner-development framework

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Having taught highly-motivated, highly proficient English language students for several years in Australia, suddenly teaching low-motivation, low-proficiency students in compulsory English classes in Japanese universities was surprising, frustrating, and challenging. After several years of confusion, the lights began to come on when I became familiar with a few themes within the learner development literature.

Reading about, and experimenting within, self-efficacy theory and language learning strategies-based instruction have helped make it possible to not only understand students better, but also provide the kind of teaching and support most likely to be meaningful and beneficial.

オーストラリアで様々な国から来た生徒を数年間教えていた時は、生徒のモチベーションも、英語のレベルも高かった。その直後に日本の大学で必修英語の授業を持ち始めた時、生徒のモチベーションも英語力も低いのに驚きと不満を感じ、毎日が挑戦の連続であった。数年間は困惑することも多かったが、学習者の発達文献に関係するいくつかの論旨を読んでいくうちに、理解できるようになってきた。

自己効力感理論や言語学習ストラテジーに基づく指導法を読んだり試みたりすることは、生徒を理解できるようになるだけでなく、意義があり有益な授業ができる助けになる。

Over the last couple of years I've become aware of just how necessary it is for us as teachers to be able to help our students become better learners. This is particularly true for teachers who, like me, spend a lot of time with low-proficiency low-motivation students. Becoming familiar with a few aspects of learner development over the last few years has given

me a much-needed framework through which to understand my students better, and, I think, to make classroom time more meaningful and valuable.

I'm from Sydney, Australia, and before coming to Japan in 2008 I'd been teaching English to international students for several years. My background had been in music, and in my mid-20s, after deciding I'd spent long enough teaching kids to whack drums, I set out, B.A. (English and Cultural Studies) in hand, to get a proper job. Straight out of my Cambridge CELTA course in 2004, I somehow managed to land my first teaching job at the University of Western Sydney, where I taught students from Thailand, China, Japan, Korea, and South America who were preparing for undergraduate courses in English. I had a real admiration for those students, who had travelled so far and committed so strongly to a really high ambition. It's no small deal to decide to undertake university study in a foreign country, let alone in a language in which you're less than proficient, so my students had a clear goal that required a real dedication.

After the university amalgamated their two language centres onto a campus far from where I lived, my next job was in an ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) college, again teaching highly motivated and committed international students in complete English immersion for twenty-odd classroom hours a week. The students, mostly in their early 20s, were from all over the world, and had come to Sydney to spend anything from a fortnight to a year studying the language, for various reasons: some for a 'gap year' or working holiday, some for credit towards their studies in their home country, some to acquire English for their future careers, some even to begin the process of migration.

During those years, the challenge for me as a teacher was meeting the students' expectations of rapid progress and the speedy development of real-world abilities with the language. You would have had a hard time convincing me that "student motivation" was something that was such a problem area for our profession—unmotivated language learners just didn't exist in my world! Students were hungry for opportunities to use their language skills, and class-time often spilled over into weekend parties and hangouts. It was a great time for me, and many students from those years remain friends today.

SIG Spotlight: LD SIG



The Learner Development SIG <ld-sig.org> is a network of over 200 members with an interest in developing and researching practices that aim to support autonomous learning and teaching (among other things!). We offer chances to get connected with other teachers, students, and researchers through our newsletter *Learning Learning*, online resources, local area get-togethers in Hiroshima, the Kansai and the greater Tokyo area, as well as forums at different JALT conferences. Our current research-based publication projects include *Learner Development: Different Cases, Different Interests and Collaborative Learning in Learner Development*. We also provide conference and research grants for SIG members, as well as SIG membership grants, not to mention SIG subscriptions for teachers and students interested in joining the LD SIG and JALT <ld-sig.org/join>

Many of my colleagues in Sydney had begun teaching English in Asia or Europe, and had taken their skills back to Australia. I did it in reverse, finding myself with skills, experience, and qualifications (by that time, an almost-completed M.Ed in TESOL) that were valuable around the world. I decided, at 30, to pack up my life and head out into the unknown, and after some deliberation, settled on Japan. Avoiding the bigger cities, I came to Fukuoka, where I've lived now for six years.

My experience and qualifications got me a part-time position at a university within a year of arriving. But wow, to call my first year of university teaching in Japan a "shock to the system" would be an enormous understatement. After all, I'd been teaching Japanese university students back in Sydney for years! I knew what I was doing! I headed off to the classroom with loads of good communicative activities, ready to meet the students, get to know them a little, answer all of their questions, and help them improve their fluency.

So why were these students so utterly unwilling to participate? Why did they appear stunned and embarrassed when I asked them basic conversational questions? Where was the six years of vocabulary that I was meant to be building on? Why did their homework, if they turned any in, represent little more than an attempt to

discover how little effort they could get away with? Why weren't they retaining what we'd covered in previous weeks' classes? And WHY, at the end of the year, did they seem so blithely unconcerned that their English had barely improved despite the time and effort of thirty classes? I urgently needed a practical understanding of my students, their backgrounds and their actual motivations, if I was to have a hope of bringing anything of value to them each week.

Over the years, the answers to these sorts of questions have come, to a large extent, from reading up on a few key areas of the literature relevant to learner development, firstly, self-efficacy theory, and secondly, language learning strategies/strategies-based instruction. Coming across these has been like turning on the lights in a dark room, and has dramatically changed my understanding of my students, made me more empathetic to their challenges and needs, and given me an angle on how to make their time in my classes valuable and rewarding.

For example, a few years ago I noticed that a lot of my students seemed convinced that they were irredeemably inept at learning vocabulary, and this low estimation of their own abilities seemed to be exactly what was preventing them from putting effort into vocabulary study: a classic vicious cycle of "failure" breeding failure. To see if the cycle could be broken, I carried out a research project that first had them establish their self-efficacy in the area, and then over the course of a semester of learning, testing, and reflecting, hopefully would lead to them adjusting that estimation upwards. The project was arguably effective; confidence levels actually did rise, and it really got me interested in the theory and in figuring out how I could apply it beyond vocabulary learning. Reading about decades of other teachers' and researchers' successes, and the change in autonomy and learning outcomes that can come about when self-efficacy and confidence problems are properly addressed, gave me something to focus on in the classroom beyond simply language-based content. Trying to teach over the top of low self-efficacy is a recipe for stress and frustration, but developing self-efficacy with awareness is an opportunity for potentially life-changing teaching.

My second research interest was piqued while reading for a project I carried out in 2013. I'd produced a video demonstration of myself using word cards to learn Japanese vocabulary, and I

needed an understanding of why it had had such a remarkably positive impact on my students' confidence and enthusiasm, way beyond what I'd hoped. It turned out that I'd unwittingly carried out some effective *language learning strategy instruction*, right in line with the best recommendations in the literature going back several decades! In doing so, I'd stumbled across yet another framework for understanding my students and how best to help them.

Looking at my students' behaviours in terms of language learning strategies, or frankly; lack thereof, immediately answered a lot of questions. Of course I knew that low-competence, low-motivation students aren't necessarily *bad* or *inept* students; but reading about the strategies that are fundamental to language study, and noticing that many of my students were hopelessly unversed in them, gave me another angle on understanding and helping them. For example, many students arrive in my classroom with seemingly no knowledge of how to create mnemonic linkages, how to review well, how to plan and set goals for learning, or how compensate for knowledge gaps, let alone note-taking, summarising, or highlighting abilities. Whether or not it *should* after so much school language study, it falls to me to help them in these areas if I want to have an impact. Low motivation, something that our field is almost obsessively concerned about (probably rightly), begins to make sense in light of an understanding that our students have never been taught strategies for learning effectively. Their disengagement can come to be seen as a *logical result* of their lack of strategy knowledge and success, something we can get a handle on; potential solutions start to show up when we have an understanding of what fundamental skills our students need to learn most.

I've actually become excited to think about what might happen in future classes if I can effectively teach good *strategies* along with actual language *content*. Seeing the vast literature and all the research that's been done in the area has set out a game that I might actually be able to win, on a playing field that I finally understand and given me a research focus that I'm enthusiastic about following up. In the coming academic year, I'm interested to see how effectively I can include some useful strategy instruction in every lesson, and I won't miss a chance to help students re-think any low self-efficacy estimations they might have.

Becoming aware of what's going on in these few areas of theory and research has really made me view my role differently, has helped me understand how to help my students become better learners, and given me a direction on how to possibly overcome those problems that seemed so insurmountable when I first came across them a few years ago.

Stephen Paton has been teaching English for ten years to international students in Sydney, Australia, and, since 2009, at universities in western Japan. Research interests include self-efficacy theory and strategies-based instruction. He is also working on compiling a visuals-based system of grammar instruction using *Keynote* presentation software.



This essay has not been changed from its original publication.

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Re-examining semantic clustering: Insight from memory models

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It has been repeatedly argued that semantically related words should not be learned together because the learning is impeded. However, the results of past research are not all in agreement, with some providing favorable results for semantic clustering, and some seeming to suggest different types of similarity affect memory in different ways. The types of connections that truly cause the problem therefore need to be discussed more carefully. Focusing on a visual component, which is commonly observed across different models of working memory, a study was conducted to examine if learners have difficulty memorizing a group of words that describe items with a common *physical* feature. The study compared the learning of three types of word sets: unrelated, semantically related, and physically related. While no statistically significant difference was observed between semantically related and unrelated sets, the

SIG Spotlight: VOCAB SIG

The Vocabulary SIG is dedicated to research of the



learning, teaching, and assessment of vocabulary. It currently produces two publications, Vocabulary Education Research Bulletin (VERB) and Vocabulary Learning and Instruction (VLI), and hosts an annual symposium. Past events have featured Paul Nation and Batia Laufer, and our 2015 event hosted in Fukuoka will feature Stuart Webb and Rie Koizumi.

scores for physically related sets were significantly lower than those for the other two types. This suggests the possibility that the impeding effect of semantic clustering reported in the past could be partly due to the nature of semantically similar words, which sometimes share visual features.