

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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Plenary Speaker Interview



Every year, the plenary and featured speakers at our annual international conference write articles for *The Language Teacher* to give attendees some background to their conference presentations. This year, we will be publishing these articles in all of the pre-conference issues of *TLT*. For more information on JALT2015, please see the pullout preview in the centre of this issue of *TLT*, or visit our conference website:

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challenges and opportunities facing language educators in Japan, and her thoughts on JALT 2015.

Stephen Ryan (SR): First of all, I was wondering what was it that got you interested in this area of research all those years ago?

Tomoko Yashima (TY): For a long time, I have been working at the intersection of two broadly different fields: second language acquisition on the one hand, and intercultural communication on the other. These two fields are more widely separated than we think, with completely different sets of literature, terminology, and concerns. I thought that both fields could inform and benefit each other, but it was not working out that way.

Looking back, I remember a symposium organized by Rebecca Oxford at AILA 1996 as a turning point. Among the presenters were Zoltán Dörnyei and Peter MacIntyre, two prominent young researchers at the time. It was an extremely stimulating session. I was particularly excited about the concept of willingness to communicate—which was, I believe, being introduced for the first time into the SLA field—as something that would connect my two fields of interest. Since then I have been increasingly drawn to the area of individual differences in learner psychology in SLA, but my interests never left communication, or a view of language as something we can use to relate to people with whom we will never be able to communicate if we do not learn the L2. The combination of the two fields then led me to the idea of international posture, which I postulated later in my motivation research.

To me, motivation to communicate is a vital concept. Infants' L1 acquisition is built upon their innate desire to communicate with people around them, the desire to share attention and intention. Similarly in L2 learning, I believe it is natural for the desire to communicate to be the driving force behind motivation to study the L2. My interest in instructed language learning centers around how learners develop their L2 in such a way that it becomes a tool they use to share information as well as their intentions, and to share—but not necessarily agree with—the views and values of significant

The theme of JALT2015—*Focus on the Learner*—is a timely one highlighting a major shift in our field, from one dominated by descriptions of language and teaching techniques to a greater consideration of the contributions learners make to their own language learning. It is particularly apt that JALT should choose this as a conference theme since researchers from Japan have been at the forefront of this shift. In fact, Japan-based researchers have been so prominent in recent years that it is very easy to forget that this has not always been the case and that for a very long time many researchers in Japan felt disconnected or even isolated from theoretical advances occurring elsewhere. A key figure in the rise of the international profile of Japanese research into individual learner characteristics is this year's plenary speaker Tomoko Yashima. Her pioneering research into L2 willingness to communicate (WTC) and, in particular, her development of the concept of international posture inspired a generation of Japan-based researchers—myself included—to have the confidence to come up with our own theories and explanations of what is happening in our classrooms, as opposed to slavishly attempting—usually unsuccessfully—to apply models and theories developed elsewhere.

Recently I was fortunate to share a conversation with Tomoko, in which I had the opportunity to ask her about her work, her views on some of the main



others, thereby turning L2 into something that represents part of their self-concept. In the process of learning the L2, learners will encounter various views, values, and perspectives expressed by others or stated in the texts and materials used in instructed situations. This creates opportunities for them to have dialogues with others, including teachers and co-learners as well as writers and authors of ideas expressed in the materials. Thus I believe that motivation to communicate emerges when learners encounter diverse perspectives in the L2 classroom, which then becomes a dialogic space.

SR: It's interesting that you refer to the classroom because one of the things that has always impressed me about your research is that it is clearly grounded in the realities of teaching. From a practical perspective, what particular challenges do you see for teachers looking to focus on the learner in Japanese classrooms?

TY: I strongly believe in the pedagogical value of motivation research or learner psychology as it helps teachers to understand learners—or simply to understand human beings—but it also takes time and a lot of observation. Although teachers have an advantage because they know learners and their backgrounds better than outside researchers—particularly when integrating context is becoming increasingly important in doing research—their role as a teacher and as the one who gives grades may affect students' perception and behavior, and might cloud his or her own perception as well when doing research. Another issue comes when you have 40 students in a class, to focus on individual learners under such conditions is a challenge and a further issue is that Japanese teachers are always very busy.

Motivation research is interesting because it is about understanding people. Motivation to learn something has so much to do with acculturation to the context and it tells us so much about how humans become members of a community that they come to value. If someone is not motivated to learn a subject, I feel there is something about the culture or context of learning that he or she finds hard to acculturate into. One day, I hope to design a study that will help teachers understand their students through the insights the research findings can offer, that is, an in-depth understanding of why people behave as they do in their living contexts.

SR: Given your strong practical interest, do you see any evidence of your research influencing actual classroom practice?

TY: You know, after I published my WTC research I received so many inquiries from teachers and researchers at different levels and in different sectors of education, from elementary school to college. It seems my research stimulated their motivation to initiate classroom research in their own teaching contexts. I hope it encouraged teachers to focus on non-linguistic outcomes and recognize that enhancing motivation, self-confidence and willingness to communicate is as valued a goal of instructed FL teaching as a linguistic outcome and might have a longer term impact on their learning behavior. My research concerning the effects of creating an imagined community in EFL classes might have stimulated some people to find ways to implement a vision-focused communicative approach or a practice in which real desire to communicate is created, which leads to WTC and frequency of communication.

SR: So if you received one of those inquiries from someone today looking to start up their own research project, what kind of advice would you give?

TY: My advice would probably be very different to the advice I would have given ten years ago, because recently my own interest has shifted from identifying causal relationships among variables to understanding how learners' motivation and WTC undergo changes in context. My most recent WTC study is a classroom interventional study. If you want to focus on the dynamic aspect of WTC or motivation, I personally believe this is the way to go and teachers have an advantage here because they can design interventions to change their teaching practice or enhance learners' motivation, WTC or reduce anxiety and observe the changes taking place in context. They can try to explain how an interaction of multiple factors brought about these changes in learners, integrating data from multiple data sources. You really have to know the learners well to conduct this type of research, and conducting research then helps you to know the learners better. Combining linguistic development and psychological changes to examine how they interact with each other is the next step; motivation research has been somewhat independent of the SLA mainstream and has not clearly addressed the connection between motivation and language acquisition. There are some great opportunities for teachers looking to research their own classroom contexts.

SR: You mention how your own interest has shifted recently, and it is certainly my impression that we have seen a huge shift in the scope and focus of research in recent years, from the issues we inves-

tigate to the methods we use to collect and analyze data. What are the big changes you've noticed in the field over the years?

TY: Well, looking at the fields of IDs and motivation, I'd first like to point out something you didn't mention in your question, a geographic shift. SLA, at least this is my impression, used to be a somewhat Eurocentric field. Motivation research is ahead of other areas of SLA in becoming more inclusive of researchers all over the world. With motivation research, Japan is now an epicenter, with so much research coming from Japan-based researchers. This is seen in the surging number of international journal articles written by researchers based in Japan and other Asian countries such as Korea and China. I believe you did the meta-study and know the figures better than anybody else. This I think is a very good trend.

I'm personally excited about the Socio-Dynamic turn in SLA, as again for me this new trend has allowed me to integrate different fields I had been working in. From my interest in human development and culture I had been attracted to sociocultural theory and research that focuses on people as embedded in the sociocultural context. As you know Zoltán Dörnyei (2014) recently instigated motivation research using Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST), which sees the context as part of the system. In terms of research, this new trend with CDST encourages us to merge quantitative and qualitative methods. For 10 years or so, I was undergoing something of an epistemological crisis and this trend has presented me with a possible solution. This is an interesting but difficult period for motivation researchers because you can no longer simply apply established quantitative methods to research and publish the results. We need creativity and rigor to try to understand learners' cognition, affect and behavior utilizing various data sources. It's challenging but it is extremely exciting at the same time.

SR: As you mentioned, Asia, and Japan in particular, has seen a lot of research into language learner motivation and the psychology of language learning in general. How would you explain this surge in interest?

TY: One thing we can say is that teachers in instructed FL teaching in Japan struggle to motivate learners, as demonstrated by the fact that research on demotivation started in Japan. One reason I can suggest is that there is a gap between social pressure, with the economic sector and various official sources, such as METI, pressurizing the education

sector and reiterating the need to cultivate a "global workforce" that can (among other things) use English, and the perceptions of many learners who cannot see any meaning in learning English except that it is an important subject for entrance exams or something required in order to graduate. They can communicate with significant others and acquire all the knowledge they need in their L1 so don't see the relevance of English to their immediate lives.

There has also been a surge of interest in motivation research internationally because EFL teachers seem to have been struggling to motivate learners. According to Ema Ushioda, motivation issues are shared by teachers in different contexts across the globe. As far as I can tell, no other subject teachers are as eager to find methods that work, as language educators seem to be. The more devoted the teacher, the greater his or her concern about what the learners are really learning and how they feel. For example, you might feel concerned about learners who appeared to be enjoying the class activities but suddenly stopped attending. Clearly, the psychology of learners is complex and dynamic. Using questionnaires and interviews, motivation research gives some clues to teachers who wish to understand what learners really think and feel. Phenomenological interviews allow us to look at the world as the learners see it. It is about looking at teaching and learning from the learners' perspective. If you accept that teachers and learners construct the class together (after all, you cannot have teachers without learners, and teaching is communication), the desire to understand the psychology of your communication partners is a natural consequence. This may partly explain this surge in interest.

SR: Given this huge surge in interest and activity, are there any particular challenges you see facing researchers working in Japan?

TY: Comparing with researchers based in the West, researchers working at Japanese universities seem to have much less time to spend on research. With such a heavy teaching load and the administrative demands imposed on teachers or researchers, usually not much time is left for doing research and writing papers. Japan-based researchers are in a disadvantageous situation in terms of research and it's hard for them to compete in the international area. Considering this, the contribution of Japan-based researchers to motivation research is amazing.

The greatest challenge we face in language education is that short-term tangible outcomes are expected, such as raising a TOEIC score by so many points within a given period of time, or we often see

economic principles being applied in education. We must not forget the long-term perspective. To do research that helps teachers is important, of course, but it takes a long time before the effects of interventions—for example, through teaching practice designed to enhance motivation—are represented in learning outcomes, so if one expects a short-term result that helps teachers immediately in a visible way, motivation research may appear frustrating or even useless. The seeds of interest sown in the classroom may bloom much later in a learner's life. Also taking a macro perspective, the trend for seeking short-term outcomes may steer people away from research that takes a long time and a tremendous amount of effort, such as ethnographic studies.

SR: Finally, let's talk about the conference. This year's conference theme is 'focus on the learner'. How do you see your research fitting in here?

TY: At one level, all research on learner psychology or learner characteristics have foci on the learner in the sense that the data sources are always learners and their voices. But of course we have to think what it really means to focus on the learner.

In my research, my data sources have included responses to questionnaires, interviews, narratives, and observations as well as language data—written discourse, class-room spoken discourse. In quantitative research, these responses are translated into numerical data that are processed statistically. As a result, researchers are not really listening to individual learners' voices—though I don't mean to suggest that these are useless. Quantitative research can be a powerful tool for us to learn about the general tendencies within groups of learners. Instead, the crucial point of qualitative approach is to elicit data from people in their lived contexts. In studies in which variables are taken out of context, we are not really focusing on the learner. In qualitative studies, and in a CDST-informed approach in particular, we use multiple data to understand people, and I experienced how by combining interview data, classroom interactions, and numerical data, I came to understand better why students communicated the way they did in the classroom as well as their personality, concerns and values. In my experience, analyses are very important because through the intense open coding of interview data and in particular in the process of selecting a code that captures the essence of an utterance, you come to have a deeper understanding of the person's psychology. This process also prevents researchers from interpreting the interview or narrative data as they wish, a trap we can easily fall into. Spending hours interpreting a learner narrative one-hour

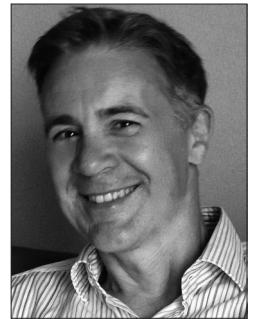
long in length can lead to the discovery of how he or she views learning the language from where they are, an insight I could not otherwise have gained. It is at this moment perhaps when I feel I'm focusing on the learner.

SR: So the process of collecting and analyzing data actually enables you to feel closer and more focused on individual learners. That's certainly given me something to think about and I hope you will talk a little more about this at JALT 2015. Thank you so much for your time and good luck with the plenary.

Reference

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Stephen Ryan is a professor in the School of Economics at Senshu University, Tokyo. His research covers various aspects of psychology in language learning, with a particular interest in learner motivation, mindsets, and the role of the imagination. He is co-author (with Zoltán Dörnyei) of *The Psychology of the Language Learner Revisited* and (with Sarah Mercer and Marion Williams) *Exploring Psychology in Language Learning*.



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