



## 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 September/October edition of TLT Interviews! For this issue, we bring you an in-depth conversation with Kay Irie, a plenary speaker from the JALT2020 conference. Rob Kerrigan and Eric Shepherd Martin teamed up to conduct a fascinating interview after her plenary speech about positive communication and its applications in the language classroom. Kay Irie is a Professor at the Faculty of International Social Sciences at Gakushuin University. She has a Doctor of Education (EdD) from Temple University, Japan Campus, where she tracked the motivational orientations of junior high school students learning English over three years. She has published several articles and contributed chapters to a number of books on the L2 self-system. She is also a major proponent of Q methodology in second language acquisition (see Irie, 2014 for a review). Rob Kerrigan is a lecturer in the Department of Global Studies at Shitennoji University. He is also the Assistant Editor for *The Language Teacher*. Eric Martin is a lecturer in the Department of Education at Shitennoji University. They are both PhD candidates at Temple University, Japan Campus.

## An Interview with Kay Irie

Rob Kerrigan

Eric Shepherd Martin

Shitennoji University

**Rob Kerrigan and Eric Shepherd Martin:** *Thank you for taking the time for this interview. We know you must be very tired after your plenary, so we appreciate you for talking to us. Our first question is, what were your thoughts on the plenary? It was very unique this year, being online.*

**Kay Irie:** I don't know if somebody had told you, but this is my sabbatical year, so I'm not teaching. I haven't used Zoom for any teaching, so I didn't know what was where on the screen.

*Well, your plenary was great and really informative. You presented ideas that we had never considered as English teachers here in Japan.*

Thank you. I wanted to make it simple and practical, so I hope that worked.

*We think so. We saw some of the comments during the presentation, and they were all positive. We think everyone took a lot from it.*

Okay, well then, I'm very happy about it.

*Let's begin. We'd like to ask you a little bit about yourself. How did you start your research career? What areas were you interested in?*

I got into research as a doctoral student at Temple University in Tokyo, and at that point, I was teaching kids. Originally, I wanted to do research on early English education in elementary school. Since part of the research design that I had was to look at not just proficiency but also the differences in motivation, my research interests shifted from children's English education to motivation. My dissertation was a longitudinal study of a group of junior high students for three years exploring their changes from their entry point in the first year, the end of their first year, their second year, and their third year. I used the same survey four times, interviewed some of the students, and examined the results. Since then, I have always focused on the psychological side of language acquisition.

*We've noticed a lot of your previous research focused on the L2 self-system (e.g., Irie & Brewster, 2013).*

The L2 self-system came out just when I finished my EdD and started teaching full-time at a university, which kind of coincided with a big change in the landscape of L2 motivation studies. At that time, my dissertation was based on Robert Gardner's (2001) integrative and instrumental motivation framework which had been dominant in the field. Zoltán Dörnyei and other researchers like Emma Ushioda (see Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013) called for the need to change the types of research that we do. That's when I became interested in the L2 self-system. It resonated with me because I was born and raised in Japan, but my parents both spoke English and used it professionally and socially. My father was a university professor, and we always had guest researchers and professors from other countries

coming to our place. It was just kind of natural to me—people coming to our place, listening to English, and my parents interacting with these people in English. I’ve never doubted that I would be able to speak English. That’s my ideal self in a way. I had this kind of experience and sensations, and I imagined that one day I would be like that. Of course, I like traveling and talking to local people, but, as for the L2 self-system, I didn’t have to worry about the ideal self or the ought-to self. Back then, I identified strongly with that whole model. It explained some of my language learning journey. That’s why I used that a lot for my research.

*In one of your previous studies (Ryan & Irie, 2014), you mentioned imagined communities. Do you see any similarity between that and integrativeness?*

Well, yes, of course some aspects of integrative orientation are that you want to get closer to the target speaking population, but in reality, it’s not always easy to be part of that community. I think if you are in a foreign language learning context, then a lot of that is imagination. You imagine what it would be like to be part of that community. Maybe that can be partially replaced by the internet—there is like a niche or a small community from all over the world that is connected mostly not only through English but in other languages, too. Then, when you enter that community, you want to remain a part of it. I think the boundaries of these concepts have become quite blurred. With the development of technology along with the current situation and that people are not physically traveling, it will be interesting to see how that’s going to affect the interest in other cultures, and what their motivation to learn not only English but also other languages would be.

*For those students who don’t study abroad and are not experiencing the outside world, how can we facilitate their imagined communities?*

That’s something I will probably need to deal with when I go back to work in April. The internet I think is a great tool and a great asset that we have. I’m relieved that this pandemic didn’t happen pre-internet. I think students are becoming savvier with technology, and in some ways, they will be more focused on interacting online. They will be able to feel more natural doing it with others across all borders and around the world. I hope this won’t turn students inward. I want them to see that things have actually become much easier for them to get to know other parts of the world. I think there is a lot of potential in tandem learning. Also, trying to set up a cooperative relationship with another university in another country, where students meet and

discuss issues or have a language exchange in some ways, would have a lot of potential. And, something I have personally become quite aware of and interested in is students processing all the different viewpoints represented in various media and on the internet—the importance of teaching students how to look for information, to evaluate that information, and to become aware of the viewpoints found in the media in other countries. It can be done by using the internet. That should also enhance students’ awareness as being global citizens.

*Let’s move on to your plenary if that’s all right with you. When JALT asked you to do the plenary, were you preparing to do it in person at the actual conference, or were you always preparing to do it online?*

When I was asked, it was already decided that it was going to be online. My first reaction was, “Oh my god, I haven’t been using Zoom!” But of course, I felt really honored. Like I said in the beginning of the plenary, I never imagined that I would be a plenary speaker for JALT because when I became a member, I was a graduate student, and I was part-time teacher, part-time wife, and soon after, I became part-time mother as well. Speaking at JALT as a plenary was something that I never thought I would do. When I was asked, I was already analyzing and writing about positive communication for language learning, so I thought it would be something people might be interested in, so I accepted the offer.

*Let’s go on to that. For those who missed the plenary and are not familiar with the idea of positive communication, would you be willing to explain it one more time?*

In a nutshell, positive communication is a kind of communication that enhances peoples’ well-being. Positive communication is a concept that was developed in the field of communication studies and not in SLA (second language acquisition) or applied linguistics. Up until like probably 2010 or so, the focus of communication studies was on fixing problems—fixing broken communication and broken human relationships using communication—so it was pretty much like positive psychology in a sense. Martin Seligman, who was the president of the American Psychological Association, told everybody at a conference to look at the positive side of psychology—not to fix problems to get people to the “normal” level but to take the normal level to a higher level and feel positive about life. I think positive communication was inspired by positive psychology. My point in the talk was that in SLA or language education, communication has been

perceived and positioned as means and ends to teach students—to be able to communicate in that second language or foreign language. How do we do it? We do it by letting them practice and communicate with each other in that language. As teachers, we forget that in our classroom because we're so focused on helping students speak, write, read, and listen. We forget what communication can actually do, so the point of my talk was to say, "Let's do that in the classroom. Let's not forget that we are communicating with students, and students communicate with each other." What we can do with that communication is to feel good about ourselves and for our well-being.

*We're guilty of that as well. We sometimes focus more on the competencies of communication rather than on positive communication because we never think that it's our job as English language teachers to facilitate that. To us, we always envision that idea as belonging in a Japanese classroom. Do you know of any classes designed to facilitate positive communication in the Japanese education system at all?*

I can't say I do because the concept of positive communication is something that I encountered recently when doing my research. I think a lot of teachers actually do it already intuitively and automatically but probably have not had a chance to really think it through. I introduced a model of positive communication and six actions that you can try, and I am pretty sure that you do some of those sometimes. I don't think we really need to make a whole class, a syllabus, or a curriculum, focusing on positive communication, but I think it's something that we teachers can be all aware of and encourage students to do in class.

*When engaging in such (positive communication-focused) activities, should students be doing this in the L1 or the L2 in your opinion?*

Ah, that's a good question. Yes of course, they can do it in their L1, too. Positive communication came out of communication studies, which were based on the assumption that people communicate in their L1. It is not just about the language classroom. It can be used with your partners at home or with your colleagues in your own language. It is just that when I encountered positive communication in the communication studies literature, I thought, "Wow! These are the things I can do in my language classroom."

*What about for learners with low English proficiency? Is it doable?*

I think so. They may want to write it instead, and

then read it together or exchange pieces of paper. Also, if a controversial topic is chosen, then students can at least provide one-word adjective responses to that. I hope the classroom will be comfortable and close enough for students to share their different opinions. I think that's something we can aim for, and I think it would actually contribute to developing language proficiency in the end.

*We were watching your plenary, and aspects of Bandura's (1977) idea of self-efficacy came to mind. For example, the influence of social persuasion. I think it all ties in to creating an environment where students feel comfortable expressing their opinions. Then they can maybe do so in their L2. It has this sort of cyclical function.*

Also, we don't really teach our students to complement each other. I have, of course, been guilty of that, and I tend to concentrate on how to be critical and give constructive feedback in peer-review activities. In my mind, Japanese students are "nice" and not too good at giving constructive feedback. They seem to be afraid of being critical of others, and I think there's a stigma attached to the word "critical," as well. In the minds of some learners, being critical is negative.

*In your talk, we got the sense that positive communication practices are necessary in the Japanese context.*

I think so. It is important not just to talk about things on a surface level but to really engage in communication and to be supportive of each other so that you feel good about yourself by doing that. You also receive that positivity from others, and you feel good about them and the connection with them, as well.

*In your plenary, you referred to a study of yours involving senior citizens (see Irie, 2021). Do you see any obstacles in implementing these kinds of communicative practices with younger learners?*

I think for teenagers, it's difficult to communicate with each other. Especially in the formal education system in Japan, the homeroom system allows students to develop a closely-knit community that may be facilitative or inhibitive. They spend all day, every day, together. Outside of the English classroom, they already form a kind of dynamic relationship that is very difficult to undo. Maybe doing this (positive) communication in the L2 hopefully will let them feel differently about themselves. Some of the senior learner interviewees told me how it's actually easier to talk *honne*, an honest opinion, with limited proficiency because you cannot afford cognitively to be too worried about how it comes out.

*We have some questions about Q methodology. Could you explain it for those who are unfamiliar with Q methodology?*

Q methodology is a package of mixed-method research methods that aims to identify subjective views that exist within a group of people or a community. If there is a classroom of 30 students, there are 30 different views about language learning. They're all different individually, but there are some core views that exist within that classroom. Q methodology finds out and identifies those representative ideas that people have. For example, maybe five people are similar, and their view is like this. Then maybe other people share a similar view about language learning, and that's that view. I think that's what Q methodology helps reveal.

*In your talk, you said that it's similar to factor analysis, correct?*

It uses a type of factor analysis. It's called *by-person factor analysis*, and some people imagine it's like a flip of regular factor analysis. We are looking at the relationships of these individual views and not individual items, statements, or constructs. It's a process of reduction and boiling down to the main ideas. We want to find a pattern in the views in a particular group.

*So, factor analysis focuses more on the items, whereas Q methodology seems to focus more on the participants, correct?*

Yes, participants and their individual views. It's funny, (William) Stevenson, who developed this methodology, was a student of Charles Spearman, who was the developer of factor analysis.

*What type of topics would be good for Q methodology?*

Q methodology is used to find out the diverse thoughts and views that exist within a community. If everybody has the same view, then it's not that interesting. It should be used for something that people have different views about. A controversial topic is always good—a topic that people have divergent views on. Anything goes, really, but you need to narrow it down to one topic. That's the part that I want to emphasize with people who want to give Q methodology a try: to really think about the research question and what you really want to figure out.

*Reading some of your studies, they take on a sort of a complex dynamic nuance (see Larsen-Freeman, 2015 for a review). Traits in people are fluid and change over time, and Q methodology seems to be a good way to*

*capture that. Do you know of any studies that have used Q methodology repeatedly with the same subjects over a period of time?*

The first study that I did was with Stephen Ryan on study abroad students (see Irie & Ryan, 2014). We did a Q study about how they perceived themselves in relation to their L2 by asking them to sort statements on cards about their L2 self before they left. Then, when most of them came back in half a year, we asked them to sort the same set of cards again. The finding was that the students' views were quite similar before the departure, but their views diverged after the study abroad experiences. What interests me at the moment are studies done with a single participant, looking at changes within the person's view about a matter over time or the views about a matter from different perspectives or in response to different instructions at one point. Visually you can compare how the participant rated the items and how they changed by comparing the raw data, something called Q sorts without statistical analyses. I'm sure there are people who would say that's not a proper Q methodological study, but I think it's interesting enough to look at Q sorts of one person, track their changes, and then interview the person right after sorting the cards and ask, "Why did you put this item here?" Then you can delve into the changes and dynamics of their language learning motivation, their L2 self, their mindset about their language ability, or any topic of your choice. I think there is so much potential for this methodology and its methods to be used in our field.

*Well, Professor Irie, we'll let you go because we've taken up far too much of your time! Thank you so much for this informative session. It was a pleasure.*

Thank you! I enjoyed talking to you!

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## [JALT PRAXIS] MY SHARE



### Steven Asquith & Lorraine Kipling

We welcome submissions for the My Share column. Submissions should be up to 600 words describing a successful technique or lesson plan you have used that can be replicated by readers, and should conform to the My Share format (see the guidelines on our website below).

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Hi everyone, and welcome to My Share, the bi-monthly column which aims to provide a little inspiration for your upcoming classes. Personally, the start of September is usually a period when I begin to pencil in new ideas for the autumn semester, and as such I find this edition to be especially timely. This month's offerings include a range of high-quality ideas which may be used either as standalone activities or adapted to enhance pre-existing materials. Given the variety of topics and skills addressed, I am sure that many of you will be able to find something to include in your planning.

First off, Richard Thomas Ingham introduces a fun, writing practice activity which stimulates students' creativity by asking them to write imaginary diary entries for famous people, teachers, or even animals, whose identities then need to be guessed by classmates. This activity requires students to use their writing skills effectively to communicate with a real audience. In the second article, Adelia Falk describes an ingenious way of developing students' skills in using keywords through reporting the contents of comic strips. As I am always looking for better ways to encourage my students not to use scripts when giving presentations or delivering information, this is one activity I will certainly try to adapt to my syllabus. Thirdly, Angus Painter introduces a method of teaching students to be more persuasive in their speaking and writing through learning about the Rhetorical Triangle. This activity actively encourages more confident and engaging writing as students must use their skills to write and deliver persuasive political manifestos. In the final article, Sam Keith explains a travel plan presentation project in which students research and describe a trip abroad. As this activity both utilizes and evaluates students' practical skills, I am sure that it will be popular with both teachers and learners alike.

—Steven Asquith

### A Mystery Person's Diary

Richard Thomas Ingham

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#### Quick Guide

- » **Keywords:** Writing, past simple tense
- » **Learner English level:** Pre-intermediate and above
- » **Preparation time:** 20 minutes
- » **Activity Time:** 30 minutes
- » **Materials:** Printouts of diary example, paper, writing instruments

Writing is seldom incorporated into lessons and is often relegated to homework, thereby reducing the opportunities to be communicative. In addition, the kinds of writing tasks that we set learners may not be motivating. This activity not only provides some great in-class writing practice of past simple form, but also offers a fun follow-up guessing activity that helps to develop a sense of audience for the writers. The activity can also easily be adapted for use in online classes

#### Preparation

**Step 1:** Write a short, imaginary diary entry for a person that the students know well. Examples of