



A Champion of Agency and Autonomy for Lao English Teachers

It is with great enthusiasm that I welcome the honor of being selected as the Balsamo Asian Scholar for the upcoming JALT Conference, where I will have the opportunity to showcase my work and advocate for greater agency and autonomy among English language teachers in Laos. As a leader, I strive to embody the principles of professional independence, resilience, and empowering educators—values essential for advancing English language teaching and student learning in resource-limited contexts.



Background and Significance of Lao Education

Laos, a land of diverse ethnic groups and languages, faces complex educational challenges. The country's educational system has historically been underfunded, with low wages and limited resources hindering teachers' ability to exercise professional judgment and agency. Recent economic pressures, such as currency devaluation and increased border traffic, have further strained the educational infrastructure. Many Lao students and teachers grapple with the stark reality that higher education and professional development are not offering the opportunities for higher salaries that working abroad can offer.

Despite these hardships, Lao teachers demonstrate remarkable dedication and passion. They work tirelessly with minimal resources, often out of a deep sense of duty and hope for their students' future. However, the systemic limitations placed upon them can stifle their professional autonomy—their capacity to adapt teaching strategies, innovate in their classrooms, and develop their own pedagogical voices. Supporting and empowering these teachers is crucial for fostering a resilient, autonomous education system that responds to local needs and promotes lifelong learning.

Why Agency and Autonomy Matter for English Language Teachers

In the context of English language teaching, especially in resource-constrained settings like Laos,

agency and autonomy are vital. Teachers must be equipped not just with materials and curricula but with the confidence and authority to make pedagogical decisions suited to their unique classroom contexts. Autonomy encourages teachers to adapt teaching methods, incorporate local culture, and address students' specific needs, thereby enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes.

Moreover, fostering teacher agency contributes to professional growth, motivation, and retention—key factors in addressing the looming shortage of qualified teachers in Laos. When teachers feel empowered to innovate and make decisions, they are more likely to take ownership of their professional development and become catalysts for positive change within their communities.

Leadership and Contributions to the Teaching Community

My work reflects a strong commitment to agency and autonomy. As the Head of the English Department at the National University of Laos (NUOL), I have consistently championed initiatives that build teachers' capacity to act independently and confidently. As a leadership in the LaoTESOL community and my involvement in the LaoTESOL Conference over the past two decades have provided platforms for teachers to share best practices, collaborate, and develop their professional identities.

One of my most impactful initiatives is the LAN (Laos Australia National Scholarship) program, which supports underprivileged students, many from ethnic minorities, in pursuing higher education and professional development. My role in designing the program's curriculum, monitoring mechanisms, and assessment tools has fostered a culture of ownership among participating teachers and students. My approach emphasizes inclusivity, equipping teachers with the skills and confidence to support diverse learners, thereby promoting a sense of agency within their classrooms.

Furthermore, my research and presentation on the LAN program's outcomes—conducted over ten years—highlight the importance of locally-driven, context-specific approaches. By documenting and sharing these findings at international platforms, I advocate for greater autonomy among Lao teachers, encouraging them to adapt strategies that best serve their students without excessive reliance on external directives.



The Importance of International Support and Collaboration

My participation in the JALT Conference aligns with a broader goal: to reinforce Lao teachers' agency through international collaboration and recognition. When teachers from resource-limited contexts are given platforms to present their work, they are empowered to take ownership of their professional narratives. Such exposure not only boosts morale but also facilitates knowledge exchange, inspiring innovative practices tailored to local realities.

The conference's focus on agency and autonomy dovetails with my advocacy for teachers' professional independence. My experience demonstrates that when teachers are trusted, supported, and given opportunities for leadership, they can transform their classrooms and communities. Sharing my work in Japan will contribute to a global dialogue on empowering educators, especially in marginalized settings.

Challenges and Opportunities

The Lao education system is at a crossroads. With enrollment declining at the university level and a looming shortage of qualified teachers, empowering teachers to act autonomously is more urgent than ever. Recognizing teachers' expertise, encouraging innovative pedagogies, and providing platforms for professional voice are essential strategies to address these challenges.

My leadership exemplifies how nurturing teacher agency can lead to sustainable development. In leadership positions, I aim to foster a culture where teachers are not mere implementers of policies but active agents of change, capable of shaping their professional environments and, ultimately, their students' futures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, JALT's support by selecting me as the Balsamo Asian Scholar is an investment in the future of Lao education—a future where teachers are empowered to exercise their autonomy, adapt pedagogies to local contexts, and lead educational reform. My dedication, research, and leadership embody the core values of agency and independence that are vital for transforming education in Laos. My participation in the JALT Conference and the Four Corner Tour will not only showcase my work but also inspire teachers worldwide to recognize and nurture their own professional agency.

I hope my presentation will offer insights into how teacher autonomy can be cultivated in challenging environments and how international collaboration can serve as a catalyst for sustainable educational development.

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Session

Collaborative Research: Trials and Triumphs

In today's globally connected academic landscape, collaboration among language educators is both a strategic necessity and a rich source of innovation. By working as research duos or teams, scholars can enhance their research capabilities (Glebova, 2024). In other words, combining different skill sets and resources can help teams tackle complex challenges that exceed what individuals can handle alone. This 25-minute presentation addresses the practical, interpersonal, and intercultural dimensions of building successful research partnerships between colleagues in higher education. Focusing on what should and should not be done to ensure effective collaboration, the talk explores key questions: Should you partner with someone who shares your style and research interests, or seek out a colleague whose knowledge and skills complement your own? Is it better to form a tightly coordinated partnership or to build a larger, more diverse team? What are the benefits and potential drawbacks of collaborative scholarship—especially across cultures, institutions, and disciplines? With particular attention to diversity, intercultural communication, and complementary expertise, the presentation draws on empirical literature and personal experience to offer guidance. Topics covered include selecting the right partner(s), negotiating project roles and authorship, managing differing communication styles, and maintaining long-term collaboration across institutional and cultural boundaries. Designed for early-career and experienced researchers, this session highlights how collaboration, done well, can deepen pedagogical insight, and foster a more inclusive, innovative academic culture. Attendees will leave with concrete tools and questions for reflection, which they can use to initiate or improve their research partnerships in linguistics and EFL.

Workshop

Co-creating Research: Are You an Effective Team?

According to Wenger et al. (2002), *communities of practice* “are the result of continuous processes of learning in which individuals engage and sustain through time.” It can be said that collaborative research starts at the community-oriented level and moves to the practice-oriented level as research goals are formed (Córdoba & Robson, 2006). In this interactive and reflective 60-minute workshop, participants will explore the interpersonal and intercultural dimensions of research collaboration. Building on the presentation “Collaborative Research: Trials and Triumphs,” this session will introduce practical tools for forming, maintaining, and reflecting on academic partnerships. The workshop focuses on collaborative dynamics such as selecting partners with complementary strengths, co-defining project roles, navigating power imbalances, and fostering equitable authorship practices. Participants will engage in structured pair and group activities, including a brain-

storming session, a “Collaboration Style Match” exercise, a discussion, a “Conflict Mapping” scenario roleplay, and a reflective dialogue. By integrating core principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), the workshop empowers participants to approach research collaboration as a culturally responsive practice. Whether their context includes working across departments, institutions, or continents, attendees will leave with a clearer understanding of how to build resilient, respectful, and productive academic relationships. Designed for early-career researchers and seasoned scholars alike, the session combines reflection, dialogue, and strategic planning in an energizing format. Participants may gain valuable insights into fostering trust and achieving shared success in their collaborative endeavors.

Navigating Real World Collaborative Research

It was quite a wonderful surprise and honor to be chosen as the Kevin Cleary Invited Speaker for the 2025 JALT International Conference. In honor of Kevin Cleary's distinguished contribution to JALT, I have chosen to present on a topic that I am sure will resonate with educators, researchers, and



JALT volunteers. This year's conference theme is *LanguageS: Learning, Teaching, Assessing—JALT 50 Years—Challenges and Perspectives*. JALT has flourished for 50 years and overcome challenges through the power of collaboration, developing professional partnerships, and service. As Dykes, referring to working on a conference team, wrote, “it's more honest and real. Ideas and opinions are shared more freely (...). You walk away with an idea of who that person is in a way often is not possible from many other scenarios” (personal communication, May 20, 2025).

In my time as a JALT participant, volunteer, and leader in various capacities, I have been provided with numerous opportunities to develop professionally as a language teacher, editor, presenter, and researcher. I have actively participated in previous Shizuoka Chapter events, attended the annual international conference, and taken part in various PanSIG and regional conferences. Supporting colleagues is important to me, and during my stint as the chair of the Writers' Peer Support Group, I was