

## Conference Review

### JALT 2008 Conference Review

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The JALT 2008 International Conference on Language Teaching was held for the second year in a row at the National Olympics Memorial Youth Center in Tokyo from Friday, October 31 to Monday, November 3. I would have loved to attend the entire program, as there were a number of interesting topics listed on Friday and Monday. Unfortunately, I couldn't. Following, then, are the highlights I noted from the Saturday and Sunday sessions.

As with the previous JALT conference I attended, I was overwhelmed with the number of presentations available. At any given time, there were at least 30 different talks. Perhaps you who have been to numerous JALT conferences have your own system for dealing with such overload, but this was only my second conference. I still found myself wandering around, wondering what to do next because I was still processing yet another bunch of intriguing ideas that I know could energize my teaching or research if I just got around to using them. In hindsight, following are the talks I found the most useful, and think they might be of interest to the CUE readership as well.

The only plenary speaker that seemed directly relevant to college

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Amundrud, T. (2009). JALT 2008 Conference review. *OnCUE Journal*, 3(2), 190-195. Copyright © 2009 Thomas Amundrud. *OnCUE Journal*, ISSN 1882-0220, is available at <http://jaltcue-sig.org> one year after publication date.

and university education was David Graddol, of the English Company and the British Council. His talk, "English and Globalisation: Today and Tomorrow," outlined his research on the future of English learning and ELT globally, and particularly in East Asia. Graddol's basic point is that with the increased funding for primary school ELT programs around the world, learning English as a second language is moving from its previous place as an academic subject that many students beat their heads on but few master, as well as a subject that allows social elites to display their status through mastery bought with extensive and expensive training, to a primary education subject that is considered necessary for the economic success of the society as a whole. Therefore, Graddol believes that while demand for English is increasing, the actual employment of English teachers will ultimately decline as fluency is attained by wider and wider segments of the world's population. Furthermore, as English as an International Language (EIL) supplants English as a Foreign Language, the need for native speaker teachers will decline as standards for competency are increasingly based on "intercommunicability" between national Englishes rather than any explicit or implied Inner Circle standard. While Graddol's comments may be better suited for the English teaching environments of China, India and other East Asian countries than Japan due to a number of historic, cultural, governmental, and economic factors, his research certainly does bear consideration for those of us planning a long-term career in EFL. You can download his report for the British Council, entitled *English Next*, from <<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learning-research-englishnext.htm>>.

Another Saturday morning talk that I found both useful and somewhat troubling was given by Peter Ruthven-Stuart, of Future University in Hakodate. His talk, "Machine Translation: We Can't Detect It, But Can We Accept It?" demonstrated and discussed his work on how students actually use free online machine translation software, and how both native and Japanese English teachers cannot

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reliably detect it. As machine translation and related technologies become more wearable and transparent in their use, and as the telltale signs of machine translation, such as a preponderance of "it" in place of pronouns, decrease with increased technological sophistication, Ruthven-Stuart urges language teachers and faculties to develop ways to incorporate or at least realistically deal with machine translation into their curricula.

I then spent the early afternoon steeling myself for my own talk later on Saturday, and soaking up the free materials at the Learning and Educational Materials Exhibition. Then I met with other CUE members for the annual CUE SIG meeting. Thanks to our SIG's great financial health, there was talk of a CUE Researcher Award in addition to the Scholar Award. We also started the hard work of organizing the 2009 CUE Conference at Tezukayama University in Nara Prefecture. It sounds like there's a lot of work to be done, so I hope all readers will try to pitch in and help with this worthy effort.

After that, I had to run off to my own workshop on university language teachers and student mental health issues. My talk was an attempt to educate fellow tertiary faculty on common practices for dealing with student mental health issues. I was pleasantly surprised that my audience of 10 was actually more interested in discussing their own classroom and institutional problems. As a speaker, it is more than gratifying to have an audience that can go well beyond your own expectations for the topic.

Saturday night, the CUE SIG joined the Learner Development SIG and students from the Master's program at Columbia University Teachers College in Tokyo for a buffet dinner at the Pink Cow in Shibuya. The Pink Cow served a scrumptious spread of entrees and desserts that were heartily enjoyed by all. It's no lie to say that the real education one gets from attending a big conference is from the connections made at the parties afterwards.

Sunday, I completely neglected my duties as your intrepid reporter

and slept in. My apologies to any early morning Sunday speakers that had to deal with thin crowds thanks to lazy would-be attendees like myself. I thus used the remainder of the morning to make connections with other teachers, and to get more free stuff at the Materials Exhibition.

I then got to play “musical presentations” in the afternoon, trying to attend as many talks as possible on a variety of topics. It is for this reason that I and no doubt other attendees appreciate having open chairs and handouts by the door. I have since incorporated this into my own presentation planning, and hope everyone remembers the value of this as well.

The first talk I dropped in on was by Gregory Scholdt of Kobe University, called “Zen and The Art of Statistics.” While I’m sure some people are masters of stats, many people like myself are quite squeamish of them or indeed anything involving numbers beyond simple arithmetic. Though I was not able to stick around long enough to gain the full benefit of this talk, Scholdt’s method of presenting a poetic “koan” of statistics for audience consideration and discussion was an intriguing rhetorical method that I will add to my own presentation toolbox.

The next talk was by Ritsumeikan University’s Ian Hosack on anonymous peer process writing techniques. Many university writing teachers use peer editing as a part of process writing, but Hosack and others have found that Japanese student comments are overwhelming vague, positive, and when criticism does occur, it’s generally focused on lower-order concerns regarding grammar and spelling. Hosack therefore devised a way of anonymizing student compositions that class members then read and commented upon anonymously. His overall findings are that this method improves the quality and quantity of student feedback.

The final presentation I caught was “CALL for Change with Low-level University Students” by Ian Brown of Kyushu University. Brown

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talked about how he used Facebook, Flickr, and other social networking sites to engage low-level learners with class journal activities that were then used in classroom conversations. In particular, he touched on the difficulties entailed in setting up CALL activities for low levels, especially the problems involved in simply filling out forms online if the students can't clearly understand what's being asked of them. Brown also encouraged the use of class web sites created through Moodle, Ning, Wetpaint, or other online applications, as they create a class home and extend class time.

While I would have loved to stay and learn more ways to improve my classes, I had a train to catch. My thanks to the CUE SIG for making it possible for me to participate in this year's JALT conference. I encourage any readers whose institutions do not provide support for attending conferences in Japan to apply for the 2009 CUE SIG Scholar Award.

**JALT CUE SIG 2009 Conference**

**ESP/EAP:**

***English for Global Living, Working, and Studying***

*Network with colleagues and learn more about this ever-developing area of language teaching!*

**Date**

October 17 & 18, 2009

**Location**

Tezukayama University  
Gakuenmae Campus, Nara City

**Featured Speakers**

Mike Guest  
(University of Miyazaki)  
Dr. Thomas Orr  
(University of Aizu)

**Co-sponsored by Nara JALT. Pre-register online Aug. 1 through Sept. 15, 2009.**



<http://jaltcue-sig.org>





*From left to right: Terry Fellner (Treasurer), CUE 2008 Scholar Thomas Amundrud, and Matt Apple (SIG Coordinator) at the CUE 2008 AGM at JALT 2008 in Tokyo.*

## **CUE 2008 Scholar Award Recipient: Thomas Amundrud**

*As the CUE 2008 Scholar, Thomas received a grant from the College and University Educators' Special Interest Group to help defray the costs of his attending the JALT International Conference at the Yoyogi Olympic Memorial Youth Center in Tokyo.*

*JALT CUE SIG sponsors up to two CUE SIG members to attend the annual JALT International Conference. Please visit the CUE SIG web page at <http://jaltcue-sig.org> for more information about application requirements for the CUE Scholar Award as well as the newly-established CUE Research Award.*