
Conference Review

The 2012 JALT National Conference in Hamamatsu City, Japan

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The 38th annual JALT National Conference, entitled “Making a Difference”, was held in Hamamatsu City, Shizuoka Prefecture Japan in October 2012. Taking place in the ACT City building complex near Hamamatsu Station, the setting was pleasant and conducive to the event, featuring a spacious wooden concert hall utilized for larger sessions and ceremonies. The weather was cool and sunny for most of the conference weekend, which seemed to help put the 1600-plus attendees and presenters at ease. With swarms of volunteers guiding participants and a registration process that was smooth and relatively painless, my first impressions were of a well-organized conference that would likely not disappoint.

The conference featured four main plenary speakers for Saturday and Sunday from a variety of backgrounds and fields of study. After the organizers’ self-proclaimed “world’s fastest opening ceremony”, the first speaker Jeannette Littlemore (University of Birmingham) addressed the crowd with a discussion of figurative language use in non-native speaker (NNS) output. She framed this mostly within an academic writing context. After enumerating the ways in which figurative language helps to manage and enrich communication, she encouraged the audience to help language learners (LLs) expand their understanding and use of these features. She noted, however, that the use of figurative language is not always possible for lower proficiency LLs still mastering the basics of their second language.

The Saturday afternoon plenary speaker was John Eyles (Eyles and Associates, Ltd.), who illuminated the potential that technology holds for language instruction. Eyles began by describing the difficulties of pre-Internet lesson

preparation and accessing source material during that era, and went on to discuss his own efforts at creating Web sites that provide English lesson materials to instructors before many such sites existed. Although it's difficult to argue with the idea that technology can be useful to teachers, a business associate of Eyles claimed (via a pre-recorded video) that software will soon allow automatic grading of writing assignments, an idea I found overly ambitious in regard to the part technology can play in the classroom.

On Sunday morning, we were presented with arguably the most impactful of the plenary speakers, Suresh Canagarajah of Pennsylvania State University. Canagarajah gave an impassioned and personal account of his struggles as a young English instructor in Sri Lanka. He began by describing a personal crisis set off by a class demonstration he attempted for a group of Western visitors, and the subsequent criticism he received regarding his methodology. He marked this as the start to his life-long journey to expand his understanding of second-language acquisition and its intersect with culture, and his eventual realization that all teaching methods must be adapted for a local population. Canagarajah argued persuasively that instructional approaches and frameworks developed in one context are at least somewhat particular to that setting and cannot be applied as is to just any classroom around the world. He ended by suggesting that we attempt to “stay in the margins” of current thought in our disciplines and constantly question orthodoxy. Personally, I found this speech to be quite captivating, as it touched on personal themes that were applicable to the audience, such as occasional questioning of our own methods as educators and the desire to search out best practices. I would encourage JALT to continue seeking out speakers of this caliber for our national conferences that provide practical advice based on personal experience in the classroom.

The last of the plenary speakers was Newcastle University professor Alan Firth, researcher in the areas of conversational analysis and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Drier and more subdued in tone than the day's earlier plenary speaker, Firth discussed his research into NNS conversations using the now-defunct Skype-casting technology. Both written and audio samples of these language events were presented with Firth's analysis. The speaker argued for the need to

relinquish “ownership” of English in light of the sheer number of non-native English speakers around the globe (reminiscent of the work of Braj Kachru and others on the subject). Despite this important message, the presentation didn’t seem to connect with many attendees who may have hoped for more practical takeaways (or a discussion of technology that is still currently available, as Skype has done away with Skype-casting as a feature). Regardless, it is always fortunate to have an opportunity to hear from a researcher of this caliber.

Beyond the plenary speakers, JALT National provided an incredible wealth of short- and long-paper sessions, poster presentations, forums, workshops, and featured-speaker presentations for their attendees. Faced with this wealth of choices, I tried to attend sessions that seemed applicable to the university context or were general enough to fit the teaching situations most tertiary educators encounter.

Notable among presentations discussing motivation and its impact on Japanese college students’ learning, Ryo Nitta (Nagoya Gakuin University) and Mitsuka Suzuki (Soka University) reported in separate presentations on studies involving the influence of the “ideal L2 self” and classroom learning outcomes. Nitta’s presentation was titled “Dynamic interaction of the motivational system”, while Suzuki’s was titled “Ideal L2 selves at different motivational levels”. As may be expected in studies on motivation, both researchers described perceived limitations in their instruments. Suzuki offered practical advice for instructors on this subject, encouraging us to help increase students’ interest in the target-language population and provide opportunities for meaningful output in the L2, which may in turn help increase their motivation to learn. Although the 25-minute format of these short-paper sessions compressed the available time for exploring their data, I would encourage more researchers to investigate and present on motivation at these conference in light of the incredible importance it has for our profession.

Also notable was Maggie Lieb’s (Meiji University) presentation “Making a difference by fostering cultural fluency”, in which she described her newly-designed course on language and culture and her efforts toward promoting this oft-overlooked type of fluency. Lieb argued that we are at a unique historical moment in terms of global communication, and that this incredible access

to other cultures has the potential to help reduce students' prejudices and misunderstandings of foreign nationals. Lieb even provided practical advice to offer our students in this effort, such as learning to behave flexibly and be tolerant of ambiguity when encountering other cultures. I would argue that instruction like this into "cultural fluency" can be of equal importance as language instruction itself to our students, and thus I applaud Lieb's efforts toward designing a course of such potential importance.

An intriguing session was held by Takahiro Yokoyama (Central Queensland University) entitled "History of native-speakerism in Japan", in which research was presented on Japan's history of preferring native English-speaking teachers for their classrooms. Yokoyama explored how far back the history of this practice goes, what the qualifications are for these teachers, and whether there was evidence of preferential treatment between NNS and native-speaking (NS) teachers (and within NS instructor populations as well). Yokoyama argued that a prevailing assumption exists in Japan that native speakers always make the best educators, despite the fact that many of these people have no teaching qualifications to speak of (Yokoyama used the requirements for the JET Programme as one example). Through the course of his research, however, he could not find evidence that Japanese-national and native English speaking teachers vied for the same positions, or that perhaps the difference in qualifications necessary for these two groups removed the perception that NS educators were preferred. Of significance to our profession, Yokoyama did find evidence for a US-born instructor preference among the native-speaker teachers selected in Japan, and an overarching desire that "American English" be taught. In light of the fact that our students will encounter a wide variety of English speakers (both NS and NNS), my takeaway was that we similarly need to provide students with this same kind of variety in the classroom, helping to buck this perceived linguistic prejudice.

Overall, the rich variety of presentations provided by JALT National at this conference left me simultaneously satisfied and hungry for more. Although the spread-out nature of the venue did require some hustling between the different sessions, I was pleased by the overall organization, quality of material, and helpfulness of the volunteers and staff at the conference. The lack of traffic and

congestion in downtown Hamamatsu City, coupled with the beautiful weather, allowed for an experience conducive to professional development and simply having a great time. Thanks to JALT National for hosting this event and all of their efforts toward its success.

Author's bio

Josh Brunotte is a graduate of the University of Texas, San Antonio (MA-TESL) and has taught ESL/EFL for over seven years in both Japan and the US. He is new to the JALT community and recently became the Membership Chair for the CUE SIG. He is currently teaching courses at Nanzan University (Seto Campus), Nagoya Junior College, and Ohkagakuen University. joshbrunotte@gmail.com

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Editor's Note: *In this issue, we welcome the conference review written by **Josh Brunotte**. He is a recipient of the Member Support Conference Grant and consequently applied his grant to a conference trip. Here, he shares some of his experiences attending the event.*



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