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## Conference Review

# The 5th International Independent Learning Association Conference

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The 2012 Independent Learning Association Conference: “Autonomy in a Networked World” was held at the Pipitea campus of Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand, from August 30 to September 2. The conference theme was driven by the question: what is the meaning of learner autonomy in our technologically and socially integrated world? Conference participants were asked to share their ideas and research findings to better understand the role of the individual learner in evolving learning environments (International Leadership Association).

The conference was well organized and proceeded smoothly. I attended all five plenaries and many concurrent presentations. Overall, the quality of presentations was quite high. I will share some of the main points from three presentations I found to be particularly insightful and relevant.

One of the best plenaries was by Peter Gu, who is on faculty at the Victoria University of Wellington. His talk, entitled “From learning strategies to strategic learning: A new research agenda,” summarized the recent history of learning strategies research and sought to offer a new direction for further research. Professor Gu stated that learning strategies research has lacked imagination, with researchers conducting similar studies that produce predictable results. Therefore, he encourages researchers to be more exploratory and formulate entirely new research questions, such as asking how and why strategic learning makes a difference. Furthermore, he implores researchers to re-conceptualize

learning strategies as a dynamic concept rather than a static one. According to Professor Gu, there is a tendency to view learning strategies merely as gimmicky skills to be acquired. Instead, he advises researchers to focus on each step of the dynamic strategic learning process and seek to capture strategic learning in action, dynamic processes such as identifying, evaluating, planning, and reflection. Moreover, he stated that learning strategies research has typically been limited to vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and phonology, and has rarely dealt with aspects of language such as cohesion/coherence, grammar, rhetorical organization, and pragmatic competence.

Damon Brewster of Oberlin University and Kay Irie of Tokai University gave an excellent talk that felt particularly relevant. They examined the role of experiential factors in the emergence of students' L2 possible selves. Their research draws on the work of Zoltan Dörnyei's L2 motivational self-system (Dörnyei, 2009). Brewster and Irie described "experiential capital," an idea borrowed from Jim Carroll, that life experiences can provide the imagination for motivation and produce higher levels of self-efficacy and self-determination (Carroll, 2005).

Brewster and Irie conducted a mixed-method multiple-case study and focused their talk on one student in particular who displayed a high level of motivation as an English language learner. To improve his English while studying abroad in America as a first-year student, he refused to speak in Japanese, which angered his fellow Japanese students. He even travelled to Italy by himself on a high school graduation trip, something unthinkable for most Japanese his age.

The presenters attributed his high level of English motivation to his experiential capital. During his early years, he took a family trip to India which impacted his life. Through that experience abroad, he was able to perceive English as something worth studying, as having a practical application. The seed was planted. Brewster and Irie explained that typical Japanese students have a more narrow range of life experiences, mainly revolving around school, club activities, and *juku*, cram schools that most junior high and high school students attend, with few opportunities to acquire genuine experiential capital. They argued that wider experience promotes reflection and growth, and that without sufficient experiential capital it may be difficult for students to perceive the possibilities

for using English. Therefore, they recommend that teachers capitalize on technology to help students forge and maintain social networks abroad. They mentioned Skype and Facebook as examples of technologies that can be used to spark student interest in making connections abroad and serve as useful tools for language development. They pointed out that capitalizing on technology is especially needed for students of low socio-economic status, who often lack opportunities to acquire valuable experiential capital.

Paul Nation of Victoria University raised an important question to consider during his engaging plenary: Is direct vocabulary instruction by the teacher worth it? No, it's usually not, argues Nation, as studies have shown that direct teaching of vocabulary is inefficient in terms of words acquired per hour of instruction. According to Nation, students need to know a minimum of 9,000 words to be able to handle un-simplified texts, and even if the instructor were to devote the entire class time to direct vocabulary instruction, students would still not come close to reaching this high number of words. Therefore, Nation advises instructors to provide students with activities that lead to incidental vocabulary learning, so that students are able to learn a sufficient number of words on their own. He contends that direct vocabulary instruction by the instructor in the front of the class should be done only sparingly to teach essential words. Lastly, Nation urges instructors to make sure vocabulary learning occurs across the four strands: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development (Nation, 2007).

Overall, it was a splendid conference with insightful presentations and fabulous social events. The conference organizers and hosts kept us happy and well-fed throughout with delicious food during lunch time and snack breaks. As co-convenor, Professor Averil Coxhead's boundless energy helped the conference sustain a positive momentum. In review, this conference was outstanding and well worth my time.

## References

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Received: May 24, 2013

Accepted: July 2, 2013