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## Conference Review

# The Sixth Annual Nakasendo Conference

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The 2013 Nakasendo Conference was held on July 7, 2013 at Toyo University's Hakusan campus located in Tokyo's Bunkyo district. Established in 2008, Nakasendo is an ever-evolving, multi-organizational English conference that provides opportunities for English-language teachers in Japan to connect with one another, share ideas, and develop professionally through annual conferences based on mutual support and collaboration. In 2013's conference, about 30 presenters shared their thoughts and experience on a variety of topics in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) field from the theoretical to the more practical.

The conference began with a casual and warm welcome from the conference's coordinator followed by a 50-minute poster session. There were six poster sessions in total, and each had something different to contribute. The poster sessions were scheduled right before the first presentations started and were held at the same time (<http://www.nakasendoconference.org/program/>). Most posters were left on the walls throughout the day for interested conference-goers. For the most part, however, the sessions either recounted experiences such as trips abroad or reported on organizations and their current activities. One poster session presenter introduced Elementary School Thematic Education Movement

(ESTEEM) (<http://www.esteemjapan.com/English-index.htm>) and explained how it was helping elementary school teachers in her city develop effective English lessons that motivate learners. Her poster was certainly a good promotion for ESTEEM but offered no significant insight nor practical advice on how to implement thematic English teaching into the elementary classroom. What it did do, however, was give conference attendees the chance to become acquainted with ESTEEM and hear a bit about what the program is doing to promote English education at the elementary school level. Another small group of students from Wayo Women's University's Graduate School of Human Ecology, along with their professor, presented in English the Japanese Food Guide Spinning Top (Japan's equivalent of the Western food pyramid). While their poster was not particularly related to language teaching, we were happy to see young Japanese students using Nakasendo as a venue for their work and a professor pushing his students to present in English. Overall, the poster sessions were interesting but offered no notable research contributions to the EFL field. The greatest benefit of this time was the opportunity to socialize with the presenters and have a personal conversation with them about their posters.

Following the poster sessions, the first round of presentations began. Because of the sheer number of presenters, nearly 30 poster and full presentations, the conference was organized into seven rounds of three presentations each round throughout the day. As it was impossible for us to attend each and every presentation, we will only review a few that we felt warranted a discussion.

Yaoko Matsuoka (International Christian University) led off the first round of presentations. Her presentation, titled "Developing collaborative writing in LMS Wiki" reviewed the use of wiki group writing projects in the classroom and argued its effectiveness, explaining how it can promote critical thinking along with academic writing skills. We were happy to see her acknowledging the importance of critical thinking in academic writing and their inseparable link to one another. Her perspective was very intriguing, and we felt she offered valuable insight for teachers of English writing in Japan. Matsuoka reported on how she set students in small groups, assigning topics for them to create text together. She used a wiki feature to track students' writing footprint. She also explained that

the above project is based on “socio-cultural theory and interaction hypothesis in that it facilitated collaborative writing by offering the environment where peer comments and more competent students’ written text served as ‘scaffolding’ to improvement, and peer interaction was promoted.”

Following Matusoka’s presentation, Satchie Haga from Tamagawa University introduced her attempt at integrating a semester-long peer review program tied to a writing assignment. Haga discussed how she utilized her university’s e-learning system to track students’ progress throughout the review process. Haga also acknowledged that while research has suggested that collectivist societies do not appreciate peer review, her study contradicted these previous findings. However, she did admit that to make peer review a success among Japanese students, it is necessary to train them in how to criticize. She also gave some practical advice on how to help students overcome their reservations of being overly critical of another classmate’s work. Overall, Haga had some great ideas for the writing classroom backed up by sound research and her classroom experience.

The conference also featured EFL contributors from other parts of Asia, a first for Nakasendo. One of them, Andrew Northern, who teaches at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, presented on useful methods of providing students with feedback that is timely, intelligible and of high quality. His presentation, “Evaluating screen-capture technology as a tool for providing feedback on academic writing: Student and instructor perspectives”, took the audience through the steps necessary to supplement traditional written comments with video feedback on student writing. He introduced a project he piloted that utilizes screen-capture feedback on an advanced academic writing course at his institution. Screen-capture was used to show the editing changes and how and why he made them in students’ work. His presentation also included the pros and cons of free online screen-capture software, such as Jing and Cam Studio. After his presentation, we felt determined to modernize our classrooms with the benefits of twenty-first century technology.

Nakasendo 2013 also offered an opportunity to publishers, as they were invited to give presentations as well. Though we were concerned representatives from the publishers would take advantage of the opportunity to simply promote

their textbooks, we were pleasantly delighted to find this to not be the case. Rob Peacock from Oxford University Press offered a mini-workshop to attendees in which he discussed how to improve confidence and fluency in ESL learners through maximization of time spent on speaking tasks in lessons. Peacock exemplified this through the use of follow-up questions, in which he involved the audience with by asking, “Where are you from? Is it far away?” and such. He also touched on how students can use the means of social networking, such as creating pages and groups on Facebook, and increase their English practice opportunities. Peacock engaged the audience throughout his presentation by asking questions and moving among the audience, as well as using one of his colleagues as a conversation partner to demonstrate example exercises.

Like the poster sessions, there was a variety of presenters, each with something different to say. Some were better than others, but generally the presentations were professional and educational. However, we would have liked to see a bit more presentations grounded in research and theory. While the practical side was refreshing from the typical high-tower, theory-based academic presentations to which many of us have grown accustomed, the complete and utter lack of any research in some of the presentations was somewhat shameful from an academic standpoint. Nevertheless, the fact that both veterans and novices were given equal opportunity to present their ideas was something we greatly appreciated.

Another notable though admittedly less scholastic part of the conference was lunch. Following the morning presentations, attendees were invited to enjoy an authentic Indian curry lunch in Toyo University’s celebrated cafeteria—rated the top university cafeteria in Tokyo. We were able to discuss topics and issues raised in the morning presentations, as well as hear from others about their classes, long-term projects and other educational matters. It was a valuable time that gave all who attended the conference an opportunity to socialize with teachers from around the world.

As Nakasendo has only been hosting conferences for six years, it suffers its share of growing pains, but because it is still rather new, perhaps organizers do not screen presentations as strictly as they should. Some of the poster sessions and presentations were of an embarrassingly low academic caliber. In addition,

the way in which the conference was organized forced attendees to choose one presentation over another. While this would not normally have been an issue, the organizers did not provide abstracts of each presentation at the conference. Though it was explained that abstracts were available on the Nakasendo 2013's Web site, that did little good for those of us actually at the conference. Therefore, attendees had to make their choices based on presentation titles. As a result, we sometimes found ourselves part of a presentation we probably would have not attended had we been able to read its abstract. The conference also suffered from a couple of presenters who did not show, which led organizers to quickly react and rush audiences from one room to another in order to assure both attendees and presenters got the most out of the conference.

Despite Nakasendo 2013's hiccups, the conference provided a pleasant educational atmosphere. Everyone was of equal importance, and every presentation was of equal importance to the conference. This equality was most likely due to the efforts of the conference coordinator assuring that all presentations were the same in length and that no one speaker was designated as keynote or plenary. It was obvious that organizers did their best to provide a first-class experience. Publishers' booths were set up in an easily accessible way, and presentations started and ended in a timely manner. Furthermore, it was very encouraging to see students who had volunteered to help with Nakasendo 2013 accommodating attendees' needs. Overall, teachers were able to expand their professional networks and see how EFL teaching is done, not only in Japan, but also in other corners of Asia. It was a pleasure to see EFL colleagues from near and far, dedicated to professional development at a grassroots level, sharing ideas on how to nurture a better educational relationship between teachers and learners. This year's conference enjoyed one of its largest number of attendees and presenters since its establishment six years ago. Without a doubt, the future of Nakasendo seems bright as it continues to pick up speed and grow in popularity.

## Authors' bios

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