
Conference Review

Perspectives on Learner Motivation and Autonomy: The 2013 Kusatsu Summer Seminar

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The 2013 JACET Summer Seminar took place from August 20 through August 23. The seminar delivered on its theme, “Motivation and Autonomy: Research and Methodological Perspectives in Language Learning,” and heralded the fortieth anniversary of the seminar. Gunma University’s Seminar House in Kusatsu was host to about 50 participants who gathered to hear a series of lectures by keynote speaker Dr. Ema Ushioda from the University of Warwick and a couple of lectures by invited speakers Dr. Osamu Takeuchi of Kansai University and Dr. Yasuo Nakatani from Hosei University. In addition, there were ten presenters who presented papers on EFL motivation. Although this was my first time to attend the seminar, I am pleased to report that the Summer Seminar greatly surpassed my expectations. I appreciated the fact that the keynote and invited speakers were available and willing to interact with attendees, and in addition to stimulating discussions on motivation, we were given unlimited networking opportunities, valuable insights from researcher-practitioners, and a glimpse of the future of motivation research.

Dr. Ushioda led off the conference with a lecture that highlighted how English as a lingua franca has created motivational dissonances. She argued that this has resulted in motivation problems with teachers as well as students because English is being taught, not as a communication tool, but as a subject that needs validation through student performance on tests. Her second lecture, a continuation of the

first, sought to address the complexity of learner motivation. She proposed that teachers need to get students to transition from their L2 learner identities to one of their transportable identities (i.e., tennis player, Lady Gaga fan, computer gamer), so that they will become more motivated to “speak as themselves”, which she says is more conducive to learning and subsequently promotes autonomy. Her third lecture was on how motivation alone is insufficient at propelling learners toward fluency. She stressed the need for teachers to help students develop metacognitive skills that will enable them to become autonomous.

She closed off the seminar with a lecture about the gaps in the literature on motivation and autonomy and suggested many avenues for future research that need to be conducted by researcher-practitioners; this was truly a treasure trove of future research ideas. Some such suggestions included (1) the need for focused group discussions with students outside of the classroom to learn more about students’ understandings and perspectives on autonomous learning; (2) qualitative studies that focus on language learning stories or histories; and (3) analyses of motivation in local contexts to learn more about the relationship between motivation and classroom dynamics and classroom events. Overall, her presentations did what they were likely designed to do—educate and motivate. I personally came away feeling good about the fact that there are still many avenues that need to be investigated by researcher-practitioners like myself. However, if you had read her newest edited book *International Perspectives on Motivation*, you might have been disappointed, since the contents of her lectures were taken from it.

The two invited lecturers were excellent choices for the conference. Dr. Osamu Takeuchi and Dr. Yasuo Nakatani demonstrated that they were conversant on their respective topics by not clinging to or reading scripts. Both speakers did not try to hide behind the podium like so many presenters do, but stood in front of their audience while speaking confidently with positive body language. On top of this, they tried to keep everyone’s attention by seeking eye contact with attendees and had their slides created with some interesting flash media that popped up from time to time to provide a little comic relief.

Dr. Takeuchi’s lecture on “Motivation, Autonomy and Metacognition: A

Self-regulatory Approach to L2 Learning” drew upon his twenty years of learner strategy research to demonstrate how some language learners are successful because they not only possess a strong sense of self-efficacy, but are good at using metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies. Moreover, he advocates that these four aspects of L2 learning, as incorporated in a self-regulatory approach to SLA, are the best predictors of successful language learning because, as he emphasized, self-regulated learners maximize opportunities for learning, practice regularly, and have vivid goals for L2 learning. In addition, he stressed that self-regulated learners use strategies effectively, hold positive beliefs about their own abilities, and produce environments that are conducive to learning. Out of all the lectures, Dr. Takeuchi’s impacted me the most because he left me with a desire to study self-regulated learning more. Unfortunately, he did not give us any concrete examples on how researcher-practitioners can go about studying it in our classrooms.

The title of Dr. Nakatani’s presentation was “Motivating EFL Students: Focus on Oral and Written Communication Strategies.” In his paper, he addressed a qualitative gap in the literature in regards to how strategy use contributes to oral EFL proficiency. He stressed the need for teachers to engage students in activities that require them to use metacognitive strategies. Specifically, he recommended teachers have students (1) reflect on the learning that took place in prior lessons; (2) recognize learning goals and procedures for tasks; (3) collaborate with peers to develop communication strategies appropriate to a given task; and (4) reflect on the learning experience. His conclusion was that when pedagogies incorporate these kinds of practices, students can learn to avoid and repair miscommunication.

In addition to attracting first-rate lectures, the seminar scheduling was also one of the strengths of this event, and I believe this was evidenced by the fact that the majority of the attendees I met were repeaters. Registration was a brief but warm affair and included personal greetings from the seminar chair Leo Yoffe (Waseda University). The conference began on a Tuesday at 3:30 p.m. with welcome remarks and an orientation by Prof. Yoffe. Sessions started on time and he made sure that presentations did not go over time.

The start of every day involved no fanfare and began promptly with a lecture

from Dr. Ushioda from 9:00 to 10:30 a.m. The second morning sessions on Wednesday and Thursday were occupied by the invited speakers' lectures, and after lunch at 1:00 p.m. a select number of attendees gave 30-minute paper presentations. Time for the three afternoon presentations on the second day passed by fairly quickly, but the seven presentations on the third day were a bit much. I am sure glad that there was one cancellation on this day. Dinners were at 6:30 p.m., and there were no evening sessions, so we were free to either engage in conversations with others or head to one of the local hot springs. I really liked this because it gave me a chance to get to know some of the attendees better than if we had been attending evening sessions. In fact, the connections I formed because of this extra social time have transpired into some lasting professional relationships. Of note, scheduling on the second day included an option to attend the Kusatsu International Summer Music Festival.

The location of the Kusatsu Summer Seminar is a mixed blessing. At an elevation of 1,200 meters, nestled in the mountains of Gunma Prefecture, the Seminar House is surrounded by lush forest and temperatures in August around the mid-twenties. Unfortunately though, the abundant green and cooler temperatures involved four train rides, two buses and nearly six hours to reach from Osaka.

For four days and three nights, the Seminar House became our home away from home. As it is a student dormitory, there were no maids to clean our rooms; we needed to bring our own towels, and there was no room service. This may be a sore point for some, especially if you do not relish the thought of staying in a student dormitory, but being lodged in small rooms with two or three other attendees, eating in a cafeteria, and using communal bathrooms is something that I learned to appreciate when I noticed how friendships developed more quickly and deeply than at other conferences. In addition, because the rooms were small, we all tended to congregate to a lounging area in the lobby when we were not in session, which allowed for greater interaction with other attendees—something that does not typically transpire when staying at a hotel. The cafeteria with its set meal times also gave us the chance to network, not only with the other attendees, but also with the invited speakers.

Some disappointments with regard to the venue were the Wi-Fi and accessibility. The Wi-Fi was slow and reception was limited to the lobby, and I was surprised to notice that the venue was not barrier-free. Individuals with special physical needs will be unable to move around unimpeded, especially considering that all of the sessions took place in the same room on the second floor.

The cost of the conference—36,000 yen—was very reasonable, considering that accommodation for three nights and all meals were included. Although the food would not have won any gourmet awards, I found all the meals to be quite palatable, and the complementary wine and entertainment by Dr. Ushioda on the last night of the seminar were a treat.

In conclusion, if the hot and humid days of August have brought on a case of cabin fever or the all too familiar *natsubate*, the JACET Summer Seminar in Kusatsu just might be the cure, because if the 2013 Seminar is any indication of the kind of event that is put on every year, you will be treated to an event with high quality lectures, educational presentations, participatory discussions meant to stimulate thought, and fellowship with leading scholars and peers.

Author's bio:

Ryan Smithers of the Osaka Institute of Technology is passionate about teaching and researching. His 16 years of TEFL experience have inspired his research interests on learner motivation, autonomy theory and project-based language learning. He is also interested in helping EFL learners develop fluency through writing. ryanwsmithers@gmail.com

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***Editor's Note:** One of the primary aims of the CUE SIG is to support and recognize the distinctive work of our members through a variety of awards and grants. For outstanding articles in the OnCUE Journal or excellent conference presentations we*

offer the member or attendee nominated Reader's Choice and Best of CUE Awards. CUE also supports our members' interests in professional development through the New Member Conference Grant, Member Support Conference Grant, and Member Research Grant, which aim to help members with little or no institutional funding. To find more information about CUE awards and grants and learn how to apply, please see our website. <http://jaltcue.org/content/cue-grants-and-awards-2014>

*In this issue, we welcome the conference review written by **Ryan Smithers**. He is a recipient of the New Member Conference Grant and consequently applied his grant to a conference trip. Here, he shares some of their experiences attending the event.*

