Sharing a Plenary Interview Conducted at PanSIG 2019

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I was privileged to be invited as a plenary speaker to the recent Pansig conference held from 17 to 18 May 2019 at Konan University, CUBE Campus (Nishinomiya), Japan. The format for that plenary presentation was an interview whereby I was required to answer a series of questions fielded by Mr. Robert Lowe, a key member of the

TEFLology podcast team. Following that was a Question and Answer (Q & A) session. That was my first time doing that and the idea of facing an audience without a prepared presentation was initially quite unnerving. Anyway it turned out to be a very good opportunity for me to share my knowledge, thoughts and experiences on the use of technology for language learning and I believe the presentation was generally well-received. I will hereby share some of my responses to the key questions asked at the interview (Qs 1-6) and questions asked at the Q & A session (Qs 7-16).

1. **Your research has included the use of ICT in both formal and informal learning environments. How does the use of ICT differ between those two environments**?

   Formal learning refers to learning in classroom situation through the use of laptops, computers and mobile devices e.g. in schools or universities. In the Malaysian context, students are not allowed to bring their mobile phones to schools, hence these devices cannot be utilized for learning in Malaysian schools. Informal learning refers to learning outside the class under the direction of teachers or on students' own initiatives. All online devices and resources can be utilized freely. There are more opportunities to learn outside the classroom environment.

2. **What are the challenges faced in implementing technologies in Asia, focusing primarily on Malaysia?**

Two main factors governed the challenges faced in implementing technologies in the Malaysian context.

A. <u>Teacher factor</u>

Teacher may be resistant to the introduction of technologies in their classes. They may feel that they have done a good job hence they believe that there is no necessity to introduce technology. On top of that they may feel that using technologies will involve a lot of time and work. Besides, using technologies that they are not familiar may make them feel inferior to their students who are generally more skills in the use of technologies.

Take for example, my effort to introduce digital storytelling to my staff at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics in UKM about 10 years ago was met with quite a lot of resistance from the teachers. However, in view of the fact that I was the Head of School I was able to implement it despite strong resistance from some teachers. Initially, it was quite chaotic and the students complained that their teachers did not know what to do despite support from a technical team. The end results showed that the students enjoyed it. Teachers (including those resistant to the technology) acknowledged that their students benefited from it and they said they would be able to manage it better the next time round. This shows that it is difficult to implement technology in Malaysian classes

without authority. Generally, students are willing to take up any form of technology that is introduced to them but teachers are more difficult to convince and without authority it is not easy to get them to cooperate. However, generally Malaysian students at all levels are not interested to use technology to learn on their own. The students who underwent the digital storytelling project were interviewed two years after their experience and none of them had made any effort to use technology to support their learning of English.

B. Support factor

Smart schools' project -- the purpose of this project was to create a knowledge society and promote autonomous learning, critical thinking and life-long learning. 30 schools were initially involved and a cascading process was implemented. Teachers who took part in the project said they did not have the capabilities to impart the ICT skills and knowledge to other teachers due to insufficient training. This was followed by other initiatives which also not successful. Private schools were better off because the students had easy access to the internet whereas public schools, especially those in the rural areas, did not have such accessibility. However, in conclusion, challenges arising from human factor is more difficult to overcome. Facilities can be improved in a short period of time but more effort and time are required to change the mindset of teachers.

3. **Here in Japan, it is often the case that students are very smartphone-literate, but actually have quite poor computer literacy skills. Do you have the same problem in Malaysia?**

It is the same in Malaysia. Most students in the urban areas possess a smart phone but they use them primarily for games and social networking. A research study I undertook on social networking indicated that clearly. However, students in rural areas may not have access to smart phones. Many of them have a simple phone and they also have limited access to Wi-Fi. In that sense, students in Japan are more privileged as I gather most of them have a smart phone.

4. **You have noted in your own work that so-called 'digital natives' in Malaysia make neither extensive nor diverse use of technology. Why do you think this is so?**

Digital natives is a term proposed by Prensky but not necessary universally accepted. In urban areas most children are exposed to games at a young age even from 3 years old so in that sense they are digital natives. In fact, when virtual reality was introduced – the Avatar thing -- I thought young people would be very interested as it is like a journey, taking on a new personality. I expected them to spend a lot of time on it but

surprisingly many of them told me they found the tasks they had to do, as they moved from one place to another in the virtual reality world, tedious and not challenging.

5. **What would you recommend to overcome this problem of children not using educational technology?**

I think this questions should be directed to those planning or designing such software. Young people nowadays spend many hours and even days on digital games. If there is way to incorporate elements that make digital games fun into educational games that will attract many young people.

How to introduce educational technology to students? The problem is that students do not equate educational technology to fun. In my opinion, students do not mind being tricked into undertaking such activities when directed by their teachers but they will probably not undertake such activities on their own initiatives. Why? Because they don't find these activities "fun". For us adult, gaining knowledge may be considered fun and enjoyable but to them only something entertaining is considered fun – nothing beyond that. It is not that they are adverse to increasing their knowledge/skills but the type of knowledge/skills they are interested to pick up are not necessarily those we want them to pick up. If "tricking" them to

play educational games leads to them being "hooked for life" then it is not necessary a bad thing.

6. What do you think is the best way to create an innovative learning environment for the South-east Asia context?

The term "innovative" can be rather subjected. Certain approaches to learning can be considered innovative but to the students it may not be necessary so. Some time back I introduced MOOC to the students telling them it was an innovative and exciting way to learn but they did not find the activities in MOOC interactive or interesting.

I would say that the innovative learning environment has to be created by the teacher. Teachers can do so if they buy in to the use of technology and they will make the effort to create an innovative learning environment through technology. Students would take them on if teachers initiate them in the Malaysian context because Malaysian students are very teacher-centered. By giving students interesting online learning activities, teachers will be able to create an innovative learning environment. This semi-autonomous, collaborative approach works best in the Malaysian context.

7. How do you get the teachers to buy in?

In my case I found that forcing the teachers to take part for the first time worked very well. After the teachers learnt the basics they were willing to be more involved. I used this approach in a public university and it worked very well. In schools that may be more difficult to implement as school heads may not buy into this concept as they prefer their teachers to focus on teaching and getting students to do well in examinations.

Some teachers may be interested to use technology but do not know how to go about it. Through attending conferences and workshops, they can learn from others. If they become more confident they will be able to go online and use the resources available. Older teachers tend to be more resistance to technology. They can learn from new teachers who have just left colleges and have many new ideas to share.

8. **Can you tell us what is Malaysia's stand on the privacy issue?**

This is a sensitive issue. Our previous government put people in jail for uploading information online which the Government deemed sensitive. Now the new government is trying to be more liberal and the line is now very blurred and lots of sensitive stuff are now uploaded online. So it is a case of too much censorship previously and insufficient censorship nowadays.

9. **Instead of "tricking" the students, do you think there is a way to "orientate" them?**

Well if you view the term as "negative' then it appears so but it is not necessary so. In life we are "tricked" into doing many things and if the end result is positive then it is not a trick and the word "orientate" can be used to replace it. When we use it to describe the outcome of a course we will also not use the term "trick" and instead we will use "orientate" instead.

10. **Physics books are not designed to be interested. Why do English books have to be interesting?**

I think it is wrong to say that physics books do not have to be interesting. Books for all subjects and the teaching of these subjects regardless of whether they are content or language courses need to be interesting to arouse students' interest. Hence I would say efforts need to make the teaching and learning of all subjects interesting.

11. **Students complained that educational games are too fun and they don't feel they are learning?**

It seems that the students you are referring to expect learning to be boring so when they enjoy the educational games they are not sure whether they are learning or not. If students understand that learning can be fun then that problem will not arise. We should endeavor to make our classes both fun and at the same time educational as that is what learning is all about. Students should be orientated to understand that concept.

A good way is for the teacher to tell her/his students from the start that he/she is introducing a certain game and the purpose of that game is to teach them "a, b, and c". In this way they are aware of the purpose of the game from the start.

12. Why was the CALL project (Smart schools project) mentioned earlier not successful?

This project was supposed to follow a cascading model. Teachers selected from Smart schools were invited to attend training sessions conducted by a private company (paid by Government through a contract) on the use of ICT for teaching and learning. After that they were supposed to share what they had learnt with the staff of their schools and then proceed to share with teachers of other schools. It was a case of A passing the knowledge to B and B passing the knowledge to C and so on. The knowledge that was passed was diluted in the process and on top of that there was a lack of follow up so there was nobody

that the teachers could refer to if they failed to understand what was taught. A lot of money was spent on this training but the results were dismal. Schools labelled as Smart schools and provided with the training and ICT facilities failed to follow through with the initial plan and many teachers involved when interviewed two years later said that most of them had given up on using ICT for their classes as they did not have enough support and the facilities provided were insufficient. This type of model has many weaknesses and in view of the fact that it was entirely top-down there were no genuine interest among the teachers to continue when the funds from the Government stopped coming in.

13. **What do you do to maintain the mental health of teachers who are not happy with the introduction of technology?**

Mental well-being? I would have to admit I did not really consider that in the digital storytelling project that I introduced. As I mentioned earlier there were some protests from the teachers especially from those who were against the use of technology in learning. But when they saw the benefits of the project and also became familiar with the technology, they were willing to embrace the technology. I think the only thing I did to counter the resistant was to provide as much support as possible. Support came in the form of two technical assistants

who were available whenever the teachers needed them and an online forum for the teachers to ask questions and get feedback whenever they were confronted with problems. The technical staff were very efficient. They supported the teachers especially the "weak" teachers all the way such as going to their classes for each session. But I would have to admit that I did not provide any counselling services to these teachers. The human factor that was the deterrent factor was the "reluctant teachers". The workshops conducted to train them were not very successful. But the support from the technical staff made up for it. They made "baby steps" progress and at the end were quite comfortable with the technology. I would have to admit that if the support was not given they might have abandoned the project.

14. How to choose which technology or software to use?

I believe that there is no need to throw away old technology if they are still useful. I have learnt that when you try new technology it may work for one class but it may not work for another class. Some students may not be receptive to certain technologies for various reasons whereas other may enjoy them. So I believe there is a lot of playing by ear in the use of technology and the willingness to experiment and test them out.

15. **I used technology in the classroom but always have a plan B in case the technology doesn't work. So why bother with technology in the first place?**

Technical failure is unavoidable. In places where there are no Wi-Fi or insufficient bandwidth then maybe the use technology is not necessary. Teachers could also use the off-line approach that is download the software or Apps before the class. Anyway if the use of technology means that a lot of time is wasted in trying to get the technology to work and the system keeps hanging, then maybe it is better not to use it.

16. **What is your view regarding the quote "We should be master of technology instead of being enslaved by it"?**

If you know the technology and use it wisely and not use it unnecessary then you have become master of the technology. End of the day the teacher is still the one that makes the decision. Don't use technology for the sake of technology but use it to promote learning,

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

Dr. Thang Siew Ming is a Professor at HELP University, Kuala Lumpur. Previously she was a Professor at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, the National University of Malaysia (until her retirement in December 2016). Her areas of interest are CALL, Learner Autonomy, Motivation, and Eye-tracking research. She is President of PacCALL and Co-chair of GLoCALL series of conferences. She has published extensively and is on the editorial boards of numerous well-known CALL and Language Education journals. Her recent publications are available in highly reputable journals such as the CALL, TAPER, Language & Education, EAR, AJET, IRRODL, IJPL, 3L and GEMA. She can be contacted at siewming.t@help.edu.my