

Message from the Coordinator: Putting our SIG in Perspective and Keeping its Vitality

Joseph Dias
Aoyama Gakuin University

Joseph V. Dias coordinates the Integrated English Program in the English Department of Aoyama Gakuin University. His research interests include the assessment of international virtual exchanges and autonomy in language learning. Currently a reviewer for the JALTCALL Journal, he is also the coordinator of the Lifelong Language Learning SIG.

This article concerns how our LLL-SIG fits into the overall ecosystem of JALT SIGs and how the application of a new rubric for determining the productiveness of SIGs may affect us.

Where our SIG Stands Compared to Others

The full history of our SIG was published in Volume 17, Issue 1 of the LLL-SIG newsletter (July 2021). Although the SIG dates back to 2003, it remains among the smallest of the SIGs, perhaps because the issue that it focuses on, lifelong learning, is often seen (unfairly, I believe) as relatively niche.

Of the 34 JALT SIGs that existed in May of this year, we were (and remain) among the smallest in terms of membership numbers. The SIGs that are of comparable size (membership that hovers between 30 and 40) include the following SIGs: ALL--Accessibility in Language Learning, JSL (Japanese as a Second Language), THT (Teachers Helping Teachers), MAVR (Mixed, Augmented, and Virtual Reality), OLE (Other Language Educators), and the new Listening SIG.

In comparison, the largest of the SIGs, CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) and CUE (College and University Educators), have hundreds of members each.

Evaluating our SIG According to a Rubric

At the end of 2021, it was my duty as the coordinator of the LLL-SIG to fill out an assessment instrument that rated how active our

SIG was according to various criteria from a rubric that was produced several years ago for the admirable purpose of keeping SIGs accountable to their members. Although the rubric had been in existence for years, coordinators had not, to my knowledge, been asked to assess their SIG using it until December 2021.

Shortcomings of the Rubric

Unfortunately, although most of the SIG coordinators were unaware of the rubric which underpinned the self-assessment instrument, it had been decided by the SIG Representative Liaison Officer that SIGs falling under a particular number, as determined by the Google Form assessment, would lose their voting rights at future semi-annual EBMs, Executive Board Meetings, for one year. Since the LLL-SIG—among several other smaller SIGs, including TBL (Task-Based Learning), LiLT (Literature in Language Teaching), JSL, and MW (Material Writers)—fell below the 100 points necessary to retain voting rights, a formal motion was advanced that would lead to us being stripped of those rights for a minimum of one year. Some of those SIGs failed to submit the evaluation form, so it may have been understandable that they would receive some punitive action, such as the loss of voting rights. The LLL-SIG, however, had dutifully submitted their evaluation report.



Figure 1: The Hybrid June 2022 EBM (Executive Board Meeting)

We felt that our SIG, and a few other modest-sized SIGs,

were being unfairly treated because the rubric's criteria favored SIGs that were larger, and we thought that small "niche" SIGs had a place in JALT's pantheon of special interest groups. Fortunately, that argument carried the day and the vote to temporarily strip us (and other SIGs) of voting rights was shelved pending further discussion of the rubric. Our SIG has always been a small one and has only briefly gone over 40 members, despite being active and having representation (forums) at EVERY JALT National and PanSIG Conference since its founding; 2021, the year of the evaluation, was no exception in that regard.

We held three public events in 2021, the minimum number required by our constitution and that always seemed like an adequate number. We held forums at both the JALT National and PanSIG, as well as having a very well-attended mini-conference at Aoyama Gakuin University, a hybrid event. We could have gotten 7 additional points had we had peer reviewed articles in our newsletter rather than merely having officer reviewed ones. In addition, we could have received an additional 5 points had we sent out more than 12 notices to our members about SIG events, which would have thoroughly annoyed them, we believe. Oddly, we lost 10 points for only having a "simple, accurate, but static website" rather than a "multi-page, frequently updated, professional" one. We did not think we wanted, nor needed, another website as we found Facebook and a mailing list much more effective in getting the word out to our members. Also, we made good use of our SIG's area of the JALT website: <https://jalt.org/event/lifelong-language-learning/> .

Improvements to the SIG Arising from the Flawed Rubric

Despite our contention that the rubric should be improved so that it would not unfairly disadvantage small, but active, SIGs, we decided to put into place some changes based on items that the rubric brought to our attention.

Although our SIG generally had no more than five or six dedicated and long-serving officers, we saw the wisdom of having a larger contingent of officers who could step in

seamlessly should an officer need to retire from their position suddenly. Therefore, we have filled 10 officer positions and we would be pleased to have additional co-chairs should any of our members wish to help out. Here is the current team:

Joseph Dias - Coordinator
Natsuki Suzuki - Treasurer
Kathleen Yamane - Membership Chair
Andrew Reimann - Program Chair
Martin Pauly - Publications Co-chair
Joseph Dias - Publicity Chair
Deborah Bollinger - Member-at-Large
Tadashi Ishida - Member-at-Large
Don Maybin - Member-at-Large
Malcolm Prentice – Webmaster

We also decided to have more events in collaboration with other SIGs and chapters, such as the Joint Mini Conference of JALT's Accessibility in Language Learning & Lifelong Language Learning Special Interest Groups, which was held on Saturday, February 26th < <https://jalt.org/event/lifelong-language-learning/22-02-26>> and a joint event that took place with the Niigata Chapter of JALT focusing on the Canva app later in the year.

In addition, we created a new LLL-SIG Website at <https://living4now.org/> in order to better promote our events and to offer links to various items of interest to our members. So, all in all, the rubric has led to positive changes in our SIG and, hopefully, revisions to the rubric will not unfairly disadvantage small, but highly active, SIGs such as ours.