

Message from LLL-SIG Coordinator

Joseph Dias
Aoyama Gakuin University

Building Resilience in Uncertain Times

With 2021 winding to an end, we await the roar of 2022's tiger, reflecting on how far we and our students have come as lifelong learners during the nearly two years since the beginning of the pandemic. Most of us have had to reassess what it means to be a teacher and a learner. We have had to master new LMSs, add to our digital tool kits, navigate new ways of socializing, establish rapport through unfamiliar modalities, and learn to live with a heightened degree of uncertainty. Through all of that, we may have been prevented, due to border closings, from returning to our home countries (or prefectures) to visit family and friends; and weddings, funerals, christenings, and holiday gatherings either were missed or moved to virtual venues.

With the improving COVID-19 circumstances in Japan over the last few months, most university classes, and those at other educational levels, have been returning to face-to-face modes. Life in and out of the classroom has felt as though it were returning to normal, albeit a new, socially-distanced and cautious normal.

Now, with news of the Omicron variant, plans for the upcoming academic year are being thrown into disarray. Although it is still too early to say with certainty, conferences that have been planned as hybrid affairs, might also need to be reimagined. One important thing that all of us have gained since the beginning of the pandemic has been an extra thick coating of resilience on top of our already tough educators' skins.

Through the experiences of having to adapt to entirely online, hybrid, and hyflex teaching; and periods when we needed to switch back and forth among F2F and various combinations of the above, we have developed the ability to cope with things that we may have once thought to be far

outside our competences, training, and comfort zones. Even those who may not have considered themselves to be hardcore lifelong learners have been baptized through fire into it.

So, despite not being able to let out a collective sigh of relief yet, we can feel assured that we can meet the uncertain future with the confidence that we can roll with the punches and continue to adapt. We cannot do it by ourselves. It is vital that we, and our students, recognize when we might need help, either with pedagogical, technical, social, or psychological (i.e., stress-related) matters.

After the end of the first semester of the first year of the pandemic, we asked both teachers and faculty what they felt to be their most serious problems in Aoyama Gakuin University's English Department. The top 10 for both constituencies included exhaustion, eye strain, anxiety, stress, and loneliness. The majority attributed their distress to the switch to online learning and teaching, and the precariousness of pandemic times.

Fortunately, most of them had colleagues, classmates, friends, and family members to reach out to for support. Although some are still struggling, most have seemed to have reached a state of equilibrium. Organizations like JALT and its special interest groups, as well as ad hoc groups such as the now nearly 30,000 member strong Facebook Group "Online Teaching Japan" (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/603548090241536/>) have helped to make us feel less alone and build up our collective resilience.

Our SIG's Participation in JALT 2021

As most of you know, JALT's 47th Annual International Conference on Language Teaching and Learning & Educational Materials was held from November 12 to November 15, 2021. The LLL-SIG was represented through its combined forum and AGM (annual general meeting). The forum, comprised of 5 speakers, was on the ambitious topic "Reflections on the Past, Projections of the Future." In the slightly more than half a century of TESOL's

existence there have been a cascade of methods and innovations that teachers have been challenged by. The move to an online pedagogy due to the pandemic accelerated trends while forcing all of us to reevaluate fundamentals. In our forum, prompts (both visual and textual) were provided to elicit discussion on where we have been on our journey as language teachers and where we are headed. The forum was a great success as the majority of the participants remained in the virtual room for more than 30 minutes after the session formally ended to continue discussions and touch upon topics they did not have a chance to bring up in the allotted time.

The 5 presenters whose presentations initiated the dialog with participants included the following:

1) Andrew Reimann

Title: Digital Templates and Worksheets

Andrew spoke about changes in teaching in the digital and post pandemic age, looking first at changes in teaching as a career and concluding with suggestions for interactive materials in both the conventional and virtual classrooms.

Bio: Andrew Reimann is from Vancouver, Canada and has a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from Macquarie University. He teaches classes on Comparative Culture Studies and Intercultural Communication. His research interests include raising cultural awareness and communication strategies.

2) Kathy Yamane

Title: Old Dogs, New Tricks: Mature Learners in the Age of Covid

Kathy Yamane spoke about the development of a three-day intensive English "Schooling" program run through Nara University's Distance Education Division and the challenges faced during the pandemic.

Bio: Kathy Yamane, a native of upstate New York, studied Linguistics at Cornell University. She came to Japan as an MEF in 1981 and is currently teaching English and Communication classes at Nara University. Her research interests are primarily in the area of language varieties. She is co-author of the Broadcast: ABC World News Tonight textbook series. She is the membership chair of the LLL SIG.

3) Taron Plaza

Title: Connecting & engaging in online teaching environments

Taron presented on teacher engagement and how the switch to computer-based lessons provided him with opportunities to transform himself as an educator. Participants were invited to share experiences of how they struggled with and/or managed to find ways of connecting and engaging with their classes in the current online environment.

Bio: Taron teaches courses in English communication, cultural studies and second language

acquisition. His research interests include intercultural communication, digital spaces and transformative learning.

4) Joseph Dias

Title: Roles for LMSs In Pandemic and Post-pandemic times

The presenter spoke about some of the most common LMSs available, the role they played during the pandemic, and how they might play a more important role in our “routine” teaching practice in the future. Audience members were asked to share what they liked most (and least) about the LMSs they use either by choice or by institutional requirement.

Bio: Joseph V. Dias co-coordinates the Integrated English Program in the English Department of Aoyama Gakuin University, also teaching courses on intercultural communication and food culture. His research interests include computer-assisted language learning and autonomy in language learning.

5) Tim Gutierrez

Title: What’s Next for Technology Supporting Remote Language Instruction?

In order to facilitate discussion of the role of technology in the foreign language classroom, the presenter first revisited a fundamental controversy from his formative years of what to do in the university composition classroom. Next, he showcased a Moodle workshop activity, a tool to facilitate process writing that he rediscovered during the remote teaching resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, participants were invited to speculate about how electronic tools will shape both online and in person teaching of foreign languages to university students.

LLL SIG’s Activities in 2022

We are now planning our major 2022 events: forums at the PanSIG and JALT National conferences, as well as an LLL Mini Conference, which we are tentatively proposing to hold in May since the 2022 PanSIG conference was moved to July.

Since the PanSIG’s call for proposals ends on January 10, 2022, deciding our SIG forum’s theme and line-up is a priority. PanSIG 2022 is being planned as a face-to-face event from July 8th to 10th 2022 at [The University of Nagano \(長野県立大学\)](#).

As many of us may have struggled with COVID fatigue and the corresponding knock-on effects affecting our teaching, family, and social lives, we thought that our PanSIG forum might focus on strategies that teachers have developed to maintain, or reignite, a lifelong learning spirit in ourselves and among our students. The hope is to bring together speakers who teach a wide range of age groups, from K-12 to university, language school, and mature students in the community. Some tentative titles for this forum now being considered are:

- (Re)igniting a passion for learning
- The LLL Phoenix rising from the ashes of burnout
- Overcoming Burnout
- Maintaining motivation & reigniting passion

It is likely that the JALT 2022 National Conference will be a hybrid affair, allowing more possibilities to bring in a wide variety of forum speakers and include some of our geographically diverse LLL members in the panel. We have decided to reprise the topic of “Lifelong (Language) Learning after ‘Retirement’.” Retirement is in inverted commas because many educators continue to teach in various capacities after formal retirement, or they may step down from full-time positions and take on part-time work, either as teachers or in other areas.

We will assemble a panel of speakers who are near retirement, newly retired, or well into their retirement years to hear about how they are coping with the changes brought on by this important period of transition and the role that lifelong learning plays in it. Our SIG will have some passes that we can provide to potential panelists so that conference fees can be waived. If any of the SIG members would like to participate in either the PanSIG or the JALT National Conference LLL-SIG forums, please contact us as soon as possible at:

https://jalt.org/email/node/51/field_group_email

The LLL-SIG Mini Conference is likely to be held in May, but its theme has not yet been determined. Ideas are warmly welcomed. We are considering cooperating with a newly-formed SIG, “Accessibility in Language Learning” for a joint conference. The possible tie-ins between accessibility issues and LLL are endless. Suggestions for presentation topics and speakers are most welcome.

Closing Words

May the Year of the Tiger usher in a more stable environment for learning and social conditions that allow us to explore our lifelong learning pursuits in ways that are not forced by circumstances. Warm wishes to you and yours in the holiday season.