

JALT 2012 - A Japanese Junket

'I think I'm turning Japanese, I think I'm turning Japanese, I really think so.' *From the song 'Turning Japanese' by The Vapors, 1980.*

Well, I'm not quite ready to turn Japanese after the four days spent in Hamamatsu with the JALT crowd, but they sure put on a persuasive show. First of all, running a conference over four days allows people to cram in many more presentations, many more parties and get-togethers, and many more delegates, secondly you get to do a lot of the planning meetings and so on that you need to do as everyone is there together, and finally you get to spend much more time with your honored guests, other delegates and your interns.

The conference venue was ACT City in Hamamatsu, conveniently located next to the train and bus station, and walking distance close to many hotels. The venue itself houses a music museum and several concert halls, and as all such venues do, sprawls across quite a few city blocks.

This made moving from one area to another for presentations a bit difficult, as a lot of the buildings were connected only via one common level, or one pathway, and not always on the same level as the main entrance. But, very clear signposting and the many helpful volunteers made sure that you got to where you wanted to go.

Friday was devoted to registration and an opportunity to explore the book sellers booths and chat with them about new developments and offers. It was also the time to set up posters and tables and set out materials. This was followed by the welcome party and a formal dinner for all the invited speakers and affiliate members, where we were treated to a Japanese sushi banquet.

I think many delegates were overwhelmed by the scope of the papers, and the numbers, available. On Saturday morning, for instance, after the plenary lecture by Dr. Jeanette Littlemore from Birmingham University, there were more than a hundred papers and presentations to choose from. And then we still had the afternoon, Sunday and Monday morning to go.

A remark I overheard while manning the KOTESOL table was along the lines of how impressed the speaker was with the value for money aspect - great professional development in any single day for a reasonable amount of money! Certainly a compliment on how well JALT 2012 was run and the caliber of the papers.

The opening plenary session by Jeanette Littlemore was about the role that metaphor and metonymy play in ELT proficiency. She and her team analyzed the use of metaphor by ELT learners who had taken the Cambridge proficiency tests. Despite the use of metaphor (idiom) only being a requirement for students to be graded as upper intermediate and above, they found that even at the very lowest levels there is some use of metaphor, which increases dramatically with rise in levels.

Also, she pointed out that in academic writing the use of metaphor is far more extensive than in any other form of discourse. It stems from the need to write in the 'neutral' tone of 'this paper states', and also from the need to use metaphor to embody abstract ideas. Her conclusion is that we should be aware how much metaphor our students use and are exposed to at all levels of language development, and actively encourage such use and exploration.

Her presentation was followed, for me, by a panel discussion forum where myself and the various representatives from either PAC or other JALT affiliates talked about the

differences we try to make in English education in Asia. In the hour and a half available to us we each had a chance to talk about our outreach into the communities around us and how we try to serve those communities.

The panel discussion was followed by the PAC meeting, and after that I checked in on the KOTESOL table, where a number of publications were displayed. People had already helped themselves to quite a few of the back issues of TEC, and some of the proceedings of our International Conferences.

The people who stopped by and chatted were all complimentary about KOTESOL, and those who were planning on attending our Conference the following weekend used the opportunity to ask for advice about transport, accommodation and budget for the weekend.

I presented my paper on the ARC of Learning at 3.50 pm, after which I listened to a presentation about using Facebook for real communication by Jonathan Lynch, where he explained the use of FB to establish a spirit of community between a group of Japanese and Indonesian students prior to the students meeting face to face for a coral reef research project. His conclusion was that the use of English by both groups grew as they spent more time together, and Facebook facilitated this by providing an unmediated forum for them to explore the language through shared interests.

After this it was time for the Best of JALT, a wonderful party where past presenters were honored for their contribution, and this was followed by another dinner, this time for the PAC and other affiliates, followed by some Karaoke! Suffice it to say a good time was had by all.

Sunday saw yet another day of great presentations and a plenary of note, presented by Suresh Canagarajah of Pennsylvania State University. He spoke about how his experiences of being an English teacher in Sri Lanka and being badly evaluated by a visiting group of American academics, led him to seek academic validation by studying in America, and how this ultimately led to the realization that people who work on the periphery of any discipline are as valuable for their experience, their pragmatic approach to the job they are doing, and the contribution they can make about what works, as those who work at the center and theorize.

Since the displays and tables had to be packed up by Sunday 5pm, I audited the presentations I'd attend and spent more time at the stand, interacting with many JALT members who were almost uniformly given to comment that they envy KOTESOL's conference, and feel that theirs is but a poor comparison. Whether this was just fishing for compliments or not, it was still gratifying to hear. All the publications I took along were snapped up, and some people even asked if I had a few more!

Monday morning saw the 'tail-end' and again some really great presentations. Since I had no more commitments to man a table, I could check out quite a few, but the most notable were by Cervantes et al. 'Using Conversational Analysis for Professional Development', Sevigny et al. 'Vocabulary, What Should We Teach' and McGuire et al. 'Online Discussion Forums: Practical Uses for EFL.'

A final comment on one of the most interesting presentations, by Diane Hawley Nagatomo in her paper 'It's a Man's World: Female Teachers in Japan', on the role gender plays in the careers of Asian women. Many of the participants in the study entered English language teaching because it was seen as womanly, a safe career, a thing to 'fall back on' and very few of them expect to be 'full-time' at it. And this ties in with the idea of the woman being the caregiver and housewife in Japan. It was

interesting that the audience listening to this presentation consisted of 19 women and 4 men. To what extent that reflects 'preaching to the choir' I leave for you to judge.

Leaving the conference to catch my flight back to Korea was an anticlimax. JALT 2012 was a rich, and enriching experience, and I just wish I had the time to have caught each and every paper presented, as I'm sure I missed some real gems. I want to thank KOTESOL for enabling my attendance, and JALT for supporting my visa application process and for the hospitality I received from them. It is deeply appreciated.

Author's Biography



Leonie Overbeek teaches at two middle schools in Hwaseong City under the Hwaseong City Hall English support project. She has lived in South Korea since 2007, and hopes to stay even longer. Her interest is in classroom interactions, both with co-teachers as in team teaching, and with students. She has presented at several KOTESOL conferences.