
Conference Report of JALTCALL 2016: CALL & the BRAIN

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Introduction

Over 200 hundred participants from several countries gathered for JALTCALL 2016: CALL & the BRAIN, which was held at Tamagawa University in Tokyo, Japan, between June 5th and June 7th, 2016. This event combined presentations related to computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and neuroscience in language education. The JALTCALL conference has been held for more than 20 years and has become a premier international event focusing on the use of educational technology in the study of languages. The 2016 conference was sponsored jointly by two special interest groups (SIGs) of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT): the CALL SIG and the Mind, Brain, and Education (BRAIN) SIG, aiming to both explore and create connections between MBE and educational technology in language learning.

Overview

The conference included more than 140 sessions of several different types. The most numerous type of presentation, at 48 sessions, was the show-and-tell. In this type of session, the presenter described a particular learning application and/or environment in which technology can be used and how. They often included some element of hands-on involvement by attendees, but not always. There were also four sponsored presentations which largely followed the show-and tell model. There were 42 paper presentations, which were research-focused, and looked at issues of incorporating technology and MBE into language learning. Additionally, over the three days, there were 23 workshops. These were longer sessions, either

70 or 80 minutes, which included demonstrations and hands-on practice with using technology in language education. There were two poster-only periods, one on Saturday and one on Sunday, with a total of 17 poster presentations. These involved presentations of research in progress or pilot studies and demonstration-type presentations. The conference also included “unconference” sessions for the first time, with one 30-minute period set aside for them. These were open, roundtable-type, participant-driven discussion and brainstorming sessions. 14 session rooms were opened for these, 5 topics were pre-announced using the Dotstorming site, and others developed organically in some open rooms. There were three virtual plenary speakers, Professor Tracey Tokuhama-Espinoza, Professor Paul Howard-Jones, and Julia Volkman. However, rather than speaking live via teleconferencing, all three of them provided video recordings of their talks. These were then set up in dedicated rooms and played repeatedly throughout the conference. Finally, there was one keynote address, given in person by Professor Mark Pegrum of the University of Western Australia.

My experiences

As an officer in the JALT CALL SIG, I was involved in this conference from the planning stages and I also assisted in setting up the registration and materials exhibition areas prior to the conference. During the planning, I found it interesting to follow and contribute to the discussions related to combining the resources and ideas of two different SIGs: The CALL SIG, which is one of the largest and well-established of the JALT SIGs, and the BRAIN SIG, which is one of the newest and fastest growing of the SIGs. The aforementioned unconference sessions were one of the ideas that arose from this collaborative planning, as were the selections for virtual plenary speakers.

The choice to have the virtual plenary speakers present via pre-recorded video was perhaps an unfortunate one, as the sessions seem to have been poorly attended. The main idea was to have the videos available for several sessions throughout the weekend, allowing frequent opportunities for attendees to view them, while preventing the need to block off three large chunks of time in the schedule from use for other presentations. In reality, this meant there were always several live presentations happening at the same time as these pre-recorded ones,

the times for which were not clearly noted in the block schedule. Therefore, many attendees were either unaware these sessions were taking place or, like me, felt they could be viewed online later and made conscious decisions to prioritize live sessions. Also, some participants who did attend expressed disappointment that the sessions were prerecorded rather than live broadcast as they had expected.

The keynote speech by Mark Pegrum, on the other hand, was well attended. It was scheduled for the time slot immediately preceding the networking reception, with no competing sessions. It seemed most attendees were present for his talk on the increasing blend of the physical world and the virtual one and what this means for language educators. He presented and promoted the teaching of mobile literacy, a form of digital literacy that involves understanding and evaluation of augmented reality information presented to us in real time as we move through and interact with our physical environment. While he had interesting ideas to present, I personally found it a bit odd that two groups promoting innovative, learner-adaptive pedagogy still gave such prominence to a so-called sage-on-the-stage session.

The workshop sessions and the show-and-tell sessions are two elements of the CALL conference that usually provide for interactive learning and sharing on the part of the attendees. They are always a favorite part of this conference for me, and this time was no exception. In each time slot there were at least five, and as many as 12, of these types of sessions happening concurrently, and it was generally difficult to choose which session to attend. Personal highlights included Elton LeClare's highly informative talk on how mobile devices can assist language learners with impaired processing in reading, and several different takes on using online quiz sites to aid instruction and learning from Robert Ashcroft, Bruce Lander, Josh Wilson, and Brent Wright and Stephanie Reynolds. I learned about sites I had previously not used as well as new things I could do with sites I had already incorporated into my teaching practices.

The poster sessions were another highly interactive element of this conference. The space for these sessions, while very attractive, was somewhat cramped since it had to be combined with the registration desks. The presentations themselves were frequently quite engaging, and I attempted to talk to as many of the presenters as I could. Several had interesting topics and it was great to be able to ask for clarifications and further information in a more dialogic mode than is

possible with regular sessions. Topics included issues of pedagogy in technology adoption, gender and other issues in game-based learning, learning assessment and technology, and also several sessions introduced apps and other technological resources for language learning and teaching. One of the highlights for me was seeing a poster that included an iPad mounted on the poster with a bracket that allowed it to be removed and used by the presenters, graduate students Mehrasa Alizadeh and Parisa Mehran. When we asked them about the bracket, they said they had worked with some fellow graduate students at their university to design it and then produced it using a 3-D printer. I found it to be a great example of collaboration and innovation with technology in action, even though that was not the topic of their poster.

In addition to attending sessions and helping with the preconference set-up of the facilities, I also gave my own presentation. While I also had had a workshop proposal accepted, I ultimately chose to focus only on presenting a paper: *Learner Cooperation in Software-based Presentations*. This paper related to a task-based project conducted in three Oral Communication A courses at Nanzan University. The project included authentic, communicative use of presentation software in a cooperative way which helped with learner engagement and led to deeper and multiple skills development. I explained the overall process, and then learner reactions to both the software and the approach based on data from two of the classes' reflections, and finally gave my own reflections framed within the context of task-based learning, task design, and a taxonomy of uses of technologies for learning. I aimed to aid and inspire other practitioners in similar settings and situations, and the feedback I got from attendees was quite positive. Unfortunately, perhaps due at least in part to the wealth of quality presentations happening concurrently with mine (there were at least three that I wanted to attend myself), my audience was limited to about half-a-dozen participants, though several other people approached me and asked if I would share my slides with them. Though limited in number, I found the participants to be quite engaged and they offered suggestions and insightful questions during my session.

Conclusion

Overall, I found the conference to be a very worthwhile professional

development experience, to be well run by a team with a good mix of experience and fresh ideas, and the members of the host institution to be very welcoming and supportive of the event. The wooded campus provided a sense of being in a retreat for learning even though it is in a large metropolitan area, and the facilities and equipment were very easy to use. I do think that the conference might be improved in a few ways, however. Firstly, I think it would be better if there were fewer sessions in each time slot. This would make it easier for attendees to choose which session to attend as well as likely lead to larger audiences for most presenters. Also, I think that the sessions could actually be shortened. Many of the topics and techniques typically being introduced could be done quite adequately in 15 to 20 minutes, with perhaps a blended learning model of presenters providing additional detailed information online for those who wish to delve further. This would also help with reducing the number of sessions in each slot by opening up more slots, and each attendee could see more sessions. Finally, I think that more innovative models such as something like a plenary workshop, where participants are interactive with a leader/speaker, would be a positive alternative to traditional plenary lectures.

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Further information

Website of JALTCALL 2016:

<http://conference2016.jaltcall.org/>

Website of JALT CALL SIG:

<http://jaltcall.org/>