

Do You See What I See? Some Thoughts on Visualizing Learner Development

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I have lived in Sydney for almost three years now, and one thing I am still not used to is the (dis)connection between festivals and weather. It is now October, and it is getting hotter and hotter by the day, but shopping malls and companies are starting to sell Christmas decorations and promote gift ideas. In some shops, Christmas songs are already chiming merrily through the PA system with Bing Crosby singing, *Do You See What I See?* (At least he wasn't singing *White Christmas*). This song reminded me of JALT2015 in Shizuoka City during the last week of November, 2015. I stayed two extra days in Tokyo, and as one can imagine, Christmas was in the air and the tune of *Do You See What I See?* was played everywhere.

Then, someone corrected me, the song is not called "*Do You See What I See?*," it is called "*Do You Hear What I Hear?*." I grew up thinking the song was called that because the lyrics include the line "*Do You See What I See?*," and because I never paid attention to the second verse of the song. And I also thought this song is only about Christmas celebrations, until I read the Wikipedia entry to the song. The music was written by Gloria Shayne Baker, and the lyrics by Noël Regney. The song was not just another commercialized Christmas song, it was a plea for peace during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. In one song, I was wrong about two things: the title and the origin of the song. I only got Bing Crosby right. This disturbing thought put me in a reflective mood. We all want to *see* what we want to see, as language teachers and researchers, but do we necessarily *see* our learners the ways they want to be seen? But how do we explore different ways for learners and their development to be seen?

Visualizing Learner Development: My (Visual) Take

When the Learner Development SIG invited me to give a presentation at JALT2015, the conference theme was "Focus on the Learner." I thought about it and the work I have done, and came up with "Visualizing Language Learning." The first thought about visualizing learner development, for me, is the actual visual representation of learner development. I grew up with an education system in Hong Kong that emphasized classroom-based teaching and learning. However, when I started teaching in schools, the students were developing their interests in English by learning outside school and in their own social worlds. My particular research interest is in what happens beyond the language classroom, and how learner development evolves over time and space. Visualizing language learning then involved learners producing artefacts to *show* various kinds or stages of learner development or reflections on the learning process. This assumption comes from my involvement in using narrative inquiry as a research methodology (Barkhuizen, et al., 2014), which considers narrative as "the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 1). It is not only the meaning-making aspect that appeals to me, the idea that telling stories as a "universal human activity" (Riessman, 1993, p. 3) means that this is a way for all language learners to make their learning processes explicit. Story telling is also a way for learners to

both better understand and construct their learning worlds (Bruner, 1991, 2004). To capture this concept of building knowledge, Barkhuizen (2013, p. 4) coined the term, “narrative knowledging” for “making sense of an experience through narrating, analyzing narratives, reporting narrative research, and consuming research findings.”

When exploring the visualization of learner development, my research approach leans toward a literal interpretation of the word “visualize,” and uses a visual narrative approach. Visual narratives come in different forms: language portrait silhouette (Chik, 2014, 2018), photo-elicitation (Besser & Chik, 2014), and multimodal language learning histories (Chik & Breidbach, 2011, 2014). There are three main approaches to using these visual narratives for data collection. First, the visual narratives are treated as artefacts and objects of investigation (Melo-Pfeifer, 2015). Secondly, visual narratives are used as prompts for language learning interviewing and/or writing (Coffey, 2015; Besser & Chik, 2014; Giroir, 2014). And finally, a hybrid of the above two approaches (Chik, 2014, 2018; Kalaja et al., 2008; Menezes, 2008).

My particular research interest with visualizing learner development is through using free form drawing (Chik, 2018; Prasad, 2014) or the coloring and labeling of language portrait silhouettes (Busch, 2012; Chik, Markose, & Alperstein, 2018; Coffey, 2015). In most of my studies, I am interested in the ways learners develop their language identities, and the resources they utilize. Through the process of drawing or coloring, a learner systematically selects and highlights emotions, practices, and peoples that are important to them. However, I did find that events are usually not being depicted. Another discovery is how frequently learners portrayed themselves as being alone, both physically and metaphorically. In my recent collection of about 175 language portrait silhouettes completed by primary school students and pre-service teachers, fewer than 15 silhouettes included more than one human figure. These silhouettes were collected in classroom contexts, and this raises a question about what and how learners actually see themselves and think about the learning process: Do most learners really think and feel that they are learning on their own? And if I use another research instrument, would the learners have framed their learner development differently?

Visualizing Learner Development: The Collective Wisdom

I have discussed one approach to visualizing learner development, and the collection of articles in this special issue has opened my understanding of “visualizing.” To start a discussion: in a classroom setting, who are involved in visualizing learner development? Are we looking at the teacher visualizing a group of students? An internal gazing by individuals? From one student to another? How about from one teacher to another?

Trying to graduate from coloring, I am very excited by the work done by Porter and Hilton. The idea of using a metaphor, and in this case a vibrant growing tree, as a model for learners to organize their reflection is a perfect way for learners to envision future growth. This tree metaphor is a particularly apt choice to remind us all that language learning does not happen over night (or in three months as claimed by many commercialized courses and providers). And if language learning can be conceived as growth, it requires some loving tender care. When learners see others’ representation, there are inspirations to think about what other nutrients do my tree needs? This reflective exercise also enables teachers to reflect upon how learners view their learning as an ecology, and start a reflective dialogue with colleagues.

A continuous dialogue with colleagues is an important way for teachers to pause, rethink, reflect, and re-energize. But Karlsson and Bradley brought out a new dimension of emotions. Many teachers experience a class and teaching not only professionally, but also emotionally. Teachers are frequently the first people who notice the ups and downs among learners, but teachers’ own emotions are frequently censured in formal contexts. In their study, Karlsson

and Bradley use free writing to capture their own emotional reaction in their language consultation. And the understanding of emotions can lead to explicit insights on a creative approach to language learning and teaching.

The externalization and display of an internal construct can possibly jog students to rethink their own learning and development. McCarthy's exercise of having students display their conceptualization of the meanings of learner autonomy presented a sad truth. In the current relationship between language proficiency (especially for English learners) and socio-economic advancement, learners are connecting levels of proficiency with all types of reflective practices. Learner autonomy, as a construct, should be directed toward helping a learner to take charge, make decisions, and possibly chart a growing path. I learn Italian on my own and in my spare time, and make hopelessly slow progress. I still feel that I am an autonomous learner, because I made choices on what and how to learn, and am satisfied when I can sort of understand some news headlines or recognize some words in a video. But I am not under any pressure because acquiring some proficiency in Italian is only for my own pleasure, and I do not receive any economic benefits. But the Japanese students in McCarthy's study do not have the luxury of learning English as a recreational activity. Their visual representation of their interpretations of learner autonomy reflects the inequalities in the education system.

The idea of keeping up with the Joneses does not necessarily have to be a negative experience. Fukada and colleagues show that visualizing possible helping others could be empowering. By focusing on attributes for positive psychology and learning, learners then visualize their own possible attainment to develop such attributes. And this could work really well with Mariani's use of metaphors to get students to move beyond the learning; and focus on the learning process. Looking at the different categories of metaphors used by students, it is not difficult to see that students connect their learning experience beyond the classroom. They think about how English learning skills can be transferred (or imported) from other types of learning, or other forms of language learning. This connects to Abe's work on developing students' metacognitive knowledge to make learner development explicit.

Concluding Remarks

After reading through the studies in this volume, several questions came into my mind: When learners are put into one classroom, they tend to be categorized as one group. The "English for Business" students, or the "Year 2" students, so on and so forth. Learner development tends to be institutionally measured in grades and achievement, and unfortunately, failure as well. The individual learner disappears into the crowd, and vanishes. However, each study in this volume asks one question: How can learner development be reconceptualized, especially by involving learners in this visualization process? The different researchers adopted different research methodology that best fitted their teaching and researching contexts. However, one observation from this collection of work is that the visualization of learner development is not limited to what happened in the classroom. Regardless of the research focus and methodology, the visualization of learner development revealed more about the learners as people, and how language learning is connected to other aspects of their social worlds. Development in language learning is connected to the development of the person, and it does not exist as just one isolated event within the classroom.

Coming back to my earlier mistaken musical memory of "Do You See What I See?," the collection of papers in this inaugural issue of *The Learner Development Journal* helps make learner development explicit. Sometimes, it is important for the teacher to see that development or the learning process explicitly because it is the students who are singing, *do you see what I see* (my triumphs and my struggles in learning a language). Sometime it is the teachers singing

the tune because they can see what the students are going through and will be likely to go through in their language learning journeys, and the teachers are finding ways to help students externalize the mental processes at work. And sometimes it is also an excited shout from one teacher to another when something amazing happened in the classroom. So maybe it is Christmas after all, and visualizing learner development is the best gift in a language classroom, for both the teacher and the learners.

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