

Japan-Based ELT Educators' Stance on Technology: Revisited with 2013 Data

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Introduction

Do we sufficiently question the massive shift to digital mediation currently underway in education? As smartphones and other digital devices become increasingly pervasive in society, those of us involved in the English language teaching (ELT) profession have generally attempted to mirror this trend in our classrooms. Never before has technology been so deeply embedded in our lessons. Undoubtedly there are plenty of compelling reasons for embracing this shift: Digital tools are allowing us to overcome the limitations of typical classrooms and materials in a great variety of ways. However, as is the case whenever a trend of this scope and magnitude enters the scene with promises of revolutionary change, it behooves us to proceed with due caution, investigate assertions thoroughly, and eventually separate the wheat from the chaff as we attempt to make the most of the new opportunity. When it comes to bringing technology into the classroom, is this evaluative process occurring in a sufficiently rigorous and objective manner?

1. Project Overview

In response to the above question, my impression is that enthusiasm currently appears to be outpacing evidence, and that we would all benefit from greater critical balance. Over the past few years while attending professional ELT conferences in Japan, keeping abreast of technology-related issues in journals and newsletters, and participating in faculty discussions in which far-reaching decisions about technology usage are being made, I have noticed that critical perspectives seem to be lacking. This is in stark contrast to the more robust backlash to the digital lifestyle that is evident in general society. As a number of observers have noted (see, for example, Jurgenson, 2012; Lucas, 2012; Anderson, 2009), there now exists a growing tide of cautionary voices and compelling critiques backed by empirical evidence that serve as a counterbalance to the pro-

digital trend in our society. In Mach (2013) I provided a detailed overview of these critiques which all point to ways in which digital tools may be negatively affecting their users.

However, my impression is that these critical voices are perhaps not being heeded enough as we rush to digitize ELT in Japan. Furthermore, it seems that many of us educators, chronically pressed for time and feeling pressure to incorporate the latest trends in our lessons, are perhaps prone to pass too swiftly over the *why* of technology use in order to focus our energies on *how* to implement it. Thus, this project which I started last year and is herein being augmented with additional data serves as an attempt to add some quantitative insight into this perceived gap in our stance toward digital technology dependency. Essentially, I am investigating whether critical perspectives on technology are being sufficiently offered in ELT, and also whether our discussions might be overly fixated on *how* to use these tools at the expense of a deeper focus on trying to justify *why* they might deserve such prominence.

1.1 Background

The research presented below is essentially a follow-up to a more extensive study published in this same journal one year ago (Mach, 2013) in which the ELT profession's attitudes toward the digitization of language education in Japan were analyzed. Findings suggested that we appear to be in a stage of over-exuberance about technology's merits. That analysis was embedded in a multifaceted critique of the digital lifestyle originating primarily from recent findings in neurocognitive science and developmental psychology, and it concluded with suggestions about what such a critique might imply for technology's role in our classrooms.

1.2 Methodology

This project consists of a straightforward analysis of the rhetorical approach and stance markers found in the titles and abstracts of technology-related presentations given at ELT conferences in Japan over the last two years. Participation in such conferences offers the most conspicuous forum for career-oriented ELT professionals to share their views, and it includes those who do not undertake the longer process of preparing those views for publication. Thus, conference presentations tend to offer us more voices in a more up-to-date and

discursive forum compared to publications, and can therefore be said to more accurately reflect the current zeitgeist of the profession, whereas publications offer a more selective lineup of voices.

The conferences included in this study have all been organized by the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT). JALT is the largest ELT professional organization in Japan, and the one with the highest international profile. Abstracts from presentations that focused on technology from JALT's main international conferences, from the technology-specific JALTCALL conferences, and from JALT's Pan-SIG conferences (*SIG* refers to *Special Interest Groups*) are categorized below in order to provide a synopsis of the profession's attitudes toward technology over the two-year period under study.

Presentation titles along with their abstracts were analyzed in terms of presentation *type* as well as the presenter's *stance* as evidenced in the framing of the reported content and/or results. For this study, *Presentation Type* consists of three groups: *Instructional*, *Progress Report*, and *Broad View*. The *Instructional* type consists of talks that described how a certain application for a particular teaching purpose had been used, discussed how to go about incorporating a particular aspect of technology, or showed the audience how to carry out particular technology-dependent projects. *Progress Reports* typically shared results of classroom-based action research projects or larger-scale and ongoing initiatives. Even if the project was completely finished at the time of the presentation, as long as the main focus appeared to be on reporting actual results rather than on demonstrating how to do something, it was categorized as a *Progress Report*. The final category, *Broad View*, captures presentations that approached their topic from a comparatively wider perspective. These presentations typically discussed a general technology-based theme, trend, or issue without focusing as much on a particular, context-specific application, study, or project except as a means of exemplifying the broader topic. Examples of presentation titles and excerpts from abstracts that illustrate this categorization system are available in Mach (2013).

Abstracts were also categorized according to each presenter's *stance* (positive, neutral, or negative) in relation to the aspect of digital technology being presented. In the case of *positive stance*, multiple instances of positive evaluative words and phrases offered without any discernable hedging typically indicated the presenter's positive attitude toward the technology topic or the digital tool that enabled the project. In contrast, presentations that were categorized as *neutral stance* had titles and abstracts that appeared essentially objective in regards to their topic or the

technology underlying their project. This was typically achieved through studious avoidance of judgmental vocabulary, by the framing of positive remarks within rhetorical hedging strategies that exhibit efforts to project professional objectivity, or by balancing the positive conclusions with an admission of possibly negative aspects as well. Here again, Mach (2013) provides illustrative examples of this categorization process.

Presentations with an abstract indicating an overall negative assessment of technology's role within or effect upon the project, study, or pedagogical issue under investigation were determined to have a *negative stance*. In fact, the 2012 data analyzed and reported in Mach (2013) contained no instances of *negative stance*. However, several such presentations appeared in the 2013 data and these are discussed in detail below.

2. Results

2.1 Overview of 2012 Data

The results from the three conferences in the 2012 subset of data were discussed in greater length in Mach (2013), and Table 1 has been reproduced herein from that article. Those results indicate that not only were there no presentations in 2012 exhibiting a negative stance regarding technology, but that the majority of presentations (65 of 109, or 59.6%) expressed overtly positive attitudes about our digital tools. And while the conferences differed somewhat from each other in terms of the ratio of presentation types offered, overall it is clear that *Instructional* (45%) presentations and *Progress Reports* (39.4%) far outnumbered the *Broad View* type; the latter constituting only 17 (or 15.6%) of the 109 total presentations delivered.

Table 1

2012 Results: Digital Technology Presentations at Three ELT Conferences in Japan

Type	JALT	JALTCALL	Pan-SIG	Total
Stance (+Positive/Neutral/-Negative)				
Instructional	24	19	6	49
Stance	(+18/6/-0)	(+17/2/-0)	(+6/0/-0)	(+41/8/-0)
Progress Report	16	19	8	43
Stance	(+6/10/-0)	(+7/12/-0)	(+1/7/-0)	(+14/29/-0)
Broad View	6	4	7	17
Stance	(+5/1/-0)	(+2/2/-0)	(+3/4/-0)	(+10/7/-0)
Total	46	42	21	109
Stance	(+29/17/-0)	(+26/16/-0)	(+10/11/-0)	(+65/44/-0)

2.2 2013 Results

The data from 2013, displayed in Table 2, has been added to the project in order to fortify the scope of the conclusions as well as to investigate whether we can detect any indications of evolution in the way technology is being discussed in ELT.

Table 2
2013 Results: Digital Technology Presentations at Three ELT Conferences in Japan

Type	JALT	JALTCALL	Pan-SIG	Total
Stance (+Positive/Neutral/-Negative)				
Instructional	25	39	7	71
Stance	(+16/9/-0)	(+28/11/-0)	(+4/3/-0)	(+48/23/-0)
Progress Report	9	31	5	45
Stance	(+1/8/-0)	(+12/18/-1)	(+2/2/-1)	(+15/28/-2)
Broad View	10	9	4	23
Stance	(+4/5/-1)	(+2/7/-0)	(+0/3/-1)	(+6/15/-2)
Total	44	79	16	139
Stance	(+21/22/-1)	(+42/36/-1)	(+6/8/-2)	(+69/66/-4)

The results in Table 2 indicate a nearly even split in *positive stance* (69 of 139, or 49.6%) and *neutral stance* (66 of 139, or 47.5%) presentations, with *negative stance* (4 of 139, or 2.9%) trailing far behind. Regarding the distribution of presentation types, The *Instructional* type at 51.1% easily outpaced both *Progress Reports* (32.4%) and *Broad View* (16.5%) presentations.

2.3 Comparison of 2012 and 2013 Data

The first thing to notice is that there has been a sizeable increase (from 109 to 139) in the total number of technology-centered presentations, but this is likely just an anomaly caused by the JALTCALL conference convening on a much larger scale in 2013 compared to 2012, and not indicative of an overall trend.¹

Compared to 2012, the *Instructional* type of presentation increased its lead over the other types somewhat (from 45% to 51.1% of the total). *Progress Reports* held steady in terms of their actual number (from 43 in 2012 to 45 in 2013) but decreased significantly when presented as a percentage of the total (from 39.4% down to 32.4%). The *Broad View* type increased its share ever so slightly (from 15.6% in 2012 to 16.5% of the 2013 total), but remains firmly in its distant third position compared to the other two types.

Regarding the stance of the presenters, 2013 appears to not have been as overwhelmingly positive as 2012 was. The share of presentations characterized as exhibiting *positive stance* dropped from 59.6% in 2012 to 49.6% in 2013. In contrast, the number of presenters who framed their abstracts in neutral terms increased from 40.4% of the 2012 total to 47.5% in 2013. Despite this noticeable movement, perhaps the most interesting development is that presentations with a markedly negative stance toward technology, although completely absent in 2012, made an appearance in 2013. At only 2.9% of the 2013 total, these four presentations still represent a very small sliver of the overall pie. Nevertheless, their entry onto the scene may be a harbinger of the type of critical perspectives we may soon see more of, and so they merit a closer look.

2.4 Negative Stance Presentations in 2013

Of the four presentations exhibiting negative stance in 2013, two were categorized as *Broad Views* and the other two as *Progress Reports*.²

- *ELT Groupthink: How we tend to talk of technology* (JALT; Broad View)

This was my own presentation. It reported and interpreted the 2012 data included in this paper, and situated it within the critiques explained more fully in Mach (2013). Since it has been thoroughly discussed elsewhere, it will be left out of the discussion below.

- *Social networking as genre: Instructional design to support collaboration* (Pan-SIG; Broad View)

This presentation's main focus was its suggestion that computer-mediated courses are not living up to their collaborative potential. It argued that evidence from studies looking at "cross-institutional collaboration in teacher education suggests that even when learners recognize the social networking potential of a CMC tool, they do not necessarily take advantage of it." The title suggests a more positive stance, apparently because the presenters concluded by proposing their solution to the problem, but the abstract indicates that the explication of this serious problem hampering a major educational trend seems to have been the central purpose of the presentation.

- *Constraints in computer-assisted text analysis* (Pan-SIG; Progress Report)

The main focus of this report was the presentation of evidence suggesting that various text analysis software programs tend to analyze the same text differently from each other, thereby likely leading to "suspicious research conclusions." The

abstract reminds us that “software is only as good as the programmer who made it,” with the implication that some of the programming that we educators increasingly rely on rests on rather wobbly foundations prone to human error.

•*Comparing the grammar feedback provided by ETS Proofwriter and school teachers* (JALTCALL; Progress Report)

This presentation reported on a study in which English essays written by Taiwanese high school seniors were evaluated by both human raters and an application called *ETS Proofwriter*. It found that the writing feedback offered by this particular software was erratic and unreliable since it included false alarms, wrong labels, and unidentified errors. In short, the human raters were found to offer more accurate essay correction, and the presenters concluded by suggesting that “language teachers and learners should treat the [computer-] generated feedback with caution.”

3. Discussion

The type of presentations in the *Instructional* category can be said to be exploring the *how* of technology implementation, whereas *Progress Reports* tend to focus on *what happened* when technology was used and *Broad View* types are generally oriented toward the *why* of technology in education. The 2013 growth in the share of *Instructional* types (+6.1%) came at the expense of *Progress Reports* (-7%), indicating that the tendency to stay in a descriptive mode in our overall technology discussion is becoming even more pronounced: That is to say, attendees at 2013 ELT conferences were more likely to hear *how* they might use technology as opposed to *why* they should consider using it or what the efficacy of implementing it might be.

At just over half (51.1%) of the total presentations in the 2013 data, the preponderance of the *Instructional* type clearly backs my original impression that we seem to be fixated on the *how* of technology in our rush to digitize the classroom at the expense of other questions we ought to be asking. Reasons behind this descriptive orientation likely include the facts that technological innovation is happening so rapidly that we are constantly in a position of simply trying to understand the changes, and that the learning curve for some of its implementations can be rather steep. Also, as Stockwell (2012) has suggested, technology-related educational research has an unfortunate tendency to be predominantly descriptive since it often sets out to justify the use of a particular

technology that has already been selected. The potential danger we face is that this fixation on how we can use technology lends to the general topic an aura of invincibility, as if the move to digital ubiquity is escaping a proper vetting and has managed to prematurely achieve a non-controversial status. Given the many voices outside of ELT raising legitimate concerns about a host of potentially negative changes in human productivity, creativity, cognitive depth, and communication skills that the digital lifestyle may be ushering in (see, for example, Carr, 2011; Turkle, 2011; Powers, 2010; Wolf, 2007), it would be a major oversight if we in ELT fail to sufficiently consider the possible ramifications of this broader societal shift when we talk about technology.

While *Instructional* presentations fortified their position of dominance in 2013, we can also see that the overall positive stance toward technology at these conferences has tempered somewhat: The overtly positive presentations constituted nearly 60% of the total in 2012, dropping to just under 50% in 2013. In contrast, *neutral stance* presentations have increased to the point that they now run almost evenly with *positive stance* ones (47.5% to 49.6%, respectively) and a few instances of *negative stance* can even be found in the latest data. This trend ought to be welcomed, as it suggests some movement, however tentative, toward greater balance and objectivity as we consider technology's expanding role in our schools. Admittedly it would be unrealistic to expect much balance in the *Instructional* category since any presenter teaching or demonstrating *how* to incorporate a particular aspect of technology into lessons is naturally starting from a position of enthusiasm and acceptance of the topic under consideration. The *Progress Report* and *Broad View* categories, on the other hand, ideally ought to exhibit a well-balanced diversity of voices and stances on technology in order to add depth and vitality to the overall discussion.

Finally, while the handful of *negative stance* presentations which entered the scene in 2013 tackle different aspects of the inclusion of technology in education, the common point is that they all urge us to be skeptical of claims made by certain software applications and their proponents. All of them also imply or directly suggest that more caution is necessary when adapting digital tools in our courses. Their tone is objective and their evidence appears solid; they hardly come across as anti-technology crusaders. Thus, it is the fact that these sorts of well reasoned albeit critical presentations constitute only four of the 248 total talks analyzed in this study which strikes me as truly remarkable. More such presentations would help to restore some of the critical balance in ELT that currently seems to be

lacking, and would therefore be a very welcome addition to the ongoing discussion about technology in our classrooms.

In sum, while various modest movements in the general contours of the data appear to have taken place between 2012 and 2013, the overall shape of our technology-related discussion in ELT remains the same: We still tend to pass almost directly into a descriptive *how* mode while barely addressing more far-reaching questions of *why*, and we are still inclined to frame what we say about technology in decidedly positive terms.

Notes

- 1) If there is any doubt to the claim that discussions of technology are now a central part of the ELT profession, consider the fact that at JALT's international conference the number of presentations in this content area outpaced all other areas during the two years included in this study. At the 2012 conference, the *Language and Technology* category (46 presentations) was followed by *Learner Development* (40) in second place, while *Motivation* (38) was the third most popular area. In the 2013 conference, these three most popular content areas held their positions: *Language and Technology* was at 44, *Learner Development* listed 37, and the *Motivation* area had 34 presentations (with *Speaking/Communication* coming in a close fourth place at 33).
- 2) Besides the first presentation delivered by me and discussed in detail in Mach (2013), the other three presenters were, in respective order: Bill Snyder and Carolin Fuchs of Teachers College, Columbia University; Eric Alan Lerstrom of Nihon University; and Ting-Yu Yang and Hao-Jan Chen of National Taiwan Normal University. Their abstracts as well as all the others included in this study are available in the conference handbooks which can be viewed on or downloaded from the respective conference websites:
<http://jalt.org/conference/jalt2013/full-schedule>
<http://conference2013.jaltcall.org/program>
<http://www.pansig.org/2013/JALTPanSIG2013/Schedule.html>

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