



Review of the PanSIG 2025 Conference: Agency and Autonomy in Language Learning

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Abstract

This review article describes and evaluates the PanSIG 2025 Conference. The theme was *Agency and Autonomy in Language Learning*, and the event was held at Kanda University of International Studies on May 16-18 in Chiba, Japan. This conference included plenaries, workshops, Special Interest Group forums, presentations, poster sessions, and showcases. After an event overview, highlights, limitations, and closing comments are mentioned. The article explains how the event spotlighted work on language learning and autonomy in Japan at a time of change. It also reflects on how lively forums such as this sustain the bonds of a research and practice community.

Keywords

1. Learner autonomy
2. Learner agency
3. Self-access learning
4. Japan

AI Declaration

Artificial Intelligence (AI) was not used in this manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.



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Introduction

The PanSIG 2025 conference on agency and autonomy in language learning was held in person from May 16–18 at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), a private university in Chiba, Japan. The event brought together more than 600 researchers, educators, and both postgraduate and undergraduate students — an all-time high for the event. 28 out of the 30 Special Interest Groups (SIGs) of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) were represented, alongside other professional organisations like the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL). The event attracted 13 sponsors, from major international publishers such as Pearson and Oxford University Press to smaller operations like English Central and domestic publishers such as Kinseido—the highest number in the 23-year history of the conference. The 86-page handbook listed around 200 presentations and SIG forums, four workshops, 36 posters, two plenaries, and a unique Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) showcase featuring 11 SALCs. As 35 people were needed simply to review around 245 submitted abstracts, suffice it to say that the event was grand in scale.

Overview

Although PanSIG technically opened on Friday night with the pre-conference workshops and a social visit to a baseball game, action really began on Saturday morning. The dismal weather could not dampen attendees' spirits at the opening ceremony. People applauded and cheered a student flamenco performance, accompanied by vocals and acoustic guitar. This set the tone for the equally energetic plenary on autonomy-supportive teaching by the eminent American educational psychologist Johnmarshall Reeve. The talk was informed by a Self-Determination Theory perspective on the satisfaction of autonomy as a key Basic Psychological Need — alongside competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). For Reeve, autonomy is linked to greater agentic engagement, that is, the extent to which autonomy translates efficaciously into new learning behaviours. He presented randomised control trial evidence (e.g., Jang et al., 2024) to support his case alongside autonomy-supportive teaching practices, such as the use of invitational language, which support internalization (valuing) and intrinsic motivation towards learning. Reeve was an engaging speaker, and the findings were convincingly presented — although the figures on his slides were quite low resolution and hard to read.

Parallel sessions were then held for around five and a half hours each day. There were three event formats: 25-minute presentations, 60-minute SIG forums, and one 60-minute poster session per day. For instance, I attended a memorable presentation on Saturday afternoon by Katherine Thornton and Mehrasa Alizadeh. *The potential role of immersive technologies in enhancing the SALC experience* introduced a pilot project to use virtual reality in a SALC. Japanese students visited selected meaningful places in international students' home countries and then conversed directly with them about this



experience. I was struck by this use of technology in an autonomy-supportive environment. On the same day, I also attended the Intercultural Communication in Language Education SIG forum. This anthology-style format brought together consecutive, shorter talks on the SIG's thematic focus. The pairing of these two formats allowed attendees to choose either a wide range of different presentations or to focus more narrowly — something I appreciated. There were parallel sessions on topics ranging from teacher development to content- and task-based language teaching to extensive reading. However, I felt the degree of fidelity to the conference theme of autonomy and agency was highly variable, and occasionally it was tangential at best. Conversely, I attended the Sunday poster session, which offered an entirely different experience. Please see Figure 1. There were 17 concurrent posters — mostly classroom research — on topics such as inclusivity, virtual exchange, or creative uses of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The room was full of energy, and the presenters seemed constantly engaged in enthused discussions. It was here that I felt some of the most relevant ideas were being offered. Work by notables of the field, such as Dr. Jo Mynard and Dr. Daniel Hooper stood alongside that of up-and-coming figures. Presenters frequently situated their work clearly within exploratory practice, action research, autoethnographic, or reflective practice modalities, or applied theoretical frameworks that were well aligned with autonomy and agency. This frenetic session likely had the most vitality of anything I attended — even my own talk on my research synthesis!

Figure 1

Photograph of the Sunday Poster Session Taken by Thomas Stringer



Separately, there were several offerings available to make the participant experience more pleasant. For instance, there was a wellness room for rest, contemplation, coffee, local peanut-based snacks, and even yoga sessions. The room had a wall of windows overlooking a large green space and plenty of seating — which made it an agreeable location.



I was able to spend time speaking with a fellow doctoral student from the International Education and Lifelong Learning Institute about our research in this space. Furthermore, professional headshots were being offered by a photographer free of charge here at certain times to help attendees engaged in job-hunting. It was also nice to see that childcare facilities had been provided in a separate area to make it easier for parents to participate in the conference. Additionally, the on-campus conference dinner buffet on Saturday night offered a chance for reunions with old friends and colleagues as well as networking in a casual, relaxed environment. One final pleasing touch was the connection to charity. Some of the proceeds from the dinner (around \$500) were donated to a local animal shelter, and the providers of free coffee—funded by participant fees—were also active in charitable work. This kind of engagement ensures the conference’s connection to the local community.

Highlights

A notable event—unique to this iteration of PanSIG—was the SALC Showcase. 10 SALCs from across Japan and one from the National Autonomous University of Mexico had set out their booths in three packed rooms on Saturday morning, and they remained there all weekend. Representatives of each SALC presented key offerings: language support, learning advising, workshops or events, conversation lounges, self-directed credit-bearing autonomous learning courses, different models of integration with formal courses, and materials lending. For one, the *English Lounge* at Hirosaki University offers seminars and events for high school students, fostering local community integration. Next, various forms of digital or hybrid engagement seem to have been a lasting impact of the pandemic. For instance, the *English Resource Center* at Saitama University typically uses a 360-degree camera called Meeting OWL to facilitate remote participation. Furthermore, it was wonderful to see that, in line with the generally empowering ethos of the self-access field, Ritsumeikan University’s *Beyond Border’s Plaza* and Gifu Shotoku University’s *Lounge MELT* had also brought student SALC staff. At the JASAL Forum on Sunday, I learned that the Ritsumeikan students’ attendance had been supported by a JASAL student grant.

One other interesting theme I noticed at the Showcase was the growing role of AI. For instance, the Reitaku University SALC, known as *iFloor*, currently offers AI-supported vocabulary, writing, and communication practice. AI had, perhaps unavoidably, been mentioned vaguely in speeches, presentations, and showcases throughout the weekend. Moreover, links to autonomy (as opposed to language learning) were often unclear, or the work remained experimental. Nevertheless, in the area of self-access, the cutting-edge intersection of technology and autonomy was clearer. Similarly, I also noted nascent AI influences on the Sunday lunchtime on-campus SALC tour. KUIS, the conference site, is widely regarded as the home of autonomy research and practice in Japan. It hosts two practitioner journals, a research centre, and a regular conference series and offers professional development qualifications — to say nothing of the SALC itself. It is the largest and best resourced in the entire country, and accordingly, it made sense for this conference to be held here. It was my first visit, and in my notebook, I wrote, “This is what all self-access centres want to be like when they grow up.” The vast space resembles an airport lounge crossed with a high-end café. I saw how attention had been paid to the learning resource layout, traffic flow, use of cosy seating, coffee bars, open and closed spaces, and thoughtful lighting. As the student staff member guided us around, I came across carefully placed learning resources and strategy worksheets with citations to research work by KUIS



staff, demonstrating clear links between research and practice. In one corner on the second floor, tucked between dedicated spaces for learning, advising sessions and relaxation, I noted a monitor with a label inviting people to try their 'AI Tutor'. I spoke to conference site chair and KUIS instructor, Prateek Sharma, about this. He seemed confident that these tools would never replicate the emotional elements of human learning advising, and that their purpose was merely to permit greater SALC engagement among shyer learners. However, I feel the question of whether such tools will gradually erode the need for SALCs as physical spaces remains unanswered.

Closing Comments

There were some slightly less satisfying aspects of the event as well. The closing plenary was informative but lacked the energy of the first. As for scheduling, I think the decision to hold some talks during the lunch break and also stop serving lunch abruptly was questionable. Next, Sunday was slightly less well attended than Saturday, and the sponsor booths looked somewhat empty. Similarly, I heard some grumbles about travelling long distances for a mid-semester conference, especially from people who had class on Friday afternoon and Monday morning. Organisers could perhaps consider holding the conference outside of term time. However, in summary, these minor irritants paled in comparison to the successes of the event. In an emotional closing speech on Sunday afternoon, the conference chair, Robert Dykes, reminded the audience that PanSIG feels far more like a family event than other, more staid conferences. As I joined other attendees on the long journey home, I began to reflect on the key importance of events like this in sustaining a national-level research and practice community. Just as a SALC can be a bridging location between formal and social language learning, so events like PanSIG 2025 can simultaneously foster scholarly debate and also strengthen personal and professional connections. Scholarship has noted autonomy's inextricability from context (Stringer, 2024). Clearly, the same can be said for a successful conference. At the end of the closing ceremony, next year's conference venue and dates were announced to warm cheers. PanSIG 2026 will be held on May 23rd and 24th at Chukyo University in Nagoya, on the theme of *Building Teachers, Building Students, Building Relations – Bringing practice into the classroom*. I, for one, hope to attend.



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