Between the Keys

The Newsletter of the JALT Materials Writers SIG © 2001

# Helpful Non–L2 Classroom Material Web Sites

Joseph J. Falout, Nihon University, College of Science & Technology

On the continual mission to seek out more authentic, raw, and non-under-assuming sources for teaching English as a foreign language, I have often turned to elementary and secondary school worksheets and activity books published for native English speakers. Regardless of age and speaking ability, I have found use of such texts to derive some type of productive class here in Japan that I never would have gotten from a specifically EFL/ESL source. Lately, the search continues on the Internet.

When you check out the web pages below, I would like to encourage you not to go directly to the language arts sections (though there are plenty of excellent songs, poems, and reading and writing ideas within), but to divert your attention toward the other sections; for example, art, science, or history. You may be surprised at what you find. Teachers these days are favoring active, interactive, collaborative syllabi. While we may have traditionally learned while sitting quietly in our chairs, students these days are doing so less passively. Furthermore, many of these educators seem a bit more up to date with computer-based learning.

The web sites below are excellent resources for the content-based teacher and syllabus designer in the university. They are equally useful for the teacher with a room full of toddlers. Wherever or whoever you are presently teaching, there are some great games, task-based lessons, project-based lessons, and dis-cussion opportunities in the sites below. Not specifically covered in this review are materials sales sites or interactive online sites, though you will be able to locate such sites in lesson plan searches and links.

Admittedly, you will come across many activities which do not generate talk or facilitate English skills. Yet here is the perfect chance for those of us who are writers. Whether something you read spurns you on toward an original idea, or whether you take a basic lesson plan and modify it for the L2 classroom, you could develop something fresh that the rest of us have never seen. Then write it up and I hope we can see it in the next issue of *Between the Keys*.

## A to Z Teacher Stuff
*<http://atozteacherstuff.com>*

This is a good site to get your feet wet. You can easily get lost when browsing in this one. If so, you will not be alone—the site claims to have one million visitors each month. User-friendly, you can search for lesson plans by subject, themes, and grade level (loosely read: ability level). While pinpointing is made easy through a keyword search, I recommend looking at the Theme Index and Seasonal Index to tickle a fancy you never knew existed and then letting your curiosity take over. Through this method I found and printed up a few tasks I may use.

One example came from a math lesson, "Comparison Food Shopping: Buying Groceries for 2 People for One Week."

With this lesson, students discover for themselves, using newspaper inserts, that nutritious food can be bought and prepared more cheaply than fast foods. You take this lesson and focus it to suit your classroom requirements, be they discussion, reading, or writing needs. For instance, it could be used in a grammar unit on countables and uncountables, as a topic in a cultural awareness class, or for students whose major is mathematics. Make it a research project with a final presentation, where the food situations of different countries are compared.

Here is another one: "Countries of the World," written by a social studies teacher. Students use the media lab to individually look up four to six main facts about a chosen country. After some research, students write their findings on index cards, form into groups, and play a game. Does this generate any ideas for you yet?

The lessons here have copyrights, which only means you cannot publish the lessons as written. Everyone is welcome to use them in class, though.

If you come up cold searching for something specific, no sweat—you are automatically given choices from other web pages. Also included in A to Z Teacher Stuff is their very own LessonPlanz.com, "a searchable directory of free online lesson plans and lesson plan resources…for all subjects." Other areas to visit are printables, tips, articles, store, and chat. You will not want to miss the links, which in themselves are worthy of browsing.

## Schoolhouse
<*http://encarta.msn.com/schoolhouse/*>

Welcome to the home of the Encarta lesson collection and other educational resources. Unlike this description may suggest, this site is not devoted specifically to selling their materials. It often does, however, promote the use of the Encarta CD Encyclopedia, the Internet, and other CD-ROM sources. Therefore, this site might be more useful to the Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) type teacher, but not always necessarily. It looks good for content-based syllabi as well. Here again you can find lessons by subject, grade level, or keyword, and I do recommend spending time browsing. Some of the subjects available are: arts, health, information technology, philosophy, physical education, religion, and vocational education. Under these headings fall subheading categories.

Let us say you have a class of architecture students. With a search on Frank Lloyd Wright, you can find a wonderful lesson plan which, if executed in its entirety, could become a whole month's unit in its own right. Given are lesson plans for the teacher, activity sheets for the student (both printables), and resources for both teacher and student alike, where one can get the required pictures and articles, as well as further in-depth research paths, including related articles, maps, and web sites. The unit follows this progression: prompts for discussion; reading strategies (using an article from the CD-ROM Encarta Encyclopedia); more discussion prompts; a writing assignment; a research assignment; presentation of the research; and ending with either comparison or extension topics to further report.

Not all the lessons require as much time or computer-intensive work, but they are all well thought out. Use this

site generally more for your advanced speakers.

## AskERIC

*<http://askeric.org/Virtual/Lessons/>*

Nonchalantly sporting a collection of over 1100 "unique lesson plans," there are a few good modifiers which might begin to explain this site: extensive, massive, where-do-you-begin. Much like the A to Z Teacher Stuff and Schoolhouse sites from above, you can keyword access anything from within and virtually anything from without, and browse for the rest of your life. There are no less than twenty-three subcategories under science alone, including paleontology, genetics, and meteorology.

Unique, but sometimes wasteful of your time, is the breadth of the keyword search. You can pinpoint your searches by gradation, as found items get sorted on a scale of relevance from 1% to 100%. For example, searching for "jeopardy," I found three games as I had wanted (including an interesting one on the solar system) at the higher end of the relevancy scale, and four other lessons at the lower end. These latter ones pertained to subjects such as endangered species, or the changing Earth. Indeed, these things could be classified as at-risk or in jeopardy. So the search potential at this site is quite remarkable.

If you can manage to escape the Lesson Plans pages, you will find yourself somewhere within reach of 3000 educational resources. Like visiting a city for the first time, it may be helpful to take the Site Tour before going any further. Of course, if you have any nagging educational doubts, you can always ask. Leave your message, and within two business days ERIC will write back with a personalized response. Who could ask for more?

## Creative Classroom Games for Fun and Lesson Review

*<http://www.suu.edu/ced/distance/creative/>*

Small on browsing opportunities, but for your students this site will prove big on speaking opportunities. Created by Kaye Bair, M.A., for a distance-learning, in-service course through Southern Utah University on creating your own materials, here is the kind of site (sight) of which I would like to find more. Throughout the pages, Bair discusses a compelling philosophy for how and why activities should be implemented in the classroom (again, these ideas need not stay at the native speaker elementary school level, but may pertain directly to our situations). You will also see listed some resources for the teacher, but these features are not the main attraction for our purposes.

Bair's course site offers a limited but rich materials source from these three click-on categories: Lesson Review Games & Activities; Brainstorms; and Community Building Games. The last selections, Camping Games and Mixers, prompt more activity in the physical sense, so they are perhaps less useful for generating verbal exercise, and not really worth clicking into for that reason. Visiting the former stops will give you a break from planning, but your students will have to work hard talking!

There are so many simple, applicable activities of elegant design. From the Community Building Games category,

"Why and Because" illustrates a playful yet relevant activity for the second language setting. Hand out 3 x 5 cards. Everyone writes a question beginning with the word "Why." Collect the cards and hand out another set. Everyone writes answers beginning with "Because." Collect these, and shuffle the two sets of cards. Now read the questions and answers out loud to hear some silly reasoning. Modification for our learners' needs: have your students do the work; change the structure a bit, e.g., substitute "If and Then"; etc.

but by timely issues. At the moment of review, the top of the page justifiably boasts "a potpourri of great October ideas." Other categories at this time are games, icebreakers, current event issues, and mini-lessons for unexpected moments.

Dipping into each section, you will be shown a brief about the subject at hand, and an annotated list of lesson plans into which you can click. There are fun activities for children, discussions suitable for adults, and always something for any English level. A

> *Whether something you read spurns you on toward an original idea, or whether you take a basic lesson plan and modify it for the L2 classroom, you could develop something fresh that the rest of us have never seen.*

This site is very useful for introducing new ideas in class or when you reach the end of a unit and you are looking for creative, interactive reviews. Used directly, it is good for learner autonomy type tasks. Be warned—these games and activities may squeeze into your subconscious and generate ideas. I highly recommend opening up this one.

## Education World's Lesson Planning Center

*<http://www.education-world.com/a lesson/>*

Education World is another mammoth site. Their Lesson Planning Center reflects a devoted team of writers who favor a fresh approach that is well worth more than one visit. Themes are not categorized by school subject, as commonly seen at the other web sites,

variety of richness amongst and within themselves, these ideas can be used immediately without much re-tuning.

For example, from under the "icebreaker" heading (a September back-to-school entry) comes this gem. Everyone starts off in a seated position. The teacher reads off from a list, beginning something like this: "If you have traveled this summer, stand up. If you have a brother, sit down." And so on. After the last instruction, it is suggested that those standing receive a treat.

Now, modify this mini-lesson, making it appropriate for age, communicative approach, or whatnot, and, depending on where you take it, you have a warm-up or introductory exercise for any classroom, a great game for children, or perhaps a clever twist for discussion protocol in an adult class.

# Super Tic –Tac–Toe

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## Quick Guide

Key Words: Negotiating Meaning, Question Formation, Reading, Review

Learner English Level: False Beginners

Learner Maturity Level: College

Class Size: About 10 to 20 students works best

Preparation Time: Minimal, outside of selecting reading

Activity Time: About one 90-minute class session

## Introduction

Looking for something a little different for reading discussion or review? Interested in authentic texts, autonomy, and student-generated materials, but have not yet reached the freedom in your syllabus structure? Been familiarizing your learners, experientially, with the target language culture? Want to see more spontaneous learning? Super Tic-Tac-Toe may be just what you need.

This game is basically a hybrid of jeopardy and tic-tac-toe, both of which are familiar communicative activities in my classes, so in my case the procedures and rules are already pre-conveyed. The game fulfils the five requirements of communication tasks (see Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993) as well as being custom-made for just about every of the ten commandments for motivating language learners (see Dornyei & Csizer, 1998). As opposed to "focused" communication tasks, I prefer to use this task in an "unfo-cused" manner, where the performance of the task is naturally determined by the content therein, with no linguistic features targeted and made prominent (see Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993). In this way, within negotiated interactions, learners can opt for utilizing comfortable constructs or more challenging ones to suit their interests.

## Procedure

1. Students form into three teams (while this number is not set in stone, it seems to work best and from hereon it will be used in example). Take a look at an assigned reading or materials selected from a unit. Any form of (re)introduction is fine (e.g. student-led, teacher-led), as long as the task is kept brief. The idea here is not to introduce new ideas, but to (re)familiarize everyone with the basic concepts, and to have a last chance to address comprehension questions.

2. Pass out to each team one sheet with a grid of nine empty boxes, three across, three down (see figure below). Inside each box, groups write a question. The answers to these questions must be directly derivable from the reading or materials (rather than questions whose answers reside in speculation or come from outside sources). Depending on your choice of materials, questions may vary from content-oriented to meta-linguistic

(e.g., where there are specific grammar or vocabulary questions written in post-reading tasks). As groups get to work deciding upon and writing their questions, walk around and check their progress to make sure everything is valid and makes sense. I prefer to give hints on how to improve a question rather than doing direct intervention and editing.

3. When it looks like the questions are about wrapped up, pass out another sheet of blank boxes. Within this grid, teams write their answers in the corresponding spaces.

4. Everyone puts away all papers from the original reading. The only materials to be kept out are the question and answer sheets.

5. Here is where prior experience with jeopardy and tic-tac-toe helps out, as little explaining is needed for comprehension of the various components. On the board up front have three empty grids, one in front of each group if possible. Explain that each team owns a grid, and that their questions as configured on paper correspond to each box on the board. Practice choosing a box. Try drills: We'll take the *right* grid, *top* row, *middle* column. (At some point after the game gets under way, I erase this structure practice from the board. Students generally pick it up quickly and have it down by heart before the end of the game.)

6. Through your favorite method, choose a team to begin, with each team in turn going "up to bat." The team who is up specifies the grid and space from which they will attempt to make their mark (they cannot choose from within their own grid).

According to their selection, the team whose grid gets chosen will "pitch" a question by reading it out loud. If the question can be understood by you, the clock starts and the team up to bat has thirty seconds to answer. They may ask for the question to be re-read or further negotiate for meaning from the pitching team, but they still have only thirty seconds to answer.

7. If their answer is correct, they get to put their mark in the box (I like to have animals drawn in, with teams identified by the image and name). If incorrect, and this may sometimes be decided by the pitching team by referring to their answer sheet, the team(s) other than the pitching team gets a shot at the answer. If there is no correct answer, the pitching team gets to have their mark placed within the corresponding box.

8. Continue play in this fashion, taking turns. Teams can get as many "wins" (three in a row) as possible. Each "win" equals one point. Of course, the team with the most points by the end wins the game.

## Discussion

While the overarching structure of Super Tic-Tac-Toe is teacher-led, plenty of opportunity exists for inter- and intra-group negotiation, with the forms and contents of their expression largely originating from their choices. In the question generation stage, members amongst the groups discuss and decide, in the target language, what questions to write in the boxes and how to construct those questions. Later, during the game,
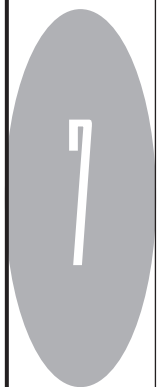
members negotiate the strategy for positioning their marks within the various tic-tac-toe grids on the board.

When there is lack of understanding the questions pitched to them, teams up to bat must elicit more explanation from the pitchers, who seem enthused with further expressing their self-authored questions and with the prospect that the batters will not be able to "hit the ball back." Occasionally, teams must discuss amongst themselves the validity of an answer hit for a moment, and spontaneity takes over. If they wait, it is too late. Facing peer-generated, peer-posed questions, respondents shed inhibitions more readily, and in place don something akin to courage or desperation to release their answers. Whatever the impulses may be, this format encourages a more ardent participation.

The purpose of the task is to generate discussion of specific content within the context of reading comprehension or review. Students are not encouraged to attend to or use specific

> ## *The purpose of Super Tic–Tac–Toe is to generate discussion of specific content within the context of reading comprehension or review.*

to them, and even request from the batters clarification or elaboration of their answer.

At moments like this, when groups are in the process of negotiating between and amongst themselves for meaning, the clock should not be running. Here, learners are simultaneously engaged in focusing on the meaning, collaboration, and peer evaluation, which to me is most exciting. The pitch and the hit are already done with, anyway. Between pitch and answer, to keep the game moving, and to ensure talk, it is key to enforce a set, limited period of time.

Without this external pressure, students fall into that silence of "excessive self-monitoring" (see McVeigh, 2001), and the game drags on. With the thirty-second time limit, which in my experience has proven to work best, participants forget themselves

linguistic constructs; however, there is a less-focused but general emphasis on question formation.

The task could be designed to focus on a specific question form (thus turning it into a focused communication task), but I prefer to keep it unfocused so that the student, when designing the game questions, can work on producing features with which she feels comfortable, or those which she perceives are useful for stumping the opponents. Concurrently, other students within the group are doing the same, and expressing their proposed constructs. Everyone in the group can attend to these forms, discuss whether they are correct or valid, and write their decision in a space on the handout.

When the teacher comes around to check, students receive confirmation of each question's status. When the

game is in play, reinforcement of what they have learned occurs in their reproduction (pitching a question) as well as in comprehension (up to bat) of similar features when questions are posed to them. In this way, groups also receive exposure to more possibilities of correct and valid questions from the pitches of other peer groups. After struggling to produce game questions, students can more readily attend to and comprehend questions posed to them.

Super Tic-Tac-Toe offers classes an interactive form of reading comprehension and review. It supplies a task-based communicative purpose with the focus on the message, though it also encourages noticing question formation. It facilitates negotiation within the boxes, freedom within the form. Most important, however, is that it is fun! 🖎

## References

Dornyei, Z. & Csizer, K. (1998). Ten commandments for motivating language learners: Results of an empirical study. *Language Teaching Research*, 2, 203-299.

McVeigh, B. (2001). Higher education, apathy and post-meritocracy. *The Language Teacher*, 25, (10), 29-32.

Nobuyoshi, J. & Ellis, R. (1993). Focused communication tasks and second language acquisition. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 47, 203-210.

## Figure

*Super Tic-Tac-Toe Grid*

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If the current choices are not already a treasure chest big enough for you, you can also hunt back through the Lesson Planning Center's Archives. Within the Archives, the click-on categories represent the traditional school subjects, so here is your chance if you are hunting for something a little more specific. However, no keyword search internal to the site is provided (although you will delight in using the "Safe Search of 500,000 Web Resources"). There is also the option of hunting back through the articles and their lessons by date, but such retro-perusal is not the same as getting it current.

The strength here lies in its up-to-date themes and issues. Frequent forays into this site may prove invaluable.

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# MW Presentations at JALT 2001

## Writing & Publishing ESL College Texts in Japan

Diane Nagatomo (Ochanomizu University)

Friday, November 23, 9:00

Room: AIM 3C

The presenter of this workshop will provide participants with a number of practical tips to help them publish their own college and university teaching materials in Japan. First, we will analyze textbooks published in Japan which are in use. Then, we will discuss how to organize our ideas and teaching materials so that they are attractive to the Japanese publishers. Finally, we will talk about how to choose and approach a publisher with ideas and manuscripts.

## French Teachers' Workshop: New Horizons in FL2

Kathleen Yamane, Eichi [Sapientia] University

Danielle Kurihara, Matsuyama University

Yoshie Lauffenburger-Hashido, Sendai International Communication Center

Olivier Urbain, Soka University.

Friday, November 23, 10:00-11:45

This workshop addresses the concerns of FL2 French teachers. Yamane will introduce listening comprehension materials designed for low-level beginning students. Kurihara will demonstrate strategies for teaching French pronuncia-tion. Lauffenburger-Hashido will share some communication activities for adult learners. Urbain will show how the theme of 'Art and Peace' can be used in the French classroom to stimulate communication. On vous attend!

## The Effects of Listening Strategy Training Tasks

Hiroko Hagino

Friday, November 23, 13:30-13:55

Room: 21C 1137

This paper presents the results of classroom research on the effects of listening strategy training tasks. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate the effects of tasks on the development of EFL listening proficiency with a focus on meaning. The presenter will demonstrate the methods and results of listening strategy survey and listening comprehension tests. The analyses of the data and implications for the teaching and further research will be presented.

## Motivating EFL Students: Lessons in Reality

Robert M. Homan (International Christian University)

Christopher Jon Poel (Musashi Institute of Technology)

Friday, November 23, 16:00-16:45

Room: 3F Room C

The presenters will discuss materials that provide a connection to real situations that both students and adults may encounter. The lessons provide

social and cultural information through business-oriented topics. These are covered not as discrete topics but as examples of how language, culture, and social norms work together for successful communication. In addition, links between the business situations and other situations where the same communication strategies may be useful are provided.

## Interactive, Integrated Projects on LAN Web Boards

Marilyn Books
Saturday, November 24, 9:30

In this presentation, the presenter will share the step-by-step process used in formulating, implementing, and assessing an integrated, interactive project-based course in writing. Students in groups of four collaborated on joint position papers first on LAN Web Boards, then published them on group web sites, researching the social issue of "parasite singles" (Yamada, 1999).

## Pronunciation and the Conversation Class

Robert M. Homan (International Christian University)
Christopher Jon Poel (Musashi Institute of Technology)
Saturday, November 24, 10:00-10:45
Room: 3F Room C

With the advent of communicative language lessons, pronunciation has fallen by the wayside. However, the presenters will show that pronunciation teaching and practice can be included in many conversation lessons. By using lessons created by the presenters, attendees will see how such topics as shopping, giving directions, and solving murder mysteries can be easily manipulated to allow for pronunciation practice. The audience will have ample opportunity to ask questions at the end of the presentation.

## Increasing Language Awareness through Dialect Study [Sheltered English Workshop]

Sunday 9:00-9:45

"You say to-MAY-to, I say to-MAH-to..." As the song suggests, we all speak dialects. The purpose of this workshop is to explore the linguistic nature of regional speech varieties and applications for the classroom. Following a general discussion of variation in language, participants will work in groups to identify the characteristics of several different varieties of English from short video clips and written passages. Intended as a basic, hands-on introduction for language teachers.

## Our Own SIG Events

*Saturday Schedule*
Our SIG Forum: 15:00
JALT Executive Board Meeting: 16:00
My Share—Live!: 17:00
You'll have to get in, get done, and get out again quickly, because…
JALT Ordinary General Meeting: 17:30
*Sunday Schedule*
Materials Writers SIG Annual General Meeting: 11:00

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# Our Share 2

Ian Gleadall, one of the editors of the original *Our Share* volume of member-created lessons, is busily at work on the sequel, appropriately named *Our Share 2*. But don't worry, there is still time to submit new materials for consideration.

Anyone who is interested in submitting is asked to take a look at the original *Our Share* and follow the same general style. Try to be as brief as possible in your explanation so that we can squeeze as many interesting articles and ideas as possible. And please provide full contact information, including snailmail &

e-mail addresses.

Ian is asking new contributors to provide electronic versions of their submissions: Simple Text files or MS Word documents are preferred. Please do *not* send pdf files (Adobe Acrobat format). If you have illustrations, send the whole thing by snailmail— *please do **not** send image files as e-mail attachments*. Once your submission is accepted, Ian will send instructions on how to submit the final files.

If you have any questions, contact Ian directly (see officer contact info above).

## From the Membership Chair

Greetings! I have a few requests to our members to ensure that our record-keeping goes smoothly. First, the Central Office has become strict about deleting the names of SIG members whose membership has expired— sometimes even within a couple of days. Try to stay on top of things and renew your JALT/SIG memberships early. For a lot of you, the conference will be the ideal time to take care of this paperwork.

Also, if you have recently acquired or changed your e-mail or other contact information, please let me know! Eventually, the information will come through JALT Central, but it is a rather slow process. Yoroshiku.

Looking forward to seeing many of you in Kokura.

## From the Programs Chair
*1) An Invitation to Present at JALT 2002*

This year's Materials Writers SIG Forum, "Developing Your Own News-Based Listening Materials", will be pre-

sented by MW SIG member Sherri Leibert and two of her colleagues at Congress Institute, Gregor Smart and Damian Fitzpatrick. Sherri responded to the appeal for Forum topic ideas that I e-mailed to online members last January, and, SIG officers readily approving, within weeks she found herself in the position of Forum Presenter.

I am hopeful that this may be the first in a series of SIG Forums that deal with developing materials for different purposes, for example, materials for writing classes, reading, speaking, materials for children, for cross-cultural studies, materials using video, using the Internet, and so on.

So I invite you now to consider being a Materials Writers SIG Forum Presenter at next year's national conference. If you and your colleagues are in the process of developing materials, and have hit upon ideas that work for you and that you would like to share with us, please let me hear about it. The SIG Forum format is very flexible, and it can probably accommodate the kind of presentation that you would like to do. You needn't have a fully developed proposal right now. Just let me know that you are interested, and thinking about it.

Looking forward to being washed away in a flood of response.

### 2) And How About a Get-Together?

Scratching my head, wondering what I can do as Programs Chair, besides submitting Forum proposals to the conference committee once a year, I thought it might be good to try to do what other SIGs have successfully done, that is, have a weekend get-together.

How does this sound? We choose a place close to our SIGs population center, a place in the country maybe, a hot spring maybe, get there maybe just before lunch on Saturday, have lunch together, get an idea of who we are, and what kind of materials we are interested in creating, then after lunch maybe an opening talk of 30 minutes or so, focussing our attention on things to consider when creating materials, perhaps a few recent research implications, then break into groups according to interests, decide on a topic for a weekend materials creation project, start work on the creation of said materials, work that can continue on and off throughout the day and evening, interrupted for soaks in the spring, sushi and sake, work that will result, before heads hit pillows, in a piece of usable classroom material, which we will present the following morning to members of the other groups, before doffing yukata and donning coats and heading back to the work place, with ideas and materials in mind and bag, and names and addresses of people we can work with maybe in the creation of that bigger project we have in mind. How does that sound?

Since the conference is in the Fall, I'm thinking the get-together would be in the Spring. I'd love to hear your reactions to this idea, either in an e-mail, or in person at the SIG meeting. If I receive encouragement from you (that's you plural, rather than you singular), I'll try to start filling in some of the details of this plan. I'll keep you posted.

## JALT General Meetings

*Executive Board Meeting*
Saturday, 16:00
Room: Main Hall

*Ordinary General Meeting*
Saturday, 17:30
Room: Main Hall

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# From the Desk of . . . the Chair

Jim Swan, Materials Writers SIG Chair

Greetings fellow materials writers,

As of this writing, the annual JALT conference is less than three weeks away and we are hurrying to put this newsletter to bed so that it can be delivered to you before you head out for Kitakyushu.

Our call for quick input last time resulted in several presentation schedule notices and two feature-length pieces, which we are pleased to share with you now. Thanks in particular to one of our newest members, Joe Falout, for his enthusiastic response.

I hope, too, that you are all putting the finishing touches on your favorite lesson plans, to share with each other at this year's "My Share—Live!" swap-meet. Bring along 50 copies to share, and take home one copy each of materials created by your fellow SIG members.

Many of you know that JALT has felt the Japanese economic recession as severely as any organization has. Several years ago, with declining membership indicating a future revenue shortfall, the Executive Board was forced to take the highly unpopular action of raising membership fees to ¥10,000 per year, where it still remains. Predictably, the result was circular, a downward spiral from our glory days of well over 4,000 members several years ago to our current state, somewhere under 3,000. Many

different viewpoints have been advanced on the root causes for this, including the drying up of college and university positions, displaced by inherently less stable employment in the commercial language training sector.

Be that as it may, the indisputable result is that the services JALT provides and projects JALT undertakes have fallen under constant scrutiny as the belt has been tightened over the past several years. Every aspect of JALT operations has had to adapt to the straitened circumstances. Chapters and SIGs both had to bear funding reductions, as has virtually every other area of the organization.

Notably, JALT has managed to do more with less by "going electronic" in a big way, beginning with the Publication Board's first forays into e-mail editing, several years ago now. Thanks to the indefatigable efforts of several outstanding code warriors, these days there is hardly any aspect of JALT affairs that is not found on-line.

In theory, this development should play directly to a SIG's strengths, in contrast to those of a chapter. By this I mean that the "electronicization" of JALT should more obviously benefit highly decentralized groups such as the national SIGs—geographically dispersed members sharing a narrowly
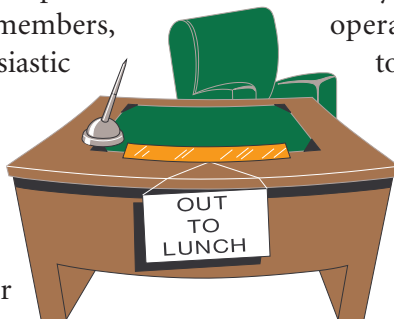
specified common interest in modes other than face-to-face—in contrast to chapters, which are physically restricted by geographical area, with less narrowly focused interests, and entirely dependent on face-to-face meetings to accomplish their aims.

The reality seems to be proving otherwise, however. Several years ago, Bob Keim and Chris Doye undertook the creation of our SIG website, and last year Sherri Leibert undertook the establishment of a dedicated e-mail chat list for us. Our website today is maintained by a non-member, Larry Davies, acting in a caretaker status as a personal favor to me, and our chat group was de-listed from the hosting service this summer for lack of use.

Lethargy is afflicting not only Materials Writers. Although some of the JALT SIGs are doing great, several others to which I belong are similarly confounded, some much worse than others. The coordinator of the CALL SIG, for example, is proposing that active participation be made a requirement for membership, and the coordinator of the FLL SIG has said that this year's Annual General Meeting will be a de facto referendum on whether the SIG will continue or not.

Perhaps one lesson to be learned here is that language teachers, maybe even more than members of other professions, really have a deep-seated need for "face time" with each other, and that a once-a-year Big Deal conference is not enough to satisfy this need. Or it could be that many SIG members are simply all e-mailed out, saturated with the daily inundation of photons coming atcha. (A few months ago, before my great computer crash of August, that second statement certainly applied to me.)

Or it could be that our narrowly-defined special interests are in fact too narrow to be supported by a member base of only 3,000. Some time ago, the SIG Representative to the ExBo, Alan MacKenzie, brought up for discussion the idea of several smaller SIGs folding themselves in together under more general umbrella terms. His notion was met with an instant chorus of rebuttal, but who's to say that this path is not the one that we SIGs must eventually follow?

The MW SIG Annual General Meeting has never drawn as many as ten members. *At this year's conference I urge everyone to attend not only the MW AGM but also the AGMs of whatever other SIGs you also belong to*, and to make your voices heard on the future direction—or even the future existence—of these groups in which you have a special interest.

See you in Kitakyushu.

Jim Swan

## On the Inside

**The Materials Writers SIG** is dedicated to continually raising the standards in the creation of language teaching materials, in all languages and in all media, whether for general consumption or for individual classroom use. The editors encourage participation from colleagues using new media or teaching languages other than English.

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