

An Interview with Dawn Lucovich

Timothy Ang
Kansai University

In January of 2021, Dawn Lucovich took office as the new president of JALT. This interview was conducted online in December, 2020. The interview covers topics including leadership, curriculum content, diversity in membership, and the new president's plans for the future of JALT.

Dawn Lucovich completed her Ph.D. coursework in Linguistics at Temple University and has a Master's Degree in Education from Columbia University. She has been involved with JALT in various capacities, including serving as president for both the Tokyo and Nagano chapters and serving as a Peer Reader for the Writers' Peer Support Group. She has extensive experience in language education and has taught in Korea, the United States, and several universities in Japan. She is currently an assistant professor at the University of Nagano.

This interview has been edited for clarity.

Timothy Ang: *How did your interest in teaching English get started?*

Dawn Lucovich: During university, I did a short placement in the United States, teaching high school literature, and also with the Intensive English Institute at my alma mater, working with Korean and Japanese exchange students.

What made you decide to run for JALT president?

Maybe the same thing that made me decide to run for Tokyo chapter president or Nagano chapter president—I was asked by someone and recommended by someone who suggested that it would be a good move for me to run for president.

In terms of being a leader, what are the qualities that you think that people look to you for?

Honestly, to get a really good answer for that, you probably have to ask the people who recommended me or suggested that I take these positions. But first and foremost, I'm around, I'm there, I'm present so I think that counts for a lot. My advice for people who are interested in this kind of leadership position is to basically put yourself out there and be around and be available for these kinds of things.

I think that involves a lot of helping other people, and at the same time, networking is a big part of it wouldn't you say?

I think so. Networking, cultivating relationships, not only between yourself and someone else, but between people, I really take a lot of pleasure in connecting people who would

benefit from knowing each other. I think that probably helps as well.

What do you think is the current state of English teaching jobs?

That's a good question, I think it's much larger than even this interview could cover. We are an organization in transition not only because of the time period—being a 21st-century organization—but because of the pandemic and also the changing demographics in society, our organization, and also the people who we serve.

What types of opportunities and problems are there for JALT as an organization?

Of course, every organization has its issues or challenges, but there are also opportunities. Obviously, right now the digital and online landscape is huge. And so many opportunities are there for us in that. Challenges will be the way that we adapt, especially as people's employment status changes.

People may not find organizations such as ourselves to be as relevant as they once were, or conversely, they might find them *more* relevant because employment will be extremely competitive. So I think one of the main challenges for us is to make sure that we continue to stay relevant.

Speaking of ways to stay relevant, aside from what JALT is currently doing, like the annual conference, is there anything in particular that hasn't been done before?

Well, the international conference that we pulled off a couple weeks ago was a huge step in remaining really relevant and also broadening our appeal and our reach and our accessibility to people overseas who may not have considered coming to an in-person meeting before. So that's one huge way that we can continue to do that and in general, adapt and change and pay attention to what's going on around us in society.

You mentioned something a while ago about certain changes, like jobs, in which some people are in a state of flux right now. I was reading somewhere that the English market here is bottoming out in terms of the number of opportunities as well as the current salaries and benefits. What is your take on that?

I think exactly what you said is true. And that's what's happening to the market now, so we need to really think about the way that we structure ourselves in terms of membership and who we are appealing to and who we are accessible to. I think broadening that base and welcoming a wider range of people in more diverse contexts will be crucial for us, and it also will strengthen us as an organization.

And when you say broadening, what's included in that? Are we talking about more non-native speakers or people related to English teaching?

I think both and all. There are all kinds of groups here that may in the past have been thought of as tangentially related or as kind of peripheral members, but I honestly don't see it that way. I see us all as being part of a language education or teaching community.

I think, again, really widening our scope and widening who we might consider as potential members is something that we should do.

During the JALT 2020 conference two weeks ago I noticed that there were a couple of sessions devoted to English conversation schools (eikaiwa) and I thought that was actually really good because getting them more exposure is definitely in line with the whole broadening concept.

I also felt the same way. Actually, one of my doctoral cohort mates, Natasha Hashimoto, was one of the co-editors and book chapter authors for one of those books, which was one of the presentations. I think really bringing a scholarly focus to *eikaiwa*—especially in that context because it constitutes such a large number of people, including ALTs and JETs—I think that will show people or demonstrate that these people should also be welcome as members of our community.

That's a very good line of thinking. The demographics for ALTs and JETs are relatively younger and I would say for JALT, it tends to be more of those people that are slightly older, I guess, from the age 30 bracket and above. In terms of getting more younger people to join, what would you suggest?

Well, not just for this demographic, but really any demographic that we want to appeal to, and also for our learners, we need to meet people where they're at, so we need to use the things that they use to communicate.

We don't have a large presence on Instagram. We use Facebook and Twitter a lot now. But if we want to expand our reach to people who are younger, we need to consider other avenues. So I think that's quite important.

And that's something I believe Bill Pellowe, who's in charge of public relations for JALT, would definitely be trying to work more on.

Yes, certainly. We don't want it just being an older demographic. I want the younger demographic working with us, and we should use whatever tools they're using to reach out to their peers.

It seems like you have a great mix of young and old teachers. It's going to be a very interesting dynamic on how to just bring everybody together like that.

And a lot of that is addressed in how we have senior memberships available now, whereas in the past, we didn't. Because we also don't want our senior members to go away. We don't want them to leave just because they've retired. That's letting a lot of institutional knowledge walk out the door so it's really important for us to retain our older and senior members as well.

Are there any new subjects that you think should be taught in English at the university level?

I think the field in general is moving towards English as a medium of instruction and content-based teaching, so we'll continue to see more subjects and programs in higher education being offered in English.

What's a topic you feel needs to be taught more these days?

I don't know if I'm the best person to ask about this, because I actually went 100% paperless last year and I had been steadily working up to it. I was at 99% the year before and 95 the year before that, so I think I was much better positioned to transition into online teaching than most people.

Up until this year, I really felt that digital literacy in university students was lacking. Even in kind of a meta way, even among instructors, they weren't really sure of how to deliver content or the best way to pace it. So I think in terms of topics, digital pedagogy, how to deliver something effectively online, or by digital means is something that we all need to investigate and learn more about.

How do you promote leadership within an English classroom?

I would say that it's difficult to teach leadership. It's something that you just have to do. It's one thing to read a book about it, but it's really something you have to do. So I make my students take leadership roles in every single class. They can read all they want to about leadership or autonomy, but it's better to just learn by doing.

What are your other goals for JALT and what are your timelines for them?

I can only speak about this really unofficially—personal goals that I have for the organization. So first and foremost, it's really to broaden and widen the spectrum of people who are interested in the organization or who have access easily, and that includes creating events which are appealing to them—different topics, or different ways of delivery, that might be interesting to them.

Another thing is having kind of set pathways so that people know how to become a leader in the organization. They're not just waiting for, you know, someone to invite them as perhaps I had to, and kind of taking that invitation and induction, and making that a formalized thing. Those are two of the main goals.

This is a loaded question. What would you want to do differently compared to the last group of people in charge?

That's a loaded question, because JALT has a long history of a lot of people. There's nothing consciously that I would want to do differently, but just by nature of who I am and my priorities, it *will* be different. The leadership will be different, the organization might be different.

In general, the approach with every new president is very different and because of the pandemic, it will be especially different next year. People will be more connected online

and we'll be able to do a greater range of things across a greater geographical area because of that.

If you had one crazy personal goal for the job, what would that be? Something that you think is almost impossible to reach but if people did get together, it might actually be possible? It's called—and I'm referring to a very old book—a big, hairy, audacious goal (BHAG).

That's a great acronym, and I would say, probably double our membership and raise percentage points of people who are not currently represented in the organization by a proportional amount. This would be critical.

I'd like to tie that in with the next question. In terms of success metrics—apart from membership numbers—is there anything else that you would include?

Right now, we're focused on the satisfaction of members in general. I think that we need to do more internal research about the organization to see what kinds of things people are satisfied with and not satisfied with.

Why do you think people leave the organization? I think one of the reasons is because possibly the dues or ideological differences.

Yeah, I would imagine. Some are purely practical, financial, and then others, as you say, are ideological. People may find another organization that suits their thinking or their practices much better and that's fine. But I think that we should also consider why people leave and what kinds of conflicting ideologies there might be.

Change in organizations in Japan in general takes a long time. Do you feel that JALT is similar to that state of affairs? Or could there be possibly a tipping point?

Honestly, I've never worked in a Japanese company. So I cannot really speak to the rate of change in a Japanese company. And also, I work at a brand new university. So, *change* is our watchword—everything that we do is new and pioneering and different. I think that a lot of changes are coming whether we want it or not.

Last question. If you wanted to publish a book, what would the title be and what would it be about?

I do want to publish a book. Many books. Of course, most are academic in nature. But, incidentally, I was awarded a poetry scholarship and specialized in creative writing during my rhetoric degree. The book title would be the same as my upcoming Toastmasters talk: 'Travel is No Substitute for a Life'—and it would be about how travel has been an integral part of my life and how the world has changed now that all travel has stopped.

Thank you so much for your time!