

Marc Helgesen: JALT Lifetime Achievement Award 2024

Teachers and students using English Firsthand (EF) know that Marc was scouted as a teaching prospect by one of his own teachers, the principal at his high school - Marc's "gratitude letter" appears in EF 2 (the "blue book"). Although he studied to teach reading to children, Marc's career began in jail, teaching prisoners. He discovered they mostly spoke Spanish, so he started investigating ESL / EFL, and the rest is history.

That history includes a mountain of publishing – over 200 publications filled with original ideas and helpful tips. Central to Marc's publishing of course, are the five editions of English Firsthand dating from the 1980s. This textbook's fun, engaging approach to learning has made it a favorite with students – and with teachers. It's been said that everything you need to learn to teach English is contained in the Teacher's edition of English Firsthand. In recent years, his attention has turned to ways in which Positive Psychology and Mind / Brain science can be leveraged to develop innovations in EFL.

Marc has spent a lifetime encouraging other teachers. Longtime collaborator John Wiltshier speaks for many of us: "Teaching is a natural vocation, not a job for Marc. He personally guided me to becoming an author, and is always supportive, always positive. This is true when our opinions about something educational are different, as well as when we agree, which to me is the sign of a true professional." Colleagues at work, at JALT, at the universities where Marc has taught teachers – all will second these sentiments. He has always been supportive of other teachers, sharing his ideas and teaching materials with others. Part-time teachers at his university, in particular, have felt his support and validation of their importance as team members. Marc was present for the foundation of JALT Sendai and remains a leader for its leaders. He has been equally instrumental in recruiting world-class speakers to our chapter and in encouraging fledgling local speakers, who otherwise would not have had the confidence to present their ideas. And he has provided support worldwide, to teachers in the Philippines, Indonesia, Nepal, Vietnam among others, sometimes with support from the U.S. State Department. He helped found the Extensive Reading Foundation to help learners and teachers understand the potential of ER and access the resources needed to make it work.

Most of all, Marc has himself been the teacher his principal expected. Arriving in Sendai, Marc first taught at the New Day conversation school, then served a short stint in Tokyo before switching to Miyagi Gakuin Women's University back in Sendai. He has taught at MGU for 30-plus years as it has grown from a two-year junior college to a four-year university, helping to build programs in International Culture Studies and in Modern Business. Although his status has recently changed to "emeritus," his teaching – warm-hearted, energetic, innovative, expert – continues to serve students. Marc consistently seeks the best for his students. This applies not only to course design, classroom activities and teaching materials, but to finding innovative ways for struggling students to complete coursework. And his leadership extends beyond the classroom. Marc's curiosity, and sense of service and adventure have inspired many students to seek their own adventures and

opportunities for service (at home and abroad) and to see how language learning can play a meaningful part in their lives. Marc has also directly facilitated opportunities for his students to present their work at our annual Tohoku ELT Expo and he has led many contingents of “pink shirts” to JALT conventions, always reminding the rest of us to say “thank you” to these student volunteers.

Now it is Marc’s turn to be thanked. Thanks, Marc, for a lifetime of teaching service.
Steven Bretherick

Marc Helgesen has influenced the lives of countless JALT members and English learners worldwide through the work he has done for JALT chapters, SIGs, conferences, the Extensive Reading Foundation, his published textbooks, and his website full of teaching materials freely available to all. He is a person of boundless generosity with his time, books (lending them to novice presenters and authors), creative teaching ideas, and networking skills. He is a genius for seeing what is needed and how he can help. Here are some examples:

- He is especially attuned to the dedication and efforts of people who mostly work out of the spotlight, such as the student volunteers at JALT conferences, and asks presenters and plenary speakers to remember to thank them;
- He also brings his own students to these conferences to help them understand how teachers from all over the world learn to teach;
- In the field of Extensive Reading, he has contributed to the production of better, more enjoyable language learner literature by conceiving and setting up the Annual Language Learner Literature Award which is now in its 20th year;

Regarding his contributions to JALT, he has served as President and for many years as Program Chair of the Sendai Chapter. He has brought speakers from all over Japan and beyond (such as Paul Nation) to give talks at JALT Sendai meetings. He has encouraged chapter members to give presentations first at the local chapter level and to then move on to the national and international level. He has created ways to involve undergraduate students in Chapter events and has collaborated with local language-school teachers, middle and elementary school teachers, as well as instructors who teach young learners. He collaborated with ETJ to organize the Tohoku ELT Expo. He has also shown his awareness of the importance of social activities and has organized many parties and overnight events for Sendai chapter members.

At the JALT national level, he served as Co-Conference Chair (with Rob Waring) for the JALT International Conference and stepped in as Co-Chair another year when the Conference Chair was sick. He was the founding editor of the very successful “My Share” column in the JALT publication *The Language Teacher*. He is an engaging speaker and has been invited by chapters all around Japan to give talks on numerous topics, such as brain science and

positive psychology.

Members of the ER SIG would like to endorse this proposal and CUE SIG will be publishing an interview with Marc Helgesen in their forthcoming issue of the Cue Circular <https://jaltcue.org/cuecircular>, which further highlights all that Marc has contributed to JALT.

And this brings us to why BRAIN SIG is anxious to show recognition and gratitude to Marc for its existence. He was one of the Four Founders of the FAB conferences, steering us through 12 "First Annual Brain (FAB)" Days. He did most of the planning for the ones that took place in Sendai, Manila, Baguio, and Cebu, using his extensive contacts in the Philippines. The JALT Mind, Brain, and Education SIG evolved from these FAB conferences and Marc continues to contribute enormously from behind the scenes. For example, he took part in designing one of our favorite presentation techniques, book talks, which are like round robin poster sessions with timing. Also, he provides many of the wonderful video clips used in the monthly BRAIN SIG Think Tank magazines, as well as cartoons, humorous anecdotes, and wonderful teaching tips. There are many other small meaningful ways he has enhanced our SIG's image and performance, such as making badges to hand out at the BRAIN SIG table and providing lists of brain-related presentations at conferences, things which other officers had overlooked but have learned from. Marc leads from behind by his shining example and has been an inspiration to our officers and members.

Finally, here are a couple of testimonials from BRAIN SIG officers that we would like to share:

"Marc has been a leading figure in holistic approaches promoting mind-body activities, such as movement, exercise, mindfulness meditations, energy breaks, etc., supporting students and teachers through countless workshops, and presentations. He was very encouraging and supportive of me..."

And this person will have our final word:

"... it is really thanks to Marc that I realized there is a way to connect positive psychology with language learning and although I have taken a different direction, I am thankful to have encountered his presentations that were a catalyst for my curiosity in positive psychology. Marc, to me, seems content in what he is doing, and it is when we feel contentment that it is natural that we want to share. I understand contentment, and I also believe that Marc does, too. The Dalai Lama XIV once said, 'Happiness is not something ready made. It comes from your own actions', and I believe that Marc is one of those people who has really got this down."

For all these reasons, we are requesting that JALT honor Marc Helgesen with the Lifetime Achievement Award in 2024.

Amanda Gillis-Furutaka