
Review

TESOL 2007: The View From Seattle

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The 41st annual TESOL convention was held last spring in Seattle, Washington. TESOL is one of the world's largest applied linguistics associations, with several major publications and approximately 13 000 members located around the world. Recognized as an (NGO) by the United Nations, its mission is to "ensure excellence in English language teaching to speakers of other languages."

The convention spanned the week of March 19th, with preconvention ticketed events being held on Monday and Tuesday and regular concurrent sessions extending from Wednesday through Saturday. The concurrent sessions included academic sessions, paper presentations, workshops, exhibitor sessions and discussion sessions. Poster sessions and other types of discussion meetings were also held through the lunch break and into the afternoon. It might suffice to say that the event was really big. You may be familiar with annual JALT conferences held in Japan. The general orientation was similar to JALT, with several keynote speeches, an array of sessions to choose from, a large exhibitor hall, and so on. Inevitably though, the TESOL conference draws more participants and attracts leading linguists from around the world. However, as the majority of participants are from the U.S. and Canada, there is a slant towards Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). The theme this year was "Tides of Change," which recurred in some of the keynote speeches and sessions to a limited extent.

I attended the conference interested in teaching language to young learners, collaboration between Native Speaking Teachers of English

(NESTs) and non-Native Speaking Teachers of English (non-NESTs), and academic writing. There was a substantial number sessions dealing with writing for specific purposes. Most of these sessions dealt with academic writing issues for high proficiency non-native speakers of English studying at the secondary or post secondary level in the U.S. I attended about five of these, which proved to be interesting, although not always applicable to my circumstances. For instance, while listening to a colorful secondary school teacher from Brooklyn, New York speaking about her experience teaching racial minorities was certainly interesting, her situation was very dissimilar to my own in a Japanese University.

Sessions dealing with ESL in the Asian context were more limited, though I attended a couple which addressed NEST/non-NEST issues in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Similar to research I have been conducting, these paper sessions indicated strong commonalities between Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan. I also attended two discussion groups focusing on issues relating to teaching young learners in Japan and elsewhere. Discussion sessions are commonly held in the evening between 7:00 and 9:00, when participants are a little more relaxed, though perhaps jet-lagged and exhausted after a full day attending sessions. The quality of discussion sessions depends on the preparedness of the presenters and the contribution of the participants. Presumably the presenters are well prepared, (though this was not the case in one of the discussions I attended). Some presentations, however, only seemed to attract one or two participants, which was unfortunate.

Due to jet-lag, I missed the first couple of plenary presentations but managed to see the presidential plenary by Jun Lui on Friday. In his presentation, entitled "Tides of Change: From Seattle to Shanghai", Lui spoke about his life, from his experience growing up in China during the Cultural Revolution, through to his current success as a prominent applied linguist. Lui is a charismatic speaker, and the content of his speech was both accessible to all and interesting. It was a pleasure

and a nice change to sit back and be passively entertained for an hour. Aside from merely amusing us though, Lui drew important connections to the broader theme of this year's conference as well as the current status of English around the world. There are more English teachers who speak English as a second language than "native speaker" teachers today, just as there are more users of English who speak it as a second language than a native language. These trends appear to be increasing and Lui suggested that choosing a non-Native English speaking president of TESOL is a reflection of the changing use and function of English. It would appear that TESOL, as an organization, is healthy, progressive and in good hands. Hopefully Lui will help to motivate passive members of TESOL such as myself, to become more active ones in the future.

Overall, the TESOL conference appeared well organized, but obviously a conference of this size is not without its headaches. One problem that did affect many was presentation cancellations. A list of cancelled presentations was given out along with the program. By the second day though, all but the most organized of us had probably lost it amongst the many handouts that we were constantly accumulating. One presentation I had hoped to attend had been cancelled, which I only found out upon walking into an empty room. It had likely been written in the appendage, of course. Another presentation had not been cancelled according to the latest information but none of the three presenters showed. Evidently, the presentation had been much anticipated. The room was full of disappointed people and there was grumbling about other similar incidents.

Generally the quality of the presentations was high, but this is also difficult to control for such a large event, especially when presentations are chosen based on relatively short proposals. One might expect that the quality of the presentations at the TESOL convention would far surpass those of national associations such as our very own JALT, but this is not necessarily the case. Some presentations are better and more

prepared than others. Some speakers are better than others. JALT is no different in this respect. Disappointment with the occasional lackluster session though, should be more than offset by the sheer variety of sessions available, spanning more than three days from 7:00AM to 9:00 PM. Besides, the occasional bad presentation might be equally interesting in its own right, depending on one's purposes. For those who might wish to present at a future TESOL conference, as prestigious as the organization is, and as stringent as the screening process is (only one in five proposals was accepted this year), one needn't feel that the presenters form an exclusive and inaccessible club. Good research and a well-written proposal stand a fair chance at being accepted, and you can submit more than one proposal. The Asian contingent is probably under-represented and I'm certain that we have a lot to offer.

This year, Seattle proved to be a very suitable location for the event. The convention Center is in the center of the city, and Seattle itself has a healthy downtown, which means there were many restaurants to choose from. There were also a variety of ways to "wind down" after a full day of academic discussion, and the recommended hotels were all convenient. This was in sharp contrast to last year's conference in Tampa, where shuttle buses ran from the Convention Center to the hotels, and the downtown area offered less in the way of restaurants and nightlife. The Washington State Convention Center itself was fairly easy to negotiate. There was a reasonable variety of restaurants located within the Center. Some events were also held in the Sheraton and Grand Hyatt, adjacent to the Convention Center, and the staff were helpful in providing directions at these locations.

With Seattle behind us, next year TESOL goes to New York City. TESOL has held conventions in New York City before and I've heard that attendance is particularly strong. The city itself is no doubt a huge additional attraction. If you've never been to a TESOL conference before, next year might be a good opportunity to attend, and to have fun in a great city.