
Conference Review

43rd Annual International IATEFL Conference and Exhibition

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I attended the 43rd IATEFL Annual International Conference and Exhibition in Cardiff, Wales from 31 March to 4 April (<http://iatefl.org/content/conferences/2009/index.php>). I have been a member of IATEFL for several years, but as this was my first IATEFL conference and presentation, I looked forward to it with both eagerness and trepidation. IATEFL hosts a conference that stresses the practical aspects of teaching and what goes on in the classroom, so any research findings have to be presented with an emphasis on the implications of the research for the classroom. In view of past complaints by delegates, presenters were sent a reminder just before the conference to keep to their abstract; keep to the time; and to present on practical classroom aspects. Indeed, one or two of the presentations I attended were disappointing when they differed radically from the abstract or showed a poor understanding of what was possible within a 25 minute time slot. The presentations reflected the huge range of activities in EFL, but I concentrated on the areas of particular relevance to my work—English for specific purposes in the workplace and at the tertiary level and the application of corpora in the classroom. I also attended some other presentations addressing other issues.

One of the highlights of the conference was the “Professional Development Day” on March 31st. I attended the ESP Special Interest Pre-Conference Event on “English for Work and the Workplace” (E4WP), a marathon of 17 presentations covering many different aspects (discussed at length by Dudley-Evans & St. John (1997) and Basturkmen (2006)), but also adding much needed African, British, Middle Eastern and South American dimensions for those like myself who only operate in Asia. Some talks (“ESOL for the workplace”- John Smith; “ESOL for work: the Scottish perspective” – Margaret Allen) addressed the initiatives taken by governments to improve the standard of ESOL in the workplace through the creation of new qualifications. Others (“E4WP in the UK private ELT sector” – Sam Thompson; “Workplace talk as gateway and barrier” – Meredith Marra) described courses developed for different workplaces, research into different workplaces, compilations of “authentic material”, and the need for all stakeholders to recognize what can be “realistically” achieved. Needs analysis is vital in such areas and this message was reinforced by Rosinda de Castro Guerra Ramos in her talk “English in the workplace: Needs analysis for IT service companies in Brazil”. Another important issue in E4WP is the incorporation of more courses at secondary and tertiary levels that address the future workplace needs of students. In many areas, English education remains heavily weighted toward literary academic genres which do not expose the students to the English they will need after graduation. Several presentations (“E4WP practices in Nigerian academic and professional industries: 1990-2008” – Adejoke Ajibowo and Oluwakemi Olayemi; “A pedagogical perspective on the needs of English for the workplace courses in Omani public schools” – Saeed Al-Saadi) explored those future workplace needs in their countries and what changes need to be implemented. Finally, there were presentations on effective classroom activities (“Teaching E4WP in Nigeria using literature and the media” – Sunday Duruoha Sotarius) and materials development, (“Developing communication skills for

international medical graduates: Good Practice” – Ros Wright and Marie McCullagh).

The IATEFL Conference continues to grow in size every year and is now available through Cardiff Online (<http://iatefl.britishcouncil.org/2009>) to a much wider audience. A new development was a live online panel discussion sponsored by Pearson Longman hosted by Nicky Hockly on 3 April as another effort to bring previous well-known presenters at IATEFL in contact with the audience at Cardiff. Such online discussions are definitely going to be happening at more and more international conferences, as there are benefits from having input from as many experts as possible in different fields, regardless of whether or not they can attend in person. The technology is still problematic because the success of this activity depends on the type of Internet connection available at the conference venues.

An unfortunate feature of the conference was that the plenary sessions on 1 and 2 April were scheduled to run simultaneously, so difficult choices had to be made. I attended Marc Prensky’s April 1st plenary session, “Engage me or enrage me”, which gave the perspective of a ‘digital immigrant’ teaching today’s ‘digital natives’. It was thought-provoking for me, as I am always looking for new ways of engaging my students. Ironically, as a sign of the times, twitterers (people using Twitter) in the audience sent out messages on laptops, summarizing the content of the talk and also adding comments as Marc spoke, and after my return to Japan, I was asked by a friend who had seen the Twitter messages if I had attended the talk. I did wonder, though, whether this is going to become a feature in university lecture halls, where large numbers of digital natives congregate. Fauzia Shamin’s April 2nd plenary session, “Teaching and researching English in large classes” provided a necessary reminder of what the situation is in much of the developing world. Her opening question “What does a large class mean to you?” led into an excellent well-delivered plenary on the problems of teaching classes with more than 100 students, research

into the topic, and some discussion of coping strategies. I was sorry that such an excellent speaker attracted a small audience, probably due to simultaneous plenary scheduling.

Another important conference event was the publisher signature events. I attended the Friday Cambridge University Signature Event “Putting grammar in its place” by Susan Hunston and Maggie O’Keefe. Research into the field of corpus linguistics (Hunston, 2002), especially the collection of corpora and their implications for vocabulary development (O’Keefe, McCarthy & Carter), is an important area for teachers in tertiary education like myself who are involved in English for Academic Purposes. Arguing that grammar is about choice, Hunston looked at the implications of different corpora including learner corpora to identify how grammar is actually used and how learners use it. O’Keefe looked at the differences in how grammar is used in spoken and written English in general and in more specialized business contexts. The input of members of the audience made the session even more informative.

There were other sessions of particular interest to me at the conference. Liz Wray’s “Jack’s story: a Chinese postgraduate student at a UK university” is one example. This study of how a student took every opportunity to engage with academic and non-academic communities reinforces the message that there is no stereotyped student, and each student’s experience is unique. Also, Dave Willis in “TBL and ELF: two sides of the same coin” offered TBL (Task Based Learning) as a solution to the lack of alternatives to standard English whose validity as a world language has been questioned by proponents of English as a Lingua Franca. Practical tips on using corpora and concordances in the classroom were offered by Sharon Hartle and Sian Morgan’s presentation, “Using corpora and concordance lines in the classroom”. The poster sessions were well worth looking at, particularly those from South America (Carmen Mota de Cabrera, “Controversies: a tool to promote critical thinking in EFL classes” and Jose Villalobos, “Writing

‘response papers’ in EFL: summaries, self-expression or what?”). These were accompanied by excellent handouts.

Cardiff is the seat of the Welsh Assembly established after devolution in the UK. Consequently, an important aspect of the conference was the introduction of Welsh culture and history. The conference program cover was bilingual in English and Welsh, and on April 1st, as an April Fools’ Day trick, the introduction to the plenary session I attended began in Welsh. Welsh lessons were offered for those who were interested, and there were excursions to the Brecon Beacons National Park, the Gower peninsula, the Roman ruins at Caerleon, and the famous medieval abbey Tintern. Evening events introduced Welsh choirs, harpists, and the rich literature of Wales.

Apart from the opportunity to present at an international conference, IATEFL at Cardiff 2009 gave me the chance to see presentations from all over the world. I came away from it with a better understanding of recent advances in E4WP, the applications of corpus linguistic research, and a reminder to question and reflect what goes on in my own classroom.

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