
Conference Review

10th Asia TEFL International Conference Review

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The 10th Asia TEFL International Conference was held from October 4 to 6, 2012 at the Hotel Leela Kempinski in Gurgaon, Delhi, India. The theme of the conference was “Expanding Horizons of Language and Communication: ELT Issues, Challenges, and Implications.” In this three-day conference there were 600 presentations (a combination of plenary, keynote, featured and special speakers, workshops, demonstrations, colloquia, papers, and posters) scheduled. World Englishes were on display with attendees from every part of the world, from as far north as Finland to as far south as Australia and New Zealand and every corner of Asia and the Middle East in between. It was this diverse group of people that made this conference so interesting and worthwhile. It wasn’t just the number of nationalities and types of English represented, but the wide variety of teaching situations and conditions that the attendees came from that made break times between presentations so informative and entertaining.

There were many interesting people to talk with, and most of the presentations and keynotes that I attended were very informative. For example, a plenary titled “Should we be planning to teach grammar? If so how?” given by Catherine Walker, a lecturer in applied linguistics at the University of Oxford, was very thought provoking. She posed many questions related to the teaching of grammar and then tried to answer them. Her presentation got me to think about my approach to the teaching of grammar and the changes I need to make in the future.

One of the interesting aspects of the conference was the wide range of teaching situations that people came from, and the presentations reflected this. They ranged from those introducing how to use the latest technology, such as tablets and smartphones, to others showing how students create and use their own dictionaries because they don't have the money for paper ones, let alone electronic ones.

As good as these points were, numerous organizational issues almost overshadowed them for me. I believe the major source of the problems at the conference stemmed from the desire to have the 10th Asia TEFL Conference be the largest yet in a facility that really wasn't designed for a conference of this size. To accommodate 16 concurrent sessions, every possible space was pressed into service. This meant two restaurants that were only open in the evenings were used, but there was the distraction of kitchen and serving staff working in the background preparing for opening later in the day. This also meant that sessions were held in huge ballrooms better suited for plenaries or in conference rooms in far-flung corners of the hotel (one down by the hotel spa and pool) that attendees and presenters were hard-pressed to find.

Besides the room size and location issues, there was the problem of signage. In the conference schedule the rooms were all numbered one through sixteen, but the signs outside of the rooms used the hotel assigned names ("Ebony", "Maple", or "Rosewood"). On the first day, there was no way to know if the workshop you wanted to attend, that the schedule said was in Room 1, was in the Ebony, Maple or Rosewood room. The organizers discovered the mistake and wrote the corresponding number on each of the signs outside of the rooms, but it was too late for the first day. In an attempt to alleviate the problem, the second day they also made copies of the schedules and put them next to the doors of each room, but in several places the pages were incorrect, so attendees and presenters ended up in the wrong room.

Other issues as well go back to the desire to have so many sessions. One was the 8:10 starting time on the second and third days. This early starting time combined with the difficulties people had in getting to and into the venue meant late starts and missed presentations. On both days, I showed up at rooms for the

8:10 sessions and the presenters never came because they were stuck in traffic or the security line to enter the hotel. These issues and the room numbering problem led to a number people I spoke with giving up and just staying in the common area talking with other attendees. They attended the plenaries and keynotes because they knew a speaker would show up and the rooms were easy to find.

Another problem that wasn't only the organizers' fault goes back to the desire to have a conference with 600 presentations. The majority of the presentations were "20-minutes" so there could be as many as possible in the time available. The drawback was that many presenters did not scale down the number of slides to match the shorter time. There were several presentations that I went to where the presenter was unable to get the main part of their topic before they ran out of time. As a presenter, I almost made the same mistake, but presenting on the third day gave me the chance see the mistake other people had made. It did mean that I was redoing my presentation at 10 o'clock the night before I was to present, but afterwards I was glad I had done the editing because I was able to get in all my key points. My advice to any conference organizing committee is that "bigger isn't always better."

I hope that the problems and issues I pointed out in this review will not discourage people from attending this conference. I feel that it is an important conference and one that English instructors in Asia, and especially Japan, should put on their schedules. At this conference you will learn how English is being taught and used throughout Asia, and you will see that we face similar challenges in preparing our students to use English in this ever-increasing interconnected world. The 12th International Asia TEFL Conference will be August 28-30, 2014 in Kuching, Sarawak, Malayasia. This conference is an excellent way to experience the types of Englishes that our students will encounter in the real world.

Author's bio

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Received: November 1, 2012

Accepted: May 14, 2013