
Conference Review

PAC FEELTA – Vladivostok

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Those of us who attend the regular round of conferences in Japan or other East Asian countries will perhaps have become accustomed to the ease with which we can hop on a *shinkansen* or a plane, find information about the conference venue or program at the click of a mouse and just “do” a conference. A cozy sense of familiarity often pervades as we see presentations from teachers teaching in similar contexts to ourselves, with similar concerns, similar complaints and similar challenges.

The 18th Pan-Asian Consortium of Language Teaching Associations and Far Eastern English Language Teachers’ Association (PAC FEELTA) international conference held in Vladivostok from November 1 to 4, 2012 was a welcome reminder that other contexts, other concerns, other challenges exist, and that the oh-so-familiar world of EFL education in Japan can color our attitudes and shape our outlook in ways that we often do not appreciate.

The process of actually getting to Russia involved a long and multi-layered visa application process. Although I started the ball rolling in mid-July, I didn’t actually receive my visa until late October. Previous travel to Russia had prepared me for this, but it was still frustrating for someone used to Schengen agreement borderless travel in Europe or “visa-on-arrival” travel elsewhere. Likewise, getting a flight for what should have been the short hop across the Sea of Japan was not as easy as I would have thought, and I ended up overnighing in Seoul before departing on a morning flight to Vladivostok. A few familiar faces were on the flight, and it turned out that there would be a sizeable contingent from Japan in attendance at the conference.

The conference venue was the recently completed Russky Island campus of the Far Eastern Federal University, which hosted the APEC summit during the summer. The venue provided state-of-the-art facilities and was impressive in scale and concept. Accommodation was available on site, but I opted to stay downtown. A free shuttle bus to and from downtown was available, and it was also possible to take a taxi, booked from the hotel front desk, at a reasonable price. (It didn't seem possible to flag taxis down in the street.)

It was clear from the first glance that the conference would offer a varied and wide-ranging program of presentations, workshops and panels, and as usual, it was a tough job to decide what to see and how best to spend the time. A subjective impression of the program was that there seemed to be less of some of the staples of conferences in Japan such as computer-assisted language learning or extensive reading, and more presentations focused on literary, social and political aspects of language and language education.

Over the next three days, I attended a wide variety of presentations, workshops and plenary sessions covering a broad range of topic areas. Rod Ellis, a familiar name to many, gave a plenary talk on designing and implementing task-based courses. Although the topic was a familiar one and Professor Ellis covered points that most teachers have dealt with at some point, it was still interesting to see that the debate over the effectiveness of task-based learning was alive and well.

Professor Ellis was followed by one of the Russian plenary speakers, Professor Marina Kaul, who spoke on the issues surrounding compiling Russian-English, English-Russian dictionaries. Professor Kaul's extensive scholarship was clearly in evidence, and she offered many thoughtful insights into the nuances of lexis and usage. The talk was all the more interesting because the language interface was not the familiar English-Japanese context, compelling me to think more deeply about issues of vocabulary and usage beyond the particular concerns of English teaching in Japan.

Another familiar face was Tim Murphey. In several sessions he talked around the basic theme of humanizing the classroom and the learning experience and making (language) learning a thing that people can and want to do and

feel good about. I have seen Tim present on many occasions in Japan, and his infectious enthusiasm and optimism about harnessing human potential always communicate readily in his talks.

Among the many other sessions that I attended, I want to mention three that I found particularly interesting. In a panel session hosted by Stephen Ryan, four panelists discussed current trends in ELT in Japan, Korea, Russia and Thailand. Representing JALT, Stephen Henneberry described the ongoing efforts of MEXT to promote English proficiency through more initiatives, but it is still not clear whether institutional resistance will once again impede real change in English education in Japan. Michael Jones representing KOTESOL outlined the move by authorities in Seoul to promote teaching English by Korean teachers of English, and reduce the numbers of native English speakers in teaching positions at schools in the Seoul area. By stark contrast, whether to use L1 or L2 teachers was not an option in the context of the Russian Far East. Elena Onoprienko representing FEELTA reported on the lack of native speakers in the Russian context (although the excellent English skills of the student volunteers at the conference showed that real results can indeed be achieved by non-native speaking teachers). The low numbers of English native speaking teachers was attributed to financial concerns in the main, but in addition the visa system may also play a role. Or, it may be the simple fact that Siberia is a less attractive venue for “tourist teachers” than some other Asian destinations. That brings us to Walaiporn Chaya, who reported on the situation in Thailand, where ELT seems to be booming, and there seems to be a strong consensus among authorities, educators and learners of the very real importance of English language skills in a dynamic and competitive 21st century economy. Overall, the panel served as a good reminder that the field of ELT is in a state of constant flux and that different contexts have vastly different concerns and approaches. The best advice for teachers seemed to be, “Don’t get too comfy. Be prepared for change.”

A short paper given by Aleksandra Eremenko dealt with learning activities based on critical thinking. The presenter did not pull any punches and made it clear that critical thinking is a weighty topic. Although her slides might have been a little bit too dense with text from a Powerpoint design perspective, they

served to remind the audience that some things just can't be simplified to a couple of bullet points. Critical thinking is a multi-component, holistic and high-level mental process which takes time and practice to develop. It was also refreshing to hear that critical thinking was problematical for students working in a European context, which perhaps undercuts some of the unthinking assumptions we may have about Asian students and Asian cultural/educational norms. Simply put, critical thinking is not a natural intellectual endowment that tags along with general learning, but a specific skill that needs to be nurtured, whatever the cultural background of the learners, or teachers for that matter.

Victoria Zhenchenko's paper on "Gender identification of epithets in modern commercials" was an engaging talk on the way commercials use language to align to gender identities. The paper itself was very interesting, but the real treat was the discussion afterwards. Even though the lunch hour had begun, the attendees remained in the room discussing issues of gender and identity in media and talking over such issues as the extent to which commercials merely reflect social reality or actually play a part in constructing it. The intelligent, informed, civil and enlightening discussion was the very essence of the best kind of intellectual debate.

To sum up, the conference covered a wide variety of topics and issues, and provided a venue for speakers with extremely diverse backgrounds and experiences to talk about issues of practical concern and intellectual interest. What really struck me as distinct about the conference, in comparison to many of the conferences I have attended in East Asia, was the way in which language and learning were conceived. That is to say, in the Japanese context much time and energy is given to the "what" and the "how" of language learning. Topics such as computer-assisted language learning, extensive reading, testing, institutional constraints and the like are the mainstay of many conference presentations. The PAC FEELTA conference tended towards the "why" of language learning.

The getting of language knowledge was seen as non-problematical in itself, given a certain amount of application by learners. The focus was what to do with the knowledge thus gained. Questions about language use in society, in media, in politics and literature all featured heavily. The university, we were reminded, is

not a way station for young people between school and work, but a place where seriousness of purpose combines with intellectual rigor to create a community that has the ability to find information and then, most importantly, analyze it. The business of education in this worldview was rather like the trip to Russia; it was not made particularly easy for you, but if you really wanted to go, the trip was more than worthwhile.

Author's bio

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***Editor's Note:** In this issue, we welcome the conference review written by **John Campbell-Larsen**. He is a recipient of the CUE Member Support Conference Grant and consequently applied his grant to a conference trip. Here, he shares some of their experiences attending the event.*



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