
Conference Reviews

The 19th Annual CamTESOL Conference, 2023

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The theme of this conference was ‘Our next normal: Resilience Building and Future-Ready ELT’. It was held on February 17–19, 2023 at the Institute of Technology Cambodia (ITC), in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

The venue and organization

The Institute of Technology Cambodia was established in the mid-1960s, and the facilities are a bit dated. The rooms were fan cooled and featured on-desk projectors with small projector screens. Typical rooms seated about 30 attendees comfortably. Since this is typical at academic events in Cambodia, I found that it contributed to a close and friendly atmosphere. The smaller rooms and screens allowed an intimacy that is not typical of large conferences. This setup also meant that there was always a lot of activities going on, with as many as 30 parallel sessions per 35-minute time slot. The allotted 5-minute break between sessions allowed ample time to reach the next presentation because all sessions were held in close proximity.

There were many student volunteers to support attendees, and strong internet access was free. However, the venue was not easily accessible for physically challenged participants. It was about 15-45 minutes, depending on traffic, from the riverfront area where the majority of hotels are found. The CamTESOL application made preparing for the conference quite easy. For CamTESOL returnees, the same ID could be used, and the app worked perfectly, including sending notifications about last-minute room changes and

presenter cancellations. It also featured a post-conference survey and downloads for invitation letters and proof of attendance for attendees. Unfortunately, even with such a useful application, the organizers felt it was still necessary to provide a hard copy to the attendees, rather than being paperless or allowing an opt-out option for the hard copy.

Overview

The conference featured a good mix of practice- and research-based presentations with presenters from many countries including Cambodia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, the UK, the US, and Vietnam. I was both an attendee and a presenter, and my main objective in attending the conference was to gain a better perspective on the challenges facing Cambodian educators in rural areas. So as such, I did not attend the plenaries, mostly attended presentations focusing on rural education in Cambodia, and focused on developing my network with rural educators.

The conference began on late Friday evening with an opt-in opening ceremony, dinner, and reception for the attendees. Separating the ceremonious activities was a good planning decision, so the attendees coming from out of town and out of country could maximize the number of sessions that they could attend. The opening featured engaging commentary from the Ambassadors to Cambodia of Australia and the United Kingdom and the Deputy Ambassador of the United States. The Minister of Education, Youth, and Sport (MOEYS) shared his thoughts on education, as well as his struggles as a language learner. All of the speakers were engaging; they spoke passionately about the importance of the role of English language education.

The sessions

I presented in the morning, shortly after the plenary sessions on Project Based Learning (PBL). As a presenter I was very happy to find a full room of attendees (approximately 25) who were seemingly interested in my topic and asked follow-up questions that extended into hallway talks. This matched my experience at other presentations. So, I can strongly recommend presenting at the next

CamTESOL, as presenters are likely to find a room full of energetic, interested, and engaged attendees.

Like all conferences, there are hit and misses. From my point of view, a miss does not necessarily mean that it was a bad session, but rather that it was either not what I thought the session would focus on, or was not applicable to my teaching needs. I will focus on my hits.

I attended a session on lifelong learning (LLL) by Mr. Sochetra Yean. In this practical session, Yean outlined the characteristics of LLL and discussed why it was important for teachers to engage in LLL, especially so that they are able to encourage their students to develop into lifelong learners. In the discussion period, teachers talked about their experiences, and in particular how they modelled LLL for their students.

I joined a professional development session focusing on Community of Practice (CoP) for teachers. The presenters, Sopheak Ngo, Ya Koy, and Heng Dara, discussed the challenges that they faced in creating a CoP for teachers in four rural provinces. In particular, they pointed out that it was very hard to get teachers to make time to join a CoP because rural teachers often need to teach at several places to earn enough money for living expenses. Organizing a CoP had further challenges of difficulties in both face-to-face and virtual meetings because of the difficulties of local travel, especially during the rainy season, due to poor infrastructure and the unreliable internet connectivity, respectively. Their experiences mirrored my own in developing CoP for university faculty in rural Cambodia. For me, the main, perhaps unintended, takeaway was that dynamic leadership was needed to overcome these barriers, as well as good interpersonal skills. In my opinion and experience, CoPs in Cambodia are very personality dependent. A few Cambodian collaborators remarked that the success of their schools were dependent on the ability and character of the principals.

I also attended a session by Sereyrath Em on the textbooks used in senior high school at Cambodian public schools. Em found that the students were unsatisfied with the textbooks. Students thought that the textbooks did not suit their daily needs for communication in English and did not provide them with the skills or tools to pass standardized high school tests. Em concluded

that further investigation of the impact of the texts needed further investigation. This session spotlighted one critical issue: There is a lack of teaching resources and funding to improve teaching resources in English language education in the public school system.

I also attended a few sessions that were not Cambodia-centric but were in my areas of interest. One highlight was Chris Pond, who outlined how he used peer feedback to improve student presentations. Pond took videos of student presentations which were used for self-evaluation (control) and self and peer evaluation (experimental), and he made a good case for using peer feedback using video. Pond's results showed that peer feedback improved performance more than only self-evaluation. He did emphasize the importance of the equipment, including good quality microphones and dual monitors. I think that since he was conducting action research that the centralized set was important. However, for non-research purposes, I think that this could also be very effectively applied if students used their existing smart technology to record themselves in small groups and share with their peers. With the widespread availability and low cost of the needed technology, then peer feedback of presentations could be accessible in almost every classroom.

Conclusions

The 19th Annual CamTESOL Conference was well organized and welcoming. It is an interesting conference in that there is a diversity of enthusiastic presenters and attendees.

Author bio

Peter Lutes is a tenured associate professor in the Faculty of Agriculture of Kagawa University. He holds a doctoral degree in communication and master's degree in applied linguistics. He has conducted research and educational development activities in Cambodia in cooperation with MOEYS, Cambodia. He interests include PBL, English for Academic Purposes, English for Specific Purposes, and developmental education. He is also the editor of the CUE conference reviews. Accordingly, this review was edited by Glen Hill, CUE Editor-in-Chief. lutes.peter@kagawa-u.ac.jp

Received: May 17, 2023

Accepted: December 31, 2023