

Aesop's guide to conferences (or Every conference has a moral)
by Adrian Tennant

What are conferences like? Do you go to everything? What do you speak about? How do you choose what to go to? Aren't conferences just for well-known people? Aren't you nervous when you speak? Why do you go to conferences? Do you think I should go to a conference? Do you think I'm ready to give a presentation?

These are just some of the questions that other teachers ask me when I mention the word 'Conference'. It seems that conferences are viewed as some kind of ritual only open to a few initiated chosen ones. And, thinking back to my first few conferences, I can see why this myth might have arisen, and why it might prevail.

So, in order to dispel the myth, and answer some of these questions, here are a few tales about conferences.

A lost soul

I remember clearly my first ever 'Big' conference. By 'big' I mean that there were well over 800 people attending. Everybody seemed to know each other, while I knew nobody. I spent my time searching out people who looked as lost and bewildered as I did, and when I found them I clung to them like a drowning man to a raft. In fact, it isn't true and most people are quite happy to strike up a conversation with a complete stranger (it's one reason we have conference badges – to remember who we are!).

Conference lag

You've heard of 'jet lag', but what about 'conference lag'? This is something that many first timers suffer from – older hands have learnt how to cope (and yes, drinking often comes into it*). If you try to go to every session (or at least one presentation in every time slot) you will soon get tired and probably not take anything in. The secret is to be selective. Choose wisely and don't be too worried about walking out if it's just not your cup of tea. It's also important to remember that you might want to chat (to the speaker or other participants) after a talk.

* The usual advice for avoiding jet lag is not to drink. The usual advice for avoiding conference lag is the direct opposite! (see Networking)

Networking

So, why did you go to the conference? To attend presentations, talks, sessions etc. NO! You went there to network. Of course, everyone knows that networking is a euphemism for drinking, don't they? No, seriously. Networking is a must. Often the most interesting things you pick up are from conversations you have with your fellow conference goers in the bar or over a bite to eat.

Just human

When you see a person whose name you've seen plastered on books, in journals and whispered on CELTA and DELTA courses, just remember – they're human too. A few years ago at a conference in Granada a friend and I invited a very prominent EFL person

and his partner out for dinner. At the end of a wonderful evening he thanked us both and said "It was nice to be treated as part of the human race."

It's where it happens.

People often ask me how I got into writing, and the answer is by being in the right place at the right time – or more precisely, at a conference. Conferences are full of people from all walks of EFL life. The more you attend, contribute (not only by giving presentations) and network, the more chance you have of being in the right place at the right time.

Gas taps & all that.

If you're giving a talk, check out the room you have been allocated. I once gave a talk in a science lab with people sitting on the desks (gas taps conveniently situated if they didn't like my talk!). Once, in Romania, I gave a powerpoint presentation with more than twenty people sitting behind the screen?

Raising heckles (or is it hackles?)

Just occasionally you'll have a heckler in the audience. If this happens to you, don't panic! It could be the best thing that could happen! Why? Well, firstly it gives your talk an edge – heckle back. Don't let him/her put you off – feed on his/her comments. Secondly, you'll find that many of your audience will come to your defence – it's a great way to get people discussing issues.

But I'm no expert.

Who said you were? Why do you think you need to be an expert to speak at a conference? Are you an expert on all grammar? But you still teach grammar in the classroom. In fact, are you an 'expert'* on anything? But it doesn't stop you doing things. Facilitate your session, don't lecture.

* And, by the way, if you are an expert I bet there'll be someone in your audience who is actually more of an expert than you!

Inventing the wheel.

One thing you must remember is if you've got a new idea, or an original idea, it isn't. In all probability someone somewhere has already come up with that idea. However, don't worry. If originality were the be all and end all of presenting at conferences then there would be very few presenters. There are three things to remember: 1) an idea can't be copyrighted, just the material; 2) even if it's not original doesn't mean it's not worthwhile and there will be some people who haven't heard, or don't know the idea; 3) whatever you do, make it interesting.

Let me tell you about my Masters thesis.

No, no, no! Nine times out of ten these kinds of presentations are dull as dishwater. However, if you present the 'dishes' this can be interesting. Pay particular attention to your audience. If you are addressing an 'academic' audience then your Masters thesis might be relevant, but if it's a group of practicing teachers then something which is directly relevant to the classroom is going to be far more relevant.

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Blind, deaf and dumb!

“Right, let me read out this OHT” Aagghh! Why? When this happens at conferences I cringe (or simply become deaf). I want to shout out “It’s OK, I learnt to read last week.” OHTs are your opportunity as a presenter to take a breather, collect your thoughts, drink some water, put your notes in order, give your audience a break from your dulcet tones etc. But some people ask for OHTs to be read out. Two reasons, either the **font size** is too small, or they need to move. At a conference last year a woman sitting behind me (I was sitting almost at the back of the hall) shouted up to the presenter, “I can’t see it, can you read it out?” I turned round and told her, “Why did you sit there if your eyesight is poor? Move to the front where there are still plenty of seats.”

Where to begin?

Begin at the beginning and end at the end, at least, that is the theory. I find it useful to start by outlining what I hope to do (this is as much for my own benefit as for the participants – a few years ago I actually didn’t agree with anything I had planned on saying!). Of course, if your presentation is meant to be a discovery technique type (i.e. as in when you set the context in a lesson and wait to see the students discover the grammar) then this kind of defeats the object. It can also be quite fun to start with something quite thought-provoking or controversial. Finally, at the end it’s useful to go back to the beginning (I’ve always liked James Joyce) – sum up, and see if you still agree with what you said at the start.

And finally ...

Remember, conferences are meant to be fun.

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