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## The TESOL Arabia Conference and its Role in the Professional Development of Teachers at Institutions of Higher Education in the United Arab Emirates.

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## Introduction

There are many reasons to pursue professional development, but perhaps one of the most important may be to narrow the wide chasm left behind by many teacher education programs. Freeman (1989) and Holliday (1994) have pointed out many of the difficulties associated with the transfer of knowledge into classroom practices, while others have directed attention to the vast kaleidoscope of cultural diversity involved in ELT (see Larsen-Freeman, 1983; Colabucci, 2007; Govardhan, Nayar and Sheorey, 1999). Consider, for a moment, what happens to a cohort of MA TESOL students upon completion of their teacher education programs. They scatter off to various points on the globe, each in search of a job with their newly minted degrees. One could end up teaching at a refugee camp in rural northern Thailand, with only chalk and a blackboard at their disposal, while another may end up teaching EAP in the United Arab Emirates. Given such diversity, then, how could any one teacher education program ever prepare its students to meet such challenges?

While the answer may be an illusive, if not impossible task, one way to narrow the gap is through professional development. This may take a number of different forms. Some common strategies for professional development identified in the literature include peer observation, journals, teaching portfolios, team teaching, workshops and action research. Traditionally, all of these strategies have received the bulk of attention over the last decade or so, while another strategy, participation in professional conferences, has long been overlooked. Gephart and Oprandy (1999, p. 134) comment on what they see as being some of the benefits of attending professional conferences:

... we might want to consider joining or renewing our membership in professional organizations. We might inquire and make plans to attend upcoming conferences and to volunteer to work at them for an hour or two. With some experience under our belts, we might choose to submit an abstract presenting our current thinking, practices, or research at a future conference – or at least discuss such ideas with colleagues and friends... Those who engage in the above kinds of activities tend to push their boundaries to the edge of their competence... this contributes to their sense of feeling what Frank Smith (1988) calls membership in the club, in this case the membership in the profession of teaching.

This paper uses the above-mentioned thoughts as starting points for research. Rather than the very rare quotation or the one-off personal account, however, it seeks to describe the experiences of a larger group of individuals, mainly college and university teachers in the UAE, and how conferences fit into their own professional learning.

## CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

### Higher Education in the UAE

The UAE has not been shy to change and is a relatively new country, having been founded in 1971 by

the joining of 6 small Trucial States. The first university of its kind, UAE University, was established in 1977 and was soon followed by the onset of a system of colleges in the 1980s. The 1990s, and especially the late 90s, witnessed rapid expansion in the number of institutions of higher education, including the first university to be affiliated with a foreign country, the American University of Sharjah, which is associated by the American University in Washington, D.C.

More recently, other foreign universities have joined the higher education community, bringing with them systems of high standards and internationally recognized accreditation. The introduction of non-government run institutions has helped to fuel a newly competitive academic environment, whereby students who can afford the tuition, can now choose to study at a foreign-affiliated university in their home country. This has the advantage of allowing students to receive an internationally accredited degree, while at the same time still being able to study in an academic environment that adheres to keeping in line with a minimal set of Islamic values and cultural practices.

In response to the competitive education market, many, if not all, government institutions of higher education have now filed for Institutional Accreditation (IA) with one of the six regional accrediting agencies in the USA. Such accreditation, by and large, has created an intense culture of evidence and accountability that includes, but is not limited to, a complete internal and external review of all faculty qualifications, resources, facilities, curricula and outcomes. As the review process ensues, faculty members have been caught in the middle by having to adjust or completely overhaul their current teaching practices, while at the same time being held to greater scrutiny with regards to their professional development and annual performance reviews. At many institutions work loads have increased in order to provide the students with more hours of instruction, and in some cases, academic semesters have been extended from what was once 16 weeks to over twenty weeks.

### Importance of Professional Development

In light of rapid and ongoing educational reform movements taking place in the UAE, the importance placed on the professional development of educators has, perhaps, never been greater. As universities move forward in efforts to improve education they are also setting ambitious goals for student learning. While large scale change may be rooted in policy and school improvement plans, it will ultimately be the responsibility of teachers to carry through and deliver change into their classrooms.

In response, professional development has increasingly become part of teachers' contractual obligations and the amount of professional development opportunities made available to educators has flourished, especially outside of the workplace. One organization that has expanded 'external' PD opportunities for teacher has been TESOL Arabia, which is important to the educational community because it functions in a way that most others do not, by bringing together both teachers and administrators who are involved at all levels of instruction. Every year the organization hosts a professional development conference and nearly 2,000 teachers attend.

### TESOL Arabia

TESOL Arabia was founded in 1993 as a small, independent, non-profit professional organization for teachers of English as a foreign language and other ELT professionals working in the Middle East. The organization is voluntary and its aims are to stimulate the growth of professional development through the encouragement of both practical and theoretical scholarship, to encourage the use of available

technologies, to adopt instructional methodologies that best meet students' needs, to promote English the language teaching profession as a career, and to provide a forum for discussion and support ("TESOL Arabia Mission Statement", 2006). The organization is one of 99 independent affiliates of TESOL Inc., which is based in the United States and has a combined network of more than 47,000 professionals worldwide.

## LITERATURE

### Professional Development

#### Definitions

The term professional development is often used interchangeably with other terms such as in-service training (INSET), in-service education, in-service learning, continuous professional development (CPD), staff development and teacher development. How these terms are used depend, by and large, on one's own interpretation of how they overlap in relation to the context, type of activity and overall goals that are set in place. Some descriptions, such as the one offered by Taylor (1975), are quite narrow in scope and break down professional development into two aspects: staff development, which concerns the needs of the institution, and further professional study, which concerns the individual needs of teachers. More recent considerations, however, have tended to take a much broader point of view that take into account some of the continuous, lifelong or developmental aspects that may be involved (see Meyers and Clark, 2002; Earley, 2004; Day, 1997; Roe, 1994; Hargreaves and Fullan, 1992). In a general sense, what all of these have in common is that they embrace, in a very broad sense, the notion of further professional learning after an initial period of training. For the purpose of this paper, we will adopt the definition proposed by Day (1999, p.4):

Professional development consists of all natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group or school and which contribute, through these, to the quality of education in the classroom. It is the process by which, alone and with others, teachers, review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purposes of teaching and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice with children, young people and colleagues through each phase of their teaching lives.

### Teacher Development

#### Definition

According to Richards and Farrell (2005), teacher development concerns long-term goals that are not job oriented. Lange (1990, p.250) describes it as "a process of continual intellectual, experiential, and attitudinal growth of teachers." He then goes on to add that it involves "continued growth both before and throughout a career" (ibid.). Whereas training is often viewed as something mandatory to be done only with experts and linked to a pre-determined external agenda; development, in contrast, often encompasses an array of non-compulsory and self-selected activities that can be done with peers, with experts or individually. The process may be thought of as being bottom up, ongoing and holistic in nature.

## What Teachers Can Develop

Larsen-Freeman (1983, p. 266) asserts that in order for teachers to make “informed choices” about their work, they need (1) a heightening of awareness; (2) a positive, open attitude to bring about change; (3) the accumulation of knowledge; and (4) skills development. She points out that:

I cannot make an informed choice unless I am aware that one exists. Awareness requires that I give attention to some aspect of my behavior or the situation I find myself in. Once I give that aspect my attention, I must also view it with detachment, with objectivity, for only then will I become aware of alternative ways of behaving, or alternative ways of viewing the situation, and only then will I have a choice to make. (ibid.)

Freeman (1989) incorporates the same four constituents into a descriptive model of teaching. He states (p.31) that knowledge is the what of teaching and includes the subject matter; to whom (the background and learning styles of the students); and where instruction occurs (the sociocultural /institutional contexts). In contrast, skills make up the how of teaching and include the methods, techniques, activities and materials. Taken collectively, these form the knowledge base of teaching (p.32).

While acknowledging that skills and knowledge are important, Freeman also asserts that teachers need to develop attitudes about their teaching. He defines this as “the stance one adopts toward oneself, the activity of teaching, and the learners one engages in the teaching/learning process” (ibid.).

With regard to awareness, he affirms Larsen-Freeman’s position, and has argued that awareness may be the most important of the above mentioned points, as it also serves to trigger and monitor the other three constituents. He states that the traditional knowledge-transmission model of teacher education overemphasizes the constituents of knowledge and skills and that awareness and attitudes are essential for long-term change and development.

## Rationale

To the best of the researchers’ knowledge, there is an alarming paucity of research related to ELT associations and conferences, both within and outside of the United Arab Emirates. In a search of the literature, including the complete TESOL Arabia Conference Proceedings, the authors were able to locate only one study that dealt specifically with conferences as a form of professional development. Bredeson and Scribner (2000) conducted a study of K-12 educators in the USA that explored teachers’ reasons for participation at a large scale professional development conference, however, the research focused on the conference theme of performance assessment, and the extent to which new knowledge was directly transferred to the classroom; the study was not related to ELT.

Surprisingly, there still remains a large gap in the literature, as echoed in the purpose statement of the 2006 International Symposium on Knowledge Communication and Conferences:

An increasing number of research, studies and reflections have been published with regards to knowledge communications by means of journal publications, but very few publications can be found with respect to knowledge communications via conference presentations. Consequently, our purpose is to use several means of knowledge communications in order to generate some reflections first, as

well as studies and research later, on the subject of conferences' organization and presentations as means of knowledge communication.

With the above mentioned points in mind, the aim of the present study was to explore the role of the TESOL Arabia Conference in relation to the professional development of EFL teachers at institutions of higher education in the United Arab Emirates. The study posited the following main research questions:

1. What types of PD activities are teachers involved with?
2. Why do teachers attend/not attend the TESOL Arabia conference?
3. What do teachers value about the TESOL Arabia conference?
4. How can the TESOL Arabia conference be improved?

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Research Approach

In this study, the researchers employed a primarily quantitative approach as a data collection strategy. The main study was, by and large, descriptive and quantitative, and a follow-up interview included open-ended questions which generated qualitative data. A quantitative approach was selected because it fit the research questions and allowed the researchers to address a large number of respondents that were located across a wide geographical area. Two additional advantages were that it could also be administered quickly and was financially economical. The follow-up interview used a qualitative approach because the research questions sought to understand phenomena that could not be easily identified through a pre-selected menu of choices.

### Sampling

A total of 150 teachers were randomly selected from four institutions of higher education in three different cities in the UAE; six campuses were involved in the main study (see Table 1). Paper surveys were distributed to teachers by selected survey administrators at each campus and each participant was given a survey that included detailed instructions for completion and a statement of confidentiality. All surveys were then completed anonymously and returned to the administrators on each campus. Surveys were administered to the participants during a two week period in February 2006 and following their return, the surveys were checked by the researcher for complete responses. It was felt that if any section was inappropriately skipped or if they did not answer more than 20% of the items on a section, then the survey would be seen as incomplete and would not be included in the study. All of the surveys that were returned met the criteria for inclusion and all were used, however, several had missing responses with regard to age, gender and nationality. Of the 150 surveys given to participants, 70 were returned, giving a response rate of 46.6 %.

The follow-up interview was completed by a cohort of 16 teachers who were identified by their filling-in an optional contact

**Table 1** Main study participants

Institution	Participants
Higher Colleges of Technology	25

information section on the main survey.

Of the 70 surveys completed, 18 participants (25.7%) expressed interest in completing the follow-up interview. All 18 potential participants were contacted,

however, two later declined, stating a conflict with time constraints as their principal reason for non-participation. The interview was conducted via email and the participants were encouraged to use anonymous non-work email addresses.

Higher Colleges of Technology	25
Al Ain Women's College and Dubai Men's College	
UAE University Women's Campus and Men's Campus	24
American University of Sharjah	13
Zayed University (Dubai)	8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>70 (46.6%)</b>

## Research Instruments

The instrument for the main study was constructed in accordance with the suggested design procedures set forth by Brown (2001) and Dornyei (2003). The survey consisted of three sections: Reasons for participation, reasons for non-participation, personal background and types of PD activities. The survey was in effect two surveys in one. Teachers who had participated in the TESOL Arabia Conference were asked to complete the sections that were applicable to them, and likewise, teachers who had not participated in the Conference were directed to complete only sections that were relevant.

The follow-up interview consisted of seven open-ended questions. Participants were asked to complete the interview by typing their responses into a word document; the aim was to gather additional qualitative data related to how future TESOL Arabia Conferences could be improved.

## Data Analysis

### Quantitative Data

The data collected in this study were not complicated and after consultation with a statistics specialist, the analysis was done manually rather than with statistical software. Responses were counted, individually tallied and converted into percentages. The data were subsequently reorganized and presented in tables when appropriate.

### Qualitative Data

The qualitative data in this study consisted of brief written statements that were in response to written open ended questions. The data were transferred from the individual documents and combined into a single document of all comments. The comments were then read many times and themes emerging from the data were then labelled and categorized.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Q1 What types of PD activities are teachers involved with?

### Results

**Table 2** Number of PD activities participated in out of 16 possible types

Participation Status	Mean	Forms of PD Undertaken
<b>Non-Participants</b>	<b>4.8</b>	Attending workshops (68.2%) Attending in-house presentations (59.1%) Peer observation (40.9%) Reading TESOL-related books (36.4%) Leading workshops (36.4%) Reading TESOL-related journals (31.8%) Making in-house presentations (27.3%) Keeping a teaching portfolio (27.3%) Attending conferences (22.7%) Self-observation (18.2%) Team teaching (13.6%) Action research (13.6%) Presenting at conferences (9.1) Keeping a teaching journal (9.1%) Taking a TESOL-related course (9.1%) Publishing (9.1%)
<b>Participants</b>	<b>7.6</b>	Attending workshops (87.5%), Attending in-house presentations (81.25) Attending conferences (66.6%) Reading TESOL-related books (64.5%) Reading TESOL-related journals (52.0%) Leading workshops (47.9%) Self observation (41.6 %) Peer observation (39.5%) Keeping a teaching portfolio (37.5%) Making in-house presentations (29.1%) Presenting at conferences (25.0%) Team teaching (14.5%) Taking a TESOL-related course (14.5%) Publishing (12.5%) Keeping a teaching journal (10.4%) Action research (8.3%)

### Forms of Professional Development Undertaken

The survey revealed that with the exception of reading TESOL-related books (36.4%) and reading TESOL-related academic journals (31.8%) the types of PD activities most often engaged in by the non-participant cohort were those that were likely to be required by employers: attending workshops (68.2%), attending in-house presentations (59.1%), peer observation (40.9%), making in-house presentations (27.3%) and keeping a teaching portfolio (27.3%). Conversely, the participant cohort was more active overall, especially with four PD activities that are usually not required by employers: reading TESOL-related books (64.5%), reading TESOL-related academic journals (52.0%), self observation (41.6 %) and presenting at conferences (25.0%).

### Discussion

The first question examined in this study regarded the types of PD activities that teachers are involved with and the findings in this section are important for at least two reasons. First, the results show that all



of the participants in this study, including those who did not attend the Conference, are involved in several types of PD activities. This underscores the fact that professional development remains an essential ingredient in the professional lives of teachers and in schools. Second, there was a great deal of variety in the forms of PD that were undertaken, which is an important consideration for administrators, as this shows that teachers' PD needs are broad and should not be restricted to merely 'internal' or 'in-house' professional development schemes.

The reasons why teachers choose various forms of PD are complex and are underpinned, to some extent, by both internal and external sources of motivation. These may be personal, dynamic, and partly determined by how teachers see themselves in relation to employment. Leithwood (1992) asserts that there are five stages in the career cycle of teachers: (1) 'launching the career'; (2) 'stabilizing, which involves making a commitment to the profession; (3) 'new challenges and concerns', whereby teachers seek out new practices; (4) 'reaching a professional plateau' and ; (5) preparing for retirement. The researchers speculate that some teachers may consciously identify themselves with specific points in their careers, such as the one proposed by Leithwood, and some of those who do may intentionally choose to modify the extent to which they participate in various professional development activities.

Q2 Why do teachers attend/not attend the TESOL Arabia Conference?

## **Results**

### Reasons for Non-participation

Respondents were asked to choose from a list of three items that best described their reasons for non-participation in the TESOL Arabia Conference. They were then asked to rank their choices using 1= most important. The reason most often occurring in the number one position (most important) was 'not useful for improving my teaching' (22.7%), followed by 'too expensive' (18.2%). In terms of non-ranked percentages, the top responses included: not useful for improving my teaching (45.5%), same old topics again and again (31.8%), too expensive (27.3%), topics not relevant to my PD needs (22.7%), not enough time (18.2%) and because it takes place during working hours (18.2%).

### Reasons for Participation

Respondents were asked to choose from a list of three items that best described their reasons for participation in the TESOL Arabia Conference. They were then asked to rank their choices from 1= most important to 3 (less important). The reason most often occurring in the number one position (most important) was 'to provide evidence of professional development to my current employer' (33.3%), followed by 'to provide evidence of professional development to a future employer' (22.9%).

**Table 3** Overview of results with demographic breakdown

Participation Status	Mean Age	Years of Experience	Nationality	Reason and percent for Participation/Non-Participation
Participants (N=48)  Male 58.3% Female 37.6% Did not respond 4.1%	36	Over 20 39.5% 15-20 27.0% 10-14 16.6% 5-9 14.5% 0-4 2.0%  Did not respond 0.0%	American 37.5% British 27.0% Canadian 14.7% Australian 8.3% Algerian 2.0% Irish 2.0% New Zealander 2.0% Did not respond 6.5%	'to provide evidence of PD to my employer' (33.3%)  'to provide evidence of PD to my future employer' (22.9%)
Non-Participants (N=22)  Male 68.2% Female 22.7% Did not respond 9.1%	48.5	Over 20 40.9% 15-20 31.8% 10-14 9.1% 5-9 9.1% 0-4 0.0%  Did not respond 9.1%	British 50.0% American 27.4% Australian 4.5% Pakistani 4.5% Canadian 0.0%  Did not respond 13.6%	'not useful for improving my teaching' (27.7%)  'too expensive' (22.7%) 'not enough time' (18.2%)

## Discussion

### Changing Work Climates

To some extent the responses given for both the first and second research questions may have been, at least in part, heavily underpinned by the dynamic and ongoing state of educational reform in the United Arab Emirates. As explained in the background section, UAE institutions of higher education have changed and working conditions have intensified. When teachers are faced with increased workloads they may respond in at least two ways. Some may wholeheartedly embrace the notion, do their best to adapt and accommodate additional duties. In a sense, they rise to the occasion and attempt to become 'super teachers', and by doing so may over extend their schedules and work commitments. One repercussion of this may be less time available for professional development over a prolonged period of time, which in turn, may also lead to a change in the preferred ways that PD is obtained. Whereas some teachers may have previously taken short courses or workshops over a period of weeks or months, with less time available some may now opt for the quick and immediate recognition that a short conference provides.

For others, an increased workload for little or no additional pay could bring about an entirely different response with regards to professional development. Some may see this as an infringement of their contracts or time away from activities that were previously spent with family. The result in this situation could possibly be a sort of self-imposed work stoppage, whereby teachers keep to the minimum amount of duties that are being imposed. For some, in-house PD may be the path of least resistance, meeting the requirements of their employer, while at the same time being convenient and (usually) of little or no additional cost.

## Slackers

The researchers speculate that there is also a third reason for non-participation at conferences: Slackers. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, p. 1170, defines a slacker as: 'a person who shirks work or obligation'. In this case, the term slacker refers to any teacher who intentionally limits him/herself to the minimum duties required by their employer for no apparent reason. As with any population, there are some who simply choose to work harder than others, and an undisclosed number of slackers may have been present in the non-participant cohort. Further research is needed to investigate the role of slackers in professional development.

Q3 What do teachers value about the TESOL Arabia conference?

## Results

Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with seven value statements using a Likert scale of 1-5 (1=strongly agree). The results were combined into 3 groups, combining 1 and 2 for agree, and 4 and 5 for disagree, with 3 being 'don't know', and are reported in Table 4.

**Table 4** What teachers value about the TESOL Arabia Conference

<b>Value statement</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
helps me to reflect upon my teaching practices	78.6%	12.9%	8.5%
gives me a greater awareness of current trends/concerns in the EFL community	72.5%	12.7%	14.8%
the TA Conference provides a sense of legitimacy to the TESOL 'profession'	63.8%	22.2%	13.5%
improves my knowledge of teaching	61.7%	20.0%	17.6%
helps me acquire new skills for teaching	58.3%	27.1%	14.5%
helps me to change my professional practice	42.5%	38.3%	19.2%
gives me a sense of empowerment	29.8%	46.7%	23.5%

## Open Ended Written Questions

Respondents were asked: What do you feel is the real value of having a teaching organization such as TESOL Arabia? 36 teachers provided 47 brief statements, most of which were less than a sentence in length. The comments were reviewed and categorized as networking (19%), community (19%), reinforcement of the profession (15%) and keeping up-to-date (8.5%). Typical responses that were representative of the group included:

"It brings people together to share knowledge as to what worked for them"

"Reinforcement of commitment + redirection when necessary"

"It gives teachers a sense of worth in what they do"

“Having such a professional organization in this region”

One teacher wrote:

... having an organization like TESOL Arabia is crucial for the PD needs of teachers in the region. Our close affiliation with both TESOL and IATEFL ensure that best practice is prevalent in the region. TESOL Arabia also gives high flyers the opportunity to showcase the exemplary work they are doing. The annual conference is the premier PD event of the year and provides us with a forum for sharing ideas, networking and having a look at new textbooks and computer software packages.

## Discussion

The third question in this study examined what participants valued in the Conference. As previously mentioned in the literature review, the findings in this section are, perhaps, best linked to the work of Donald Freeman and Dianne Larsen-Freeman, who have written about what people need to develop as teachers. In this regard, the study showed that although the Conference took place over a relatively short period of time of only three days, it was clearly seen as being helpful for acquiring new skills, knowledge, awareness and attitudes about teaching.

Another way to view the responses in this section is in relation to participants' individual time frames for learning and use. For some, attending conferences may be seen as a way to pick up several 'quick tips' for immediate use in the classroom, and the presentations they attended may have met those expectations. Others, however, may have been more interested in the long-term or developmental aspects in learning, and for them, the types of presentations they chose may also have met their expectations, albeit a different set of expectations. Further, the researchers would like to point out that for some, the purpose of attending presentations may not have been to change their thinking or get new ideas at all, but may have been just to reaffirm their current teaching practices. In this case, the participants may have already adopted some form of change in their classrooms, tried it out for a long period of time, be of the belief that it seems to be working for both the teacher and students, but now merely seek a bit of consensus that others, too, are in agreement with their point of view.

In addition to the constituents involved in teaching, the study showed that the majority of participants value the sense of legitimacy the Conference provides to the TESOL profession (63.8%); two themes that emerged from open-ended questions were increased opportunities for 'networking' with others (19%) and community building (19%). To a larger extent, the above responses may be linked to the collective ways that members of an organization engage in developing a shared sense of community, and the opportunities that may result in doing so. Whereas in-house PD schemes are aimed with the host institution in mind, conferences offered by extended communities of practice may be more enticing in a number of ways, as they not only offer opportunities for professional development, but also serve as conduits to make contacts, make friends and also make deals. Much of what TESOL Arabia appears to embody in this regard seems to be supported by Parker (as cited in Lieberman, 2000), who wrote about 'outside' educational improvement networks. Parker stated that such networks exhibit five key characteristics: (1) A strong sense of commitment to an idea; (2) a sense of shared purpose; (3) a mixture of information sharing and psychological support; (4) voluntary participation; and (5) an egalitarian ethos (ibid).

Q4 How can the TESOL Arabia conference be improved?

## Results

### Written Follow-up Questionnaire

Respondents were asked: Do you have any suggestions for improving the TESOL Arabia Conference? 16 written comments were received and were categorized as: greater variety of presentations needed (31.3%), change of venue (31.3%) lower the conference cost (25.0%), allow more prayer time for Muslims on Friday sessions (6.3%) and increase the book selection offered by vendors (6.3%).

Respondents were asked: If you were Chair of the TESOL Arabia Conference, what would you choose as your conference theme? 12 comments were received and were categorized as The Arab/Islamic context (25.0%), Critical Issues in TESOL (25.0%)

Other non-related responses (50.0 %). One participant suggested:

If I were chairing the conference this year, I would choose a more specific theme and focus on it. For the past few years, the themes have been very general. Perhaps it is now time to target a certain area of the profession and build the conference around this theme.

### Discussion

The last question in this study examined how the TA Conference can be improved. Before addressing the research findings, however, the researchers wish to point out that although this study involved teachers at institutions of higher education, any such findings need to be considered in relation to the entire conference population, which includes a broad scope of participation. TESOL Arabia brings together both administrators and teachers at all levels of instruction, thus any changes made need to be of benefit to the entire membership and not to any one specific sub-population. With this in mind, the study identified three areas for improvement: cost, venue and presentation topics. What may be inferred from the findings in the previous section is that since many participants value 'networking' with other teachers that enhancing such opportunities may serve to improve the Conference as well.

The study showed that the overall cost of the conference was a general area of concern. 22.7 % of the non-participant cohort reported the Conference being 'too expensive' as the main reason for not attending, while 25% of the follow-up survey responses recommended lowering the cost. Although TESOL Arabia may be seen as a bargain when compared to attending the annual TESOL Inc. Conference in the USA , it may also be perceived as being far more expensive than many other international conferences abroad. Appendix 3, "Convention Registration," 2007, provides an example of costs between TESOL Arabia and Korea TESOL.

In addition, the study showed that the Conference venue was an area of concern and several comments appeared to link the choice of venue, a hotel, with increased overall expenses; 31.3% of follow-up respondents suggested a change of venue. What may be inferred from the comments, as well as from local media accounts (see Hussain, 2006; Ahmed, 2007 ), is that the cost of simply doing business at hotels is generally perceived as high. This may be due, in part, to the customary 10% service charge and 10% Value Added Tax on meals and services.

The survey also identified repetitive presentation topics as a third point for improvement. 31.8% of

respondents who did not attend the Conference stated 'listening to the same old topics again and again' as their main reason for not attending, while 31.3% of the follow-up survey respondents called for a greater variety of presentation topics. Again, the responses may be due, in part, to the age and experience levels of the teachers involved, and surveying a sub-population of TA with less experience may have resulted in inverse findings. Now that this has been identified as a point of improvement, however, the key may be for the planners of the Conference to strike a balance between the two extremes found within the membership. Simply labeling new topics in the program may help increase awareness as to when and where newer topics occur during the event, as previous scheduling of such topics appears to have been mostly random.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

In the last section of this study, participants provided suggestions as to how planners could improve future Conferences. A preliminary copy of this research study was shared with the Chair and planners; the section below lists the specific suggestions that were received and details how they were incorporated into the 2008 Conference:

### **Cost and venue**

- Consider moving the event to an academic institution that will host the conference at cost and use the savings to reduce attendance fees
- Use the services of the academic institution to provide affordable meals
- Provide ample parking free of charge
- Offer shuttle bus service to and from the event at cost

An often cited recommendation by participants was to move the event to an academic institution so that savings could reduce attendance fees or costs. In response to these findings, TESOL Arabia conference planners did indeed go to an academic institution for the 2008 Conference- Dubai Men's College. Preliminary feedback on this move has been for the most part extremely positive. Although savings were not used to decrease registration fees, more benefits in the form of full meals, additional catering, a better conference bag, and reduced development course and job fair fees were included.

Additional suggestions offered by participants related to transport to and from the conference venue and parking costs. TESOL Arabia addressed both of these issues through offering shuttle buses free of charge to each of the conference hotels at periodic intervals throughout the day as well as shuttles to three of the biggest shopping malls in Dubai. Parking at the venue, DMC, was plentiful and free of charge.

### **Conference Topics**

- Consider 'Critical Issues' or 'Arab Contexts' as Conference themes
- Encourage presentations that are related to 'Critical Issues' or 'Arab Contexts'
- Devote a block of time each day specifically for 'New Topics in TESOL' and label it as such in the

program

- Consider offering a specific workshop for retiring teachers

Participants suggested having a theme that was related to critical issues in TESOL. The TACON 2008 organizers adopted one participant's proposed theme and set it as the 2008 conference theme, "Finding Your Voice: Critical Issues in ELT."

Another recommendation was to block time each day to address 'new topics in TESOL.' This was taken on board by organizers in the form of Critical Issue Discussions groups. A total of 14 of these sessions appeared on the TACON 2008 program.

The main conference development course took as its theme Reigniting, Retooling and Retiring in TESOL. 16 special sessions were provided, including sessions on how to keep motivated, having fun in the classroom, and strategies for recovery or prevention of teacher burnout.

### Networking

- Request presenters devote the final ten minutes of their presentations to a Q&A/ 'Networking' session
- Request 'plenary speakers' offer a follow-up or related presentation to a limited or smaller audience
- Include the email addresses of presenters in the Conference Program unless they request to 'opt out'
- Create lounges free of charge where participants can relax and talk in between presentations or at any time of the day
- Consider offering educational site visits or additional social activities

Participants suggested that more time was needed at the end of sessions in order to exchange information. Presenters received communication from organizers with their session timing which included suggestions for the amount of time to present, providing question and answer sessions, and vacating the room for next presenter. The organizers could only suggest that presenters allow sufficient time at the end of their presentations for networking with others and the actual implementation of this was left up to the individual speakers.

An additional recommendation to improve networking was to have 'plenary speakers' offer follow-up presentations. As is customary, plenary speakers usually address large audiences, and some participants felt that this limited the types of interaction in the sessions. TESOL Arabia is considering the idea of having asking more plenary speakers to provide additional sessions; the 2008 plenary given by John McRae had a follow-up session pilot.

Several participants suggested that providing the email addresses of the presenters, so that they could follow up with requests for information additional information about the sessions, if needed. The 2008 Conference Program provided email address of most of the speakers.

A frequent concern stated by the participants was that previous hotel venues were not designed for large crowds of people and that space was needed for sitting or relaxing in between Conference sessions. In response to this suggestion, the 2008 Conference planners selected a venue that had

several lounges available to participants, as well as covered benches for sitting outdoors and additional free cafeteria seating.

A final recommendation was for TESOL Arabia to offer educational site visits and additional opportunities for meeting other teachers. In response, the 2008 Conference offered a 'Desert Networking Safari' for all of the members who attended the optional professional development courses. This consisted of sand dune rides, a BBQ dinner and beverages; the opportunity to participate was extended to both speakers and non-presenters.

#### Summary and Suggestions for Further Research

This study explored a number of ways in which the TESOL Arabia Conference fit into teachers' professional learning. The areas that were considered included PD activity types, forms of attendance, what teachers valued in the Conference and various ways that future Conferences might be improved. There are, however, several other potential areas that need to be addressed in future research. Large scale studies involving entire memberships, the group dynamics of TESOL organizations, mapping the interactions of conference participants, and establishing criteria for assessing the success of teacher associations are some of the possibilities that future studies may wish to investigate.

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