

# See you at the coffee stand!

**Darren Elliott** considers how to get the most out of conferences.

Conferences are a fantastic way to get out of a rut, to blow away the cobwebs, to come into contact with new ideas and new people, and to find new approaches to old problems. For those of you in the UK, and possibly beyond, the IATEFL April conference is likely to be one of the major events in your professional calendar. However, this isn't the only conference; there are many other significant opportunities to get involved with people in our fields throughout the year and across the world.

The larger conferences, in particular, can be quite daunting for the first timer – and also exhausting. Here are a few ways in which you can maximise the benefits.

## **Wear good shoes**

Being comfortable will help you concentrate. A good bag is also very important. You will want access to pen and paper, the conference programme and, possibly, a bottle of water and some nibbles. You will also need somewhere to put the various handouts, flyers and other materials you accumulate throughout the day. Many conferences give out bags at registration, which can be useful as long as you decant some of the advertising material to a locker or hotel room for later, more leisurely, perusal.

## **Plan ahead**

Most medium-to-large conferences will have several plenary sessions, and will then split into smaller seminars or workshops held in different rooms. There can be some tough choices to be made in deciding which to attend, so it is better to think about it in advance. Going through the programme, making a note of the times and room numbers of the presentations you really want to

see and slipping this note into your pocket can save time later.

## **Be flexible**

Just because you went through the programme with a highlighter on the first morning and noted down your personal schedule, it doesn't mean you have to stick to your original plan. You might have your interest piqued in one presentation, which then leads your thoughts in a different direction. You may hear especially good things about one presenter. You could fall in with a group of interesting colleagues who suggest a change of tack. Remember, you didn't carve your timetable on a tablet of stone; you just jotted it down on a piece of paper.

## **Take a break**

Seeing seven presentations in a row for three days straight is not especially conducive to reflection and development. Have a coffee with the nice person you met in the last session, and have a chat about what you heard. After all, meeting people with different perspectives and experiences is one of the benefits of attending conferences. Having a look around the publishers' exhibition area can be advantageous, too – you can pick up free samples of textbooks and promotional gifts, such as pens. The books which are on sale are sometimes discounted at the end of the conference so the sales staff don't have to box them up and take them all home again, so it is worth paying a visit to the exhibition towards the end of the final day.

## **Be sociable**

Get out and about – see a new place and meet new people. Many old hands enjoy conferences mainly for the prospect of meeting up with colleagues they only see once or twice a year. Don't be afraid to

strike up a conversation with the person next to you. Also, I always think it is considerate to go up and say a quick 'thank you' to the presenter after a session.

## **Try something different**

Rather than seeing a series of presentations in only one or two fields of interest, a conference is an opportunity to open your horizons to something that you don't usually approach with enthusiasm. Not usually thrilled by corpus linguistics? Maybe this might be the time to re-evaluate.

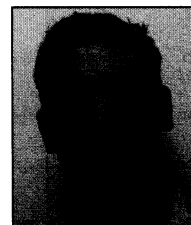
Something I've discovered is this: if you hear someone is a good presenter you should go and see them – no matter what they are presenting on. Ask your colleagues if they have seen anyone particularly interesting; most veteran conference goers will have a list of names not to miss (and maybe one or two to avoid – but let's not go there!).

## **After the conference**

You will probably return from the conference laden with papers, ideas and energy. The general reinvigorating nature of a conference visit is in itself a wonderful reason to go, but if you don't want the feeling to peter out, you need to manage what you have learnt carefully and realistically. Look at your own context and consider what will actually fit. Make a detailed plan of how you would like to implement change, either in your own classroom or institutionally. Like the sarong you bought on holiday in Bali, what seems marvellous at a conference may simply not work when you get back home. But if you are pragmatic, you should be able to implement the good ideas and develop as a teacher.



I hope these suggestions help you to get the most out of the next conference you attend. And if you see me at the free coffee stand, please say hello! **ETP**



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