



PARTICIPANTS' PERSPECTIVES ON AN INTERNATIONAL ELT CONFERENCE

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Abstract:

The quality of education has long been intriguing the researchers in recent years, and almost all countries in the world are on the lookout for new methods in order to continuously develop the quality. No matter how carefully they have developed their new curriculum, effective teaching depends on teachers' knowledge, skills and professional development since teachers are at centre of the movement to achieve quality education. It is therefore essential that ELT researchers and teachers understand and share examples of practice in professional development (PD). They should have opportunity to modify their existing beliefs and develop their practices by gradually incorporating new ideas and ways of working. Academic conferences provide excellent opportunities for the participants to gather fresh insight into the world of education beyond their school walls. Thus, the aim of this study was find out the participants perspectives on the activities carried out during the conference. The results of the quantitative data revealed the overall description of the conference as a positive and encouraging conference, and the qualitative data supported this by providing the thoughts and feelings of the participants.

Keywords: quality of education, international ELT conference, participants' perspectives

1. Introduction

Improving the quality of education has received great deal of attention in recent years. More and more countries have been reconstructing their teacher education curricula in order to improve the quality. No matter how carefully they have developed their new curriculum, effective teaching depends on teachers' knowledge, skills and professional

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development since teachers are at center of the movement to achieve quality education. It is therefore essential that ELT researchers and teachers understand and share examples of practice in professional development (PD). Hattie (2009) maintains that of the 150 factors which are effective in learning, 19th is the PD. Thus, there is rapid change throughout the world and to meet the changing needs of learners in the modern world, professionals have to pursue professional development.

Richards and Farrell (2005) define the term professional development as “*the general growth aimed at reaching a longer term-goal and which often involves examining the different dimensions of the teachers’ practice in order to improve their performance in the classroom*” (p. 4). Participants should have opportunity to modify their existing beliefs and develop their practices by gradually incorporating new ideas and ways of working. Professional development can be in many ways. Bailey, Curtis and Nunan (2001) suggested that professional development can be achieved through journals, action research, team teaching, portfolios, mentoring coaching and reflective teaching. These options help provide teachers with opportunities to grow during their teaching careers. There have been various choices for professional development. For example, to acquire new knowledge and skills, to keep pace with change, to increase the income or/and prestige, to add an impressive line to our curriculum vitae, to increase the power by increasing knowledge acquired, to avoid burnout, to combat negativity. (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 2001, pp. 6-7)

Different terms used for professional development and distinctions between these terms are not exactly marked in the literature. However, Mann (2005) claims that professional development is “career orientated and has a narrower, more instrumental remit” (p. 104). Another term used is “sustaining professional development” since it covers both informal and formal approaches to PD. According to Myers & Clark, (2002, p. 50) it “is ongoing, coherent, and continuous, rather than unrelated and episodic.” The concept of professional development especially for teachers has developed into continuing professional development (CPD) rather than solely on training and qualifications. CPD enhances the skills and abilities of researchers and teachers once they have formally qualified (Barduhn, 2002).

Borg (2010) discusses the common view that published research ‘should directly inform practice’, and instead proposes that second/foreign language acquisition research should be viewed as a “*source of enhanced understanding of their work, not as a direct solution to their problems*” (412). Borg (2015) also suggests that CPD should be commensurate with a “development-constructivist” (“process-product”) model of teacher education, rather than a “training-transmission” (“input-output”) model. Borg suggests that the main thrust of CPD should be to ensure that teachers “own” their professional learning, although the need for the availability of expert support is acknowledged. This could be in the form of “*courses led by external trainers who provide teachers with knowledge and ideas*” (Borg, 2015, p. 542).

Attending conferences and gaining some insights in the wider profession has been considered to be a form of the formal and centrally-managed CPD activity. Academic conferences provide excellent opportunities for the participants to gather

fresh insight into the world of education beyond their school walls. Borg (2015) suggested that attending conferences and presenting papers researchers and teachers can develop their knowledge and experiences continually since; they feel a sense of achievement when they actively participate in the conference; they have the opportunity to compare their professional experience with that of other ELT professionals; They become more aware of their own potential; they develop their self-confidence and credibility in the eyes of their colleagues

International ELT (English Language Teaching) conferences provide an opportunity for the participants to gain powerful and refreshing experience and to become aware of what is happening in the field (Crandall, 2001). According to Borg (2014), there are a growing number of ELT professionals around the world attending various numerous conferences each year. Borg also suggests that teachers participate in such events which have positive impacts upon their careers and practice. Thus, Çukurova International ELT Teacher (CUELT) Conferences comprise a consecutive set of academic and social activities that intend to foster collaboration among academics, practitioners and researchers working in various sociocultural contexts.

The CUELT 2018 conference provided a communication platform for scholars, professionals, academics and graduate students, ELT teachers and teacher candidates. They not only presented their recent and latest researches but also shared their thoughts and discuss the future development in the EFL/ESL settings. The conference also embraced a broad range of studies focusing on different aspects of ELT including novel practices in teaching the four major skills, integrating the 21st century skills, culture and educational technologies in language classrooms, and shaping language teaching along with socio-affective factors. Besides, the conference offered four workshops, which specifically intended to inform the participating pre-service teachers about current trends in pre-service and in-service teacher education. Thus, this study aimed to find out the participants perspectives on the activities carried out during the conference. The f three research questions guiding the study were as follows;

1. What are the participants' perceptions on CUELT 2018 Conference?
2. Is there any noteworthy difference between ELT researchers (academics) and teacher candidates' views?
3. Do they think that ELT conferences contribute to their professional development?

2. Methodology

The study was conducted as a descriptive research design to find out the participants' perspectives on an International ELT Conference. Both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools were used for triangulation.

2.1. Participants

A total of 280 participants consisting of Academics, English Language Teachers and Teacher Candidates participated in the conference. Of the participants, 96 were the

registered presenters, 26 were ELT teachers teaching at different levels at state schools and the rest were ELT teacher candidates.

2.2. Data collection

The data collected with an evaluation survey consisting of 5 point Likert scale and, eight open ended questions investigating more views on the sessions. In addition, informal interview was conducted with the participant to support the data collected.

3. Findings and Discussion

A total of 43 academics responded the survey and 10 of them were informally interviewed. The majority of the responses indicated a positive, enriching experience at the conference.

Table 1: Academics' views

Items	Mean	St. D.
1. I am satisfied with the sessions	4,0698	,93593
2. Time in the presentations was sufficient to allow learning and practicing new concepts.	4,0240	,76828
3. The presentations were well planned and interactive.	4,0698	,66888
4. The presenters delivered the ideas clearly, using brief notes.	4,2558	,53865
5. The atmosphere was enthusiastic, interesting, and conducive to a collegial professional exchange	4,0000	1,0000
6. I understood and learned several things from the presentations.	4,0698	1,14216
7. The presenter(s) spoke enthusiastically.	4,0698	,79867
8. I would recommend this session to colleagues.	4,3256	,60635

Statistical analysis of the data obtained with a 5 point Likert scale evaluation survey provided valuable information about the participants' views on the sessions. The overall description of the conference suggested a positive and encouraging conference. For example; *"I am satisfied with the conference"* showed a mean of 4,0698, *"The presentations were well planned and interactive"* had a mean of 4,0698, *"I would recommend the conference to colleagues"* had a 4,3256mean. In addition, there seemed to be a consensus among the participants that *"The atmosphere was enthusiastic, interesting and conducive to a collegial professional development"* since it had a mean of 4,000 and St.D was 1,000 the *"Presenters spoke enthusiastically"* had a mean of 4.4380. The informal interviews with the presenters revealed that the negative feelings about presentation were resulted from two of the plenary speeches.

Table 2: Teacher candidates' views

Items	Mean	St. D
1. I am satisfied with the session	4,4891	,71863
2. Time in the presentations was sufficient to allow learning and practicing new concepts.	4,2847	,75682
3. The presentations were well planned and interactive.	4,4088	,75298
4. The presenters delivered the ideas clearly, using brief notes.	4,4526	,71713

5. The atmosphere was enthusiastic, interesting, and conducive to a collegial professional exchange	4,2847	,93107
6. I understood and learned several things from the presentations.	4,4015	,87833
7. The presenter(s) spoke enthusiastically.	4,4380	,75597
8. I would recommend the conference to colleagues.	4,5036	,74876

A substantial number of teacher candidates (137) responded the survey and 20% percent of them responded to the open ended questions. Survey findings indicated that the majority of the teacher candidates found the conference fruitful. For example; *"I am satisfied with the conference"* showed a mean of 4.4891, *"The presentations were well planned and interactive had a mean of 4.4088"*, *"I would recommend the conference to colleagues"* had a 4, 5036 mean. However, *"The atmosphere was enthusiastic, interesting and conducive to a collegial professional development"* had a mean of 4.2847 and the *"Presenters spoke enthusiastically"* had a mean of 4.4380. Borg (2015) claims that academic conferences provide the participants with the opportunities to build network and increase their awareness on changes and innovations in their area of interest. In addition, OECD reports that education conferences and seminars are the most common events attended in Lithuania (68%), Slovenia (75%) and Turkey (68%).

As the Respondents' views about what they understood from the term professional development was also a concern for the study, one additional open ended question was asked. *"What is your understanding of the term professional development"* The majority of the teacher candidates used the term *"being an effective teacher"* as a response to the questions. On the other hand, several of them defined the term professional development as *"developing teaching skills."*

In planning for the future professional development activities, one open ended question asked *"In your opinion, what is the purpose of professional development."* The most frequently used phrases were to become *"aware of weaknesses and strengths"*, and *"well educated teacher"*. Cochran-Smith (2003) suggests that professional development be included in the teacher education curriculum, which provides the teachers with the knowledge to meet demands of students for the twenty-first century. In addition, individual professional development has been considered as a useful tool since it enables individuals to monitor the growth of competences on a problematic field (Zepeda, 2012; European Commission, Eurydice, 2013).

The interviews revealed that the majority of the participants were truly satisfied with conference venue and the as well as time of the year the conference was organized though there were a few negative comments about the structure of two of the rooms where the sessions were held. In addition, the informal interviews with the presenters revealed that the negative feelings about presentation were resulted from two of the plenary speeches.

In addition, the open ended questions shed lights into the strong and weak points of the presentations, thereby the conference. The most frequently used words for the conference were *"beneficial"*, *"motivating"*, *"innovative and "engaging."* The only potentially negative words with any prominence was *"time"* allotted for the presentations and *"crowd"* for the two halls physically small for the audience.

The positive comments for the sessions were derived from the words like “interesting”, “beneficial”, “interactive” “innovative”. However, there were negative perceptions of the conference; it was likely associated with sessions, time issues and two of the rooms. Academics used the terms “sessions” “concurrent” “small”, “size, suggested that overlapping sessions with similar content were problematic for some attendees.

Attendance rates varied across sessions although an overwhelming majority of the participants was pleased about attending the presentation and workshop conducted by Dr. Christine Coombe. Based on this finding, we can say that it was not surprising that respondents wanted more workshops from Dr. Christine Coombe and panel sessions in the next years CUELT Conferences.

The teacher candidates were asked to reflect on the practicality of the conferences and their relevance to the classroom situations. The majority of the responses focused on building the bridge between the theory and classroom applications. The following two excerpts are the examples of common responses; *“I gained some insights from the sessions which I would use in my classes”* and *“Academics came here from different parts of the world and shared their ideas with others, so I tried to benefit from them since they presented some practical things from the classrooms.”*

Attending an academic conference is an advantage for the teacher candidates to be with experienced and expert practitioners in the field of ELT to be an effective teacher, which has already been associated with professional development. Silverman et al. (1992) suggest that teacher candidates must have the opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and practice to become an effective teacher, so they must be equipped with the skills such as being critical and creative thinkers and problem solvers.

Table 3: The comparison of Academics’ views and Teacher Candidates’ views

Items	Means		P
	Academics	Teacher Candidates	
1. I am satisfied with the session	4,0698	4,4891	,009
2. The presentations were well planned and interactive.	4,0698	4,4088	,006
3. The presenter(s) spoke enthusiastically.	4,0698	4,4380	,009

Compared to overall conference satisfaction, results suggested that respondents had a very positive view of the sessions and conferences in general although there seems to be statistically significant difference in the participants’ ratings.

4. Conclusions and Implications

The overall aim of this study was to investigate the perspectives of the participants of CUELT 2018 Conference with regard to CPD in the context of academics presenting papers and teacher candidates attending as audiences. Within this broad perspective, the study aimed to explore the perspectives on the sessions evaluated by both academics and teacher candidates. The purpose of the investigation was to develop a

better understanding of the relationship between an International ELT Conference and professional development. Generally speaking, the findings showed an overall enthusiasm and commitment among the participants towards the conference. While the questionnaire data showed revealed the enthusiasm, the open ended questions and interview provided an additional insight into the various factors attributed to bring about the incongruence between academics and teacher candidates.

This study is somewhat significant in three ways. First, it widens the scope of earlier investigations on the relations between attending academic conferences and professional development. Second, the study is not limited to ELT researchers who aiming present their research papers but it looks into the perspectives of the participants including post graduate students and teacher candidates. Third, it strengthens the role of academic conferences on professional development of the ELT teacher candidates, an aspect which needs more emphasis in the current research culture.

In conclusion, the CUELT (2018) Conference paid considerable service to extending practical information about novel ways to handle various challenges of authentic teaching practices in the 21st century classrooms. Moreover, the conference gave the participants ample opportunities for sharing expertise, exchanging opinions and gaining new perspectives about teaching/learning practices. Finally, the social activities (like the gala dinner, sightseeing tour) enabled the participants to meet ELT practitioners/academics from different parts of the world and thus, contributed to furthering collaboration among people with similar research interests.

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