How to Present at a Language Teacher's Conference

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Introduction

It was early June, 2004 and my year-long slog with the DELTA course had finally come to an end. As fulfilling an experience as it was when it was finally over, I was ready to move on and I wasn't wasting any time. Anyone familiar with the DELTA will know that the exam was (is it still?) always on the first Wednesday in June; in retrospect it was a bit ambitious to make my first conference presentation on the following Saturday.

My thinking was that I wouldn't have time to worry about the presentation because I'd be getting ready for the exam in the weeks leading up to it. Nevertheless, many, many things ran through my mind in the days leading up to the conference. What if somebody asked a question I couldn't answer? What if people got up and walked out during my presentation? Would I remember what I wanted to say? How would I feel if nobody showed up? On the day of my presentation I tried to go to other sessions and get something out of what was being said, but I was much too busy imagining myself in the presenter's shoes. So, the day wore on, the time had come, the room was full, I had all my materials ready, and I was off.

In many ways my first conference presentation marked a significant transition point in my career. Albeit a small step, I had made the jump from being teacher to being a contributing professional who was concerned about the advancement of English language teaching. My opportunity arose as a result of being part of a small team tasked with developing innovative and engaging materials for the university's self access CALL center. For the first time I felt that I might be doing something that few others had done and therefore my travails might make for a suitable topic to present to other teachers. A local conference came up that was focused on a theme appropriate to what I wanted to present, I submitted the proposal, was accepted, and then the panic began!

One of the most rewarding ways of becoming more involved in your profession, I believe, is through presenting at a conference. For the large part, audiences are positive and encouraging and the prevailing atmosphere is one in which everyone has a feeling that they have something to contribute.

Although it is a lot of work and stress and it can be a huge challenge, presenting at a conference is an important step for those of us who are looking to make a mark in this profession. What's more, conference presentations may lead to you getting published, as you can get instant feedback on the degree of interest in your work, plus you get the chance to learn from your audience as they share ideas related to the subject and, hopefully, offer constructive feedback. Furthermore, you'll be able to start networking with people who share your professional interests. Above all else, you'll really start to feel more a part of a wonderful profession.

Over the course of the four chapters of this book, you'll find a series of steps dedicated to getting ready for a conference presentation, which I hope all those of you who've gone through the process can relate to and those of you who've never done it but are giving it consideration can learn something from.

CHAPTER 1: Taking the first steps

In this chapter we'll be looking at the pre-pre-conference stage, and so this really is specifically for those among you who've never done this before. This is an important stage of the process, as it is the stage at which many falter. Indeed, a lot of people give up before they've even thought about submitting a proposal. Here then, over the course of four chapters, are the small steps you can take to help get you on the way to making your first conference presentation.

1. Attend a conference

If possible, attend a conference before you present at one. It doesn't necessarily have to be the one that you end up presenting at later on, any event will give you a feeling of what being a part of a conference entails. Knowing what conferences are like will give you an idea of the types of presentations people are making (a talk, a research presentation, a workshop, etc.) as well as helping you feel more confident about presenting. That's not to say that it's impossible to be a first time attendee and a presenter at the same time, but it's not the way I wanted to do it when I branched out into this area of the profession so I wouldn't recommend it.

If you've been to a TEFL conference, you'll probably feel more confident about presenting for a couple of reasons. Firstly, while there are many great presenters in the world of TEFL, a lot of people absolutely stink at it. I was (still am) amazed by the number of people who are prepared to stand in front of their peers and read directly from a printed word document for forty minutes. You would also be amazed at the number of people who either wrap up after 20 minutes of their allotted 45 or who clearly have no regard for anyone else at the conference and are determined to outlast one of Fidel Castro's infamous six-hour monologues. Believe me; you're already better than half of the people out there doing this. Secondly, you'll quickly realize that you don't have to be breaking barriers to contribute in a meaningful way.

If you can't get to a conference, then try looking through past programs, or talking to colleagues who have attended to help you get some idea of what is involved.

2. See what's coming up

Check websites such as IATEFL or TESOL, your school's notice board, journals for upcoming events. My advice for starting out as a presenter is to present at a relatively small national conference in the country where you teach, rather than at a behemoth of an event like IATEFL International. You'll probably find that there are quite a regular number of events near you, so wait for one that has a theme you're interested in. If you look carefully at the description of the conference and the expectations for submissions, you'll have a better idea with regard to identifying an appropriate venue for your debut. As much as I'm tempted to say here that pretty

much any well-written proposal will get accepted by your chosen event, I won't (I'll leave that until later).

3. Choose your topic

Think about something that you do particularly well in your classroom or perhaps something you're interested in doing research in. What ideas have you shared with your colleagues over a cup of coffee or a glass of beer? This may have seemed like idle chit chat, but it could have unwittingly provided the seeds for your presentation.

Most importantly when thinking about what to present is to choose a topic that you feel comfortable with; don't worry about being an expert. Sometimes, particularly with newly emerging areas there are no experts. Podcasting was a big fad a couple of years ago, for example, and I had a couple of colleagues who did a great job of simply showing people how to use iTunes and download podcasts: it sounds simple but it was quite an innovation at the time (yes, I am jealous I didn't think of it).

You may think that you don't have anything new to contribute. Remember this: you are a unique individual in a situation different, even if it is only slightly, from the other conference participants, so never doubt that you have something to offer. The purpose of the conference is for people to learn from one another and you'll find that people really will come to your presentation to hear what you have to say. You should, of course, do your homework and be as knowledgeable about your topic as you can.

4. Get in the hired help

In my first presentation I had a co-presenter, as I did for my second and third presentations. In fact, it wasn't until last year that I stepped up to the plate and did it on my own. I don't know if I would ever have made even a first presentation without someone by my side, never mind becoming a regular presenter.

A co-presenter can facilitate both your preparation and your actual delivery. In terms of preparation, your co-presenter will be able to offer practical input on ideas and how to organize and deliver them. If you're going to bring in the hired help, don't even think about who will do what at this stage, just focus on developing ideas collaboratively. You'll have time to work on the mechanics of who does what later on. As for actually delivering your presentation, your co-presenter gives you the ultimate advantage of only having to speak for half the time you would otherwise have to.

I hope these few ideas have given those of you who are thinking of getting onto the conference circuit a few ideas of how to take the first step. Next up we'll be looking at how to put together a proposal that will get accepted.

Chapter 2: Creating a proposal

In the first chapter we looked at the first steps a teacher should take when getting into the conference game. In this chapter we'll be focusing on the next step; creating your proposal. Here are three steps I recommend taking.

1. Follow the call for proposals

If you've no idea what I'm talking about, basically, the call for proposals is the announcement from the conference organizer inviting people to apply to present at the conference. This 'call' usually takes place six months or so before the conference actually happens, so bear this in mind when you're considering making your decision to present. Carefully read and follow all the instructions regarding the submission of your proposal. This is really important: even though you know you have a great idea, your proposal probably won't be accepted if you don't follow the submission guidelines.

Typically, you'll need to write an abstract of less than 100 words (which will appear in the conference program), a summary of about 250-300 words (which the conference committee will use to either accept or reject your proposal), and a snappy title. Sticking to the specified limits is quite important here. To give you an example of how important this can be, I'll describe what happened to a colleague of mine recently. She had done the research, written it up, and completed the submission form including a sixty-word abstract and a 300-word summary, only to forget to give her presentation a title. Her submission was rejected because of a missing title with a ten-word limit. It sounds tough, until you remember that the committee deciding what to accept and what to reject will probably have hundreds of proposals to look through; why should they bother with one that hasn't followed the clearly laid out instructions. Basically, careful attention to detail at this stage is vital.

2. Make sure your title and abstract reflect your presentation

A clearly focused abstract will help conference delegates decide if your session is one that they want to attend. Really try to consider the conference theme. You'll usually find that there is a particular aspect of the conference that you are able to relate your presentation to, so try to link your title to that aspect. It may not always be necessary to focus on the theme, but this will definitely enhance your chances.

Back in October, 2009 I attended an IATEFL conference in Northern Cyprus. This was a conference specifically looking at the assessment of spoken English. Here is the abstract I submitted:

'This paper presents findings of research conducted on student perceptions of what constitutes effective pre-oral exam practice. Findings indicate what students consider beneficial, what they

find less useful, and overall feelings about oral assessment, while also highlighting key differences in what teachers perceive as beneficial and what learners actually feel is helpful when preparing for speaking tests. Also discussed is awareness, with regard to how sharing grading criteria and self-grading help learners enhance their performance.'

The word limit for this abstract was 75 words. I'll save you the trouble of counting by telling you that I wrote exactly 75 words for this submission. Look at what I wrote and ask yourself, '*do I have a pretty good idea of what Adam would present from this abstract?*' This is all the delegates will have to go on, so make sure you clearly explain what you're going to do in your time slot, while also trying to pique their interest.

3. Where to submit?

Make the most of your work. You'll generally find that you can't submit more than one proposal to any given conference, but you can submit the same proposal to different conferences. This isn't being cheeky, even the heavyweights of the TEFL conference circuit will do a presentation at a small national event and then do the same one at a larger international conference. Consider following this path to get the most mileage out of your work.

I hope this has given you a few more ideas if you're thinking of making the leap into presenting. In the next chapter we'll be looking at [how to develop your idea into an effective presentation](#).

Chapter 3 – Developing your presentation

This particular chapter on presenting at conferences is quite pertinent, as it's exactly what I should be doing now! So, in order to help me get started on getting my thingy ready, here's the summary of a workshop I'll be giving in the near future.

'As a universally popular and accessible form of entertainment that transcends national boundaries, the TV game show is a phenomenon recognizable to language learners throughout the world. Thus, as a means of teaching, the potential use of such formats has wide-ranging implications for classroom practice.

Many language learners face difficulties when trying to develop their lexical knowledge due to traditionally employed methods which focus less on the cognitive processes required for such constructive increases in their vocabulary knowledge. The task of the language teacher therefore is to develop a more stimulating environment in which language learners are better able and more

In this workshop, we will present a series of activities, lexically related, based on popular TV game show formats such as 'blockbusters' and 'Who wants to be a millionaire'. These shows can be easily adapted by teachers for use in the language classroom. They offer opportunities for the recycling of vocabulary in a motivating and engaging way.

Firstly, the workshop will allow participants to discover and reflect on the potential of such activities through the process of participating in actual classroom activities and then discussing their relative values. Additionally, participants will have the opportunity to share their ideas on comparative practical applications, thus making them relevant to their particular teaching contexts.'

So, how can I go from this, which I wrote about six months ago, to an effective workshop that will keep the punters happy?

1. Refer back often

As I've just said, I wrote this proposal many months ago, and if I don't refer back to it regularly, the chances are I won't be able to effectively stay on task. People attending your session will expect the abstract (a much reduced, 60-word version of the above summary) to be an accurate reflection of what actually occurs: do what you say on the tin. In the above summary I describe how I intend to deliver several practical activities that teachers can easily adapt to suit their own teaching environments. If I say I'll be giving practical teaching ideas, how do you think my audience will react if I spend half of my time giving a literature on the theories of vocabulary acquisition? Compare the abstract below with the one that I put in the last chapter about creating your proposal.

'This workshop presents a series of activities, lexically related, based on popular TV game show formats that are easily adapted for use in the language classroom for recycling vocabulary in an engaging way. The workshop allows participants not only to discover and reflect on the potential of such activities, but also to share ideas on their relative practical applications.'

Look at my summary again. Have I effectively given the conference participants an idea of what my workshop will be about (really do leave comments if you don't think so, I'm still learning too)? It isn't so easy condensing it into a mere 60 words. If you compare this with the previous example I showed you, you can see that I had a very different kind of session planned to what I'll be delivering next month. The audience always comes to a session with an expectation and it is your responsibility to ensure you deliver.

2. Who are your audience?

Think about who your audience might be and prepare accordingly. The beauty of IATEFL is that you can indicate if you're pitching your session to new teachers or to crusty old professionals, which is really helpful when it comes to preparation. Think about who is likely to attend. I doubt, for example, that I'll be attracting researchers to my workshop. More likely, my room will be full of classroom teachers looking for new ideas to implement into their teaching. Ask yourself what people will be expecting from your presentation.

3. Stick to the time limit

Keep the time limit of your session in mind so that you can cover all of your material without having to omit anything important while you're giving the presentation. Bear in mind that you absolutely won't get started on time, so don't imagine that you can dive straight in. The first 5 minutes will be taken up by people wandering in and finding a place to sit; this is inevitable so don't plan around needing this time (I'll have a couple of suggestions about how to utilize this period of time in part four). Running late will have a knock on effect to the following presentations. I hate being in a session that overruns as it means I'll be late for the next session I wish to attend and will look rude when I finally arrive. Also, another presenter is almost certainly going to want to get ready for the room and you're eating into their preparation time: don't run over!

4. Practice makes pretty good if not perfect

In part two, I mentioned how it was a totally reasonable course of action to present your session at a small, local conference before taking it to a big international event. This is a great way to give your session a trial run, often with a smaller and perhaps more familiar group of colleagues. The time between your two presentations can be used to streamline and revise what you did so that it will be even better the second time round.

Another possible alternative is to present at your own institution. I can't imagine anywhere that wouldn't welcome the opportunity of one of their teachers giving some professional development. A big reason why I'm not too worried about my IATEFL presentation is that I've already done exactly what I've just described, using the feedback of my colleagues to ditch something that didn't work very well and generally improve my workshop.

Well, these chapters are actually helping me get ready for my upcoming session by making me reflect on whether or not I'm following my own advice. I hope it's making for interesting reading for all of you who find yourself in a similar position. Let's now move on to the final chapter of the conference series: Making sure you present professionally.

Chapter 4 – Delivering your presentation

At IATEFL in Harrogate in 2014 I delivered my presentation at 17:50 in the evening on the final day of a grueling three-day marathon. The biggest challenge of being scheduled at such a time slot was one that was completely out of my hands; would I have an audience? This was compounded by the fact that I've been placed in a room with a potential audience of 60 people. The number didn't frighten me, the prospect of there only being five people in this big room did!

So, in this example it looked like the conference organizers had given me plenty to think about in the weeks leading up to the event, but what else is there to consider for those of us who've never done this before? In this chapter I'll share a few ideas that will help things run smoothly for you.

1. Find your room

A great way to psychologically prepare yourself for what is to come is to familiarize yourself with your surroundings. When you arrive, find your room and look at the size and layout. Stand at the front where you'll be delivering your session if you can.

2. Arrive early

Get to your room at least 10 minutes before your session is due to start. This will enable you to set up any necessary equipment and make sure you're ready with time to spare. Some people, me included, like to attend the presentation scheduled ahead of theirs in their allotted room. I do this so that I can start making my preparations at the earliest possible moment. You are also in the position to politely remind people if / when the presentation before yours starts to overrun. Don't feel embarrassed about making a noise when somebody is overrunning; they are being rude by not sticking to their time limit, not you.

3. Have enough handouts

I get really upset when I'm in a room and I don't receive a handout that other people get. Sometimes the conference organizers allow more people in the room than should really be there so you can't always blame the presenter, but it is extremely disconcerting when the person at the front has only made 10 copies for a room of fifty people. Experiences tells me that 30 is a reasonable number of copies to make.

Also, people coming to your session will appreciate receiving a handout at the start, so they can use them for note taking if nothing else. If you're using a PowerPoint presentation, therefore, make sure you make the type big enough that people can read it and write down anything not included on the handout.

4. Stick to what you should be doing

If your session is supposed to be a workshop, make sure it is that. As I suggested in part three, people will want what's written on the tin, so don't start presenting research or deliver a literature review during your workshop; that's not why people are there. If you can stick to what you said you'd be doing, you'll have won half the battle.

5. Don't get led away

Sometimes people in the audience will ask you a question that causes you to go off at a tangent. Such questions may even lead to interesting discussion among several audience members. This is all well and good, but you have an obligation to your entire audience to provide the session you promised to deliver based on what they read in your abstract. If someone asks a question that leads you off in a new direction, you'll soon pick up on the discomfort in the audience, probably a lot more than the person asking the question does.

There are a couple of things I do that are good ways of avoiding this scenario. Firstly, you could announce at the beginning of your session that you won't be answering questions during the presentation but will be allotting five minutes at the end to answer any queries.

Secondly, and this is a good one if a question absolutely throws you, tell the person asking the question that you can't ask them now but would be happy to discuss the issue they've raised after you have finished. These 'solutions' will lead to you having time to deal with such issues without causing harm to the flow of your session.

6. Be nice

Always extend every possible courtesy to your audience; they were after all good enough to choose you over all the other sessions on offer. Speak loudly and clearly (ask people if they can hear you) and respond respectfully to questions, however you have arranged to receive them. A nice touch (which I wish I would remember to do) is to ask the name of the person who's asked the question and then to thank them by name before answering.

7. Don't panic when people walk out

It's happened to the best of us, so don't be alarmed if it happens to you. This doesn't mean that you are doing a bad job; it is more than likely that these people are merely making the most of their time at the conference and hadn't read your abstract clearly enough. Remember: what you're doing will not appeal to everyone. You'll almost always find that there are several concurrent sessions, and as a consequence a few people might take the opportunity to join another when they realize that yours doesn't meet their interests.

8. Tricks of the trade

Here are a few things I always do to make sure that things run smoothly.

Reward with a tasty treat

Have a bag of candies with you. Reward people who respond to your questions or who ask a question with a treat. This sounds really childish but it's surprisingly effective. I go even further and put a candy on the table in front of each participant along with their handout, so that when they walk in they are happily surprised and aren't staring at you.

Get them involved from the off

I always leave a small slither of paper next to the candy with a couple of questions on it relating to my session. Again, this stops this group of people that you don't know from staring at you for a few minutes at the beginning of the session and it gives the participants something to positively focus on. You can also elicit their responses to open your presentation to instantly involve your audience (but don't forget point 5).

Keep them involved

Just as you would plan a variety of tasks in a lesson to maintain interest, vary the way you deliver your session. This could mean showing a short video clip in the middle of your presentation to display how students approach the task you're describing, or even get participants to speculate among themselves on the outcomes of your research before actually delivering your findings. Short activities like these change the focus of the session and get your participants involved.

Thank you for reading my book. If you enjoyed it, won't you please take a moment to leave me a review at your favorite retailer?

Thanks!

Adam Simpson

About the author

Adam has been fortunate enough to spend the last fifteen years of his journey as a lifelong learner working with others in what some call the 'language classroom'. He is currently privileged to have the opportunity to help young adults meet their educational goals at Sabanci University in Istanbul. His professional interests include flexibility within the curriculum and the considered use of technology in the classroom. He occasionally finds time to blog about his life.

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