

A Report on the 43rd TESOL Convention in Denver “Uncharted Mountains Forging New Pathways”

Kyoko Oike

I. Prologue

“Empower Yourself.”

In teaching English we face a wide range of challenges and sometimes meeting the challenge at hand, seems very hard. On occasion, I have attended TESOL conventions (the largest annual international convention for English teachers) to further my professional development.

As an example of the effect the conventions have had on my growth as a teacher, in 2000, I attended the TESOL Convention and met the keynote speaker, Dr. Mary Ashworth. Her speech, titled “Navigating a New Millennium”, was tremendously encouraging. In the speech she used the metaphor of an airplane trying to take off in adverse winds to describe the difficulty of bringing together all involved parties



to reach a common goal: reforms in English education. Her speech, together with a lively on-stage sign language interpretation, greatly inspired and recharged me.

At the conclusion of Dr. Ashworth's speech, I approached her to shake hands and to discuss the upcoming educational reforms in Japan, and how the changes would affect my teaching and my students. She said to me, “Empower yourself.” Since then she has been a lighthouse for me, illuminating the way through the difficult seas of teaching and research.

Then in March 2009, I learned that Dr. Ashworth had passed away the month before. After a moment of shock, I felt the desire to attend the convention in Denver, to be held later that month. The TESOL convention has been a kind of home base for me, a place of origin, to which I must return periodically for inspiration, guidance and now, solace.

II. Five Most Impressive Sessions and Events

“What a great time!”

Landing on the Denver International Airport tarmac, I was warmly welcomed by a

beautiful contrast of clear blue sky and green Rocky Mountains. After registering at the convention, I headed for one of the most important sessions I came all the way from Japan for: “TESOL Research: What? Why? How?”

The 2009 Denver TESOL Convention marked my 6th attendance. Although each TESOL convention was very unique and fruitful, I found the Denver Convention to be the best ever, probably because I had clear objectives in mind and I participated in the convention seeking answers for several prepared questions.

A. Research

The first session was a pre-convention institute, “TESOL Research: What? Why? How?” organized by Anne Burns and Michael Legutke. I felt as if I was taking a class in a Ph.D. program. Starting with “burning questions,” the session illustrated basic issues surrounding educational research. Research was a recurring theme interwoven throughout the convention sessions.

A session entitled “Research Fair: Research Methodology: Qualitative and Quantitative Analyses” organized by Anne Burns, Michael Legutke, Christopher N. Candlin and David Olsher, was truly informative. In this 3-hour session, participants discussed a list of common teaching situations. We learned the steps to gradually grow a research seed into a research project:

- 1) How to set up a good research question
- 2) The use of two kinds of data
- 3) How to collect data
- 4) Data analysis
- 5) Ethical issues: considerations for the research participants
- 6) How to publish in order to share the research findings with other practitioners.

The entire content was taught in a combination of pair discussions and group discussions to deepen each participant’s understanding. Several times during this session, I felt like a Ph.D. candidate. This was exactly why I came here, to be challenged! Later I had a chance to talk personally with one of the organizers and it was really energizing.

B. Global Issues Education

“How important our work is to students’ lives!”

Two impressive sessions were the following: “Nurturing In-Service Language Teachers Affected by Trauma” presented by Dr. Michael Medley and “Peace Education and English Language Learning” by Khadar Bashir-Ali.

In the former session, "Nurturing In-Service Language Teachers Affected by Trauma", Dr. Medley reported on the progress of an ESL teacher in Kosovo, recovering from her traumatic experiences at work. He also outlined a well-tested therapeutic process to help students accept the harsh reality of war and overcome their painful experiences of living in a war zone. As teachers, we could relate to each step of that therapeutic process. The session showed a very deep and insightful collaborative research project, carried out by his team.

In the latter session, "Peace Education and English Language Learning" the presenter talked about her students' living environment where gender bias, bullying and abuse are constantly taking place and how she helped her students overcome the situations. Although we incorporate global issues in our teaching from time to time, for these teachers it is an everyday challenge. Here again they mentioned what a big difference teachers can make in their students' lives.

At the very least, teachers can be a source of emotional support for their students by helping them accept their present reality and by guiding them toward a better future. "Teachers as a guide."

I also realize there are people, not far from where my family is with difficult daily lives. I strongly think we need to expand our capabilities and deepen our humanity to better lead our students into the future with hope, no matter how hard and difficult their situation may be.

C. Specific Language Groups

"Teachers' attitudes do make a great difference to the growth of our students"

I greatly appreciated the third session carried out by Audrei Gesser on "English Instruction to Brazilian Deaf Students: Beliefs and Practices." I had also taught a deaf student in a regular class in the previous year and that experience gave me a strong desire to exchange stories of my experiences with fellow practitioners too. Although there was only one session on this subject this year and participants were few, I found the session to be very informative; the teachers present shared many thoughts. Audrei Gesser's research findings gave me more motivation to work harder on my research project upon returning to Japan.



D. Conference Full of Surprise

"Every day the conference was full of pleasant surprises."



On the second day of the convention, it snowed rather unexpectedly and snow piled up about 10 inches. We all rushed to shoe stores and clothing shops for warm clothing. What a change from the first day! Then we had a blizzard and windy weather all through the convention.



Sessions started as early as 7:30 in the morning and continued until 7 or 8 p.m. I attended sessions throughout the day and enjoyed the variety. It was an honor pleasant experience that I was part of the two newly created Interest Sections: “Materials Writers Interest Section” and “Global Issues Education.”

On the way to the theater to listen to keynote speeches, we were relieved of our exhaustion by street performances, such as Capoeira and African music. The performances gave the conference a cross-cultural touch and we enjoyed the moment, clapping our hands and swinging our bodies to the music.

I attended as many as 24 sessions including workshops and lectures. Also, keynote speeches were held at the theater twice a day and most TESOLers, including me, were busy walking from one side of the Convention Center to the other side. It was quite good exercise.

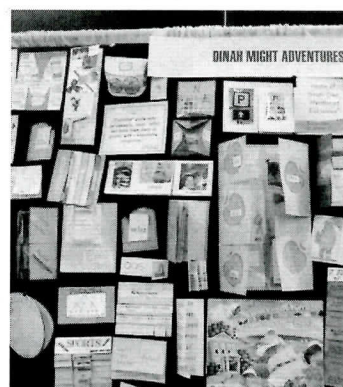
A Session on leadership and professional development: “Leadership in Challenging Times” organized by Denise Murray, MaryAnn Christison, Neil Anderson, David Nunan and Kathi Bailey was another attractive event. It was a collaborative session by several famous TESOL researchers and teacher educators. They demonstrated how to develop a research project from several simple questions and were open to any questions from participants.

E. Sharing, Connecting and Learning

“Sharing, Connecting and Learning: that’s what TESOL is all about.”

Last but not least, I have to mention the greatest characteristic of attending the TESOL Convention: Sharing, Connecting and Learning.

“We do love to talk and there is a lot to talk about.”



Between sessions, I visited exhibitors and publishers booths and exchanged lots of ideas. “Foldables” , by Dinah Might Adventures, gave me practical ideas for teachers to help students organize their cognitive thinking. At the Barron’ s booth, I talked with the iBT TOEFL textbook author, Dr. Pamela Sharpe. I had used her book for my students and I liked the teaching philosophy behind her text design. We discussed current situations surrounding TOEFL examinees and that led to another exchange with one of the sales representatives at the ETS booth. I believe the feedback of text users is greatly beneficial for the development and improvement of a textbook. I also talked to some representatives of STEP, Eiken and the like.

Of course I fully enjoyed the chances to talk with a variety of TESOLers from many parts of the world, who were working on unique research, teaching or learning situations. The TESOLers were made up of M.A. students from various universities, Ph.D. candidates, professors, teachers, teacher trainers, administrators, etc. Conversation started right away upon arrival at the hotel and continued in the hotel lounge waiting for a van, in the van to the Convention Center, at the hall, at the cafeteria, at the theater and over lunch and dinner. We always had lots to talk about and I truly enjoyed these precious opportunities.



III. Epilogue

“Mambo Sawawa, mambo sawawa”

After returning to our home countries, I am sure we will be instantly faced with piles of problems to tackle. However, I realize that we, TESOL practitioners, will always be united and can freely discuss any related matter without worrying about anything.

In this complicated global society, continuing sincere dialog among practitioners will gradually lead to solutions to hard problems and realities. In this sense, the 43rd TESOL Convention in Denver gave us many opportunities to network, exchange sincere dialog and encourage each other. As the African music performer sang the phrase “Mambo sawawa, mambo sawawa” (“We have got this job from the heaven, and we truly enjoy our job,” according to him), I would like to continue to enjoy being engaged in this profession.

Finally the 44th TESOL Convention and Exhibit is scheduled to take place Mar. 24–27, 2010 in Boston, Massachusetts. The theme will be “Re-Imagining TESOL.” I hope to grow as a TESOL practitioner and return for this convention.

