

What We Gain From ELT Professional Presentations

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One common way in which ELT professionals engage in professional development is to attend academic presentations. It is not known, however, exactly what ELT professionals gain from these opportunities. This study was conducted in Japan and the data were collected from participants in presentations given by two eminent scholars in the field by using questionnaire and interview methods. The data indicate that, overall, the participants enjoyed a variety of benefits by attending the presentations (e.g., acquiring academic knowledge, reformulating their ideas on English teaching and learning, and improving their motivation). One particular trend that derived from the data, however, was that the participants addressed what they learned from the presentations from situated professional positions (e.g., as researchers and as graduate students). In conclusion, implications for the presenters, audiences, and organizers of ELT professional presentations are discussed.

英語教育に携わる者が教師としての資質・能力を育成する上で、各学会に参加し、発表を聞く機会を得ることは至極自然なことであるとされている。しかしながら、それらの機会から彼らが具体的に何を学ぶかは現在まで明らかにされていない。そこで本研究は、著名な学者2名による研究発表へ参加した人々の経験を調査することを目的とし、アンケート、インタビューを用いてデータを収集した。結果、参加者はそれぞれの発表から様々な恩恵(新たな知識の習得、既存の考えの修正、モチベーションの向上など)を受けていることが判明したが、特にそれらの恩恵や特有な経験は各々が置かれている職務上の立場(大学教授、大学院生など)によって大きな相違があることが判明した。最後に本研究結果を踏まえて発表者、聴衆、会議の主催者に対して提言を行う。

ELT professionals are expected “to keep up to date with developments in the field, to regularly review and evaluate their teaching skills, and to take on new teaching assignments according to the changing needs of the institution” (Richards & Farrell,

2005, p. ix). Among a plethora of ways to achieve the professional development of ELT professionals (e.g., journal writing, action research, and team teaching), one that has enjoyed relative freedom from empirical scrutiny is attending conferences and listening to academic presentations. JALT (2016), for instance, listed a number of benefits that result from attending presentations at its conferences, some of which are meeting experts, transforming oneself, networking, and building one’s career. TESOL (2016) claimed its convention to be the largest professional development event in the field, with more than 6,500 attendees. It is said to offer attendees an opportunity to gain knowledge of current teaching trends, develop a professional network, and cultivate a global perspective through the exchange of ideas and practices with professionals from around the world. Quite a number of researchers argue that by attending conferences and presentations, attendees can update their knowledge on the latest issues in the field and boost their confidence in trying new skills and techniques (e.g., Crandall, 2001; Murray, 2010; Ur, 2012). These benefits have neither been questioned nor examined until very recently (Borg, 2015). Considering the popularity and cost of conferences, studies that investigate what and how we learn from professional presentations and how this learning can be increased are urgently needed.

Literature Review

Despite the numerous claims of the benefits of attending academic conferences and presentations, the literature has lacked empirical studies until very recently. Borg (2015) carried out the first study of this kind in 2015. He investigated ELT professionals in seven Gulf countries regarding the impact of attending conferences on their professional development. Through questionnaires and interviews, most of the participants indicated that they were positive about their experience of attending conferences and presentations because, for example, they felt that they were able to broaden their knowledge about the use of ELT techniques and that they could take a more favorable attitude toward their jobs. Even more recently, Salas (2016) in a Mexican context and Büyükyavuz (2016) in a

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Turkish context explored this issue. Salas examined why teachers attended conferences, what they experienced, and what they intended to do with the knowledge they acquired. Questionnaire data collected from 32 participants in an international convention suggested that the participants had diverse reasons for attending ELT events (e.g., to learn new teaching methods) in accordance with their particular academic interests and stage of teaching career. In Büyükyavuz's study, data were collected via questionnaire and interview methods from a total of 83 Turkish ELT professionals. The findings showed that they attended conferences principally because they wanted to obtain new information on their profession as well as meet keynote speakers and listen to their presentations. As a result of attending conferences, moreover, the participants in this study became more inclined to use the information and knowledge from the conferences in their classroom practices.

In short, research in this area is very new and therefore lacking in quantity and scope. As a result, not much research has closely investigated how attending presentations affects teachers' professional lives, nor how the effects can be enhanced. I seek to add to this new endeavor by examining data from the attendees of two professional ELT presentations in Japan.

Methodology

In this study I investigated the perceived benefits of those who attended two professional ELT presentations given by two distinguished scholars in the field, both in their 70s. The presentations were held on two different days in 2015 at a university located in one of Japan's southern prefectures. Each presentation lasted about 2 hours. One presenter, from the United States, dealt with issues involving English language teaching methods. The other presenter, from New Zealand, covered topics concerning task-based language teaching.

Questionnaires were distributed to the attendees of the two presentations before the presentations and gathered immediately after. The total number of attendees was 216, and the number of respondents to the questionnaire was 91 (a response rate of 42%). Of the respondents, 41 (45%) were teachers or researchers, 47 (51%) were undergraduate or graduate students, and 3 (3%) were involved in other occupations. I selected two focal participants from among the respondents for subsequent individual interviews, during which I inquired into their experiences of attending the presentations in more depth. In choosing the focal participants, I used both convenience sampling—a way of choosing participants based on their accessibility to the researcher—and a maximum variation sampling strategy—a method that allows the researcher to zoom in on two very different

cases among all the participants in the study (Patton, 2002). As a consequence, Doug (Canadian male university professor in his 40s) and Momo (Japanese female graduate student in her 20s) were selected (names are pseudonyms).

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of two sections (see Appendix A). The first section was open-ended and prompted the participants to write freely about any experiences they had during the presentations. The second section was closed response and asked participants about their profession, their current position at work, their sources of information about the presentations, and their future interest in joining similar events. The responses to the open-ended items were analyzed qualitatively, with attention paid to the meaning of the responses in order to identify salient and recurrent themes. These themes were then analyzed quantitatively, by counting the number of times they appeared. However, because some respondents referred to more than one theme or subtheme in a particular utterance, frequencies do not add up to the total number of teachers (i.e., 41) or students (i.e., 47) (see Tables 1 and 2 below). Finally, responses to the closed-response items were grouped and collated to produce statistics that describe respondents' demographic information.

Interviews

Semistructured interviews (see Appendix B) were carried out to understand the details of the two focal participants' experiences of the presentations (for interview procedures and rationale, see Seidman, 2013). Each interview was conducted by the researcher and lasted about 2 hours in participants' respective mother tongues. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, and Japanese transcripts were translated into English. The data were analyzed qualitatively, focusing on the meaning of the participants' comments in order to identify important and repeated themes.

Findings

Findings from the open-ended questionnaire items and the interviews indicated that, overall, the participants enjoyed a variety of benefits by attending these presentations. One particular feature was that the occupations of the participants affected what they gained. For university professors or researchers and English teachers, the presentations served as an opportunity to reformulate or reconfirm their ideas about teaching and learning as well as regain motivation for their teaching practices and research activities.

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On the other hand, students appeared to gain new knowledge about how best to teach and learn English as well as to increase their motivation for studying English and taking their school courses seriously.

Table 1. What Teachers ($n = 41$) Gained From Presentations

Theme	Frequency
Experience of idea reformulation and reconfirmation	19
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reformulation of their ideas about teaching, learning, and research Reconfirmation of their ideas about teaching, learning, and research 	(12) (7)
Motivation as a teacher	16
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Motivation to become a better teacher Motivation to become a better researcher Motivation to become a life-long learner 	(10) (4) (2)
Others (e.g., exposure to native English, knowledge about presentation skills, and information about the presenters)	10

Reformulation and Reconfirmation

Table 1 illustrates what the participating teachers gained from the presentations (see also Borg, 2015). The most commonly cited benefit was the experience of reformulating and reconfirming ideas about teaching, learning, and research (19 references). One teacher reported, “After listening to the engaging presentation, I remembered the fact that it is important for us to teach both basic grammar rules and communicative aspects of English.” Another noted, “A lot of what he talked about was something I had forgotten because of testing and grading. I now want to bring about students’ curiosity in my class so that they can learn English by themselves.” In a similar vein, several teachers reconfirmed their beliefs with respect to teaching and learning. One teacher stated, “There were many useful and feasible ideas that were not necessarily new to me but those I had not resorted to for a long time.” Another commented, “We teachers should send a message to our students that they should not get bogged down with grammar rules so much. I relearned this fundamental point during the presentation.” Some responses related directly to the reformulation and reconfirmation of research ideas. One teacher summed up, “My knowledge and ideas about the topic were deepened and expanded. I am now more con-

fidant in completing the research on the topic.” Another expressed satisfaction with the presentation by writing, “Very reaffirming presentation—teaching in Japan spends [sic] so much energy on exams that it is easy to lose sight of other important educational pedagogy and research. It was nice to refocus.” This theme of experiencing idea reformulation and reconfirmation was evident in Doug’s interview, too. He stated,

Even though I consider myself to be a very experienced teacher, it is easy to forget to look at my own teaching practice from a different perspective. I recognized a lot of things in the presentation I was already doing, but it helped me to reflect on things that I had gotten away from. So, for me, it was a good reminder.

Motivation as a Teacher

The second most frequently cited theme was connected to motivation (see also Borg, 2015; Büyükyavuz, 2016; Salas, 2016). Due to the presentations, the participating teachers became motivated to be better teachers (10 references), better researchers (four references), and life-long learners (two references). Typical responses included “The presentation made me want to scrutinize my lessons and conduct successful classes for my students”; “While listening to his lecture, I was thinking how I could effectively apply the method in designing my class”; and “It was interesting in that I could learn the detailed procedures and methods for research. I feel like I now have the ability to conduct research on the topic.” Specifically referring to the desire to become a life-long learner, one teacher remarked, “It was a meaningful lecture because it made me want to continue learning about different things in the future.” In the interview, Doug also provided concrete examples of how the presentation had led to changes in his motivation:

I think I got what he intended the audience to get out of the presentation, which is to have passion for teaching and have instructional methods. I will change his activities slightly differently and try them out. His presentation was almost like a wrapped-up present that I could color in my own way.... For me, life-long learning is always important and I will constantly try to be the best teacher and the best researcher.

Other themes included exposure to native English, acquiring knowledge about presentation skills, and getting information about the presenters.

Table 2. What Students ($n = 47$) Gained From Presentations

Theme	Frequency
Knowledge	27
• New ideas about teaching English	(11)
• New ideas about learning English	(6)
• More knowledge about English	(6)
• More knowledge about trends within ELT	(4)
Motivation as a learner	16
• Motivation to learn English	(8)
• Motivation to take university/graduate courses seriously	(5)
• Motivation to conduct research	(3)
Others (e.g., exposure to native English, research topics, and an opportunity to get to know about students from other schools)	14

Knowledge

Some of the key benefits of participating in the presentations for the students were (a) acquiring new ideas about teaching and learning English, (b) gaining more knowledge about the English language, and (c) learning prominent trends within ELT. As can be seen in Table 2, 11 comments referred to acquiring new ideas about teaching English. Some of the statements illustrating this point are as follows: “I felt like my concepts and images about teaching have been completely changed. I began to realize that it is OK to try something new that I thought might not work in actual classrooms”; “I was able to develop new, unique understanding about English teaching methods”; and “I was able to study the TBLT method from A to Z.”

Gaining new ideas about learning English was mentioned six times. Some students learned that “learning English takes more time and curiosity” than they thought, and others were glad to discover that “new ways of learning English seemed fun and efficient.” The students also thought that increasing their knowledge of English is a benefit of attending presentations (six references) because “the presenter was talking in English about English language teaching.” This would have provided a vast amount of English input at an academic level and thereby led the students to believe that their English abilities (especially listening comprehension) were improving. Four students mentioned that

they could get information about the current trends of English language teaching and learning: “I was able to learn what is currently popular and prevalent in this field.” The student participants thus viewed taking part in presentations as worthwhile in regard to getting new knowledge related to teaching, learning, the English language itself, and some current ELT issues. Momo was no exception and commented in her interview:

I learned different kinds of useful tasks for actual classrooms, and evaluation methods for those tasks. The fact that the presenter was a renowned scholar might have helped my learning. However, I was too occupied with all the new knowledge thrown at me that I did not have time to think or envision how we could arrange and modify those tasks for Japanese students. Maybe in-service teachers in the room did not have this difficulty. I don’t want what I learned in the presentation to be an impracticable theory, though.

Motivation as a Learner

Like the teachers and researchers, students benefited from an increase in motivation after participating in these presentations. This was particularly apparent in terms of their motivation for learning English (eight references), for taking university or graduate courses seriously (five references), and for conducting research (three references). Comments about their improved motivation to learn English included “The presentation made me hold a positive attitude for learning English”; “A small change in our perspectives can motivate us to learn English more and deeper. I will study English harder!” and “I want to study English more so that I can understand better when I attend this kind of workshop in the future.”

Five students noted the positive impact the presentations had on their determination to take their school courses more seriously (e.g., “I now want to know more about the topic of the presentation in my future university courses”; “I am taking TESOL courses at my university, and this presentation was a wonderful addition to what I learned in the courses”). In addition to the motivation for learning English and taking courses seriously, three students described their strengthened motivation for conducting research. For example, one said, “The explanation about the research was very clear and concise. It made me want to conduct my own research on the presented topic.” Momo echoed these positive sentiments:

I only experienced, as a learner, English classes where students were given assignments to memorize, and teachers followed routinized instruction before. So the presentation became a good opportunity to break out of my shell? I want to attend

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more of this kind of presentation because, for students like me, it is the only chance to get motivated to learn further.

Other benefits the students gained included listening to native English, finding research topics for their own studies, and having an opportunity to get to know about students from other schools.

Discussion

This study was conducted to inquire into the benefits of ELT academic presentations. Two presentations in Japan given by two prominent scholars in the field were used as the context for this study. Two data collection methods were used: a questionnaire and semistructured interviews. Analysis of the data from the 91 respondents to the questionnaires and the two focal participants who were interviewed revealed that due to the presentations the participants acquired new knowledge, reformulated or reconfirmed their professional ideas, and bolstered their motivation. These findings suggest a number of implications for presenters, audiences, and organizers of ELT academic presentations.

The first and foremost is that presenters and presentation organizers should clarify their target audience. In its current form, the descriptions of presentations are limited to the name of the presenter, the title and abstract of the presentation, and at best the theme or key words of the presentation. However, the target audience should be added. At the time participants were recruited for this study, my primary intention was to single out common themes among all the participants with respect to the benefits of attending presentations. However, the need to consider the professional and academic status of the attendees became immediately apparent when analyzing the data because expectations and experience differed greatly between teachers and students. It is therefore important that presenters keep their target audience in mind during the preparation, delivery, and follow-up of their presentations. They should endeavor to make their presentations relevant to their audiences' professional and academic lives and applicable to their working and learning contexts (Büyükyavuz, 2016).

Moreover, presentations targeting teachers or researchers should have extensive time for discussion and Q&A within the given time frame. The audience can then share their own insights rather than the presenters' keeping control of the whole session. In doing so, there is an opportunity for the audience to provide enlightening perspectives and opinions based on their own backgrounds and experience that could perhaps further enrich the reformulation and reconfirmation of the topic, not only for other audience members but also for the presenters. Presentations tailored to undergraduate and gradu-

ate students could contain a number of detailed theoretical explanations with an array of useful examples. This could help the students imagine how the content of the presentations could be feasibly employed in class rather than remain armchair theories. Furthermore, for English-medium presentations, a translator or a co-presenter who can speak the first language of the audiences should be provided so that the audience can more easily and clearly understand the new knowledge and concepts that might otherwise be difficult to grasp, although this should be done only when necessary. The majority of the participants in this study enjoyed listening directly to the English spoken by the native-speaking presenters. To this end, presenters should provide copies of PowerPoint slides or detailed notes so that the attendees have a secondary source of input and can concentrate on the presentation without the distraction of having to take notes.

Another chief implication is related to the variety of areas in which the attendees became motivated. This suggests that attendees should keep an open mind when attending a presentation, instead of rigidly assuming a certain type of outcome from the presentation judging from the presenter or the topic. Any presentation can contain hints, advice, and the potential to create implicit knowledge for their future teaching, learning, and research. Lastly, program organizers should schedule a debriefing session after each presentation in order that the attendees can talk with other attendees and engage with the new information. This may also increase idea reformulation and reconfirmation, improve motivation, and provide opportunities for networking. In the present format of conferences, it is often the case that attendees do not often go out of their way to talk to other attendees even if they want to and that they have limited time until the next presentation begins.

Conclusion

This study, which was based in Japan, addressed the invitation extended by Borg (2015, p. 44): "Much further work of this kind, though in a range of different contexts, is needed to generate clearer understandings of how attending conferences impacts on ELT professionals and how these impacts can be enhanced." The two groups of participants in this study, teachers and students, were found to gain both similar and dissimilar benefits from the presentations in the ways the presentations developed their knowledge and motivations.

I recognize that this study makes only a small contribution to the topic and that more research is needed. I therefore recommend that future research focus on a broader range of attendees, data analysis methods, speakers, and presentation topics. My study looked at the benefits of attending conferences for teachers and students. However, future

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studies should separate and analyze the participants within the teacher group (e.g., university professor group and secondary school teacher group) and the student group (e.g., graduate student group and undergraduate student group) to discover the unique benefits of attendance for each subset of the groups. Second, the strategies used during the data analysis phase of this study were limited in that they were designed to identify similar benefits between the two presentations. Future research could employ a case study approach and attend to each presentation as a bounded, singular case to detect its distinct strengths and shortcomings (Duff, 2008). We might then be able to shed some light on what constitutes a successful ELT presentation. Possible factors might be related to the personalities, styles, and status of presenters (see Büyükyavuz, 2016), the topic and organization of the presentation, and the size and types of the audience. Finally, it is of importance for future researchers to undertake studies that focus on how to improve the experiences of the attendees by exploring what presenters, audiences, and organizers can do prior to, during, and after the presentation (see Salas, 2016). Empirical research, such as this contribution, can help ELT professionals and students who attend academic presentations gain (or regain) confidence in their professional development. Publication of the positive results of attendance may inspire teachers and students to attend presentations more frequently. Also, the discourse created around the topic of participating in presentations, which has until very recently enjoyed relative freedom from empirical scrutiny, may encourage conference organizers to create learning opportunities and spaces that enhance the professional development of all attendees. Given the time and financial investments often made by professionals and students to attend presentations and conferences, there is an apparent need for more empirical research with the aim of to improving the quality of the professional conference and presentation experiences for all.

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Bio Data

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Appendix A Questionnaire Items

1. What were your overall impressions about the presentation today? (本日の研究講演会の感想をお聞かせください。)
2. Please write down freely your comments and suggestions concerning professional presentations. (どのような研究講演会に興味がおありですか、ご自由にお書きください。)

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3. What is your occupation and position at work? (差し支えなければ教えてください、あなたのご職業は何ですか。)
4. How did you find out about today's presentation? (本日の研究講演会をどのようにお知りになりましたか。)
5. Would you like to attend professional presentations like this in the future? (将来このような研究講演会参加に興味がおありですか。)

Appendix B

Examples of Interview Questions

1. Could you tell me about your experiences in the past in regards to attending professional presentations and conferences? (これまでの研究講演会、学会参加の経験について教えてください。)
2. Could you tell me about your thoughts on the presentation you attended this time in particular? (今回の研究講演会の感想をお聞かせください。)
3. Could you tell me the possible impacts the presentation had on you? What accounts for them? (今回の研究講演会はあなたにどのような影響を与えましたか、理由も添えてお話しください。)