REPORT ON THE 38TH THAILAND TESOL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE, JANUARY 26-27, 2018, CHIANG MAI, THAILAND

Samuel Newbould & Austin Pack

The opening address of the conference encapsulated the ethos and goal of Thailand TESOL 2018, for presenters and attendees to contemplate the "real challenge for teachers to explore, select, and integrate appropriate digital medium and devices in the hope of achieving classroom transformation which truly enhances learners' ability and effectively stimulates the learning process and enthusiasm." This quote, from Thailand TESOL President Paneeta Nitayaphorn, is applicable to teachers worldwide in the 21st century.

The theme of the conference, "Digital Literacy in English Language Learning and Teaching," was well discussed over two days via 127 paper presentations, 50 workshops, and 31 poster presentations. Attendees came from all over the world and included academics, teachers, students, publishers, and teaching organizations. Of note was the large number of workshops conducted by English Language Fellows on behalf of the United States State Department's English Language programmes. In addition, there was a particular emphasis on encouraging local teachers and local language teaching students to attend.

The keynote speech by Charas Suwanwela, a professor emeritus of surgery and current chairman of the Independent Committee for Education Reform in Thailand, highlighted how teaching has moved beyond basic communicative competence to include a range of competencies, including financial, social, and digital. Suwanwela noted that digital literacy is especially important for economically undeveloped areas of the world as it provides new opportunities for engaging in learning. One important example of this is online distance education.

The first day's opening talks also saw plenary speaker Dr. Cynthia White address the topic of margins of practice, or the space and resources available to teachers. Interestingly, White was present at the first Thailand TESOL conference in the 1980s. She recalled that at that time the blackboard, dictionary, and classroom were considered technology. White is currently an associate professor of Applied Linguistics at Massey University, New Zealand and is perhaps best known for her book Language Learning in Distance Education. Her research interests include online and distance learning, agency, and autonomy. Her focus was firmly on pedagogic practices, highlighting the importance for teachers to remember that digital literacy involves exposure to multimedia that includes sounds, images, video, and text, all of which interact, sometimes simultaneously, and demands more of the student than the traditional reading text or listening activity. She went on to stress that digital literacy may also be a challenge for teachers unfamiliar with technology, and called attention to the TESOL Technology Standards which have been developed for teachers and teaching administrators and published by TESOL International Association. These are standards were, developed from practice and research and designed to guide English language educators and administrators on technology use in and out of the classroom. Specifically, she highlighted a point within Standard

2 (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc., 2008), which suggests teachers "stay informed and learn about how to use new technologies for instructional and professional purposes."

The other two other plenary sessions were well attended. Randall Davis, creator of the website Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab (www.esl-lab.com), discussed the importance of embracing and celebrating imperfection on the road to better teaching. He shared experiences from his own career that served as examples of how teachers can learn from their mistakes as they try to overcome the challenge of selecting and using technology to stimulate the learning process and enhance learners' abilities. Additionally, he recommended teachers to 'find their niche' and specialize in one area of technology since keeping abreast of developments in different classroom technologies may be overwhelming.

Dr. Mike Levy, an honorary professor at the University of Queensland and the final plenary speaker, argued that while digital literacy is not a new concept, it is nevertheless of great importance for today's teachers, citing content evaluation and fake news as two examples of its continuing relevance. Levy also addressed a key idea echoed throughout various presentations, that technology should not and cannot replace the element most essential to successful classrooms: the interaction and rapport shared by teachers and students.

Building upon the plenary speeches, key themes of the conference emerged from within the presentations and workshops. Blended learning was especially popular, featuring in 14 different sessions, a number of which addressed issues of practical problems, such as creating valid and reliable online assessments and motivating students through blended learning. Editor-in-Chief of the Regional Language Centre (RELC) Journal, Dr. Marie Yeo, noted that as blended learning has been firmly established within English language teaching, the key question left to educators now is "how to blend."

On the conference's second day, an entire room was given over to discussion of intercultural communication and the need within 21st century language education to develop intercultural competence as a means of fostering global citizens. A colloquium "Increasing Intercultural Competence in Ourselves and Our Students" stressed the importance of teachers being aware of and appreciating intercultural communication issues if they are to teach it themselves.

A final key theme was the use of social media in language teaching, especially in providing motivation and interest for students through authentic and real-world applications. Additionally, the uses of social media by students outside the classroom was highlighted, especially (as mentioned in the keynote speech) in economically developing areas. Mir Sadia Siddequa shared her experience teaching adult learners in Bangladesh and how she uses Facebook groups to develop students' English when they are unable to attend classes due to work commitments.

Both Thailand TESOL and the Empress Hotel did an excellent job organizing and managing the event. Attendees were treated to a feast of a lunch during both conference days. Our only suggestion is perhaps in the future Thailand TESOL can select a venue with more centralized rooms for presentations, as a problem of this conference was many attendees found it difficult to locate several rooms.

Overall the conference was a success. It provided everything important to an academic conference, including intellectual stimulation, new ideas to improve teaching, a better understanding of the latest research relating to the conference theme, and ample opportunities to network and engage with the wider academic community in a welcoming and stimulating environment. For more about the conference, and future Thailand TESOL conferences, please consult the website: http://tesol.conferences.in.th/

REFERENCES

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (2008). TESOL Technology Standards Framework. Retrieved from https://www.tesol.org/docs/default-source/books/bk_technologystandards_framework_721.pdf

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Sam Newbould is currently an EAP tutor at Xian Jiaotong-Liverpool University, he has taught English in universities in China and the UK.

sam.newbould@xjtlu.edu.cn

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Austin Pack has taught English, Greek, and Linguistics since 2007. His research interests include L2 motivation, game development, and technology. Austin has taught at XJTLU since the summer of 2017.

Austin.pack@xjtlu.edu.cn