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## **Benefits of attending ELT conferences outside the Czech Republic**

We attend professional development events to learn from our fellow professionals, share our experiences, get encouraged, stimulated, or just have fun with people who share our interests. Between October 2006 and January 2007, I had the privilege to attend two ELT conferences outside the Czech Republic for all these reasons. First, I represented the ATECR at the 16th Annual IATEFL Hungary Conference in Esztergom, Hungary. Then, I attended the 12th National Conference for Teachers of English in San Jose, Costa Rica.

The conference in Hungary was titled "Personality-Centered English Language Education" whereas the conference in Costa Rica was called "Crossing Frontiers for Innovative Teaching." Obviously, both titles appeal to ELT professionals who seek the best possible practices in teaching English. About 300 people attended the conference in Esztergom, and about 600 attended in San Jose. In Hungary, one could participate in sessions related to mixed-ability groups, learning strategies, successful classroom activities, autonomy, ICT, and so forth. In Costa Rica, the talks likewise focused on a variety of topics ranging from encouraging cooperation among students to integration of all four skills; from issues in teaching grammar and pronunciation to reading for fun to authentic assessment (portfolios and self assessment). Although I could provide details about various sessions and plenary speakers that I had the opportunity to hear or summarize my own presentations, I think it is equally important to reflect on those two conferences and share some observations with you. In fact, I believe one of the biggest reasons to attend an international conference is to experience another culture and language, which is also a significant element of professional development.

Trips to Hungary and Costa Rica made me more than anything realize again of what it is like to try to learn an unfamiliar foreign language. The mastery of just a couple of words of Hungarian was beyond my abilities. How stressful to create unfamiliar and "weird" sounds and say words that I cannot relate to! I did a little bit better in a Spanish-speaking country but still experienced frustration. Saying anything in Spanish was a slow and awkward process for me since my vocabulary is limited. It was even worse when my friend kept stressing that I should nevertheless be trying to improve my language skills by using Spanish as much as possible. I had this mental block and needed time to process the language at my own pace. I felt so much like a typical language learner. Maybe, this feeling was even enhanced by the fact that I was listening to talks about language teaching all day long. It is easy for us, language teachers, who function

in one or more foreign languages with ease to forget what our students experience in our language lessons, especially the low-level ones. I almost think we should constantly be learning another foreign language to stay down to earth in our expectations of our students. After slightly stressful and very beneficial language experiences, I feel I am much more understanding of my language learners and appreciative of their achievements. The question that is yet to be answered is “Will it last long?”

Another benefit of attending an international conference is the opportunity to talk to people with different cultural backgrounds. When we travel, we may be able to interact with local people, but do we really have a chance to learn about the visited country and its education? I always find it interesting to learn about the daily habits and worries of the natives. I become grateful for what we have in our home country or get ideas for improvements. In Hungary, for example, I enjoyed attending a session called “open lesson” which allowed me to see an English language class in Hungary. If I did not know I was in Hungary, I could think that I was in a Czech school. I was encouraged to see similarities not only in a language class but also in the issues that the Hungarian English teachers were concerned about such as understanding of the CEF, reflective teaching, or learner autonomy. Moreover, I was very touched by the incredible warmth and generosity of the volunteers at the conference in Hungary. Feeling welcome in a country makes people want to go back there, but it also inspires us to make people welcome in our home country. But not everything was a positive reminder. In Costa Rica, for instance, I happened to learn that although they introduce English in that country in kindergarten, public high school graduates have very low intermediate level language skills for a variety of reasons, including some instructional problems. Doesn't the problem of years of language instruction versus the level of language skills sound familiar to us? I also learned about a mentoring system at a language school which guarantees a high level of teaching performance among teachers. Interestingly enough, it was highly appreciated by the mentors as well as the mentored teachers. This aspect of language teaching and learning is something we miss, in my opinion, in our schools, and I wish we successfully implement something similar. I am grateful, then, for the opportunities to get new perspectives on old problems.

It is a well known fact that traveling broadens our understanding of the world and increases awareness of global issues. Traveling for professional reasons not only serves those purposes, but it also allows us to reflect upon our practices through an international framework, build expertise in ELT issues outside our home country and thus makes us better professionals. Of course, there is one condition to meet. As Kate Cory-Wright said at her plenary in Costa Rica, reflections need to be acted upon. Only then, we improve as teachers.

To conclude, I want to encourage you to attend international ELT conferences (if you have or haven't done so yet). You can either submit proposals through the ATECR which seeks presenters to represent the Czech Republic at conferences

held by its partner organizations in Europe, or independently. Or you can go as a participant. Get a couple of colleagues together and plan a fun professional trip. I have been told that conferences in Croatia are really nice (professionally and location wise). There is a conference coming up in Budapest in October 2008 that will be very good (lots of participants). It does not matter if you go as a participant or as a presenter: you will always benefit from it in ways that you cannot imagine. I always have.

P.S. For those always looking for new online resources for teaching, there is a useful site I learned about in Hungary: <http://www.webenglish.hu>.