

Conference report

TETA's 2nd International Conference *Advancing the EL Classroom: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, Tuzla, June 13-14, 2014.**Asmir Mešić**

The second international conference organized by members of the Tuzla English Teachers' Association (TETA) took place in June 2014 at the University of Tuzla. The theme of the conference was *Advancing the EL Classroom: An Interdisciplinary Approach*.

The plenary talks and workshops were presented by English teachers, methodologists and linguists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, the UK, the USA and Greece, representing numerous teachers' associations, and publishing houses. What the organizers were really happy about was the fact that the conference brought together over 100 teachers from all parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is not at all an easy task to accomplish, with the country's extremely complicated political and educational structures.

It is worth mentioning that the organizing association, best known by its acronym TETA, established only in 2011, has already organized two very successful international conferences, hosting some of the greatest names in the field of ELT, such as Penny Ur, Peter Medgyes, Mark Andrews, to name just a few. To date, TETA has been involved in the organization of numerous events, including workshops and seminars for teachers in Tuzla Canton, participation in international conferences, and establishing partnerships with other English language teachers associations in the region. All of this has been accomplished in quite a short period of time and on a very limited budget. What adds more weight to its success are the challenging circumstances in which TETA was born, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with thirteen ministries of education at the cantonal and entity levels, each with a high degree of autonomy.

TETA's fellow teachers value that they are trying to address the most relevant issues facing their professional community. The teachers themselves share their own positive experiences and ideas and in turn, TETA gathers feedback on what topics they want covered in the future seminars. These events also provide professional development opportunities for teachers to give presentations and/or facilitate workshops. For example, teachers with less presentation experience are partnered with more experienced fellow teachers, who usually have formal training.

TETA's goal is to set an example which other areas might wish to follow in order to gradually build a network of associations connecting English language teaching professionals in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

After the opening ceremony, in her talk *Where do we go from here?* Penny Ur (Cambridge University Press, UK) provided an overview of what is going on in English teaching methodology, based on perspectives from research, theoretical literature, and educational policy, as well as teaching materials and classroom practice. A critical discussion of the present situation was followed by a discussion of her own expectations – and hopes – regarding future developments: where do we go from here?

George M. Chinnery and Gergo Santha (Regional English Language Office, U.S. Embassy, Budapest, Hungary) in their presentation entitled *What's in it for me? A Complete Guide to RELO for Teachers* invited teachers to discover a multitude of EFL teaching and learning programs and resources available through the Regional English Language Office (RELO) based at the U.S. Embassy Budapest, and to learn about their teacher exchange programs, training programs and grant opportunities, as well as about a wealth of free books, journals, games, mobile apps, and audiovisual materials.

George Kokolas (Express Publishing, UK) presented a workshop called *Knowing your coursebook*, which focused on the essential features a coursebook should have in order to help learners acquire the target language and prepare them for real life situations. New trends in EFL teaching were also discussed as well as how these are incorporated in modern coursebooks. The speaker demonstrated that a badly designed coursebook which at first sight looks simple to teach, may in the long run prove to be quite the opposite.

Alma Pirić (English Language Fellow, University of Banja Luka, B&H) completed the online course she had done in April with a follow-up discussion.

Almedina Tokić (Elementary School 'Šesti mart', Hadžići, B&H), one of the TETA representatives, in her workshop *Teaching Pronunciation: Let's give it a shot!* argued that teaching pronunciation involves a variety of challenges. Most often, teachers find that there is not enough time in class to give proper attention to it. However, when they do find the time for it, their attempt usually results in series of dull unrelated exercises making the lesson highly unsuccessful. While the repetition exercises seem to bear fruit in lower grades, the minimal pair exercises do not yield good results in higher grades and neither does transcription since our students are usually unable to read it. These are the problems teachers face on a daily basis, and the lack of the proper solution usually leads to avoiding teaching pronunciation altogether. However, Tokić claims, pronunciation is one of the language aspects our students should focus on as a part of the L2 acquisition process, and the lack of our ability to teach it should not inhibit them. The workshop included several practical exercises teachers may use when they do find the time to teach pronunciation.

The second plenary talk, entitled *From Human Rights to Conflict Resolution: Language for Peace and Cross-Cultural Acceptance*, was given by Mary Lou McCloskey (English Language Specialist, U.S. Department of State). The presenter shared processes and outcomes of the Teaching Tolerance Through English Project. In this project, teen learners of English and their teachers developed their language while learning about one another and building knowledge, skills and dispositions to be peace builders.

The second day started with Peter Medgyes's plenary talk *Why won't the little beasts behave?* Peter, who is a Vice-President of IATEFL and a Patron of SOL (Sharing One Language), UK, returned to the classroom to teach a group of 15-year-olds, after nearly twenty years of absence, just to find himself unable to cope with the students' misbehaviour. This made him wonder whether the kids are any worse today than their predecessors were. As a matter of fact, there were numerous questions to be answered. What is classroom discipline? How do you judge the "train → disobey → punish → obey" paradigm? If without discipline there is no effective teaching, why do ELT authors still give this problem short shrift? And why do teachers not discuss it either? All of these questions were discussed during the presentation, which the audience clearly enjoyed. The teachers were also asked to which category of teacher they belong: that of the strict and scary, the firm but fun, or the soft and shaky teacher, and then the presenter tried to answer the question 'How does the reflective teacher view classroom discipline and the problems relating to it?' After the presentation, many of the teachers felt that in the future they would look at the student misbehaviour from a different perspective.

George Kokolas's second workshop was about *Applying Multiple Intelligence Theory in EFL Teaching*. He observed that Dr. Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory is being increasingly applied in the field of foreign language learning in an attempt to develop parallel coping strategies across the whole spectrum of language skill areas. The talk discussed the specific application of MI Theory to current EFL practice and its resultant implications in understanding second language acquisition.

Joseph Lough, Jasmina Husanović, Damir Arsenijević and Selma Veseljević Jerković (University of Tuzla, BiH) presented a workshop entitled *American Studies in BiH: Key Challenges and Opportunities*. Taking as its starting point recent developments in the field of international American studies, the lecturers contended that when applied in a specific national context, American studies in Bosnia and Herzegovina display certain departures from the generally recognized trends. To support this claim, the lecturers addressed the issues of the emergence, the application, and finally, the institutionalization of American studies in BiH. They also claimed that while it can be said that there is great research potential for American studies, it is also the case that in the past, the local context, the practitioners' goals, immediate geo-political circumstances, and academic infrastructure have more than incidentally shaped the way American studies have subsisted in B&H. The presenters argued that without a more concrete action on the part of the Academia, this will

continue to be the case in the years to come. The aim of the workshop was to enhance the research potential and the knowledge production in the sphere of the American studies in BiH.

Sandra Vida (IATEFL Slovenia) in a very practical workshop, *Using Visuals to Promote Speaking*, presented some low tech activities using visuals that will help learners repeat, expand, and creatively use their language both in general English and in professional environment.

Another TETA representative, *Nizama Muharemagić* (Elementary School '25. novembar', Velika Kladuša, BiH) took part with a workshop entitled *Mind Maps 101: Unleash Your Brilliant Mind*. The workshop introduced the notions of radial thinking and its physical manifestation in the form of mind maps, as a means of overcoming everyday obstacles EFL teachers cope with in teaching and motivating their students. The presenter pointed out that advantages of using mind maps in EFL teaching are multiple: awaking interest in students, lessons becoming more creative and enjoyable, presenting relevant material in a clear and easily memorable form, students' tendency to get better marks in examinations, and giving students deeper understanding of the subject. Participants were also able to see examples of practical application of mind-mapping in EFL primary school classes, with students of different age groups. During the practical part of the workshop, participants worked in groups and created their own mind maps related to different EFL subjects and obtained practical skills of mind-mapping.

In her second talk, *Using Lesson Time*, *Penny Ur* (Cambridge University Press, UK) discussed some common ways classroom time is wasted. She observed that as teachers, we have various resources at our disposal: ourselves and our own teaching skills; the learners themselves; textbooks and learning materials; other facilities such as computers, video; lesson time, and explained that of all of these, the most flexible and the most easily used - or abused - for learning is lesson time. It is also the one that has been least discussed in the literature. The presenter suggested practical guidelines for optimizing use of lesson hours for teaching/learning.

Rakesh Bhanot (Sharing One Language, Devon, UK) in a workshop entitled *Will You Be a Better Teacher Next Year?* observed that following initial training, some teachers may have few possibilities for further professional development. Moreover, many courses aimed at English language teachers require considerable financial investment as well as time and effort; not to mention the 'blessings' of the employer. Therefore, the presenter attempted to answer the question 'how can teachers know that their professional practice is changing for the 'better' over a given period of time - without incurring heavy costs and having to attend (or seeking permission to attend) formal courses?' In the workshop, the lecturer examined a variety of strategies that can be adapted in order to enhance professional practice in ELT.

Ilhana Škrgić (TETA, Elementary School '25. novembar' Velika Kladuša, BiH) presented a workshop *Mind Matters: The Cognitive Dimension as a Window to Better Learning*. Starting with the observation that we often regard our students as eager

little “sponges” that can learn a great range of vocabulary simply by being introduced to new words and phrases, the presenter believes that the way of presenting second language items in a formal educational setting does not often correspond to their tremendous mental abilities. She argued that motivation through raising cognitive awareness provides useful connections of lexical fields, mental images and corresponding physical experience which, in turn, facilitates quality learning. Teaching young EL learners basic mental concepts of spatial orientation and related physical phenomena means using simple cognitive tools and methods in order to transform the EL classroom from a 2D space into a 3D environment with rich and expressive learning atmosphere.

After his plenary talk, *Peter Medgyes* (Vice-President of IATEFL, A Patron of SOL - Sharing One Language, UK) gave a workshop entitled *Teaching English Is a Political Act - a non-P.C. Dialogue*. He suggested that, for good or ill, teachers are political animals. He claimed that education is a political act and we are unwittingly involved in a power game in and outside the school. We are powerful and powerless at the same time: powerful in relation to our students, and powerless in terms of our social status. To be sure, TESOL is the politically most charged subject in the school curriculum. In order to assess universality of this claim, the lecturer had circulated a questionnaire in which fellow-professionals were requested to answer some embarrassingly non-P.C. questions about the role of politics in TESOL. This talk reported on their responses.

In her workshop *Making Homework Relevant*, *Lea Sobočan* (IATEFL Slovenia) pointed out that the words “For your homework...” are often followed by groans and grunts from our students. She found that we will probably never get students to actively look forward to homework, but by giving them motivating, real-life examples of language they can search for or fun tasks to carry out, we can alleviate the burden to some extent.

Ivana Marković (ELTA Serbia) dealt with the issue of Business English coursebooks for secondary students, which in her view do not correspond to the needs of our Facebook-oriented-what-business-are-you-talking-about teenage Business English students. Her workshop *I see you mean business. - No, I don't.* attempted to present activities that would help our students to think about business in a different way, so they can make connections to learning Business English.

In *George Kokolas's* (Express Publishing, UK) third workshop, *English For Professional And Vocational Achievement*, the focus was on the practicalities of teaching EOP (English for Occupational Purposes). The needs of the students and the role of the teacher were discussed, in combination with the context in which teaching takes place as well as which results should be a motivating and useful learning experience, productive for all concerned. Practical suggestions were given relating to the structure of a course and tips were given regarding individual lessons.

Dragana Filipović (Pearson, UK) in her workshop *The Choice is Yours* observed that life is full of difficult choices, such as choosing between going to the gym and staying in bed, between marking some more writing and switching on the TV.

According to the presenter, for teachers of English planning and managing successful lessons also involves making choices. Decisions must be made about which areas of language to focus on and which contexts to set this language in; which methodology to use and what sort of activities to include; and how best to prepare upper-secondary students for the school-leaving exam. This session looked at the decision making in the language classroom and analysed the factors involved in making the most beneficial choices for our students. In doing this, the participants explored a variety of methodological approaches and practical activities to take back to the classroom.

Ivana Kirin and *Marinko Uremović* (HUPE, Croatia) gave a workshop entitled *Speaking Skills for EFL: Practicing and Assessing Discussions*, in which they argued that discussions, either whole-class or small-group, tend to break down for many reasons, as all teachers have probably experienced at one time or another. They emphasised the importance of this type of activity for students, suggesting that despite all problems teachers face, it should be used on a regular basis. They looked at some of these problems and how to deal with them and offered possible solutions as well as a number of steps and ready-made materials to address teachers' weaknesses when it comes to preparing discussion-based activities for our students. The special focus of the workshop was on small group discussions. Finally, they showed how discussions can be used to assess students' knowledge.

In the last of her talks, *Penny Ur* (Cambridge University Press, UK) explained that student motivation is one of the crucial issues in language teaching: if students are motivated they learn better, and the lessons are more pleasant and productive for both learners and teacher. She has found that perhaps the best way of motivating students is to make our lessons interesting. *Ur* pointed out that one problem with this is that the textbooks we use may not be interesting: topics may not be relevant or attention-catching; tasks may not involve any interesting challenge. So-called 'communicative' activities or the use of 'authentic' texts do not necessarily help; for the crucial point here is not how relevant to real life the topic or language use is. It is, rather, whether the task is interesting enough in itself – for whatever reason – to make the learner feel he or she wants to participate. In her workshop *Making textbook exercises interesting*, the participants looked at, experienced and discussed some textbook activities, and were able to see what happens if we try to change the way they are actually done in the classroom: what makes them more – or less – interesting for participants? In conclusion, the presenter tried to define some practical theories about what is and is not conducive to learner interest in classroom activities.

Mary Lou McCloskey (English Language Specialist, U.S. Department of State) demonstrated how TPR can build language, content knowledge and skills, and community in language classrooms at various ages and stages of language development. In her workshop *Total Physical Response for many ages and stages*, the participants learnt a variety of chants and action sequences and acted out the story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott in the US civil rights era.

In the workshop *Creative Writing Toolbox for Writing Beyond Borders*, Christina Nichol (English Language Fellow, University of Prizren, Kosovo) informed the participants that in November and December of 2013, students from the University of Prizren and from the University of Pristina participated in NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writer's Month), an event concurrently taking place in the U.S. They signed a contract to write a page a day in English for the month of November. During the month of October, they first warmed students up with creative writing exercises about plot, setting, description, tone, and character development. In the second month students wrote a story. Students who had never written a story before, let alone in English, were all able to finish stories of significant themes. After that they chose a partner and helped edit each other's work. The whole process significantly increased their confidence and their ability to express themselves in English. The collection of their short stories has been published. The workshop narrated the process of the whole project and included writing prompts and other creative writing activities.

In a practical workshop entitled *Engaging Students with Readers*, presented by Nick Goode (Macmillan Education, UK) the participants looked at ways to use graded readers in class, including a range of activities designed to get students to 'buy in' to these resources. The workshop also included an overview of what a graded reader actually is, for example the mechanics of how the texts are graded down and the scope of the current Macmillan Readers range.

Božica Šarić-Cojtković (ELTA Serbia) in her workshop *Let's talk about speaking!* concentrated on the problem of many students who perform well on tests but find it difficult to express their own opinion fluently. The workshop attempted to show that preparing students for speaking activities can increase the use of spoken language in the classroom. According to the presenter, it is about finding ways and time for practicing speaking effectively. She looked at problems and offered solutions for speaking activities, believing that there is always something that we can skip in favour of a little talk.

In her workshop *Checking Students' Understanding* Sabina Skenderović Bakir provided different ways of checking students' understanding, for both elementary and high school students. TPR method was applied for young learners. Some techniques were used to involve students with certain styles of learning and with specific kinds of intelligence in focus so multiple intelligence theory was applied. Other ways of checking students' understanding included use of cognitive skills. There were also ways which included interaction of students without teacher's direct involvement. Whilst some of the techniques were appropriate for large classes, others were suitable for the small ones. Each technique also has its place in the lesson plan: the beginning, mid or end of the lesson. This vast array of ways of checking students' understanding, according to the presenter, is an essential tool for creation of an interactive and fruitful learning environment.

Danielle Capretti (English Language Fellow, University of Tirana, Albania) delivered a workshop entitled *Hey, Kids Let's Put on a Show! EFL Through Drama*. It

was a participatory workshop which guided teachers through mounting a theater production with their students. Participants contributed their ideas about each stage of the process, as well as receiving additional guidance from the trainer. Areas covered included: 1) choosing a script, 2) casting the show, 3) bringing the text to life, 4) rehearsing and 5) preparing actors for opening night. By the end of the workshop, participants gained an enhanced understanding of how to organize a successful student show. Ultimately, the process requires an interdisciplinary approach, marrying language acquisition, theater performance and Anglo-American culture studies.

The final plenary talk *Clearing The Ground and Clearing Our Minds - before we start teaching and learning!* was delivered by *Rakesh Bhanot* (Sharing One Language, Devon, UK). Having been involved in many aspects of ELT for over 40 years, the presenter shared some of his delights and doubts about our profession by addressing basic questions such as 'what do we mean by teaching and learning? What is English? Do we just teach language in the class, or much more?'

The conference closing ceremony included each presenter's brief summary of their own impressions of the event, as well as the reactions of the audience. They all expressed great satisfaction with the overall organisation and the realisation of the event and are looking forward to being invited to TETA's third international conference.

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