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## Impact of ELT conferences in Iran on Participants: Exploring EFL Keynote Speakers and Conference Organizers' Attitudes

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### Abstract

The main goal of this research was to evaluate the efficiency of Iranian ELT conferences and their impacts on participants. To this end, the researcher interviewed six keynote speakers and four conference organizers. Keynote speakers were foreigners, while conference organizers were Iranian. Both keynote speakers and conference organizers agreed on the effectiveness of ELT conferences in Iran. They mentioned that attending these conferences has benefits, such as networking with researchers in other contexts, professional development of participants, and familiarity with various research areas in different contexts. They pointed out some weaknesses and limitations of these events, including low quality of papers and presentations and organizing and management issues, which could be demotivating for participants. In this regard, they also proposed helpful suggestions for improving the quality of these conferences.

**Keywords:** Attitude, Conference Organizers, ELT Conferences, Keynote Speakers, professional Development.

### Introduction

In-service teacher (INSET) programs area significant debate in English language teaching (ELT). According to Glotthorn (1995), teachers usually develop professionally as a result of achieving enhanced experience and systematic evaluation of their practice. INSET programs are beneficial ways for the professional development of teachers. Conferences are prevalent and comfortable in INSET programs because they are short-term (usually three to four days) and are available regularly. Thus, many teachers worldwide attend national and international conferences every year. The main aim of participants is their professional development.

However, the impact of conference participants teachers' professional development and practices has been evaluated. Therefore, this research attempted to investigate the effects of attending Iranian ELT conferences on teachers' professional development and teaching practices from the perspective of keynote speakers and conference organizers.

### Background

Understanding the reasons for participants to attend an INSET program and the significant number of participants

helps us know the significance of participating in these programs for the professional development of contributors. Various INSET programs, according to their intention, context, and allocated time, may have different objectives; therefore, varieties of elements should be regarded in their effectiveness evaluation. Nevertheless, as Sandholtz (2002) stated, a significant factor in the effectiveness of these programs is to place participants and their needs at heart and to engage them not only in the program's activities but also in the planning step.

In developing countries, the objectives of INSET programs are different from rich countries. INSETs in developing countries focus on providing primary qualifications for poorly trained teachers. In these countries, INSET should consider factors including changing teachers' behavior, local context, replicability of skills, follow-up programs, support, and ongoing development (Courtney, 2007). Previous research into the evaluations of INSET programs showed that long-term INSET programs are more effective than short-term programs. Teachers participating in long-term INSETs in Garet et al.'s (2001) study claimed that these programs have highly impacted their active learning, including observing teaching and being observed while teaching, and other parts of their jobs, such as those relating to their aims and experiences.

Moreover, these programs positively improved teachers' knowledge and skills, consequently leading to some changes in their practices. On the other hand, Roberts

(1998) indicated that although short-term workshops are more common but less effective and a short course, in order to be effective, should complement the activities of the school. Even Tomlinson (1988) claimed that short-term INSET programs are risky and the drawbacks of their attendance outweigh their privileges. On the contrary, Borg (2015), by favoring conferences as short-term programs, stated that they lead to improvements in participating teachers' confidence, motivation, and knowledge.

Although about two decades ago, Gebhart and Oprandy (1999) emphasized the significance of conferences within other INSET programs such as observation, monitoring, courses and seminars, reading literature, informal dialogue, qualification programs, and personal and group research, less has been researched. They stated that by presenting research at conferences, teachers show their competence, contributing to the community of professional teaching. However, the extent of the impact of attending conferences on participants in various contexts is different. For instance, the Malaysia conference is considered a relatively efficient INSET, and three-quarters of participants in the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) informed high or medium impact of this program (OECD, 2009).

INSET programs can have a different effect on teachers, including on their attitudes and beliefs, practices, knowledge, as well as the achievement of their students (Asu, 2004). In their study, Birjandi and Hesari (2010) used questionnaires and interviews to reveal

teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of INSET programs in Iran. It was revealed that 40% of teachers strongly agreed, and 30% agreed that teacher educators are skillful in the theoretical part of the INSET courses. Teachers assumed that although these programs enhance their knowledge and skills, they are more theoretical than practical. Moreover, some teachers suggested it would be more effective than INSET programs to separate teachers' classes based on their levels.

Borg (2015) mainly explored the advantages of conferences for participants from different Gulf countries in his study. His findings revealed that increasing participants' knowledge of ELT, familiarity with other contexts of EL, motivation for attending upcoming conferences, self-confidence as a professional teacher, and collaboration with other researchers were the main benefits of this event. In another study, Aubrey and Coombe (2010) investigated the benefits of participating in conferences of TESOL Arabia. Their results showed that the impacts of these conferences on teachers were creating a network with others, providing recent trends in the fields and professional development. However, they complained about the distance and cost of conferences and the combined effect of these events on participants' teaching practices.

Moreover, Büyükyavuz (2016) evaluated the ELT teachers' attitudes about the reasons for participating in conferences. The outcomes revealed that obtaining new knowledge in ELT and visiting plenary speakers were their main reasons for participation. Nevertheless, the expense of

attendance was a limitation of these events from the viewpoints of this study's participants.

Like other parts of the world, ELT teachers in Iran attend national and international conferences, which are sometimes sponsored by related authorities. As a significant element of effectiveness, the setting of INSET programs should be collaborative and convenient (Uysal, 2012). However, according to the researcher's experience, most of the participants are not active. They do not collaborate with others, and they go to the conferences only for one day or even one hour for their presentation without participating in other lectures and sections. Besides, it is not apparent to what extent conferences achieve their claimed objectives on their websites and brochures. However, a particular study investigating the effectiveness of Iranian ELT conferences, precisely the attitude of keynote speakers and conference organizers, is rare as the primary decision-makers of conferences in this regard. Therefore, this study attempts to evaluate the efficiency of Iranian ELT conferences and their impacts on participants based on the attitudes of keynote speakers and conference organizers.

To achieve the objectives of this research, the following research question is guided this study.

What attitudes do keynote speakers and conference organizers hold toward ELT conferences and their effectiveness as a professional development tool in Iran?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The researcher interviewed keynote speakers and conference organizers to evaluate the efficiency of Iranian ELT conferences and their impacts on participants. For selecting these participants, convenience sampling was applied. According to Farhady (2008), in availability sampling, participants are selected based on their availability and willingness to participate in the research. More than 12 foreign keynote speakers who attended previous Iranian ELT conferences and 15 conference organizers were contacted through email, from which only six and four answered the interviews. All 10 Keynote speakers and conference organizers were university professors in the ELT field. Keynote speakers were foreigners, while conference organizers were Iranian.

### **Data collection**

Considering the main aims of this study, an interview was designed as a data collection tool (Appendix). The interview is a "legitimate research method" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 48) which is considered "a versatile approach to doing research" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 3) and provides in-depth data from participants about the intended topic. Interviews were conducted with six university professors as foreign keynote speakers who attended Iranian ELT conferences and four organizers of these conferences. The interviews were collected through emails from participants. Moreover, thematic analysis is used for analyzing interview questions. The thematic analysis gives "a detailed description of the data set, or a detailed account of one particular aspect"

(Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). Based on this method of analysis, the researcher read and reread the transcribed data to create primary codes to be more familiar with the collected data. Next, codes were arranged into possible themes. Then, after reconsidering themes, each of those themes was named. Finally, an analysis report was prepared (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Results**

Interviews included five open-ended questions, and the responses to these questions were thematized along with representative quotes from the participants. The first question asked them about the main benefits of attending ELT conferences and their effects on the professional development of participants. Themes that have emerged from the answers of keynote speakers and conference organizers were as follows:

- a) Networking with researchers in other contexts
- b) Professional development of participants
- c) Familiarity with various research areas in other contexts

a) Almost all of the keynote speakers and conference organizers agreed that networking with researchers in other contexts is one of the main benefits of attending ELT conferences.

Participant D:

"... meet so many Iranian academics, administrators, graduate students as well as people from other walks of life gave me a deep appreciation and fondness for the Iranian people."

Participant H:

“Socialization of prospectus scholars with the members of their professional community.”

b) They also believed that attending conferences positively affects participants' professional development.

Participant A:

“When teachers attend conferences, they can learn about new findings related to different aspects of teaching and learning. This will help teachers' professional development.”

c) Familiarity with various research areas in other contexts was another benefit of conferences from respondents' points of view.

Participant B:

“...the possibility to hear about the research being carried out in Iran and discover the research areas Iranian academics find important.”

Participant G:

“Knowing more and learning more about one's research topic”

Moreover, one of the keynote speakers explained that attending such conferences would change their presentations and affects their professional development.

Participant J:

“The teachers shared with me the challenges they would face in their local context. This, in turn, makes me reflect on the content of my workshop and plenary and how, in the future, I might present my ideas in ways that would make participants more open to considering how they might be adapted to their teaching/learning environment.”

Another keynote speaker believed that the benefits of conferences are not the same and depend on their quality; high-quality conferences have more positive effects than low-quality conferences on the professional development of participants.

Participant E:

“Obviously, a high-quality conference can be a profound PD experience for those who are invested in the process of learning from the conference. However, poor quality conferences, badly prepared and presented papers, and participants at a conference for reasons other than to grow professionally can all undermine the potential benefits.”

The second question of the interview was about the extent of achieving the main objectives of ELT conferences in Iran. The respondents, both keynote speakers and conference organizers, mostly believed that the Iranian conferences, to a great extent, achieved their goals, although they had some drawbacks.

Participant H:

“I believe that there was no problem in the performance of our conferences and they fulfilled what they intended.”

Participant J:

“They have had acceptable and satisfactory activities; however, some did not achieve all the objectives they were advertising on their websites.”

The third interview question asked about the differences between the academic level and quality of ELT conferences in Iran and other countries. Surprisingly, all keynote speakers and conference organizers agreed that the quality and academic level of Iranian ELT conferences are similar to ELT

conferences in other countries, or the difference is not significant.

Participant F:

"I did not notice any differences between the conference in Tehran and other academic conferences that I attended in other countries."

Participant B:

"... The difference in quality is not as significant as the difference in many other areas in comparison."

The fourth interview question was about the limitations and shortcomings of Iranian ELT conferences. Only in this question keynote speakers and conference organizers had relatively different answers. Some keynote speakers noted that the limitations and weak points of conferences are:

a) Low quality of papers and presentation

Participant G:

"... Lack of high-quality vetting for presentations"

Participant C:

"... some papers and presentations reduce the quality of conferences"

b) Organizing and management issues

Participant A:

"... I may just suggest that they become more disciplined."

Participant I:

"... the conference schedule should be strictly followed"

However, conference organizers had different views in this section, and they pointed to different reasons for the failure to attract scholars and foreigners, including a) financial issues of Iranian institutes for inviting keynote speakers and b) political and social issues of the country for foreigners.

a) A number of the conference organizers asserted that the financial issues of Iranian institutes are a barrier to inviting keynote speakers.

Participant F:

"Because of financial limitations, we cannot invite keynote speakers."

Participant H:

"We cannot accommodate many high-quality scholars."

b) Moreover, some of the conference organizers claimed that because of the country's political relations with other countries and social issues of foreigners in Iran, such as clothing and hijab, some foreigners are unwilling to attend these conferences.

Participant D:

"... and some foreigners may not feel free to have different clothes to attend a conference in our country."

Participant A:

"... Social limitations for some sectors of foreigners."

Participant J:

"Political issues that make many foreigners refrain from participating"

The last interview asked participants' opinions about how Iranian ELT conferences can improve their effectiveness. Their suggestions were: a) providing guidelines for presentations and double-blind review of submitted papers, b) being more disciplined and organized, and c) inviting more keynote speakers.

a) Conferences should provide guidelines for presentations and a double-blind review of submitted papers.

Participant I:

"... the quality of conferences can be enhanced by selecting more robust abstracts and setting out panel discussions and symposia through which a group of experts can present and reflect on their research."

Participant A:

"Better vetting of papers and clear guidelines on delivering an effective oral presentation, i.e., NOT reading a paper verbatim!"

b) Conferences should be more disciplined and organized.

Participant E:

"... Some conferences have management issues; they should pay more attention to it."

c) They should invite more keynote speakers

Participant B:

"I guess my only suggestion would be to invite plenary speakers representing theoretical perspectives that challenge educators to question their thinking and reflect on their current research and pedagogical practice. Nevertheless, that should be the goal of conferences in all parts of the world."

However, there were two more important suggestions for improving the quality of these conferences. The first one was the general evaluation of conferences' effectiveness. The second suggestion was the financial support of both Iranian conferences and participants and facilitating the participation of foreigners in Iranian conferences by related authorities.

Participant C:

"In my opinion, conferences must evaluate their effectiveness to improve their quality in future conferences."

Participant F:

"National conferences and participants should be financially supported, and there should be facilitators for international participants to attend Iranian conferences."

**Discussion**

This study attempted to investigate the extent of Iranian ELT conferences' efficiency and the effect of attending these conferences on teachers' development and practice. Attitudes of keynote speakers and conference organizers are investigated through interviews.

The first question asked about the benefits of attending ELT conferences; based on the answers, the below themes have emerged: Networking with researchers in another context, professional development of participants, and familiarity with various research areas in other contexts.

The results of this question are compatible with Borg's (2015) findings which were networking with other researchers, enhancing self-confidence and motivation, and improving their practice as a result of enhancing knowledge of the field. In the same way, based on Aubrey and Coombe (2010), the main benefits of these events were creating a community of teachers and the professional development of participants. Moreover, Büyükyavuz (2016) concluded that one benefit of attending conferences is obtaining new information in the field.

The second question of the interview was about the extent of achieving the main aims of ELT conferences in Iran. Keynote speakers and conference organizers mostly believed that the

objectives of Iranian conferences were significantly achieved, although they had some limitations. However, since the effectiveness of these conferences is less evaluated, and they did not investigate the participants' attitudes in a comprehensive study, their opinion about achieving the objectives of conferences is only based on their perception.

In the third question, all of the keynote speakers and conference organizers were agreed that the quality and academic level of Iranian ELT conferences is similar to ELT conferences in other countries or that the difference not significant.

The last two questions of the interview inquired about the respondents' opinions about the observed limitation and shortcomings of Iranian ELT conferences they have attended, as well as their suggestions for improving the quality of these conferences in the future. Participants of the conferences referred to drawbacks and limitations such as low quality of papers and presentations and time management and organizing issues. However, Keynote speakers talked less about the limitations and shortcomings of Iranian ELT conferences. They mentioned the low quality of papers and presentations and management and organizing issues. The main reasons are that, as they mentioned in the interviews, some attended only one conference in Iran. In addition, they usually did not visit all sections and presentations of that conference; therefore, they possibly were unaware of all the issues in these conferences like other participants. Some conference organizers related the limitations of attracting international

keynote speakers and presenters to the subjects such as financial issues of Iranian institutes for inviting keynote speakers, political relations of the country with other countries, and social issues of foreigners in Iran such as clothing and hijab. These reasons seem to be argumentative.

Finally, keynote speakers and organizers proposed practical suggestions for improving the quality of these events, such as providing guidelines for presentations, double-blind review of papers, making conferences more disciplined and organized, and attracting more keynote speakers. Suggestions of some organizers of the ELT conferences were financial support of both Iranian conferences and participants and facilitating the participation of foreigners in Iranian conferences.

Based on the above discussion, it can be interpreted that, although the keynote speakers and the conference organizers agreed on the efficiency of ELT conferences in Iran, they pointed out some weaknesses and limitations in these events, which may be demotivating for participants. In this regard, they proposed valuable suggestions for improving the quality of these conferences.

### **Conclusion**

The main goal of the research was to evaluate the efficiency of Iranian ELT conferences and their impacts on participants. To this end, the researcher interviewed six keynote speakers and four conference organizers. Generally, all participants of this study agreed on the productivity of these conferences. Nevertheless, they pointed out some drawbacks and limitations of these events.



Finally, they proposed some recommendations for removing or at least decreasing the adverse effects of these drawbacks and improving the effectiveness of these conferences.

Different clients may benefit from this research's findings, including conference organizers, keynote speakers, university instructors, school teachers, graduate students, and related authorities that sponsor teachers to attend conferences. Conference organizers should evaluate their conferences through different methods and by investigating the attitude of different participants, including keynote speakers, teachers and instructors, and graduate students. Keynote speakers also should pay more attention to the needs of local teachers and provide more practical workshops rather than focusing only on the theory. Teachers and graduate students, as the main participants of conferences, should improve the quality of their papers, not only participate to get an attendance certificate.

Participants of this study were only six keynote speakers and four conference organizers; therefore, the results may not be generalized to all Iranian ELT conferences. Conducting similar studies with more participants in the field of ELT, as well as other fields of study, is recommended.

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#### Appendix: Interview Questions

One\_ What are the main benefits of attending a conference?

Two\_ Do you believe that attending conferences affects participants' professional development?

Three\_ Do you think that the academic levels and quality of Iranian ELT conferences are the same as conferences in other countries? If not, what are their differences?

Four\_ What are the limitations and shortcomings of Iranian ELT conferences?

Five\_ In your opinion, how Iranian ELT conferences can improve their effectiveness?

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