

## Dealing with Success: The Changing Face of the IATEFL Conference

Ghana to Gibraltar, Germany to Guyana, the Annual IATEFL Conference attracts speakers from the world over; each hoping to fulfil their professional development needs. For some it's the chance to represent a school, ministry of education or local teaching association. For others it's the launch of a new ELT product, the chance to present alongside 'big' industry names, or exchange with those from a particular interest group. While for newbie presenters, it's the chance to cut their teeth on the international conference circuit. For speakers and delegates alike, it's the chance to recharge those proverbial intellectual batteries and network with like-minded ELT souls.

### Proposals process

If you've ever submitted a proposal to speak at an IATEFL Conference, then you'll already have an idea of how it works. Assuming you are a member of IATEFL, proposals are welcomed from all areas of the field, however niche or country-specific. By mid-September once the deadline for submissions is passed, the Proposals Committee, consisting of four experienced ELT practitioners, work tirelessly to read both abstract (50-60 words) and summary (200-250 words) to ensure that each proposal conforms to the set criteria. Proposals are read 'blind' with any allusion to the name of the speaker removed to ensure impartiality. Speakers are then informed of the final decision in late November.

### Growing numbers

However, 'victim' of our own success, statistics for the 46<sup>th</sup> Glasgow Conference (563 presenters and 2,313 delegates) indicate that we have long outgrown many of our old venues and even purpose-built conference centres are at maximum capacity. With IATEFL membership now close to 4,000 worldwide; it comes as no surprise that the number submitting proposals has also increased. While the period 2008-2010 brought in 550-600 proposals a year, in 2011 we received 800! The result this year was that for the first time ever the Proposals Committee was obliged to make rejections of proposals that, having met the criteria, would previously have been accepted.

### 2012 Delegate survey

Given the concern over capacity constraints, the sudden rate of expansion and the impact on future IATEFL conferences, we set about surveying the 2012 conference participants. We asked questions such as, *Would delegates be in favour of ... extending the conference? shorter sessions? a stricter selection process?*

To satisfy requests for improved quality, a stricter selection process has now been put in place. There have been a couple of new additions to the selection criteria to help guarantee that the content is of relevance to the field and the focus coherent, that the session sheds new light on a topic and that research is state-of-the-art.

Such a diverse audience as that of the IATEFL conference calls for an inclusive approach and one that we have always been keen to promote. To maintain this key factor we needed to be able to maximise speaker numbers without compromising on quality. Our survey concluded that today's IATEFL audience is not averse to shorter presentations, but that TED-talk style 20-minute sessions constitute the minimum acceptable length. Talks and workshops are therefore now set at 30 and 45 minutes respectively.

### New formats

We have introduced a new format. *Forum on ...* gives three delegates the opportunity to present together on a given topic, e.g. *'Forum on ... extended reading in ESP'*. The 65-minute slot, led by a facilitator, can be organised either as 3x20 mins individual talks including questions, or 3x15 mins talks followed by a 15-minute panel Q&A session. Speakers can either submit together or, once having read through all the proposals, the Committee may decide to form groups of three according to topic area. We see this format appealing equally to first-time presenters as to more established speakers. Research groups may find this a workable option, as may those speaking on their specific teaching situation. The appeal for delegates is two-fold: the opportunity to delve more deeply into a particular interest area, without feeling they are missing out on valuable conference time.

There will also be the option of submitting a *Panel discussion* in one of the 65-minute slots. *Panel discussions* may involve up to five speakers but differ from Forums in that only one proposal is submitted per group. A moderator will then facilitate the presentations, discussions or Q&A session in a manner that best suits the speakers and the

topic. Finally, alternative formats – posters and the *International Language Forum* – will still be offered and are ideal for those presenting research results, or a new self-published ELT product.

The continued success of the Annual IATEFL Conference is such that numbers of proposals will continue to rise for the foreseeable future. However, as an association we have a responsibility to select a full range of quality sessions and ensure we tick as many boxes as possible in terms of delegate demand. So for those wishing to present at the 47<sup>th</sup> Conference in Liverpool next year and beyond, we hope you find a session format that suits your needs and that enables you to get your message across while engaging in meaningful interaction with your target audience.



**Ros Wright** has been member of the IATEFL Proposals Committee since 2008 and joined the Conference Committee in 2010.