

How to Reflect on Research Talks at a Conference

Joint co-ordinators of the IATEFL Research SIG, **Daniel Xerri** and **Sarah Mercer**, present their ideas for getting the most out of research talks at this year's conference, especially if, like me, you are less acquainted with this aspect of the field.

Introduction

Conferences are most often exciting events and those of us who have the opportunity of attending international or regional language teaching conferences usually value the experience for its intellectual, practical and personal enrichment. Some of the reasons for which we attend conferences include: networking with other professionals, enhancing our professional confidence and motivation, and developing our knowledge of language teaching techniques (Borg, 2015). However, in order for us to benefit as much as possible from the experience of attending a conference, we require a certain level of support. We need to be able to apply and adapt ideas from the conference to our own context, share ideas with our colleagues, and extend learning from the conference (Borg, 2015). In order for us to be able to do all this, we also need support with reflecting on what we learn at the conference (Borg, 2015). In this article we shall briefly consider how we can reflect on the research talks that typically feature at language teaching conferences like the one organised by EALTHY.

Why do we reflect?

Reflection is an activity that involves a serious amount of thought or consideration and it may help us to formulate an idea about something. When we reflect we usually think deeply or carefully about an issue or topic. Sometimes *"We reflect on things for which there is not an obvious or immediate solution"* (Moon, 2005, p. 1). In fact, reflection *"is not just to do with the subject matter of what you are thinking about or*

learning, but how you think about it and how you learn" (Williams, Woolliams, & Spiro, 2012, p. 2). The reflective process consists of an examination of our thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, values, assumptions and practices. It involves revisiting our experiences and knowledge and considering *how* we think and *why* we think the way we do. This implies that those of us interested in attending research talks at a conference have to start by considering our expectations and intentions in attending such talks. In a way, we have to ask ourselves why we are engaging with research and what we hope to get out of such engagement.

Searching for common ground

Once we're sufficiently aware of our expectations and intentions we can proceed to reflect on the researchers/speakers' intentions and priorities. Researchers might give talks to share their conceptual thinking and empirical ideas with respect to methodological design and findings, to seek feedback and evaluation on their research, and to connect with other perspectives in the audience. Researchers' priorities are bound to their role and hence they expect to be evaluated on their research and their actions as researchers rather than on their work's practical relevance. Instead of being directly involved in language teaching, researchers might be primarily concerned with theorizing and researching language teaching and learning. As audience members we need to be aware of differences in priorities, realities and communicative purposes as this facilitates communication (see Ur, 2002 for a list of differences). Most importantly we have to bear in mind that researchers and language teaching professionals share a number of common interests, including that of developing better understandings of the field with the aim of – directly or more indirectly – improving practice.

In order to enhance the reflective process we can make use of a number of strategies that can be deployed at different stages of our engagement with research. As mentioned already, before attending a

... / ...

Membership @



Individual Membership

55CHfr*

(1 year on receipt of fee):

- Free workshops
- Discounted rate - *English for Healthcare Conference*
- 3 issues of *EALTHY* magazine
- Healthcare English materials
- Publisher special offers

*approx. £50 / 55 Euros

Institutional Membership

185CHfr

(private language schools, university faculties, etc.)

- 4 EALTHY membership subscriptions (unnamed, so more flexibility for you)
- Additional membership cards at reduced rate 40 CHfr

Research Talks *contin.*

research talk it is important for us to reflect on our priorities and what we seek to gain from it. We need to consider the aims of different types of research-related sessions (i.e., plenaries, workshops, talks, poster presentations, etc.). We also need to choose suitable sessions by reading abstracts, considering the communicative intent of the speakers, and how the sessions align with our priorities.

While listening to the talk it might be worthwhile to make notes and perhaps continue to reflect on our perspective and priorities. It's important to attend a talk with an open but critical mind. We should esteem our own expertise but also respect that of the person presenting. Asking questions – either in forum or after the talk – might help us clarify certain things we're still unsure of. This is also a means of engaging in dialogue about the research being presented. Most significantly, we should seek common ground with the researchers and their perspectives.

After the talk it's probably useful to organise our notes and continue the process of reflecting on our own and the researchers' motives, assumptions and expectations. To benefit as much as possible from the research talk, we should consider how the ideas shared in it could be adapted to our own context. If possible we should read further about this research and share our reflections via writing or dialogue. A powerful extension of our reflection could manifest itself in us engaging in similar research in our context. Practitioner research is perhaps one of the most valid means of establishing common ground with professional researchers and their work.

What else to reflect on

As we've seen already, when we engage with research via a talk at a conference it is important to consider our expectations, priorities and intentions, as well as those of the researchers giving the talk. Some other areas that we might wish to reflect on consist of a number of details about the study, such as its context and participants, the methods of data collection, the actual instruments used, ethical issues, data analysis, the study's fit with the literature and our experiences, its contribution to the field, and its practical implications. In order for us to reflect on these details we have to ask ourselves a number of key questions, such as:

- What are the assumptions underlying this research?
- What counts as evidence in this study?
- How do the methods match the research questions?

- Has the research been done systematically?
- Do the researchers appear to be aware of the study's limitations?
- What are my opinions about, experiences with, and knowledge about this topic?
- Are the conclusions reasonable and appropriate to the study?
- What can I 'transfer' from this study to my own context?

Conclusion

Reflection is an important component of the learning process because it enables us to establish connections between different experiences and sources of information, as well as to apply what we learn in one situation to other contexts (Costa & Kallick, 2008). By reflecting on research talks we have the possibility of enhancing our understanding of the most recent developments in language teaching and learning, assessing the value of the research conducted about these developments, and identifying ways of adapting what we learn from this research to our own context.

Sarah Mercer & Daniel Xerri

References

- Borg, S.** (2015). The benefits of attending ELT conferences. *ELT Journal*, 69(1), 35-46.
- Costa, A. L., & Kallick, B.** (2008). Learning through reflection. In A. L. Costa & B. Kallick (Eds.), *Learning and leading with habits of mind* (pp. 221-235). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Moon, J.** (2005). *Guide for busy academics No. 4: Learning through reflection*. York: The Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/N1NN6F>
- Ur, P.** (2002). The English teacher as professional. In J. C. Richards & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), *Methodology in language teaching* (pp. 388-392). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, K., Woolliams, M., & Spiro, J.** (2012). *Reflective writing*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.



Daniel is a Lecturer in TESOL at the University of Malta, the Joint Coordinator of the IATEFL Research SIG, and the Chairperson of the ELT Council within the Ministry for Education and Employment in Malta.



Sarah is Professor of Foreign Language Teaching at the University of Graz, Austria, where she is Head of ELT methodology and Deputy Head of the Centre for Teaching and Learning in Arts and Humanities. She is the Joint Coordinator of the IATEFL Research SIG.