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Research Paper

# Iranian EFL Teachers' Attitudes towards the Effectiveness of ELT Conferences

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#### Abstract

This study was an attempt to evaluate the attitude of Iranian conference participants regarding the effect of ELT conferences on their professional development and teaching practices. To this end, an appropriate questionnaire was administered to 192 conference participants selected through convenience sampling. The collected data was statistically analyzed, and the obtained results revealed that the participants believed that ELT conferences in Iran have positive effects on the participants' professional development and teaching practices in terms of familiarity with the existing trends in the ELT, motivation for conducting further studies and application of conference materials in their teaching. The results also showed that the participants noted a number of drawbacks in such events, including the low quality of papers and presentations, attendance just for the sake of getting a certificate, and theoretical rather than practical orientation, which might be the cause of demotivation for teachers to attend upcoming conferences. To remove these drawbacks, the participants offered some suggestions such as providing guidelines for presentations and double-blind review papers, holding more workshops, internationalizing the conferences, and attracting more keynote speakers and foreign presenters.

**Keywords**: ELT conferences, teachers' attitude, professional development, teaching practices

#### ارزیابی نگرش شرکت کنندگان در کنفرانس های ELT در ایران در مورد تأثیرات این کنفرانس ها

این مطالعه تلاشی است برای ارزیابی نگرش شرکت کنندگان در کنفرانس های ELT در ایران در مورد تأثیرات این کنفرانس ها بر پیشرفت حرفه ای و شیوه های تدریس آنها. به همین منظور ، این مطالعه با استفاده از پرسشنامه، نگرش 192 شرکت کننده در کنفرانس ها را مورد بررسی قرار داده است. داده های جمع آوری شده از نظر آماری مورد تجزیه و تحلیل قرار گرفت و نتایج به دست آمده نشان داد که شرکت کنندگان بر این باورند که کنفرانسهای ELT در ایران از نظر آشنایی با روندهای موجود در ELT انگیزه انجام مطالعات بیشتر و استفاده از مواد کنفرانس در آموزش خود ، تأثیرات مثبتی بر پیشرفت حرفه ای و شیوه های آموزش شرکت کنندگان دارند. نتایج همچنین نشان داد که شرکت کنندگان در چنین رویدادهایی به اشکالاتی از جمله کیفیت پایین مقالات و سخنرانی ها ، حضور فقط برای گرفتن گواهی شرکت در کنفرانس و تئوری بودن و نه عملی بودن این کنفرانسها اشاره کردند، که این عوامل ممکن است انگیزه معلمان را برای حضور در کنفرانس های آینده کاهش دهد. برای رفع این اشکالات ، شرکت کنندگان پیشنهادهایی مانند ارائه رهنمودهایی برای سخنرانی ها و ارزیابی دقیقتر مقالات، برگزاری کارگاه های آموزشی بیشتر ، بین المللی سازی کنفرانس ها و جذب سخنرانان اصلی و شرکت کنندگان خارجی را ارائه دادند.

واژگان كليدى : پيشرفت حرفه اى ، شيوه هاى تدريس، كنفرانس هاى ELT ، نگرش معلمان



# Introduction

One of the relatively recent debates in language teaching is in-service teachers' professional development. Glotthorn (1995, p. 41) believes that "teacher development is the professional growth a teacher achieves as a result of gaining increased experience and examining his or her teaching systematically" Attending conferences is considered as one of the important professional development programs. About 92% of teachers in the USA attended workshops and conferences during 2000-2004, while in other professional development programs, fewer teachers attended (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson and Orphanos, 2009).

Regardless of the quality of pre-service teacher education, based on Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), preparing teachers for confronting all issues in their practices is not expected (OECD, 2009), and not only in their first years of teaching may face "reality shock" (Veenman 1984, p. 143), but also in their following years may encounter many challenges. Therefore, in-service training programs are a necessity for teachers' professional development. These programs help teachers to enhance their competency in the subject matter and to improve positive beliefs about their new curriculum (White, Raun, and Butts, 1969). According to Junaid and Maka (2014), for teachers to maintain their teaching and learning in high quality in their classrooms, in-service programs are crucial.

Although all other types of in-service programs have been studied by plenty of researchers, conference and its impact on teachers` professional development have been less studied. More than two decades ago, the importance of attending conferences was stressed by Gebhart and Oprandy (1999). They asserted that people after some investigations might decide to participate and present a study, work, or reflection in a future conference; with performing these activities, they "push their boundaries to the edge of their competence... (and) this contributes to their sense of ... membership in the profession of teaching" (p.134).

Although conferences and seminars, among other professional development programs including personal and group research, qualification programs, informal dialogue, reading literature, courses and seminars, monitoring, and observation, have had the lowest influence on teachers, their impacts have been varied. For example, in Malaysia, they are regarded as relatively effective programs; moreover, overall, 75% of teachers in Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) reported high or moderate effects of conferences and seminars on their professional development (OECD, 2009).

#### **Literature Review**

Tomlinson (1988) claimed that conducting a short-term in-service program is risky, and the disadvantages of participating in these programs are more than their advantages. Borg (2015), however, favors participating in conferences as a short-term in-service program and mentions that it improves the knowledge, motivation, and confidence of professionals who participate in such programs. He has investigated the advantages of participating in conferences and believes that there are major impacts of conferences; that is, knowing more about ELT contexts of other participants, motivating for participating in future conferences, and personal motivation as a teacher.

Aubrey and Coombe (2010) evaluated the effects of attending TESOL Arabia conferences on the professional development of teachers in the UAE. They showed that the real values of these conferences are networking community, reinforcement of the profession, and keeping upto-date. Nevertheless, they asserted that the main reasons of participants in their study for not attending conferences were useless of conferences for their teaching practice and the high cost of these conferences.



Büyükyavuz (2016) investigated the ELT professionals' reasons for attending conferences and their outcomes. Surveying 83 Turkish participants showed that obtaining new information in the field and visiting keynote speakers were their main reasons for attending conferences. Participants also showed their tendency to apply what they learned in conferences in their teaching practices. However, they complained about attending expenses.

Canagarajah (2012) and Nguyen (2011) claimed that teachers in some parts of the world are marginalized as results of venue distance and attendance costs of conferences; recently, online conferences and webinars as a partial response to this issue are burgeoning in all fields of study including ELT. This kind of conference removes the cost and time of travel for participants. In this regard, Moore, Fisher, and Baber (2016) examined the extent of interactivity and satisfaction of 1696 participants from 109 countries in the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) online conference. They concluded that online conference was beneficial for teachers' professional development. However, these authors also called for further study about online conferences and specifically an appropriate pedagogical method for a huge number of participants in such conferences.

In Iran, every year, many national and international ELT conferences are held in different cities. Teachers are highly encouraged and promoted by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, universities, schools, and other related authorities to attend these conferences. Moreover, the presence of famous keynote speakers in conferences encourages teachers to attend these conferences. Yet, in some of these conferences, active participation is missing, no questions are raised, and the number of audience decreases in the last days.

The main aims of ELT conferences, as claimed by their organizers, are to bring scholars and researchers together to learn new skills, find solutions for real-world problems and contribute to the ELT field by sharing recent trends and innovations, their experiences, and results of their researches. Some conferences in Iran make a contract with the Ministry of Education or ask for sponsorship, and they register a certain number of teachers with the purpose of transforming their teaching beliefs and practices.

As for the evaluation of such conferences, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, there are few studies that have evaluated their impact, as an in-service teacher training programs, on the teachers' practices and beliefs, while a lot of effort, time, and money are spent on the part of both conference organizers and participants. Therefore, the present study intended to touch on this area of research and see to what extent participants have a sense of satisfaction with conferences, view them as relevant to their practices, find them frustrating, and only participate to get a certificate. On this basis, the following research questions were formulated:

- **Q1.** What attitudes do Iranian EFL teachers hold about the effectiveness of ELT conferences as a professional development tool in Iran?
- **Q2.** What kinds of positive impacts have Iranian EFL teachers experienced through attending ELT conferences?

#### Method

## **Participants**

For the purposes of this study, more than 6000 teachers and graduate students were contacted through email and various groups in social media (mostly Telegram channels). Out of this population, only 192 teachers who had attended at least one national ELT conference were selected through convenience sampling as the main participants of the study. Table 1 below shows their demographic representation.



**Table 1**Demographic representation of participants

Number	Age (Year)		Years		of	Field of study		Position				
of				Tea	ching							
Participant												
S	ess than 30	01	e than 50	s than 5	ς.	ore than 15	English Language eaching	anslation ıdies	anguage& iterature	Applied linguistics	ool teacher	University instructor
	Les	30-7	More	Less	5-15	Moı	Eng Lang	Transla studies	Lan liter	Ap] ling	School	Uni
192	58	61	73	44	69	79	157	16	11	8	89	103
	Mean=38		Mean= 13			-						

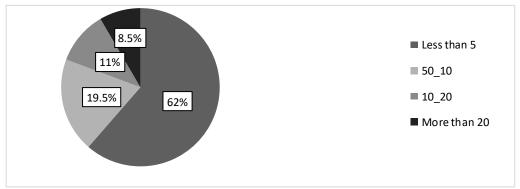
#### **Procedures**

To collect data from the participants, we used Borg's (2015) ELT conference survey questionnaire. The questionnaire includes multiple-choice items as well as open-ended questions. The obtained data were analyzed using SPSS 24, and the results were reported in tables and graphs. It should be noted that although in the main questionnaire five-point Likert scale was used, in order to understand better and summarize the tables, *strongly agree* and *agree* were here considered as *agree*, and *strongly disagree* and *disagree* as *disagree*.

#### **Results**

The first part of the questionnaire was demographic information. As Figure 1 illustrates, from among 192 respondents, most of them (62%) had attended less than five Iranian ELT conferences.

**Figure 1** *Number of conferences attended by the participants* 



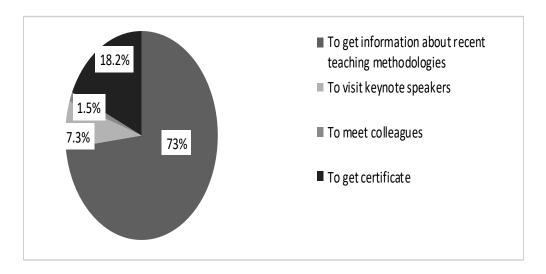
# **Reasons for attending conferences**

One section of the questionnaire asked about the participants' main reasons for attending ELT conferences in Iran. It included one multiple choice question with four items as well as one open-ended question in order for the participants to specify other possible reasons. According to Figure 2 below, *acquiring information* about recent teaching methodologies was the item with which nearly three quarters (73%) of the participants agreed. Also, *getting attendance certificate* and visiting keynote speakers were selected by 18.2% and 7.3% of the participants, respectively. Only three participants (1.5%) chose *meeting colleagues* as a reason of attending conferences.



Moreover, about half of them in answering the open-ended question commented that all or most of the mentioned factors were inspiring for conference participation.

Figure 2
Reasons for attending conferences



## Impact of attending conferences on participants' professional development

The questions in this section of the questionnaire asked about the impact of attending conferences on participants' professional development. The results are presented in Table 2 below:

 Table 2

 Impact of attending conferences on participants' professional development

As a result of attending the conference	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I deepened my theoretical knowledge of ELT.	74%	14.5%	11.5%
I became more familiar with current trends in the field.	82.3%	7.3%	10.4%
I obtained practical materials I could use in my work.	63.5%	13.5%	23%
I became more familiar with the latest ELT resources.	76.5%	11%	12.5%
I was more aware of what is happening in other ELT contexts.	78.1%	13%	8.9%
Attending the ELT conference(s) had a positive impact on my	75.5%	11.5%	13%
professional development.			

As is seen in Table 2, most of the participants believed that as a result of attending national ELT conferences, they had experienced some changes. The first change that had the highest agreement among the participants was familiarity with present trends in the ELT field with 82.3%. Other important results of attending conferences for participants were awareness of what is happening in other ELT contexts and familiarity with the latest ELT resources with 78.1% and 76.5%, respectively. However, the item with relatively the highest disagreement was "I obtained practical materials I could use in my work".

In answering the open questions, the participants expressed their feelings about general impacts of national ELT conferences on their professional development. The main impacts they reported are as follows:



Motivation for conducting further studies
Applying materials of conferences in their teaching
Deepening their knowledge in the ELT field
Learning from Keynote speakers
Reflection on their teaching
Learning new skills and innovations

## Participant 23:

"I learned more in these conferences that could apply in my teaching practices."

## Participant 73:

"We will be familiar with innovations in the education and specifically ELT."

## Participant 22:

"I reflected on my teaching experiences in conferences."

Although most of the participants referred to the positive effects of Iranian ELT conferences, there was some negative feedback. The teachers mostly complained about the low quality of presentations and papers and noted that they only attended to get a certificate.

# Participant 47:

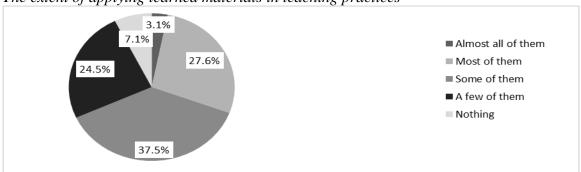
"The quality of presentations is not so high that can be beneficial for our professional development."

## Participant 77:

"I find such conferences a pure waste of time, which most people have to attend to obtain a certificate to advance their career goals. What's worse, there is a little quality check on presentations".

One of the multiple-choice questions asked about the extent of implementing what the teachers had learned from the conferences in their teaching practice. One open question asked about the main obstacles in this respect. As Figure 3 depicts, not all the participants were unanimous in this issue. Actually, 27.6% claimed that they had applied most of what they had learned, 37.5% said they had implemented some of them, and only 3.1% noted that they had applied all of them in their teaching. Surprisingly, nearly one quarter (24.5%) asserted that they had implemented a few of them, and 7.3% stated that they had applied nothing from what was covered in conferences.

**Figure 3** *The extent of applying learned materials in teaching practices* 





Answers of another open question in this regard showed that the main obstacles in implementing what they had learned from the conferences in their teaching were as follows:

The education system, curriculum, students, institutes, classroom, practical knowledge, contextual differences. Below are some of the responses:

# Participant 81:

"... the imposed curriculum and the authorities wouldn't give the teachers a wiggle room to have the chance to try new things and new ideas."

# Participant 44:

"Student's level and schools' equipment are not suitable for applying innovations in the classroom."

Some other participants noted that most of the conference presentations are theoretical, and thus they do not provide practical instructions in classroom practice.

# Participant 85:

"... there is difference between knowledge and understanding and implementation". What we gain there in conferences is a kind of knowledge and awareness."

However, there were some eager participants who believed that, in spite of all these barriers, teachers could apply the learned techniques and skills in their teaching.

## Participant 143:

"All of the above items are obstacles, but still we can implement new findings."

The final part of the questionnaire included two open questions regarding the participants' attitudes toward the shortcomings and limitations of the Iranian ELT conferences and their suggestions for improving the quality of such conferences in the future. The participants mentioned various shortcomings of these conferences, and, based on their answers, the following themes emerged:

- a) Low quality of papers and presentations and attendance only to get a certificate
- b) Time management and organizing issues
- c) Being theoretical rather than practical
- d) Less attention to presentations of graduate students
- a) Absence of international keynote speakers and presenters in most of the conferences
- b) Not addressing what the conferences claim as goals and inconsistency with teachers' needs
- c)Distance of conference venues and travel and attendance expenses

## Participant 3:

"Teachers mostly come for getting a certificate and do not pay more attention to their presentations and conferences accept most of the submitted articles."

## Participant 56:

"Time management is one of the main shortcomings of conferences."

#### Participant 99:

"They were less about how to cope with the barriers of implementing innovations."

# Participant 47:



"Foreigner keynote speakers and presenters are usually absent in Iranian conferences."

# Participant 62:

"It's not feasible for teachers in remote areas to attend conferences because they need lots of time and money."

As for suggestions, the participants provided the following effective suggestions for improving the quality of future national ELT conferences.

- a) providing guidelines for presentations and double-blind review papers
- b) being more disciplined and organized
- c) Providing more workshops and instructions for implementing innovations
- d) Encouraging and motivating graduate students
- e) Internationalizing these conferences and attracting more keynote speakers and international presenters
- f) attempting to reach their objectives and considering the real needs in ELT
- g) Holding virtual and online conferences
- h) Focusing on specific themes and topics of ELT rather than being too general
- i) Networking with fellow participants in conferences

## Participant 104:

"... conferences must have regulations for presentation, and they can encourage communication between people in the conference."

# Participant 85:

"Sharing the latest theoretical improvements as well as putting those developments in practical ways."

# Participant 17:

"Paying more attention to graduate students and motivating them to participate more in such events."

## Participant 84:

"making it more international and attracting foreigner participants to be more familiar with other contexts."

#### Participant 128:

"making them more convenient through virtual attending."

## Participant 190:

"conferences can create a tool or a platform for their participants to stay in touch after the conference."

#### **Discussion**

This study was an attempt to investigate the extent of Iranian ELT conferences' effectiveness on teachers' development and practice. Moreover, teachers` perceptions regarding shortcomings of these events and their suggestions to improve the effectiveness of conferences were to be evaluated.

Overall, the participants confirmed that as a result of attending these conferences, they experienced positive changes in their professional development and teaching practices. All of the changes that they mentioned were related to teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical content



knowledge, curricular knowledge, and contextual knowledge. This is in line with Roberts (1998) and many other scholars (Garet et al., 2001; Golombek, 2009; Graves, 2009), who believe that progress in these types of knowledge is strongly related to improving teachers` teaching practices. It is also supported by the main findings of Borg's (2015) study that concluded the major benefits of attending ELT conferences as improving participants` teaching practice due to increasing knowledge of ELT materials, creating a community with other researchers, and increasing their motivation and self-confidence.

Moreover, the results of the first item of the questionnaire are compatible with Büyükyavuz's (2016) study in which obtaining new information in the field and visiting keynote speakers were participants' primary motivators to attend conferences.

With respect to the barriers on the way of implementing conference gains mentioned above, the findings are in line with what Tomlinson had predicted over three decades ago. Tomlinson (1988) noted that some teachers participating in in-service programs do not apply all of the learned materials in their classrooms because of contextual differences, conflicting with their routine teaching, and being mostly theoretical rather than practical.

In connection with the shortcomings, it should generally be mentioned that the majority of the participants (62%) had the experience of attending less than five ELT conferences in Iran, and even some of them had attended only one conference; therefore, their attitudes toward the shortcomings cannot be generalized to all Iranian ELT conferences.

Finally, in respect to the participants' suggestions for improving conference effectiveness, the findings are consistent with those of Aubrey and Coombe (2010), which suggested the diversity of presentations, changing the venue and lowering the attendance cost, and with Büyükyavuz (2016), which complained about attending expenses.

Based on the above discussion, it can be interpreted that although Iranian ELT teachers believed ELT conferences in Iran are effective, leading to improvements in their professional development and teaching practices, there are some drawbacks and constraints in these conferences which may demotivate teachers to attend upcoming events.

#### Conclusions

Conferences can be regarded as one of the beneficial in-service programs for the training and development of teachers. The current study attempted to investigate the extent of Iranian ELT conferences' effectiveness in teachers' development and practice. Overall, a high degree of impact on participants' professional development and practices was reported by them. However, some participants questioned the effectiveness of these conferences by mentioning numerous drawbacks and limitations. Finally, they proposed some suggestions for reducing these shortages and a further improvement in the quality of the furture ELT conferences in Iran.

Usually, after a short period of time, websites of conferences will not be available; however, the researcher checked most of the available websites and noticed that only a few of them provided some suggestions of the kind presented by the participants of this study on their web pages. Thus, they are expected to provide constructing suggestions not only on their web pages but also during the conference period.

In terms of the implications of this study for future conferences, such organizations as the Ministry of Education in Iran, which sponsor teachers' attendance, should hold conferences and workshops that more suit the real needs of teachers and give them practical instructions needed in a classroom rather than theoretical materials. Moreover, it is recommended that teachers submit their action research to the conferences because it can be motivating for other teachers to reflect on their own. It is also recommended that Iranian ELT conferences, like other international conferences such as IATEFL mentioned by Borg (2015), consider an orientation session for participants, especially those who attend fewer conferences. Finally, it is recommended that ELT



conferences be evaluated for reducing their shortcomings in order to improve the quality of future conferences.

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Appendix		(004 <b>T</b> )				
<b>ELT Conferenceadapted</b>	version of Borg	(2015)				
Section 1	: <b>C</b>					
Please provide the following		11 64 11				
Age:		eld of teachin	_			
Title (Position):	Ye	ears of teaching	ng:			
A) Please mention the approx 1) Less than $5 \square$ 2)	ximate number of 5-10 □	f the conference 3) 10- 20		ou have a More tha		
B) Please mention the main of	conferences that y	you attended	in last yea	rs, the las	t one firs	t.
Section 2 Reasons for attending confer <i>Please tick ONE of the follow</i> a. To get information about rb. To visit keynote speakers c. To meet colleagues d. To get certificate e. Other (please	ving reasons. recent teaching m ask about the incour changes that	npact of attent occurred as	ding con			
	attending the		Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I deepened my	theoretical			disagree		
knowledge of ELT.  I became more familiar trends in the field.	with current					
I obtained practical materia in my work.	als I could use					
I became more familiar v ELT resources.	with the latest					
I was more aware of wha in other ELT contexts.	t is happening					
To what extent do you Attending the ELT conference	-		_			
Strongly Disagree disagree	Neither		Agree [	] Stı	ongly ag	gree 🗌



	Please explain why you feel this way about the impact of the conference on your own professional development.
	Section 4
	After the Conference:
A)	To What extent you applied what you have learnt from the conference(s) in your teaching
	Almost all  Most of them  Some of them  A few of them  Nothing
B)	What were the main obstacles, if any, in implementing what you have learnt from the conferences
	in your teaching? (Ex: Curriculum, students, university or school authorities)
	Section 5
	Shortcomings and Suggestions
A)	What were shortcomings and limitations of the conference(s) you attended?
ĺ	
B)	What are your suggestions for improving the quality of future
	conferences?
	0