

Phnom Penh: CAMTESOL

February 16-17, 2019

Ricky Ribeiro

The International CAMTESOL 2019 was my second conference in Asia. The main theme for this year's conference was "Teachers as Learners". The conference presentations were given all day on Saturday and on Sunday morning. With only a day and a morning, it was very difficult to attend all presentations of interest. However, I was able to attend a total of eleven presentations and all the plenary sessions, and I of course as facilitated my own workshop.

The first plenary speaker engaged his audience with a simple but rather interesting talk. He had us think of what skills from other occupations could be used by the English teacher in his or her classroom. This stimulating thought experiment helped us, in my opinion, rethink our roles as teachers as well as understand the complexity and multifaceted nature of our profession. After the plenary, due to time limitations, I decided to attend mostly workshops--particularly those that were especially pertinent to my teaching. Below follows a brief summary of the workshops I found to be most meaningful and fitting to my current interests.

The first workshop I attended discussed ways to make the textbook more brain-friendly through the use of a few simple principles. The first principle deals with the use of emotion to make learning more meaningful and memorable. The presenter claimed that emotion shapes learning since it is responsible for the discharge of brain chemicals linked to memory and motivation. Hence, giving students choices in how they want to accomplish certain tasks (e.g., individual work, pair work, group work) stimulates a reward system in the brain. Another principle is to teach across the senses, making sure to include in every class something for the auditory, visual and tactile senses. Personalizing activities to make them more meaningful to students is another important principle. The idea of personalizing entails letting students adapt activities using their own ideas and their own personal information. Finally, the presenter emphasized the importance of adding positive stress in class through somewhat challenging activities so that students won't be bored.

Simple Tools to Integrate Critical Thinking in the ESL Classroom was the title that caught my attention next. Knowing the importance and emphasis we should all place in our classes here at STU regarding critical thinking, choosing this workshop was a no-brainer. This workshop was presented by three young Cambodian teachers who did a great job of conveying their important message. First of all, critical thinking was defined as analytical and intentional thinking used with the purpose of breaking down complex ideas, giving reasons in a logical order, using one's own judgment and evaluation, and finally, developing ideas with reasons and application to the real world. To achieve this a three-part principle was introduced: The first one was called the Big Picture. This is where the teacher helps students to spark their imagination and predictive powers by allowing them to look for main ideas. Next, in stage two (Break up Details), the grammar points are identified, and small details and facts/opinions as well as causes/effects are analyzed. Finally, in stage three, it all comes together when the students connect the dots by finding creative solutions to problems through carrying out the task presented to them.

The next workshop dealt with maximizing students' engagement when the availability of resources is scarce. The appropriate title was *School in A Box*, a title inspired by the UNICEF initiative of the same name. The presenters demonstrated a range of highly practical, hands-on activities that required very few resources (e.g., pen, paper, a picture and, most importantly, a lot of creativity). Although the content was presented with new ELT practitioners in mind, it also had a great appeal to career-long professionals. The presenters also demonstrated how these simple-to-prepare but not simplistic activities related to Scott Thornbury's necessary conditions for learning a second language—namely, Input, Interaction, Output, Feedback and Motivation.

My next stop was at a presentation on the comparison of negotiation strategies among Japanese business students. I found this presentation quite useful due to the similarities between Chinese and Japanese students--particularly

in their communication style. In talking with the presenter after the session, I found that there are a lot of similarities between Japanese students' behavior in class and that of Chinese students. The Japanese professor informed me that sometimes silence in class is OK and that the students may feel comfortable with silence. I found the presenter's insights and suggestions to be a great help for me as I am one who tends to be quite the chatter-box in class.

Perhaps mostly importantly, I was also able to spend some time socializing, meeting old friends and making new ones. For instance, I met a group from Indonesia with whom I had spent time while at various conferences in their country last year. In fact, some of them came up to me and told me that they remembered me from workshops I had conducted and were still using some of the material I had shared with them. That felt really good!

Overall, my visit to Cambodia was a great opportunity to discover this small but fascinating kingdom, visit some cultural sites, and learn about its tragic history of genocide during the Khmer Rouge regime. As for my overall experience at the conference, I felt, once again, happy with the opportunity to share one of my favorite ELT topics and to meet like-minded people as well as to be exposed to new teaching methods and trends in the field. I hope to be able to take part in more conferences in the future and to continue contributing to the profession.

