

# A Checklist for Organising Conferences

By Marjorie Rosenberg, Austria



Many of us in the teacher training and education world wind up organising conferences for our institutions or teaching organisations. These can be one-day events or they can stretch out for several days. They can be in cooperation with another institution or partially sponsored.

As a board member of TEA (Teachers of English in Austria) I have been involved in organising several events. These have been primarily national ones with a couple of international guests and generally didn't include bringing in rafts of plenary speakers from abroad. I have put together below a check-list of the things which I have found important to consider. Not every point is necessary for every conference.

## Things to do 6 months to a year beforehand

- Create a committee/Decide who is responsible for what – e.g., one person in charge of venue, one person for delegates, one for speakers, one for more general duties
- Find a venue. Clarify what it will cost or if it is possible to use the facility without paying. Make sure the venue has got enough rooms, the proper technical equipment, is fairly easy to reach, has staff who can help out. If there is a plenary speech, does the venue have a room everyone can fit into or do you need, in addition, to find an auditorium? Check on parking facilities and unloading bays for exhibitors.
- Choose a date.
- Choose a call off date (i.e., a specific deadline when the organisers can call off the conference if there are not enough people signed up for it).
- Choose a name for the event (unless it is simply an annual or bi-annual event which always takes place).
- Decide if the event is meant for a particular target group or is a general conference.
- Decide on focal points or program tracks.
- Decide on timetable (how many talks, workshops, plenary or no plenary).
- Find plenary speaker(s) if necessary.
- If it is possible for teachers to get expenses reimbursed (or the day off from school) through the Ministry of Education or another institution, find out what you need to do for this and contact the person who can help.
- Discuss lunch breaks with the people on site. Can we offer lunch at the venue? (What would that cost?). Supply lists of nearby restaurants.
- Discuss coffee breaks. Decide if these will be supplied for delegates, covered by conference fees and/or sponsors. Or will delegates have to pay for themselves?
- Decide on the conference fee. (Will speakers have to pay or not, or do they pay a reduced fee?)
- Decide on the charges to exhibitors. (Per table? Per stand? Per day? etc.) What about advertising in the programme? Putting leaflets in bags?
- Check whether the venue can provide all the necessities for exhibitors—e.g., electrical power points and internet access.
- Inform exhibitors about limitations (e.g., on space or technical facilities) so they can adapt their stands accordingly.
- Decide if you can raise money from corporate sponsors. (How would they benefit? What could you offer them?)
- Create forms
  - General information form
  - Conference registration form
  - Speaker proposal form
  - Exhibitor form (How many tables, chairs, etc? When will they arrive?)
  - Exhibitor confirmation form (with costs for exhibitors)
  - Corporate sponsor forms
  - Confirmation form for participants (Add a box asking if their names can go into the list of delegates.)
  - Confirmation form for speakers
- Send out the forms.
- Send exhibitors the forms as well in case they want to sponsor speakers or register for the conference.
- Set a deadline for speakers' proposals.
- Set a deadline for registration.
- Publicise the conference. Mail out the forms, send emails, create posters, find out about websites where you can advertise, contact newspapers, etc.
- If the conference lasts for more than a day arrange a welcoming meeting and an evening program.

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## Things to do in the last six months

- Decide which honorary guests should be invited, who should speak at the opening, and who is responsible for inviting them.
- Collect speakers' forms.
- Vet the forms and decide on who will speak.
- Inform applicants whether or not their proposal has been accepted. (If possible, give speakers an idea of how many people to expect so that they know what to do about photocopies.)
- Put the program together.
- Send out confirmation letters.
- Send out information about hotels to delegates. (Give delegates some names of hotels near the venue, give them a website where they can see where to book, etc.).
- Ask publishers or other sponsors for bags, pens, paper, etc. Offer to put their brochures and catalogues into the bags. Give them an address where they can send the materials before the conference. Inserts can also be charged for, generating more income to cover costs.
- Begin to advertise the event intensively.
- Have a treasurer who is responsible for making sure the conference fees are paid and who can make payments for the event.

## Things to do in the month before the event

- Arrange for a conference office or registration area. Decide who will be there and what they have to do.
- Arrange with the venue about the coffee breaks. (When, for how many people, what will be served, who will do the serving?)
- Print the program. Find out if it can be sponsored so that printing and copying costs can be saved.
- Send out a provisional program if possible.
- Let speakers know when they will be speaking. (At least inform them about the day and general time frame.)
- Let the people at the venue know how many rooms will be needed and what kind of equipment they need. Make a site plan showing key rooms, spaces, and facilities.
- Let the people at the venue know what the exhibitors will need.
- Find student helpers or other assistants. Explain to them what they need to do.
- Arrange with the venue about a cloakroom—i.e., have a place for people to leave luggage as well as coats.
- Arrange with the venue about a speaker's preparation room.
- Arrange with the venue about photocopy possibilities if it is necessary to make copies on the spot. Find out how to do this and what it will cost. (Sometimes a copy card can be bought or a person is appointed by the venue who then charges for the copies on the spot.)
- Arrange with the venue a room for exhibitors to store things.
- Arrange with the venue for speakers to be able to store things – i.e., if they have more than one presentation and are presenting on different days they may want to leave things at the venue.
- Create a feedback form.

## These are the last minute things

- Make the name badges. (We have found it helpful to put names, titles and institutional affiliations on the badges. We have also made speakers' badges a different colour than others so that people can ask someone what they are speaking about and when.)
- Print the list of the delegates and presenters.
- Print confirmation forms saying that people were at the conference.
- Stuff the conference bags.
- Label the building – e.g., put up signs for registration, workshops, rest rooms, restaurant, and speakers' room.
- Put up signs outside the rooms listing the names of the workshops and the times they are being held.
- Put up full programs (giving rooms, names of workshops or talks, times) in several places in the building including on a central bulletin board.
- Set up a message and general information board.
- Make sure there is a student helper or assistant at each room. Explain to them what they have to do. (Their main job is to help the presenter; if equipment is not working, they have to find someone to take care of it; they can help with handouts; if necessary, they keep the room from becoming too crowded; they find more chairs, if necessary; etc.)
- Have several student helpers or assistants to help with general information, traffic flow, etc.
- Remind people to fill in the feedback forms.

These are especially important things to remember

- Make sure that there are enough people at registration desks/table to make registration go as quickly as possible.
- If students work at registration, make sure that one of the conference organisers is there as well in case there are questions.
- Have a copy of the list with payments so that this can be found quickly.
- Have copies of the program with the exact times of the talks and workshops. Keep one at registration and hang some others up around the venue.
- Have a speaker's room if possible.
- Have a place for people to leave coats and luggage.
- If possible, have special badges or T-shirts for the helpers.
- Provide a vegetarian and a non-vegetarian lunch.
- Let smokers know where smoking is allowed.

All this may seem overwhelming to those who have never been involved in such a project. It is vital to remember that you need a team and that many jobs can be delegated to others. Having assistants who can be relied on is of utmost importance and they should have some sort of briefing before the event. They need to know who they can go to when they need help (either to conference organisers or to people on the site) and must know where the delegates can find rooms, rest rooms, vending machines, and so on.

## And finally...

The most wonderful part comes, however, when the day arrives and all is running smoothly. The majority of delegates have checked in, the bags and badges have been given out and people are attending workshops, talks, plenaries, looking at books, and chatting with colleagues. Then you can relax for a few minutes and know that your efforts have been well worth it. At that point, try not to think about all the dismantling, clearing up and thanking that will follow. Just enjoy the buzz!

## Author

Marjorie Rosenberg is an instructor of English and methodology at two teacher training institutions (Pädagogische Akademie Hasnerplatz and Berufspädagogische Akademie) in Graz, Austria. She is also an active teacher trainer throughout Europe and deals primarily with learning styles, multiple intelligences and NLP. Besides these activities, Marjorie is a member of the authoring team for Friends, Veritas Verlag, Linz and has written Communicative Business Activities, öbv&hpt, Vienna. She can be reached at [mrosenberg@aon.at](mailto:mrosenberg@aon.at). Marjorie has been on the committee of Teachers of English in Austria (TEA), an IATEFL Associate, for the past six years and stood for chair at the BGM in autumn 2004.

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University English and Teacher Education Depts in  
Australia, Canada, Malaysia, Sweden, Taiwan, Thailand,  
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Language schools in Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Portugal,  
Saudi Arabia, Switzerland

Teacher Trainers and Mentors in Angola, Brazil,  
Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Palestine, Peru,  
Poland, Russia, Vietnam

The Centre for British Teachers, Brunei, Vietnam

Paedagogisches Institut, Switzerland

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The Open University library, UK

# Empowering Non-native Speakers for English Language Teaching: The Case of Hong Kong

By Icy Lee, Hong Kong Baptist University

In this article, I discuss the ways in which I have addressed the specific needs of non-native speaking (NNS) teachers-in-preparation in a full-time Postgraduate Diploma in Education course (PGDE) at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. My main purpose was to elevate the NNS status, boost NNS teacher-trainees' confidence, and make them aware of the advantages possessed by NNS teachers in teaching English so that they will better utilize them. First I provide some background information about the critical challenges NNS teachers of English face in Hong Kong.

## Critical challenges faced by NNS teachers of English in Hong Kong

### Benchmarking initiative for English teachers

In Hong Kong, English and Chinese are the two official languages. Since the majority of the population in Hong Kong are ethnic Chinese, Cantonese is the language of the home and the street. As a result, English is seldom used outside the classroom. However, because of Hong Kong's strategic position as an international centre, English plays an important role in the business sector, in the workplace, and especially in higher education. Thus, there is an urgent need to produce competent users of English.

Unfortunately, complaints about students' declining English standards have been escalating in recent years. In Hong Kong, the overwhelming majority of English teachers are native speakers of Cantonese. Naturally the blame is put on local teachers (in this paper "local teachers" is used to refer to NNS teachers), who have increasingly come under fire for their own declining English standards and hence their failure to enhance students' English proficiency. As a result, the government has established a benchmarking initiative (the first benchmarking tests were held in 2001) to set language standards of language proficiency expected of English teachers (see Coniam & Falvey 1999; Falvey & Coniam 1997). The benchmarking tests comprise five components, namely speaking, reading, listening, writing and classroom language. All English teachers are now required to possess minimum proficiency (i.e., level 3 out of 5 levels) to teach English.

### Reforms in English language education

Added to the benchmarking challenge are the ongoing language education reforms that are proposed by the

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