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# *The contribution of conferences to teachers' professionalism*

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# The Contribution of Conferences to Teachers' Professionalism


## Abstract

While conferences have always been seen as an indicator of professional activity, very little is known in an ELT context regarding how teachers perceive these experiences as contributing to their sense of professionalism. The purpose of this article is to address this knowledge gap and to examine teachers' perceptions and experiences of ELT conferences in order to determine the role which conferences play in professionalism. Based on the literature, a practice-based perceptual definition of professionalism is adopted and operationalized in this study as pertaining to the concepts of Continuing Professional Development (CPD), Community, and Professional Identity. Seventeen teachers who had attended face-to-face conferences were interviewed and the data analysed through content analysis. The results suggest that conferences have a valuable contribution to make to English teachers' sense of professionalism because they offer a rich source of CPD, provide a strong sense of community and help develop their professional identity. This leads to acknowledgement of the special role which teaching associations play in conferences and advice on how, through their agency, the conference experience can be maximised. Recommendations are made for future studies, including the suggestion that online conferences be added to the research agenda.


## Introduction

Conferences are a traditional indicator of activity within a field and of the commitment of individuals to their own practice and the sphere in which they operate. A testament to the diversity and global spread of English Language Teaching (ELT) is the number and range of conferences available. These can broadly be classified by size, target audience and medium. For example, the TESOL International Convention (TESOL International Association, 2019) claims to be the largest conference with 6500 attendees and to provide "something for everyone" with 1000 face-to-face sessions spread over four days. For those attending, conferences represent a not inconsiderable investment of money and time, particularly if self-funding. Added to the actual cost of participation is the opportunity cost of lost revenue. There is also the environmental cost left by the heavy carbon footprints of participants travelling en masse to the venue (c.f., Desiere, 2016). To outweigh this, conferences typically sell themselves as vehicles for developing teachers' professionalism, particularly contributing to their continuing professional development (CPD) needs. The purpose of this article is to examine ELT teachers' perceptions and experiences of conferences in order to determine the role which conferences play, if any, in contributing to their sense of professionalism. As the relationship between conferences and professionalism has not been explored in depth, it addresses a knowledge gap in the field. The article draws on data from part of a wider study, the results of which are published elsewhere (c.f., Rimmer & Floyd, in press).

In hypothesising a link between teacher conferences and professionalism, both terms need to be examined and operationalised for the purpose of this study. An examination of call-for-papers announcements swiftly highlights that the form and scope of conferences varies considerably, with terms such as *symposium* and *congress* in competition with *conference*, but there seems to be a basic distinction between the provision of a series of sessions featuring multiple independent speakers and a one-off event such as a webinar with one presenter or presenters in tandem. The former only is referred to in this study as a conference. Excluded are educational courses which may select participants, follow a syllabus and lead to qualifications or licensing, for example the five-week *Basic Linguistics for English Language Teachers* described in Garríguez et al. (2019). A non-essential but typical feature of a conference as understood here is

that sessions cover more than one day as this allows more opportunities for social interaction, whether through evening activities or informal liaison. Online conferences are not excluded from this definition, but from the outset this medium, despite its ubiquity (Castro, 2019) and the technological affordances offered (c.f., Jeong & Hmelo-Silver, 2016), still seems less central to ELT than the archetypal face-to-face opportunity (Waite & Hume, 2017).

Professionalism is much more challenging to define. The term receives special emphasis in fields where the relationship between practitioner and client is key, notably medicine (e.g., Gutshall, 2011; Youngson, 2011) and care work (e.g., Blair, 2014; Hugman, 2005). While on this crude criterion education appears an appropriate milieu for professionalism, there is the problem that the concept has come into such common currency that it is incorporated into academic discourse without a proper understanding of the issues involved or how the construct is defined. As Evans, an authority on professionalism in general (i.e., non-ELT) education, puts it, "there remain considerable lack of clarity and disagreement over how professionalism should be conceived" (2013, p. 472).

The problem with an occupational approach to professionalism is that it credits practitioners for who they are, not what they do. The seminal work of Evans (e.g., 2008, 2011, 2013) has recognised that professionalism is not an inherent quality but that it needs to be demonstrated, by individuals, and interpreted, by a range of stakeholders, on specific occasions of use. Hence, Evans' (2008) definition of professionalism is adopted here for two reasons: first, it puts the onus for professionalism on practitioners and how they perform; second, it highlights professionalism as perceptual, dependent on the expectations and requirements of others:

> [Professionalism is] practice that is consistent with commonly-held consensual delineations of a specific profession and that both contributes to and reflects perceptions of the profession's purpose and status and the specific nature, range and levels of service provided by, and expertise prevalent within, the profession, as well as the general ethical code underpinning this practice. (Evans, 2008, p. 29)

This also makes it clear that there is always a context to determining professionalism in what amounts to effectively a judgement call on the performance of the teacher in a specific environment. Nor can subjectivity be precluded from professionalism. Attempts at making performance measurable through criterion-referenced descriptors may achieve face validity through a "public demonstration of professionalism" (Connell, 2009, p. 220) but such scales are often framed with a neo-managerial agenda which obscures any representation of professionalism that is meaningful to teachers.

Although in Evans' (2008) definition, no field can be de facto excluded from professionalism, the pretensions of ELT to professionalism are questioned. In terms of popular perception, ELT seems a transient work and travel opportunity, an impression borne out by Ruecker & Ives' (2015) discourse analysis of job advertisements, which found that posts were generally positioned towards young white native-speakers looking to combine remuneration with recreation. Consequently ELT has been stigmatised: Gonzalez (2015) describes how teachers in Mexico are often referred to not as *profesores* (teachers) but as *pobresores* (the lacking), a wordplay jibe at their lack of proficiency; in the UK, Gower (2018) feels many teachers are embarrassed by what they do. As regards ELT scholarship, Smith & Sky's (2015) survey of UK research finds professionalism unexplored while Canagarajah (2016), perhaps from a more global perspective, views professionalism as part of a developing narrative of ELT in its search for academic recognition. In short, both the experience and theorisation of professionalism in ELT are beginning from a low base.

It is posited that professionalism matters both for teachers and their learners. A sense of professionalism empowers the former to maximise the learning potential of the latter.

Conferences have positioned themselves as contributors to professionalism. If true, this would be justification for encouraging teachers to attend and for organisations to provide support and incentives for teachers. This article is an exploratory study of the extent to which teachers' self-articulated perceptions and experiences of conferences are projections of a sense of enhanced professionalism. Its significance is that conference attendance is "an under-researched activity" (Castro, 2019, p. 417), leaving a gap in the research for an empirical study of factors in the conference experience which can be linked to a robust conceptualisation of professionalism for ELT practitioners.

## Literature Review

The paucity of empirical literature on conferences in general and ELT in particular makes it incumbent to include fields which are outside ELT. Accordingly, this review of the literature is organised into two sections: the first on conferences in general; the second on ELT conferences.

### Non-ELT Conferences

CPD is a hallmark of a practice-based definition of professionalism as adopted here, and one strand of the literature compares conferences to other forms of CPD. For example, the discussion article of Finnegan et al. (2019) claims that nursing conferences are often more effective than journals because they offer a swifter route to knowledge dissemination, which is facilitated by a range of delivery modes, for example workshops and poster presentations. Vrettas & Sanderson (2015) checked the legitimacy of conferences empirically in computer science by measuring citations of journal articles and conference papers. They found approximately equal citations, pointing towards conferences as sources of scholarship accepted by the scientific community. However, raising the academic credentials of conferences may not always be in participants' interests: in the same IT field, Cabot et al. (2018) report that new presenters struggle to have their papers accepted in refereed conferences. They appeal for conferences to be more equitable, in part because of the CPD opportunity for those entering the field.

That CPD is the most important benefit of conferences is confirmed by Shannon et al. (2019), the most comprehensive and rigorous empirical study found in this literature review. The authors used a case study of teachers at a two-day science conference and their multi-method approach included surveys, interviews and post-conference lesson observations. The latter, unique in the literature, provided some evidence that teachers could apply their conference learning to the classroom, in other words that CPD was activated. Similarly, Ologunde et al. (2017) attempted to measure knowledge gain from a nursing conference by administering pre- and post-conference tests to the attendees. They recorded an increase in raw test results but did not supply descriptive statistics, so the validity of the increment as concerns CPD is not clear. Nevertheless, research in this direction is particularly valuable because it is the outcome of CPD that is particularly relevant to professionalism.

Shannon et al. (2019) also credit the networking benefits of the conference, and this community-building facet is widely acknowledged. Toloudis (2010) traces this back to the nineteenth-century roots of formalised secular state-wide education when conferences were a rare collaborative opportunity for teachers isolated by the system. The social side of conferences cannot be overlooked today: Blanchard et al. (2016) consider medical conferences to be ritualistic in terms of the interaction patterns they install while Hickson (2006, p. 467) deems conferences "the professional equivalent of the Thanksgiving Dinner." Empirical studies have shown collaboration to be a feature of both face-to-face (e.g., Waite & Hume, 2017) and online conferences (e.g., Castro, 2019). Chai & Freeman (2019) prove interaction to be more than

socialising as their quantitative data show that scientists who attend the same conference are more likely to later produce joint work, for example publications, than scientists in the same field who have not attended together. This highlights that CPD has a peer-learning dimension (noted in Ojala, 2019, in the context of library studies conferences) which builds a professionalism founded on sharing and furthering best practice.

## ELT Conferences

The reporting of non-ELT literature comes with the caveat that the external validity of the findings, whether they are transferable to a completely different environment for professionalism, is a concern. However, the literature on ELT conferences is limited, and it is referenced exclusively to those organised under the auspices of teaching associations (TAs). Paran (2016) in a volume dedicated to research on TAs (Hall & Paran, 2016) notes that conferences are the central activity of TAs, and this is confirmed by the literature generated by TAs themselves: in their history of IATEFL, Rixon & Smith (2017) state that "[t]he annual conference will surely for many people continue to be the essence if not the totality of what IATEFL offers them." (p. 80). Paran (2016) recognises that a TA-centred account may filter out findings which are not perceived as useful for TAs. Additionally, TAs tend to associate themselves, and by extension conferences they organise, with professionalism to the extent that there is little internal scrutiny of how that professionalism is manifested.

As with non-ELT conferences, the CPD from ELT conferences emerges as the major contributor to professionalism. Aubrey & Coombe (2010) targeted both participants and non-participants in the TESOL Arabia conference. The inclusion of non-participants in the sample is a marked but welcome departure from other studies, which focus on those privileged enough to have the funds and time to attend conferences, and an interesting initial finding is that non-participants were also active in a range of CPD, i.e., they could construct a professionalism independent of conferences, and of TAs. Regarding the participants, the CPD impact of conferences was valued most, although, in contrast to the findings of Shannon et al. (2019) cited earlier, the majority of teachers doubted that this would actually lead to changes in their own practice.

Borg (2015) questioned teachers, also from the Arabian gulf, who had recently attended conferences and found three themes in the data: an increased skill set; networking; and professional confidence. The first of these is linked to improved practice, but this relies on teachers' self-reporting rather than a verification instrument such as the follow-up lesson observations in Shannon et al. (2019). The second theme, networking, was investigated (Moore et al., 2016) in an online context through a case study of an IATEFL web conference. Discourse analysis of web chat data found a range of discourse types, most of which were not related to the actual content of the session, for example, off-topic discussion. However, given that 40% of participants made no contributions to the web chat at all, it seems an over-statement to suggest that "networking and interacting with other ELT professionals are as important for participants at virtual events as for the face-to-face conferences" (p. 209).

Borg's (2015) elaboration of the third theme, professional confidence, deals inter alia with teachers' self-belief and credibility, and as such pertains to identity. This is of particular interest because while teacher identity is a consistent part of the discourse of professionalism in ELT, see for example Crandall & Christison (2016, p. 11), in a climate where working conditions for many are poor and their contribution is seen as marginal, practitioners may feel that they are not "*real* teacher[s]" (Waldron, 2016, p. 11 [emphasis in original]) and lack a professional frame of reference. A very real impact of conferences on professionalism would be to bolster a fragile identity. Motteram's (2016) study proposes this outcome. His content analysis of two surveys of IATEFL members found that attending the annual conference was linked to identity, which in

turn connected them to an ELT community of practice in the Wenger (2000) sense. The conference was thus a means for teachers to confirm their identity and contribute to a community with the shared beliefs and values that mark professionalism.

To conclude, three themes relevant to professionalism emerge from analysis of both sets of literature. The first, the most pronounced, is CPD and how conferences are avenues for an enhanced knowledge base and skills set which allow teachers to perform at a level perceived as appropriate to professionalism. The second, inter-personal, is community and how conferences create solidarity and relationships that make professionalism a shared investment. The third, intra-personal, is identity and how conferences fashion teachers' self-image and the adoption of beliefs and values that constitute a personal projection of professionalism. For the purposes of this study, professionalism is thus conceived around the three interlinking concepts of CPD, community and professional identity.

The research questions which emanate from this review are formulated below:

1. What are teachers' perceptions and experiences of the CPD provided by conferences?
2. What are teachers' perceptions and experiences of conferences as opportunities for community-building?
3. What are teachers' perceptions and experiences of the way conferences contribute to their professional identity?

## Method

In order to address these questions, it was appropriate to adopt a qualitative approach in order to capture teachers' own articulation of the meaning and interpretation they attribute to the conference experience. Interviews were chosen as a method because they recognise knowledge as socially constructed with the purpose of the interview to "understand the meaning of central themes of the subjects' lived world" (Kvale, 2007, p. 11). The present study represents a departure from previous work in that it is not a case study of a single conference offered by a single TA. In contrast, teachers with experience of different ELT conferences were interviewed. This was to offer a wide perspective on conferences which was not confined to one context but represented the variety of the ELT world.

Identified by convenience sampling, participants were acquainted with one of the authors; teachers known to have attended at least one face-to-face ELT conference were contacted and informed about the aims and procedure of the study. The final sample size of 17 represented teachers who had agreed to be interviewed. This sample size is comparable to similar studies which have used interviews as a method. For example, Borg (2015) features 15 interviews, and Shannon et al. (2019) 13. The profile of the participants is summarised in Table 1. Individual biographic details of the anonymised participants are provided in the Appendix.

**Table 1. Participant Profile.**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Number** | 17 |
| **Gender** | 13 female, 4 male |
| **Age range** | 23 – 61 years |
| **Nationality** | Australian, Bangladeshi, Brazilian, British (3 teachers), Chinese, Egyptian, Filipino, Indian, Italian, Japanese, Moldovan, Polish, Russian, US-American (2) |
| **ELT experience** | 2 – 39 years |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Current employment** | Further education college (1 teacher), freelance (2), private language school (6), state secondary school (3), state tertiary (5) |
| **Conferences attended**[i] | Bangladesh English Language Teachers' Association (1 teacher); BRAZ-TESOL (1); IATEFL, UK (10); IATEFL Poland (2); International House Barcelona ELT (1); Japan Association for Language Teaching (1); National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults, UK (1); National Association of Teachers of English, Russia (1); NileTESOL, Egypt (1); TESOL International, USA (4); TESOL-Ukraine (2); Thailand TESOL (1) |

Semi-constructed interviews were conducted by Skype. Interviews were arranged individually with participants once they had signed their consent to an ethical approval form explaining the purpose of the project, the interview procedure and how their data would be used. The interview schedule included questions on the topics of CPD, community and professional identity in relation to the conferences participants had attended. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and then sent to participants for them to confirm the veracity and edit as they wished.

Using the NVivo software programme, the interview data were analysed through content analysis. CPD, Community and Professional Identity as theoretical constructs were used as themes to categorise the data. This a priori approach to content analysis is appropriate when the research questions are theory-driven (Berg & Lune, 2014, p. 340). Data analysis was an iterative process of reading the interviews, coding the data to categories which could be mapped onto the themes and constantly revising the categorisation as the exercise generated fresh insights. The results of the content analysis in Table 2 show the eventual categorisation and the distribution of codes.

**Table 2. Themes and Categories.**

| **Theoretical construct** | **Theme** | **Category** | **Number of participants** | **Number of comments** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Professionalism | CPD | Knowledge and skills | 17 | 41 |
| | | Resources | 13 | 16 |
| | Community | Bonding | 15 | 28 |
| | | Collaboration | 4 | 6 |
| | Professional Identity | Self-efficacy | 11 | 12 |
| | | Status | 10 | 15 |
| | | Motivation | 13 | 15 |

CPD consists of two categories: Knowledge and skills (the perceived impact of the input on the pedagogical understanding that informs practice); and Resources (exposure and access to pedagogical materials). Community is made up of two categories: Bonding (interacting and relationship-building); and Collaboration (joint endeavour towards a goal). Professional Identity contains three categories: self-efficacy (confidence in one's fitness to practise); status (self-esteem and a sense of purpose); and motivation (the desire to teach). Displayed for each category is the number of participants who made comments coded in that category as well as the number of comments across all the interviews. A comment is not equivalent to a linguistic unit as it could consist of a single word, for example "No" in response to a question, or a whole turn consisting of multiple sentences.

## Results and Discussion

The three themes of CPD, Community and Professional Identity are addressed in turn with selective illustrative quotes from the seventeen participants.

### CPD

The strongest and most consistent finding from the data was teachers' conviction that conferences represent an almost unrivalled CPD opportunity. Teachers linked this to professionalism by claiming that exposure to a kaleidoscope of input improves their practice. Although the participants, as indicated in Table 1, represented a large variation in teaching experience, and worked in different contexts, conferences were effective providers of CPD across the board. Prisha, a regular attender of the IATEFL annual conference, illustrated this point:

> "I always come back with something new, something I've picked up from one of the sessions. It's amazing really what you can go to, there's so much choice, too much really."

The notion of "choice" span across much of the data, as understood in terms of variety of content and mode of delivery, for example talks and workshops. As touched on earlier with reference to Finnegan et al. (2019), part of the attraction of conferences is the ability to select what and how to learn. Autonomy of practice is often regarded as an attribute of professionalism (cf., Evans, 2011), and the data suggest this freedom of choice extends to CPD uptake.

Further probed as to how CPD was connected to professionalism, Sean's response was:

> "You need to keep up-to-date these days, we all do. Like I was saying before, I'm not really into tech stuff myself but the kids are, so it's kind of expected, that's why I went to [name of presenter]'s session."

Sean's comment reflects a universal feeling that conferences represent innovation and best practice in ELT and corroborates both the non-ELT (e.g., Shannon et al., 2019) and ELT literature (e.g., Lamb, 2012) in identifying conferences primarily with CPD. Disappointment was expressed with individual sessions; for instance, Magda expected "more from such a big name". There were suggestions for how the programme could be customised, as when Mei said that she felt there was "not enough on very young learners". Overall, however, teachers perceived conference attendance as a visible indicator of professionalism.

Eight participants had presented at a conference, and this experience was highly estimated as a CPD exercise. As Hickson (2006) highlighted, beyond its value as a personal CPD opportunity, presenting brings benefits to the wider community, who may not have been at the conference. Francesco commented:

> "I guess in a way they do [have an impact on CPD] for example if I think about [name of organisation], when we had people who had attended conferences, they came back and they presented what they'd seen etc. Then it obviously had, it was obviously good for professional development because we learned a lot."

Two more comments referred to a cascade effect, which shows awareness that those privileged to attend conferences should share their learning. This duty was expressed in educational terms but commentators on professionalism, including Evans (2013), point out that there are ethical issues if CPD is self-contained: while professionalism is an individual responsibility, knowledge and values must be distributed across the field. This cannot be done in a vacuum where those who have access to CPD guard it to their own advantage.

The majority of participants also highlighted resources as an important take-away form of CPD. These comments referred to the resources exhibitions that are common to international and local

conferences alike and complimentary materials distributed by publishers, often in sessions they sponsored, as Neil testified:

> "I bought that book [name of presenter] wrote and got her to sign it at the stand."

The term *resources* also includes technology. and several comments, for example, Oksana's, below, suggest that teachers intended to use the technology in class:

> "I'll tell my students to download the app, because it looked useful."

It would seem that despite resource-free approaches such as Dogme (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009), there is still a high demand for materials, both paper and digital, to complement lessons, and conferences are opportunities, as Aubrey & Coombe (2010) found, to obtain an informed, if not always objective (publishers have commercial motives), picture of the latest products. By seeking to maximise the learning experience through resources, regardless of how effective these materials are in practice, teachers are demonstrating professionalism.

Nine teachers who had attended both local and international conferences compared them. Seven of the nine felt that international conferences were particularly potent in CPD, most forcibly put by Ragna:

> "I mean Cairo has its own [conference], we have local universities which have their own symposiums and conferences. They're much smaller and they tend to be sort of more focused on issues which relate to their context, but I think in an international conference you learn a lot more."

This participant had been to several IATEFL and TESOL International conferences, so this was no novelty appeal for her. Several teachers valued local conferences precisely because of the contextual factor identified in her comment, and of course they are more affordable, but it was felt that the size and diversity of international conferences gave them the edge. Although the literature (Hall & Paran, 2016; Lamb, 2012) includes both local and international conferences, there is little comparison of their contribution to CPD. If professionalism is accepted as context-based, as in Evans (2008), comparison may be worthwhile in order to understand the CPD dynamic operating in different conference settings.

To conclude this section, it is important not to dismiss the CPD experienced in conferences, local and international alike, as superficial or transient, as evidenced by Akiko when discussing methodology:

> "It's still more popular with the grammar-translation than communicative [methodology]. It's a kind of combination. But you've got more new ones, like CLIL or some new approaches, new ways to learn. But still it takes time to learn those, so the conference is a very good thing. We have our own ways too but we respect other ways too."

CPD is often associated with changes in methodology (Howatt & Smith, 2014) but this comment and its subsequent expansion exemplifies a shared sense amongst participants that CPD happens at a more profound level. The teacher went on to contrast her interpretation of the Japanese system, where she framed the teacher as expert and learners as receptacles of knowledge, with a model she claimed exposure to, through guest speakers at a local conference, of a more equal and collaborative relationship between teachers and students. This epistemological shift obviously goes beyond incorporating new teaching techniques or technologies and reveals conferences as influencers of core beliefs and values that underlie instructors' pedagogical approach and by extension professionalism. As Borg (2015) opines and Shannon et al. (2019) demonstrate empirically, the next crucial step is for this internal transformation to be externalised and result in better practice. In support of this, the literature (Aubrey & Coombe, 2010; Crandall & Christison, 2016; Lamb, 2012) identifies CPD as the core element in professionalism on the basic premise that, whatever its format, CPD delivers real outcomes which can be appreciated by learners.

## **Community**

A key message was that teachers experienced conferences as an opportunity to interact and share a sense of professionalism, as expressed by Laura below:

> "You need to share ideas, to get something from other people, and sometimes when you just go to a conference, maybe you skip the talks and get to hang out with other people, even talk and realise, '[expletive], this person has fantastic ideas and I never thought about this.' And it's not sort of networking to get another job, it's real professional connection."

The teacher sees community as something more ardent than networking, which is somewhat disdained as being functional in that it exploits a conference as a convenient venue for self-promotion. Community, in contrast, is not self-interested, and works on rapport and mutual appreciation.

This was a shared sentiment to the extent that we coded this category "bonding" to indicate the degree of attachment both cerebral and emotional, the latter patent in Janice's comment:

> "… the family sort of feeling, the fact that you know you can do this through social media, all the new things that are happening. But you know when you go to conference and everyone gives you a hug, 'I haven't seen you for years, that's our only contact with you'. I think that's the part most people really like."

In fact, a key word search showed "networking" only to be used four times in the corpus of interviews and then always slightly disparagingly as earlier. In contrast, Borg (2015) and Motteram (2016) coded "networking" as a theme in their data with positive associations. This alternative depiction cannot be discounted but here participants' descriptions of their interactions could be interpreted as disinterested (they were not looking for personal advantage) and emotive (they were often a highlight of the conference).

What comes across in a number of comments is a sense that teachers such as Elena below are often professionally isolated:

> "I'm sure [my colleagues]'re interested in their job, but they're not interested in the focus I have, so I can't talk to them, I can't bounce ideas off them, you know. My head of department is very encouraging, he doesn't work in our department but he's seen my students at work. So, I don't mean that I'm completely isolated or something but if I want people to talk to me and listen, I have a great response from other teachers at conferences."

The data show that conferences are rare opportunities for teachers to express themselves. There is a historical precedent for this. Toloudis (2010) discussed how much the origins of professionalism owed to conferences as venues for community-building, which redounds in the contemporary literature (e.g., Lamb, 2012). Furthermore, at conferences, feelings and views can often be more open than in the workplace because there are no repercussions for teachers' jobs. This openness and non-judgemental offering of support seem conducive to professionalism, especially in an environment (cf., Connell, 2009) where teachers are under increasing scrutiny.

Although this study did not aim to compare face-to-face with online conferences, six teachers, unprompted, remarked that what distinguished the former from the latter was the fuller sense of community, as Orpita illustrated:

> "It's what you don't get online, basically, to be there in the thick of it (is that how you call it?). Many things you can do online, and I do, but you still need to have human contact."

While acknowledging the greater convenience and reach of online conferences, these teachers were keen to retain the face-to-face experience. They did not see online conferences as a replacement to face-to-face but as a more accessible alternative in the construction of professionalism. The literature which suggests the equivalence of face-to-face and online formats (e.g., Castro, 2019; Moore et al., 2016) should acknowledge that the former, for now, play a role in community-building that is difficult to replicate virtually.

A smaller proportion of participants (four) referred to conferences as means of collaboration, i.e., working together on a project or issue demanding the sharing of expertise. Two of these concerned special interest groups, sub-sections of TAs, as participants convened for an update on tasks. As these groups operate outside the conference, arguably the conference was not key to this collaboration. One participant met by prior arrangement a contact over a publishing opportunity and the other decided to pursue research with a fellow presenter. Only the latter seems a genuine instance of collaboration due to the conference itself, perhaps reinforcing the point made earlier that the community engendered by conferences is visceral rather than telic. Consequently, it appears problematic to apply Wenger's (2000) Community of Practice designation to teachers purely based on conference attendance because conferences lack the joint outcomes that are essential to Wenger's model. Whether and how teachers engage in a Community of Practice is outside the scope of this study, but it is argued that this process will involve more than conference attendance.

## Professional identity

Confirming Borg (2015) and Motteram (2016), conferences were perceived as instrumental in professional identity. The majority of teachers viewed attending a conference as confirmation of their self-efficacy and status, and they reported increased motivation. Each category is illustrated by the following comments:

> "I thought [name of presenter]'s talk would be over my head, but I got almost all of it." (Neil)
>
> "I put the conferences I've been to on my resume." (Niko)
>
> "You always come back after a conference raring to teach." (Ann-Marie)

Comments relating to self-efficacy reveal that conferences revitalised participants' confidence and even pride in their knowledge and skills set. Self-efficacy was particularly pronounced amongst the eight teachers who had presented at conferences. In fact, the positive effects of giving a conference presentation cover all categories as presenting is depicted as demonstrating one's expertise of the subject area, conveying kudos, especially in refereed conferences such as TESOL International, and being highly motivational, mainly because of the feedback from delegates. Furthermore, the data suggest (seven comments) that the conference experience is not only intrinsically but also possibly extrinsically motivating because increased professional stature was connected to tangible rewards such as promotion. It should be added that there is often pressure on teachers to present – several of the participants mentioned that their funding was conditional on presenting – but on the other hand the two least experienced teachers in the sample aspired to having a presentation accepted at a conference.

Status deserves particular attention, as participants made frequent allusion to the fact that ELT is often degraded. Thus, Celia made a comparison with established professions:

> "I was at dinner with some scientists and they were talking about a conference, so it's not just us who do this kind of thing."

Scientists, unlike ELT teachers, seldom need to defend their status, so this participant is arguing that the conference is a universal in professionalism. Crucial for perceptions of professionalism is the sense that ELT has characteristics similar to recognised fields. The literature on professionalism (e.g., Evans, 2013) showed a departure from identifying professionalism with occupations, but a hierarchy probably remains in the consciousness of the general public, with ELT, as Gonzalez (2015) and Gower (2018) illustrated in different continents, ranking very low. Conferences are unlikely to overturn stereotypes about an entire industry but they were viewed by participants as an individual response to a complex issue outside their control.

Comparison of status was also internal, with three teachers contrasting their own professionalism in attending a conference with those who don't and wouldn't, most harshly verbalised by Marcia below:

> "We get people [applying for a teaching post] who think they can teach because they have worked at Disneyland. You'd never get them at BRAZ-TESOL and we don't want them here."

It may be unfair to criticise non-attendees as, first, they may not have the resources to attend conferences, and, second, as shown in Aubrey & Coombe (2010), non-attendees are often just as active in CPD as conference-goers. Marcia's virulence probably reflects the widespread concern, for example, Ruecker & Ives (2015), that ELT is over-represented by casual teachers. Individual reactions aside, conferences were viewed by participants as a stage for professionalism where their role could be foregrounded, leading to self-justification, external acceptance by the ELT community and personal gratification.

## Conclusion

The findings from this study suggest that English language teachers highly value conferences, especially international conferences, as vehicles for CPD and hence markers of professionalism. CPD is realised in many forms. For example, a teacher presenting a session and a teacher accessing a new classroom resource display different CPD behaviours, but there is evidence that the conference experience contributes to a transformation of values and beliefs, and is non-trivial in the process of professionalism. Our data also point to the fact that teachers are enthusiastic about conferences as, often rare, opportunities to feel part of a collective characterised by warmth and openness. The nature of the community-building seems to be primarily social, for instance establishing rapport, rather than pragmatic, for example collaboration on tasks. This strongly experienced but weakly utilitarian sense of community suggests a merging of vocational and personal values in professionalism which the face-to-face element of conferences accentuates. Finally, the findings indicate that teachers express a more robust professional identity because of attending, and particularly presenting at, conferences because they confirm themselves as competent practitioners with a valuable role to play in a job which brings them personal satisfaction. Because ELT as a field is vulnerable to accusations of unprofessionalism, one salient functionality of conferences is to bolster teachers' status and sense of self-worth.

While not claiming to be universally generalisable, the evidence from this study suggests that ELT conferences may have a valuable role to play in teachers' professionalism because they offer a rich source of CPD, provide a strong sense of community and develop teachers' sense of professional identity. Overall, this offers a strong justification for teachers to attend conferences and thus demonstrate their professionalism. However, three points need to be considered in accepting this conclusion.

The first is that this study, like all the literature reviewed except Aubrey & Coombe (2010), only describes the experiences of those who have attended conferences. It is likely that a large number of teachers, particularly in the unregulated private language school sector, do not go or rarely go to conferences. It cannot simply be assumed that such teachers are uninformed or that they eschew professionalism. They may lack the financial means to attend (the cost factor was referred to several times in this study), they may doubt the merits of conferences (the emergence of bogus conferences is described in Asadi, 2019) or they may even have had negative experiences (Thompson et al., 2012, detail how conferences can be abused). Data from non-attendees would provide a valuable counterpoint to a literature which is to date dedicated to a minority experience.

The second issue is that the findings reported are perceptual rather than actual. In other words, the gains participants claim from conferences may not be real, or may be of limited duration. To illustrate from the data, Oksana expresses a desire to incorporate more technology into her teaching, but her classroom practice may not change at all or for long after the conference. Also, even if there is pedagogical change, this must be judged to be effective in terms of language acquisition. The construct of professionalism which informs this study is practice-based, so it is important that perceived benefits translate into outcomes which positively impact the learners. To ascertain this would require post-conference data, and the only study found in the literature which included this step was Shannon et al.'s (2019) observation of science lessons. Post-conference verification of the perceived benefits of ELT conferences would extend and complicate research – observation is an imperfect instrument (c.f., Kawulich, 2005) – but it would significantly increase the validity of future studies.

Finally, the significant role that TAs play in conferences and in professionalism in general (c.f., Rimmer & Floyd, in press) must be recognised. TAs have no monopoly on organising conferences, but eleven of the twelve conferences named in this study were run by or in conjunction with TAs and the, admittedly paltry, ELT literature on conferences is exclusively concerned with TAs. The contribution of conferences to professionalism thus reflects very positively on TAs themselves and is possibly justification alone for their existence at a time when membership of TAs is falling (Lamb, 2012). However, TAs do need to make conferences more accessible. To this end, TAs should promote themselves better, as too many teachers lack awareness of their conferences, and should reduce costs, for example through sponsorship.

This study has included both international and local conferences, and future research could usefully address both. As highlighted, this research would ideally be larger-scale and include a mechanism for evaluating the impact of conferences on individuals' teaching. In response to ever-advancing technology, online conferences must also become part of the research agenda. Indeed, for some teachers, through financial restrictions, logistics or personal preference, online will be the only viable alternative to face-to-face conferences. The data from this study suggest that participants preferred the face-to-face experience, mainly because of the sense of community, but there is no reason why Stevens & Dudeney's (2009) optimism that online will achieve at least parity with face-to-face should not be realised. Whatever the future format or content of conferences, TAs surely have a large role to play in their development. In turn, it is theorized that conferences will continue to feature prominently in the discussion of teachers' professionalism.

## About the Authors

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**Appendix. Participants.**

| **Name (anonymised)** | **Gender** | **Age** | **Nationality** | **ELT experience (years)** | **ELT sector (location)** | **Conferences attended** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Akiko | Female | 48 | Japanese | 24 | Tertiary (Japan) | IATEFL (UK), Japan Association for Language Teaching |
| Ann-Marie | Female | 47 | British | 21 | Tertiary (UK) | IATEFL (UK), International House Barcelona ELT |
| Celia | Female | 52 | US-American | 25 | Secondary school (USA) | TESOL International (USA) |
| Elena | Female | 29 | Russian | 7 | Tertiary (Russia) | National Association of Teachers of English (Russia) |
| Francesco | Male | 32 | Italian | 7 | Private language school (UK) | IATEFL (UK) |
| Janice | Female | 36 | British | 12 | Further education college (UK) | National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults (UK) |

| Name (anonymised) | Gender | Age | Nationality | ELT experience (years) | ELT sector (location) | Conferences attended |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Laura | Female | 36 | Australian | 13 | Private language school (Czech Republic) | IATEFL (UK), TESOL-Ukraine |
| Magda | Female | 23 | Polish | 2 | Private language school (Poland) | IATEFL Poland |
| Marcia | Female | 34 | Brazilian | 12 | Private language school (Brazil) | BRAZ-TESOL, IATEFL (UK) |
| Mei | Female | 38 | Chinese | 16 | Secondary school (UK) | IATEFL (UK) |
| Neil | Male | 27 | British | 4 | Private language school | IATEFL (UK) |
| Niko | Male | 29 | Filipino | 6 | Private language school (Thailand) | Thailand TESOL |
| Oksana | Female | 42 | Moldovan | 20 | Freelance (Russia) | TESOL-Ukraine |
| Orpita | Female | 61 | Bangladeshi | 39 | Tertiary (Bangladesh) | Bangladesh English Language Teachers' Association, IATEFL (UK), TESOL International (USA) |
| Prisha | Female | 44 | Indian | 20 | Secondary school (UK) | IATEFL (UK) |
| Ragna | Female | 49 | Egyptian | 28 | Tertiary (Egypt) | IATEFL (UK), NileTESOL (Egypt), TESOL International (USA) |
| Sean | Male | 35 | US-American | 11 | Freelance (Korea) | TESOL International (USA) |

[i] This list is incomplete. In the interviews, participants referred to other conferences they had attended without naming them.