

**A virtual conference: the first of its kind for ERLA - a personal account**

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ERLA Conference – Tuesday 5 May 2020

News of the fifth conference hosted by the *International Association for the Educational Role of Language* (ERLA) started filtering into my inbox in October 2019. The scope of the conference was to be ‘Learner and Teacher identity.’ This focus instantly appealed after grappling with my own issues of teacher identity following a change in role a few years ago, so I secured my place. Then the global health crisis hit. As the virus rampaged across the globe, countries went into lockdown, people were confined to home, and life went virtual.

Our movements may have been quietened by the pandemic, but our voices have certainly not; the ERLA conference was to go online. A significant date was chosen – 5 May to mark the significance of the fifth conference.

The work behind the scenes to set up a virtual conference appeared onerous, but the vision was clearly communicated – the online session was to be ‘everything which the ERL conference is not!’ That meant ideas focused, rather than research-based, short 15-minute presentations rather than long talks, and the mood to be informal. The goal was to promote the co-construction of knowledge; the reach was to be further than formal educational institutions. Clear guidelines were issued, not to be acknowledged as rules, but more as a framework for disseminating ideas. One of the key principles was to formulate the talk around two or three key ideas and ensure that the audience benefitted from a pedagogic takeaway. This slight shift in focus was exciting and empowering, allowing the move away from fixed schedules and long presentations, permitting a freer discussion and sharing of ideas. Beforehand, there was a trial run of the software to ensure connectivity and functionality. The sudden thrust into online teaching had been, for most, a steep learning curve, incorporating a multitude of different platforms and mediums; therefore, a trial run was certainly a welcome idea. A spreadsheet was emailed allowing presenters to provide a synopsis of their talk and a rough guide to the timeslot. As the conference was planned to last the entire day, this was a useful feature as, no doubt, busy academics were trying to plan around their teaching.

The day was divided into four blocks and the talks spanned a diverse portfolio of topics ranging from the more abstract (critical thinking, communication in the Covid-19 climate, gender and identity) to the more practical classroom-based (the role of language in assessing mathematics, making classes more engaging and business English vocabulary). Other talks showcased the ideas, projects and research of the presenters. The flexible format allowed participants to dip in and out to fit around other commitments.

There were several talks which aligned with my own research interests: I was delighted to listen to the Intercultural reflection on teaching, something which I focus on in my own classrooms with International learners and trainee Teachers of English to Speakers of other Languages (TESOL) specialists. ‘Listening beyond the scope of the classroom’ appealed to my English for Academic Purposes (EAP) background.

The talk on mindfulness, cultivating calm and mindfulness in the chaos of an online environment, struck another chord with me; emotional education is an area in which I specialize and aligns strongly with my ethos of empowerment in the classroom.

Approaches to business English vocabulary teaching was a firm favorite and something which I could relate to, drawing from my own experience of the lexical issues that English for Specific Purposes (ESP) elicits. Another talk raised the idea of the multilingual classroom, particularly topical in the UK at present with an increased number of English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners in our schools. There has been a recent shift away from the rigid confines of the monolingual classroom, with its imperialistic overtones, and towards an appreciation of how other languages can enrich the learning environment. Multilingualism is starting to be regarded as an additive rather than a subtractive quality. Overall, the sessions were refreshing, thought-provoking and offered ample opportunity for discussion through the online chat or using the microphones.

The day ran seamlessly thanks to the organizers and culminated in a group picture showing attendees from across the globe. Social media reported that in excess of 40 participants had booked a place. In order to round off the event, feedback and evaluative comments were to be left for the contributors; this only added to the sense of collaborative learning. Praise for the format, organization and the opportunity to share so many 'fresh' ideas in a collegial environment were noted in the comments and I wholeheartedly agree. Opportunities to network and collaborate were also plentiful. Making ideas accessible and stimulating discussion seemed to have been a successful ethos which underpinned this first online event thanks to the dedication and commitment of the organizers, and the enthusiasm and passion of the participants.

I can only conclude that the virtual ERLA conference may well have been the first of its kind, but hopefully it will not be the last.