

Column: Conference Reflections

CamTESOL

by Adrienne Verla Uchida

Have you attended any conferences that were especially inspiring? Would you like to recommend a conference to our members? In this column, contributors can share information about specific conferences, presentations they attended, or helpful logistical information for those of us who have not stepped out of our comfort zones yet. Please contact the editor if you would like to contribute an installment or if you just have an idea you would like to run by her. We look forward to the next installment of “Conference Reflections.”

The 14th annual CamTESOL Conference on English Language Teaching (CamTESOL), themed “English Language Teaching in the Digital Era,” was held on February 10-11, 2018, at the Institute of Technology (ITC) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Additionally, on Friday February 9th there was a pre-conference Regional Research Symposium held, as well as optional educational and cultural tours throughout the day. According to the CamTESOL website, over 1,700 people from 39 countries attended the weekend conference. As a prominent ELT event in Southeast Asia supported by IDP Education, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport of the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Australian and US embassies, and a variety of other institutions and individuals, the conference brought together a diverse body of people from various backgrounds.

This was the first time for me to attend an overseas conference but not my first trip to Cambodia. While I had no idea what to expect at CamTESOL, I had a positive, though somewhat dated, image of Cambodia in my head as I boarded the plane from Tokyo to Phnom Penh. It was my first visit to the country in over 10 years. The first thing that struck me upon arrival was not the balmy summer-like temperatures but rather the development of the capital, from the number of vehicles on the road to the prices of coffee at a local cafe.

I chose to not stay at a hotel listed on the CamTESOL website because I wanted to give my money to hotels and organizations that promote sustainability and community development in Cambodia. However, it is worth mentioning that the CamTESOL website provided a wide range of hotels to fit a variety of budgets, so rest assured

you can find a good hotel even if it is your first time visiting Cambodia.

My hotel was located about 30 minutes away from the venue by tuk-tuk, taxi, or Uber. A few things to keep in mind when navigating Phnom Penh: haggling for a tuk-tuk is fine and expected, taxis use metered fares (you can pay in American dollars), and Uber’s pricing can be confirmed using the app on any smartphone. Lucky for conference visitors, this year CamTESOL teamed up with Uber so that people who downloaded the Uber app for the first time received a coupon code for \$4 off of 4 rides, and previous



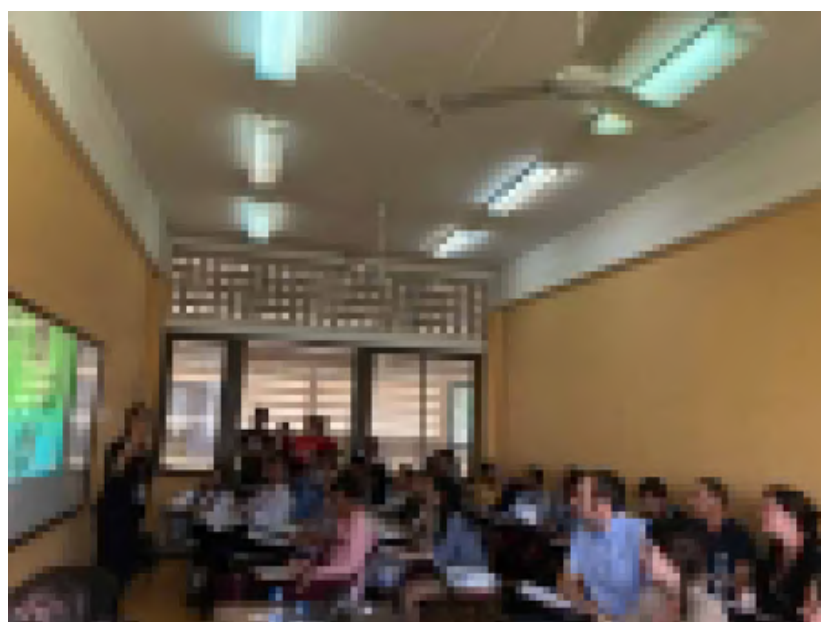
users received \$3 off of 3 rides. These discounts were available for use throughout the weekend providing reliable travel around the city, and I personally enjoyed trying out Uber service for the first time. At the same time, remember to plan your time with regard to traffic jams as the driving style in Cambodia is very different from Japan. I think I could count the number of traffic lights I saw with my fingers and the way traffic yielded at intersections was both fascinating and horrifying!



One final piece of advice that deserves a passing mention is that some participants complained of stomach troubles that required doctor's visits upon return to Japan, and while rumor has it one building on the venue had Western style toilets, the majority of the restrooms were Cambodian style and toilet paper was not provided. If you are coming from Japan, make sure to pack pocket tissues and be ready for an experience different from attending a conference in Japan!

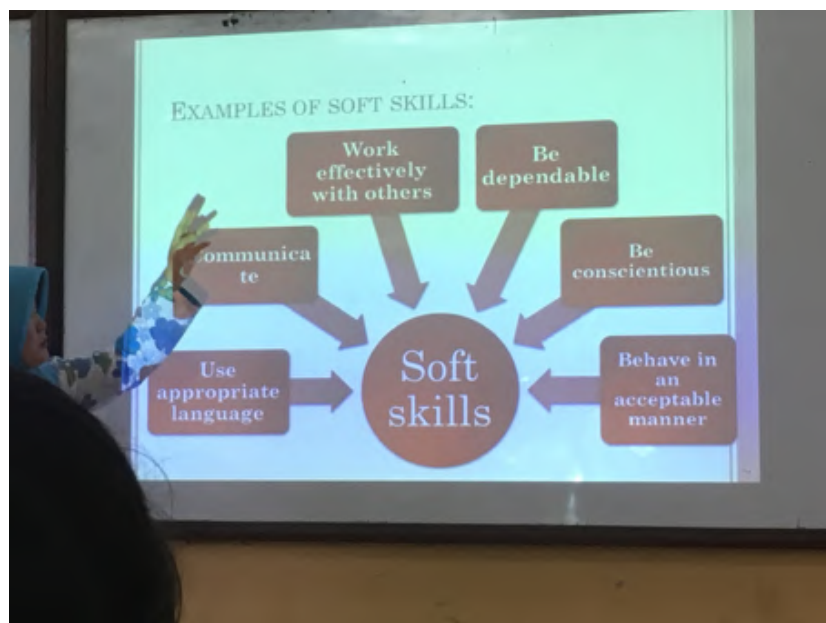
The conference started off on Saturday morning and the atmosphere was filled with nerves and excitement. While there were many people seated in the conference hall in pairs or groups, just as many participants were sitting alone. The demographics at CamTESOL were different from what I usually see at JALT-related functions in Japan, namely there were many women and even more

young people. The opening ceremony included the usual speeches by stakeholders but also the national anthem performed by a local brass band and a beautiful traditional welcome dance by Khmer dancers. John Macalister kicked off the conference with his morning plenary sharing research on what works and doesn't work when teaching reading in ELT settings and provided the audience with various ways they can incorporate extensive reading in their classrooms regardless of access to technology. People in the audience around me sat quietly and eagerly jotted down notes from his talk.



For me, the best part of CamTESOL was the variety of concurrent presentations and workshops being presented by researchers and educators from around the world. There were 29 different streams including topics such as motivation, teaching specific skills, professional development, research methods, curriculum and materials development, and many more. I made a conscious effort to avoid presenters from Japan because I hoped to learn about what educators in other parts of the world were doing in their classrooms. In some cases the presentation rooms were so full that there was standing room only and participant overflow spilled into the hallways. Despite the heat and lack of air-conditioning, audience members were engaged and hanging on the words of each presenter. Participants asked interesting and thought-provoking questions at the end of each session I attended, which created an atmosphere unlike what I had experienced at a Japanese conference. One reason for this could be that for many participants this is their only chance of professional development and they don't know if or when another opportunity will arise, so they take advantage of every moment. Understanding that clearly, as a person taking up

a desk in the audience, I too didn't want to let the opportunity to attend CamTESOL pass me by: I took notes, participated actively in discussions, asked questions, and overall did my best to be part of that engaged public.



The most memorable talks that I attended were by women from a variety of Asian countries, including Cambodia, Vietnam, and China. Examples of some of the presentations I saw include sessions on the role of growth mindset in ELT, various ways to incorporate rubrics into ELT writing classes for peer evaluation, cultivating soft skills through project collaboration, and a way to implement Facebook for classroom use. However, two presenters stood out above the rest to me. Sarina Monh, a lecturer from Cambodia, shared a great reflective activity using the “Tree of Life” as a visual for reflecting on one’s practice as an educator. It allows the reader to examine various areas, including the reasons of becoming an educator, their teaching beliefs and practices, and aspects in their teaching they want to improve. She also had each person fill out a reflective questionnaire adapted from Taggart and Wilson (1998) cited in Farrell (2015). I was shocked to find that I was on the borderline of two classifications and it has made me want to become even more aware of my teaching practices and beliefs.

Mei Lin was another speaker who I found very inspirational and motivating, so much that I attended both her presentation and workshop. Her presentation discussed the integration of 21st century key skills into EFL classrooms and then she elaborated more on how to create a classroom environment promoting those skills in the workshop. Mei Lin introduced three classroom tasks that could be incorporated into the majority of classrooms at a

variety of levels regardless of age or ability to facilitate deeper cognitive thinking skills and active classroom participation. I was particularly interested in the activity she called a “living graph.” In groups students are given a scenario, like “Sally’s first date with Marvin,” and students need to make a graph of the events that occurred that day in the chronological order and set them against different emotions that Sally felt that day. Once students have completed the graph, they present the results to other groups in the class. The results and ideas can be vastly different, so it is a “living graph!”

CamTESOL also created a positive atmosphere for networking throughout the weekend. Twice on Saturday and once on Sunday, 30-minute break times were scheduled and drinks, small sandwiches, and baked goods were laid out for the participants to enjoy while networking with other attendees or visiting the various exhibition booths around the venue. Another event that was offered for an additional fee was the Cultural Dinner on Saturday night. It included an amazing buffet with both Khmer food as well as Western dishes, and traditional Khmer theater performances. It was a nice way to chat



with friends, take photographs at the CamTESOL photo booth, and eat and drink to your heart's content.

Overall, as my first international conference, CamTESOL proved to be a great choice! I met and networked with people from all around Asia and had the opportunity to learn about teaching contexts outside of Japan. If I have an opportunity to go again, I would love to attend as a presenter and hopefully inspire and share my ideas with other educators to give back for all the things I was able to take away from the conference this year. In fact, the preliminary details for CamTESOL 2019 have already been announced. The conference will take place on February 16-17, 2019 in Phnom Penh under the theme "Teachers as Learners." Whether you have never attended an international conference and would like to or are a world-traveled conference veteran, I highly recommend attending CamTESOL at least once. Hopefully, like me, you will become enchanted with Cambodia and her people and want to attend yearly. For more information please check out the official CamTESOL website at <https://camtesol.org/>.



Bio: Adrienne Verla Uchida is an associate professor at Nihon University based in Mishima, Japan. She has 14 years of teaching experience at the secondary and tertiary level, providing her with many opportunities to work with curriculum design and student motivation. She received her MA in TESOL from Teachers College Columbia University. Her interests

include academic writing, project-based learning, student motivation, reflective practice, and the role of English in Japanese music. Correspondence should be sent to verla.uchida@nihon-u.ac.jp.