Content list available at www.urmia.ac.ir/ijltr

Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research

Urmia University

The key for holding a successful ELT conference: some nuts and bolts

Karim Sadeghi [a,*], Sima Modirkhameneh [a]

[a] *Urmia University, Iran*

ABSTRACT

Conferences are gatherings that attract attendants from various places and serve both academic and social purposes. Organizing an international conference is, accordingly, a very challenging, demanding and time-consuming task. In order for the conference organizers to hold a successful conference, there is a need for a comprehensive guide to use as a departure and reference point. No academic paper seems to have attended to do's and don'ts of organizing a successful conference in ELT/Applied linguistics. Drawing on the very positive evaluation of a recent international ELT conference held in Urmia, Iran, in May 2013, the authors (as the academic and executive organizers of this conference) share, in this paper, their experiences in holding what was viewed as a 'mammoth success' and a 'magnificent conference' by the attendants (http://www.urmia.ac.ir/elt2013/doclib/testimonials.aspx). The paper discusses conference organizing tasks in terms of two major categories: academic and executive, each with different phases and sub-activities. The paper is hoped to provide a resourceful piece of first-hand information to conference, especially first-time, organizers in the field of ELT and related disciplines.

Keywords: ELT; organizing a conference; conference guidelines

ARTICLE SUMMARY

Received: 20 Aug. 2013 **Revised version received:** 25 Sep. 2013

Accepted: 29 Sep. 2013 **Available online:** 15 Oct. 2013

* Corresponding author: Urmia University, Iran
Email address: ksadeghi03@gmail.com

Introduction

Conferences or academic gatherings are one of the best venues for specialists in a field to exchange their scholarly ideas. Although the meaning of the word 'conference' seems to be self-evident, it can be defined as "a meeting for consultation, exchange of information, or discussion, especially one with a formal agenda" (Collins Online Dictionary). Every year, various local, national and international conferences are held in the four corners of the world on different topics. Apart from some politically sensitive conferences which are usually directly managed by first-level government authorities, most other conferences are organized and run by interested scholars in academic or research institutions such as universities, academic societies or private organizations. The time, energy and level of dedication that need to go into organizing an international conference attracting hundreds of attendants from different parts of the world can easily be understood by comparing it to the planning for a small family outing. Conferences in the field of ELT and Applied Linguistics are no exception and to render them successful, dedicated teams need to spend several thousand working hours to manage such gatherings and be able to provide a satisfying experience for all those attending the event with different expectations in mind. While there are quite a number of conference organizers' manuals in different fields, there is a shortage of comprehensive guides on organizing ELT conferences and one of the few papers tackling the issue is Potvin's (1983) classic work which attributes the success of a conference to careful planning and organization.

The success of a conference can refer to different things; however, the yardstick we apply here for measuring the is the closeness of the match between the expectations the organizers, participants, presenters, sponsors and the academic society at large have and actual experience. As members of the organizing committee of a recent international conference on ELT which was held in Iran (Urmia University: http://www.urmia.ac.ir/elt2013/default.aspx) and which was judged to be 'a mammoth success', 'a magnificent conference', 'fine work' and 'a model for other conferences' by distinguished scholars who either attended the conference or heard the news (http://www.urmia.ac.ir/elt2013/doclib/testimonials.aspx), we feel an obligation to share our experiences in holding this academic event so that our fellow colleagues and conference organizers elsewhere in Iran and other parts of the world may benefit and hold even more successful conferences in the future. While organizing a conference can be approached from various perspectives, we have found it useful to divide conference organization activities into two major phases: academic and executive. The following pages illustrate the meanings of these terms further as well as offering advice on how each phase may be implemented in the best form possible.

Academic phase

By academic, we refer to activities related to setting up the organizing committee: inviting scientific committee members, managing the proposal submissions and the evaluation process, inviting plenary speakers and the like. No doubt, an academic conference in our field is above all a scientific event and most of the delegates attend the conference to have academic exchanges with their fellow researchers from different institutions. For this purpose, the academic level of an international conference should be kept to a maximum. While conference organizers may be unable to implement whatever they actually plan, they should, however, aim for the highest standards possible so that if there is a shortfall, this will be minimal and non-significant. As an example, rather than inviting one or two well-known ELT figures to deliver plenary speeches, it is better to have a couple of world-class keynote speakers; and indeed one criterion for judging the academic quality and consequently the success of a conference is the number (quantity) as well as the quality of plenary speeches (which depends both on the quality of the speech itself and the standing of the speaker among similar international figures). The point is that conference organizers should aim for the best so that the conference quality will not suffer seriously if they are forced to drop their expectations one level, or if, in practice, they are unable to implement their initial plan. To better illustrate the range of activities involved in the academic phase of organizing a conference, we have divided this phase into three mini-phases: the pre-conference, during conference, and post conference phases.

Pre-conference tasks

Planning for the conference

Organizing an international conference is a huge and demanding task. The organizing institution/s must be highly motivated and dedicated to accomplish such a big assignment; otherwise, the conference can be a failure. When the ultimate decision is made by the authorities of the organizing institution/s to proceed with the preparations for a conference (a decision which is highly dependent on the authorities' willingness to spend money and prepare the relevant facilities and equipment), an organizing committee should be set up, and an active member of the organizing institution who has good academic standing and links with the professionals in the field should accept the responsibility of acting as an academic organizer. The academic organizer is the link between the organizing committee and the academic community. The academic organizer as well as the executive organizer should select the rest of the organizing committee team, who are usually made of academic staff and interested post-graduate students eager to help with the different phases of holding the conference as explained below (Bajec, 2003; Papadopoulou, 2008). While preparations for the conference could have been an ambition of the organizers for years, the actual start of organization should begin at least one year before the conference starts.

Immediately after the academic organizer is appointed, s/he should start contacting national and international scholars to enrol the members of the scientific committee. The more top-level scientific committee members from various universities/countries. the higher the prestige of the conference. Invitation letters (with information on conference theme/dates, etc.) should be sent to renowned scholars to join the conference as scientific committee members as early in the process as possible. The conference poster (if available at that stage) should also accompany the invitation letters.

Inviting plenary/key speakers

At the same time, or even before this stage, the academic organizer should contact top ELT/Applied Linguistics figures (both nationally and internationally) and invite them to deliver plenary speeches at the conference. For an international conference, the number of international figures should be more than the number of national figures, of course. For each day of the conference, between 2 and 3 plenary speeches are appropriate (depending on the facilities available in the conference site). One key factor for the success of the conference and to attract a large number of participants/delegates to the conference is for the attendants to know who else will be attending the conference and giving lectures. Therefore, conference organizers should be very careful in the selection of their plenary/key-note speakers. Inviting foreign and top scholars is a very costly and time-consuming process, especially if visas are to be arranged (more on this comes in the next section); however, an indispensable criterion to guarantee the fame and success of the conference is the physical presence of such key figures. Many participants/presenters will be persuaded to attend the conference to at least meet these renowned personalities. In addition to a few top plenary speakers who will actually be present at the conference, it is also possible to arrange for some other plenary speeches to be given online via Skype or other communication devices or in the form of video-recording. For Skype or other online communication, the Internet speed, time difference between the location of the speaker and the conference venue, etc. need serious consideration. A test of online communication should be conducted before actual conference presentation, and arrangements should be made with the relevant authorities to have the maximum Internet speed for better communication.

Conference website/details

When the conference dates, venue, plenary speakers, themes, etc. are finalized, a conference website should be set up and the information should be added there. A conference poster should also be professionally made with information on conference title, topics, dates, plenary speakers, instructions on how to submit proposals, the review criteria, etc. The presence of organizing committee members with website/poster designing experience will be a great blessing; otherwise, professionals should be consulted for these purposes. After the abstract submission dates/procedure, and the information on the conference website and the poster are reviewed and finalized by the organizing committee, it will be time to look for conference sponsors, although this process could have started much earlier and indeed at the very beginning stages of planning the conference (see the executive phase for more on this). Depending on the nature of the contract with sponsors, their names, logos, website links, etc. may appear in the conference website and/or the poster.

Now that the website and poster information is final and the abstract submission procedure is known, the academic organizer should start publicizing the event and a call for papers (CFP) should be issued. The CFP should be announced on as many conference alert sites as possible, including Linguist List, Congress Calendar, Conference Alerts, etc. The CFP should also be shared as quickly as possible among professionals via email groups, discussion groups, Facebook and Twitter links as well as sent to as many relevant academic departments as possible.

Abstract submission and processing

It is better for the submission process to start as soon as the CFP is out. While email submissions are feasible when few submissions are expected, managing email submissions will be quite challenging if a large number of submissions are made, as each submission needs to be attended to and acknowledged immediately. To solve this problem, it is preferable to design an automatic submission process. There are some conference submission sites such as Linguist List which already have such a facility available free of charge for conference organizers. Whatever the submission procedure, the CFP should include information on what the content of the proposal should be like and how it should be submitted. The CFP should include information on whether an abstract or an extended abstract should be submitted, and if the full paper will be needed. Information should be provided to potential contributors on the length of the title, the length of the abstract, the number of key words, as well as the category of submission (oral/poster/seminar/virtual) and the theme the submission is related to. Contributors should be cautioned not to include any author-identifying information in the body of the abstract (or in the proposal file when the submission is made as an email attachment).

A deadline of one to two months for the submissions is best. Depending on the number of submissions received and the plans of the organizers regarding the number of sessions to be included in the conference programme, this deadline may be extended and a second or third CFP may be announced. According to McClosekey (1994), conference organizers should be reasonably rigid on proposal deadlines, but should not reject a superb proposal simply because it was a few days late. In some conferences, because of the limited number of proposals submitted, almost all papers are accepted for presentation, and this is not desirable. Generally speaking, accepting one third of the submitted papers is normal. In high quality conferences with a large number of submissions, the acceptance rate may be as low as 10 per cent. All such considerations will affect the length of the submission period.

Processing the submitted proposals should begin as soon as they are submitted in the first days of submission. The submissions will come very slowly during the first days but will gradually increase as the deadline approaches. Indeed, on the final submission date, the organizers may receive tens of submissions every hour. This was our experience when we held the *International Conference on Current Trends in ELT* in Iran. Therefore, leaving processing of proposals to the deadline will put a big burden on the academic organizer. As soon as a proposal is received, the academic organizer should initially check and see whether it is ready and complete to be sent to the reviewers. Then, for each submission, two reviewers should be selected based on their areas of expertise, who should be sent the proposal for reviewing based on an initial agreement. With a big number of submissions (that is 1000 +), there is a need for many reviewers as well, so that each reviewer will not be required to evaluate more than 20 proposals on average (although the number can range between 5 and 50 depending on how busy individual volunteer reviewers are). Reviewers should be given clear instructions on the criteria to use for evaluating the proposals as well as the scoring system (which can range from 1 for the least acceptable proposal to 5 for the best proposal overall, or which can use a detailed evaluation system with different scores for different items in the abstract). The reviewers may be requested to provide comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal and provide reasons especially in the case of those proposals which are not acceptable or those which receive a very low score. Reviewers should be given a deadline (of usually one or two weeks) to complete their review assignments. Good advice on the review process can be found in conference organizers' manuals such as *IEEE Conference Organizers' Manual* (2011).

After all the reviewers (who are usually members of the scientific committee of the conference) have submitted their evaluation reports, the academic organizer should follow up and see which proposals have not yet been evaluated. For each proposal, two evaluation reports should be available; and in case there is a strong contrast between reviewers in the scores given to a proposal, a third reviewer's judgment may be sought. Based on the average scores given for each proposal according to reviewer evaluations, those proposals receiving the highest scores (usually 4+) should be accepted for oral presentation. Considering the number of papers to be included in the conference programme and based on the number of submissions, the score for the last paper accepted for the conference programme may be 3.5 or 3. Usually papers scoring lower than 3 will not be appropriate for a quality conference, but depending on the conference policy, some papers with such average scores may be accepted for poster presentation. It may also be a good policy to accept only one or two papers from each presenter to allow the chance for more quality papers to be presented. Furthermore, since not all contributors who receive an acceptance manage to register for the conference and make their presentation, it will be a good idea to have more proposals accepted than the programme can accommodate and have some of these put on a reserve list so that the authors can be contacted in case a slot becomes available.

After the evaluation results are finalized, a decision should be made on the number of oral/poster/workshop/virtual presentations to be included in the programme, and all the contributors should be contacted and informed about the status of their proposal. The contributors should be sent either a rejection letter or an acceptance letter in which the type of presentation (Oral/Poster) should be specified. The same letter should contain information for corresponding authors to inform their co-authors of the status of their submission. The decision letter should also include information on how the proposals were evaluated and the reasons why some papers had to be declined. In the same letter, authors should be given information about how to proceed to the next stages, that is how to register as a presenter or as a participant.

Registration

Full information on how to complete the registration process should appear on the conference website and a summary or the link to this should be given in the decision letter. The Registration page of the conference website should include information on the forms to be filled in by presenters/participants, the registration fee, how this should be paid, whether the fee is refundable, what the fee covers, how the registration forms should be submitted, etc. The completed registration forms which are then sent to the conference organizers along with payment receipts should be processed and acknowledged by the organizers and any mismatches or problems sorted out. If there is an option for on-site registration or a discounted student or member fee or a fee waiver policy, this should also be explained on the conference website as well as information about travel grants, or any other form of scholarship. The registration page should also make it clear whether the fee covers all conference sessions or whether it includes/excludes any sessions specifically whether workshops, lunches, conference dinner, refreshments, transportation, sightseeing, accommodation, certificates, publication, etc. are also included or not. The Registration page should also specify deadlines for presenter/participant registration and should specify whether there is an early-bird registration policy. An alphabetical list of registered presenters/participants should, then, be prepared and made available for the registration team during the conference.

Conference programme

After the registration forms are received, the detailed conference programme should be drafted. For drafting the conference programme, the number of concurrent and plenary sessions as well as poster sessions should be determined first. Plenary sessions are best arranged for the hours of the day that most participants will have a chance to attend. It is a good idea not to plan any concurrent session when there is a plenary session. The number of plenary/concurrent/poster sessions on different days of the conference should be balanced. The papers to be presented at each concurrent session (usually 3 or 4) should be on the same theme so that participants will not need to change rooms/sessions after each presentation. Break times, lunch times and prayer times should also be specified in the programme. If there is a plenary before or after concurrent sessions, and if the sessions are in different buildings, plenty of time should be allowed for participants to change venues. For each session, whether plenary or concurrent, a session chair should be assigned. It is advisable to choose session chairs from among scholars coming from different universities, who will themselves have presentations at the conference. Ideally, session chairs should be specialists in the theme of the session they are chairing. These arrangements should be made with session chairs in advance so that their names can appear in the programme when it is finalized and sent out for publication. When the draft programme is ready, it should be sent to all contributors to check their session details and report any problems in names, paper titles, affiliations, etc. There will always be some requests by certain presenters to change the date/time of their presentation and the organizers should accommodate such requests as far as possible. When the programme is finalized, it should be posted on the conference website as well as being announced to all presenters/participants. The programme will then be ready for printing, but it is better to delay printing the programme to the final days of the conference (say, one week before the conference starts) since there will always be a need for some last-minute changes based on contributor requests.

Book of abstracts

An important task for conference organizers is to have the book of abstracts published in as professional a manner as possible. Based on conference policies, the publication may be in hard copy or on a DVD. A hard copy is usually preferred by most presenters and a CD or DVD may also be provided. A professionally designed cover and layout will add to the quality of the work. Before finalizing the book of abstracts for publication, it is ideal to send the abstracts back to the original authors for a final check of the title, the authors, the affiliations, contact details, and the body of the abstract for spelling and language problems. A template may also be used for consistency purposes. The returned final abstracts from authors can then be arranged either alphabetically (based on first author family name) or based on different themes represented in the conference programme (again alphabetically). It is desirable to have separate sections for plenaries, oral presentations, poster presentation, and workshops. A list of authors with their email addresses should be appended at the end of the abstracts book, with page numbers, so that it can work as an appendix. Depending on the arrangements with the publishing company, the book of abstracts should be submitted for publication in time, and indeed the final printed booklet should be ready at least two weeks before the conference dates so copies may be sorted and placed into conference packs in time. Depending on conference policy, full papers of the conference (a selection) may be published as Conference Proceedings (such as Procedia) or in a Special Issue of a Journal.

Pre-travel information pack

Another useful pre-conference arrangement is to provide presentation tips for presenters on how to make an effective PowerPoint presentation and how to produce a poster (how it should be developed, the size, content, template, who to report to and submit their posters on arrival, poster presentation times, etc.). Useful tips on oral presentation and posters (which can be very handy for novice presenters) can be found in different websites such as http://www.google.ca/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=8&sqi=2&ved=0CFUQFjAH&url=http%3A%2F%2Fweb.uvic.ca%2Fspp%2Fdocuments%2Fconferencpresgagne.ppt&ei=gys4UuqaC8HY2wWa_4HwDQ&usg=AFQjCNGlJaPA2T3HQBQ-S8asq4lZwGVoGQ; http://maadmob.net/donna/blog/2008/10-tips-conference-presentations; http://sterneworks.org/delgado.html. All such information should also be placed on the conference website in addition to being emailed to all contributors. As explained later, all the participants should also be sent details about the exact venue of the conference, the registration desk, opening and closing sessions, plenaries and oral/poster sessions, when registration starts, what documents are needed for registration, how to travel to the conference venue, etc. A useful list of activities to do one week and one day before the conference can be found in Papadopoulou (2008).

Tasks during the conference

Although preparing for a conference takes several months, the success of the conference depends on how the whole thing is managed during the conference. Conference organizers should make sure that all necessary arrangements have been made and finalized several days before the conference.

Different conference teams should be rostered day and night during the conference days to ensure the smooth running of the conference. The registration team, who should be supervised by one member of the organizing committee, should check the registrations, and provide a conference pack to each participant. This pack should include: the conference programme, the book of abstracts, lunch/dinner/break vouchers, name tags, a pen, writing paper, a city map, a conference site map/information, etc. Different members of the registration team should be given specific tasks. For example, some members should be responsible for on-site registration; some will take care of incomplete registrations; others will oversee whether sessions start and end on time, whether chairs/presenters attend their sessions, whether posters are submitted and collected on time, whether the conference programme and changes/cancellations are posted in specified places, etc. In addition to the registration team, members of an ASK ME team should be posted in different conference locations. They should be trained (like all other teams voluntarily working for the conference) to provide information on the different issues participants may require and should lead the participants to presentation sessions when the sessions are in progress.

In addition to an information desk, there should also be a desk at the registration area where presenters can collect their certificates after their presentations. Based on prior arrangements with session chairs, presenters can have a confirmation note from the session chair which they can then take to the certificates desk to collect their certificate. Certificates of participation and presentation should be made ready before the conference; however, facilities should also be available on site to issue new/replacement certificates in cases of missing/problematic certificates. It is a good idea to issue a single certificate for each presentation (in the case that a presenter has more than one presentation) and it is desirable to have the title of the paper included in the certificate as well since this may be required by the organization funding the presenter. All registered co-presenters should receive separate presentation certificates, even though only one of them usually does the presentation.

One desirable task for the conference organizers is to give a brief report to the participants in the Opening Session of the conference about the activities undertaken before the conference, the number of papers submitted, the evaluation process, the number of papers accepted for oral/poster presentation, the ratio of national/international papers, the share of different universities/organization in accepted papers, etc. Another important assignment for the conference organizers is to evaluate the conference success using questionnaires which should have been made before the conference. Such questionnaires can be placed in the conference pack with a request that they be returned to the registration desk by the end of the conference. Seeking the opinions of those participants who have attended a good number of conferences (national and international) and who can make comparisons and provide comments on positive/negative features of the conference will be especially helpful. Such evaluation reports will help organizers to hold more successful conferences in the future.

Post conference tasks

The memory of most conferences dies away as soon as the conference is over and delegates return home. However, conference organizers can make the conference a more memorable event for participants by up-dating the conference website with conference photos/videos, asking the participants for feedback on and evaluation of the conference and putting these on the conference website, adding plenary speaker papers/presentation to the conference website, adding the finalized abstracts booklet to the website, providing information on how conference films/pictures can be ordered, etc. All such information and additional post-conference updates can regularly shared with those whose contact details the conference organizers have access to. The publication of selected full papers in a Conference Proceedings or a Special Journal Issue is another post-conference activity to be followed up by the academic organizer. Furthermore, the conference email should be active for months after the conference is over since many presenters will still have numerous follow up questions or requests regarding publication of their papers, access to conference films, etc.

Executive Phase

As mentioned above, a conference, even a small one, requires a lot of hard work. Conference organizers have to start months, or (for a large conference) even a year or more ahead in order to make sure that space and everything else (e.g., facilities, equipment, help team members) are in place by the time they are needed. For that reason, the first decision organizers have to make is whether they *want* to organize a conference. Once they have decided to go ahead, they must start, at least 6 months before they start *anything*, negotiations requiring patience and hard work with the head/s (of the organization where they work, the relevant Ministries (MSRT in Iran http://www.mdhc.ir)) to get approvals to hold the conference. Normally one person, the *executive chair/coordinator/organizer,* keeps track of all negotiations. With regard to executing a conference, organizing a successful conference is mostly about the details – how it is publicized, how you communicate with the people running the space, how you choose the location, how you manage the plan and on and on.

Conference Executive Organizer

In every circumstance, for an efficient operation, and to simplify communication and accountability, it is a good idea to have a single executive chair/coordinator/organizer. A conference organizer is the person responsible for all the conference logistics; however, in many cases this role extends far beyond that. A conference organizer, who must develop a vision for the conference with reachable goals, is responsible not just for the details but also for the big picture. Being the organizer does not mean doing everything, but rather being the one who knows what is going on in every area of the plan. The organizer, in addition to promoting good communication among all members, carries out the team's decisions, and serves as the first line of communication in dealing with the academic organizer, suppliers, participants, presenters, the site providers, exhibitors, caterers and others outside the planning and oversight group. An organizer spends a great deal of her/his time discussing with the committee members about everything.

A final point to keep in mind: the more work you can delegate, the better (Community Tool Box, http://ctb.ku.edu). A conference will be far more successful if the organizers find most of the work enjoyable and feasible. Sub-committees, individual sub-coordinators or volunteers can take on some tasks and do them well. Therefore, one of the first tasks is to delegate tasks and divide the biggest task (organizing the conference) into smaller areas of responsibility, that is, to form task-oriented committees and then assign individuals to these tasks.

Establishing a Committee

A successful conference requires a coordinated effort by many informed and well-trained people who have the time, energy, ability, and desire to do the job. Most conferences benefit from having a group of people in charge. The first thing a conference executive organizer does is to form the infrastructure -- in the case of a conference, this means the organizing team or committee that will be in charge and work together. In this way, decisions are considered from more than one perspective, so that there are a variety of ideas to draw from, and there are more hands to do the work.

As recommended above, to avoid overloading everyone with tasks, and to make for more efficiency, organizers should split conference committees into sub-committees with members who can be assigned certain responsibilities, as suggested below. The work should be distributed evenly among members who have a thorough knowledge of the conference programmes and plans. The following is an example of a series of tasks assigned to the committee members in the ELT conference (2013) held in Urmia, Iran.

- Programme development
- Keynote speaker choices, and support (Invitation letters, visa, lodging, transport, etc.)
- Budgeting
- Marketing and promotion
- Registration
- Support materials and supplies
- Facilities/Equipment
- Food and refreshments
- Sponsor arrangements
- Accommodation and transportation
- Special events
- On site management
- Post-conference follow-up

An overview of all the above-mentioned tasks allows for the formulation of the timeline that is essential to keep you on track. The timeline includes 'hard' deadlines, that is, the important dates for tasks that you cannot afford to over-run (Key, 2004). Make sure that you check that your conference does not clash with another event (elections, nationwide festivals, important national events, etc.) in your organization or nationally (Corpas, Gehlenborg, Janga, & Bourne, 2008).

An important joint task of the executive and the academic organizers is choosing the keynote speakers, tracking them down, negotiating with them, and doing everything to persuade them to come to the conference.

Keynote Speakers

In addition to many conference presenters who normally come from the same country as the conference participants, the particularly outstanding feature of international conferences is the big names in the field. These should be contacted, mostly by the academic organizer, personally. However, while this is an academic-task, inviting guests is also an executive assignment.

The most stressful task associated with international plenary speakers is the painstaking task of obtaining visas which is jointly done by the invited speakers in their home country and by the organizer in conference organizing institution. Make sure that you ***can*** obtain a visa for any international featured speaker invited to the conference. Conference organizers are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the visa entry requirements for the country in which their conference is being held (IEEE Conference Organizers' Manual, http://www.ieee.org/documents/manual.pdf**)**. They have to fill out many *guest information* and *invitation forms* (see for example, http://www.mdhc.ir for the conferences in Iran) and send gust presenter information to the Ministry of Science Research and Technology (MSRT) in order to proceed guest-visa issues.

Moreover, everything should be arranged well in advance. During the conference, in fact from the moment the guests arrive in your country, it is very important to assign a designated person for each of these honored guests to make sure that they have what they need, get to the right places at the right times, understand what is expected of them, get meals, get introduced to people, etc. Organizers should make sure that these speakers – especially if they have made room in their schedules to be at the conference, or have agreed not to charge a fee – have good experience, and leave with a positive feeling about the conference and the sponsoring organization (Community Tool Box, http://ctb.ku.edu).

Publicity

As mentioned above, for conferences, publicity is crucial to the success of the event and to attract a broad audience. If the publicity falls short, an excellent programme will result in failure. Certain strategies may be used to publicize the event, obviously taking into account the budget and the potential payoff involved. As mentioned above, in addition to mailing information to a list of interested people and posting conference information on the Internet, sending posters and/or other announcements to organizations and institutions concerned with the conference topic or theme is the first step. Also known as a *save-the-date card*, postcards or posters, that should provide an eye-catching and informative method of attracting attention, should be distributed as early as possible. This allows potential attendees to mark the conference into their calendars. Postcards should include the conference date, location, conference theme, key speakers, and how to get more information (usually through the website). As a promotion tool for publicity, websites are used for updates, conference registration, and provide links to lodging, maps, and a downloadable schedule of events (e.g., conference programme, concurrent sessions, transportation timetables, hotel information). Remember there is nothing worse than printing a thousand brochures with an incorrect date. Make sure all the information is accurate, and always have at least two people proofread your materials (Annarino, McGrew, & Douglas, 2013).

Now, it is time to turn to another important issue, that is, the budget, which should be managed with great care.

Managing the budget

Every conference has a budget. Normally the budget, for which the organizing committee appoints a head, is based upon how much income is expected from all potential sources (the organization where you work, registration fees, event sponsorship, etc.) set against the anticipated expenses, including venue, special guests, website, registration, conference proceedings. Remember that you should be realistic about what is affordable within the limits of your budget income. Therefore, it is wise to set aside some things that, on reflection, are not affordable. Always make sure that the expenses, some fixed and some variable, must be accurately estimated and continually reviewed. As mentioned above, part of a conference income comes from registration fees. In large, multi-day conference costs including promotional materials, mailings, travel and transportation, space and equipment rental, catering, expenses and/or payments for keynote speakers and other presenters, lodging costs for the committee, copying and printing, etc. are partly covered through conference fees. Based on expenses, expected attendance and sponsorship determine the registration fee to cover the shortfall. Fees may range from as little as $25 or $30 for a one-day local conference to several hundred dollars for a multi-day national event (Community Tool Box, http://ctb.ku.edu). In addition to the registration fees, often, some organizations like language institutes, universities, education departments, etc. may contribute to the conference in other ways in return for being allowed to attend the conference sessions or to publicize their institutions in various ways. Therefore, make a decision about if you wish other sponsors and exhibitors (e.g., textbook and software companies) to be there and sell materials (basically books) relevant to the topic during the conference. Lengthy negotiations with sponsors and their representatives will need to be entered into many times before the final agreement is reached according to such details as what is expected from the sponsoring organization/s, what the conference will offer them in the conference . Many sponsors, especially well-funded organizations, offer conference venues or locations where different conference activities can be organized, but, certainly you should try to find the best venue which allows you to publicize your organization.

Conference Venue

The amount of space you have limits the size of your conference. Moreover, the number of the people who are expected to attend will influence the selection of the venue. It is wise to select a location that is, or can be made by the organizers, easily accessible to the audience and one that offers unique qualities (including enough space, audio visual equipment, lodging, food, etc.). The multiple concurrent sessions of a large conference require a number of rooms that can accommodate groups of at least 40 or so, as well as the signs, tables, chairs, podiums, and audiovisual equipment needed. For featured speeches, depending on the number of participants, one large and well equipped hall or auditorium can do. Successful conferences provide free wireless internet connection in all conference spots with free, quick access to the Internet.

There are some important questions you should ask before you finalize your plan. Is the venue convenient to transportation, lodging, and restaurants? Can the staff provide a secure hospitality area and refreshments? Do you need a room large enough for all participants to fit into at once? Do you want informal space where people can sit comfortably and talk? Is there a secure wardrobe for the presenters? Do you want outdoor space as well? The conference site must be visited many times before the final decision is made.

As already mentioned, in organizing a conference, the devil is in the details. There are many other things (the most important of which are accommodation, transportation and food), in addition to those mentioned in the forgoing part, that should be arranged well in advance.

In international, multi-day conferences, attendees, speakers, or presenters normally come from a distance, and may need a place to stay. Conference organizers often agree to pay lodging expenses or to provide a home stay for keynote speakers and/or other special guests. Participants, however, are virtually always expected to pay for their own hotel rooms. The conference organizers, having negotiated special discount rates should announce information about the hotels online through the conference website. The best thing is to handle accommodation bookings, at least two months before the conference begins, through a secretariat that does all the reservations and payments, and confirms hotel bookings by email. This helps the organizers to manage transporting the participants to the main venue during the conference days.

When conferences are held in hotels where everything is centered around the hotel area, there is no need, to worry too much about transportation, except for special guests and plenary speakers. But, when the conference venue is located outside the city, it is best to arrange a good transportation plan (timetable, available at the welcome desk, and registration desk as well as the website) a week before the conference. Setting up welcome desks at the airport and bus terminals on the first and second days of the conference to guide the presenters is a good idea. It is best to provide shuttle buses from the arrival locations to the hotels, particularly when a conference is held in a very big city. Arrange shuttle buses that transport participants and speakers from their hotels and back, as well as to the social events while the conference is in progress.

Another important thing that must be finalized before the conference days is *food and refreshments*. In general, in large formal conferences meals are paid for as part of the conference registration process (registration forms are used to collect information about meal requirements) and participants sign up and pay for the meal they want at that stage. Food includes lunch during the conference, often accompanied by a conference dinner. Furthermore, conference organizers hire a caterer to provide a midmorning and/or mid-afternoon drink and snack. Bottled water and tea/coffee should be available throughout the day. It is very important to make sure that the caterer is provided with accurate information about meal requirements (the number of the individuals, the type of food for each day, menu options for special guests, etc.) and that these are stipulated by contract. Problems occur if there are last minute changes and inaccuracies in this area.

On site management

When the conference date has arrived, planning is over. Your role as an organizer will become that of a problem solver and troubleshooter. Compile a to-do list ahead of time. This is a way to help keep all the details under control. Having a checklist of the necessary tasks for each area of the work you and other team members have to do – registration, facilitates, presenters, etc. – will make your job considerably easier. A checklist greatly reduces the chance for errors and forgetfulness, and increases the efficiency of the team's operation. Make sure that all team members, and their backups, have already been delegated their responsibilities and tasks. These tasks include the conference desk, registration, delegate packs, speaker and guest management, security, health and safety, etc. Make sure that especially uniformed members of the ASK ME team are present in every corner of the conference venue for people to approach with questions. Appropriate *signage* should be used, that is, signs pointing the way to various points of interest in the conference site like conference rooms, meals, official conference tables or booths, registration, information, advocacy, etc. should be used. Prepare name badges that stand out, through the use of different colours for the conference staff, help teams, technical assistants, so that everyone knows who everyone else is. All participants should have *badges* that show their names and work affiliations.

The unexpected should be expected. It is impossible to have a contingency plan for everything that might happen, so you should organize extra help ahead of time so you can make a flexible response. In short, the important things to be decided upon in advance and managed properly during the conference re:

- Registration: staffed with a well-trained people

- Support materials: packet with name tag, conference programme, schedule, maps, coupons, and sponsors' items,

- Hosts: for speakers, special guests, special sessions, and events,

- Equipment: computers, audiovisual equipment, and presentation needs,

- Banquets/awards: time, place, service, and meal arrangements, including accommodation for special requests,

- Refreshments and hospitality area.

There are many other things (e.g., media coverage and filming sessions, special events, pre and while conference meetings with the heads of the delegations, departure of the special guests and participants, follow ups and evaluations) that both the executive and the academic organizers should attend to.

Summary

Conferences come in many shapes and sizes (small, large, local and international) and need to be organized, managed and run well. A successful conference requires cooperative people organized effectively to determine plans – its location, space, timing, content, and form – and do whatever they can to improve the event. Such improvements should be incorporated in all fields, from preparation, pre-conference issues, through execution to analysis. Regardless of what the objectives of a conference are, a conference should attract as many participants and presenters as possible, excite them, and leave them wanting more. A good conference should bring about change and have the ability to inspire in everyone (participants, presenters, even organizing team members) more ideas and facilitate more contact with those who share the same concerns. Therefore, throughout the monumental task of organizing a conference, conference organizers should aim to put into motion currents that can have great influence on an issue or a field. Good signs of a well-organized and well-run conference are informing the intended audience of its existence, convincing enough of them to attend, leaving them with good experience, attracting well known speakers, and being followed up and evaluated.

This paper, written following the main organizers' (executive and academic) personal experiences in holding the *International Conference on Current Trends in ELT* (2013) which was called a 'mammoth success' and a 'magnificent conference' by plenary speakers and other experienced conference attendants, was an attempt to share some general guidelines with those who may one day try organizing such an academic event. To conclude, we seem to concur with Bajec (2003) who maintained that it is a challenge to organize a conference, but be sure to enjoy every minute of it.

References

Annarino, D., McGrew, C., Douglas, J. (2013). *Smart conference planning: How to plan and host a successful conference.* Retrieved from www.agriculture.purdue.edu/agcomm

Bajec, P. (2003). *How to organize a conference: Step by step manual.* IAPSS.

IEEE Conference Organizers' Manual (2011). Retrieved from http://www.ieee.org/documents/manual.pdf

Key, K. (2004). *The keynote guide to planning a successful conference.* Keynote Networks.

McClosekey, D. N. (1994). Other things equal: How to organize a conference. *Eastern Economic Journal, 20*(2): 219-222.

Papadopoulou, E. (2008). *How to organize a conference: Step by step guidelines*. Linguistic Association of Great Britain.

Potvin, J. H. (1983). Planning and organizing an annual conference. *IEEE Transactions of Professional Communication, 26*(3): 123-152.

The Community Tool box. (2013). Retrieved from http://ctb.ku.edu

Acknowledgements

We would like to seize this opportunity to thank many people who contributed to the success story of the *International Conference on Current Trends in ELT* (Urmia, Iran, May 2103). We are indebted to all organizing committee members (in particular, the academic members of the Department of English Language and Literature of Urmia University), international scientific committee members, reviewers, sponsors, plenary speakers, university authorities and all scholars who attended the conference and made it a pleasurable event to remember. Special thanks go to Prof. John Sivell of Brock University (Canada), Professor Farzad Sharifian and Susan Stanford, both form Monash University (Australia), and Dr. Parviz Alavinia from Umia University (Iran), who read an earlier draft of this paper and provided constructive comments.

Karim Sadeghi has a PhD in TEFL/TESOL (Language Testing) from the University of East Anglia in Norwich, UK. His main research interests include: language testing, alternative assessment, and critical research evaluation. He is currently the editor-in-chief and managing editor of *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*. In addition to serving as an editorial and advisory member of national and international journals, he is also an advisory board member of *International Encyclopedia of ELT* (edited by John Liontas, University of South Florida).

Sima Modirkhameneh has a PhD in TEFL/TESOL from the University of Surrey, UK. Since her return to Iran in September 2006, she has been lecturing at undergraduate and postgraduate levels and researching in Urmia University, Iran. Her main research interests include: bilingualism, first and second language acquisition, cross-linguistic transfer, and multiple intelligences in relation to language learning. She has served as the Head of the Department of English Language and Literature and the Deputy Head of the Foreign Languages Center of Urmia University since 2008.