

40th TESOL SPAIN NATIONAL CONVENTION

EVOLVING AND INVOLVING

3 – 5 March 2017

UMH, ELCHE

She's back again! We can't get rid of her. She comes every year.

Yes, but I always get such a great welcome from the friendly TESOL Spain Committee.

I attended this year's Convention in Elche with Csilla Jaray-Benn, TESOL France's president this year and Debbie West, former president. We weren't staying at the same hotel so I met up with them later.

A word about the beautiful hotel where I was staying, the Huerto del Cura. I had my own little bungalow with a view of a blue oasis pool and palm trees. Also the privilege of having breakfast with some of the TESOL Spain's ExCom members, most of us – me included – with tired but smiling faces.

For those who haven't been there, Elche is a charming historic town near Alicante. Spanish and Valenciano (correct me if I'm wrong) are spoken here. The town's original Iberian name was Elx and then, Ilici when under Roman rule in the first century A.D.

On the cover of this year's Convention programme is the calm, enigmatic face of the "Dama de Elche", a symbol of the city and its past going back to 450 B.C. This beautiful work of Iberian art is now in the Archeological museum in Madrid, but you can see the Lady in various places in the city.

As soon as you approach Elche coming from Alicante you catch a glimpse of palm trees. They are everywhere. First cultivated by the Arabs who occupied the region (and most of Spain) they have been declared world heritage by UNESCO. The palm tree with three "arms" – el tridente – is rare and very beautiful, the three "arms", all of the same size, rising from its trunk.

I had time before the opening of the conference in the afternoon to explore the city. Elche combines modern buildings, streets lined with shops and wonderful monuments like the 17th century Basilica de Santa Maria and the fortress tower la Calaforra, dating back to the period of Islamic rule. I had just enough time to pay a short visit to the Archeological Museum close by in an historic building known as the Alcazar de la Senoria, housing exhibits dating back to Neolithic times.

The University of Miguel Hernandez was the ideal site for a conference: modern, welcoming and bright. The spacious ground floor was the ideal setting for the Publishers stands. I greeted many of the publishers, most from companies I know already but some new names for me.

TESOL France shared a stand with Mark Hancock and Annie McDonald. So we were

lucky!

Of course, I was unable to go to all of the talks I would have liked to attend, so I will only comment on a few. The standard was extremely high and the organisation of the event excellent.

I must, of course, mention the opening plenary speaker, Michael Swan, who spoke on *“Student Involvement, Teacher involvement and the Goldilocks Principle”*.

Learning in a straight line or learning imaginatively.

Crucial questions a teacher should ask him/herself:

- Why am I teaching this particular item?
- After a lesson: what do they know that they didn't know before?
- What can they do better than they could before?
- How sure am I?

Our job is to find out what learners' needs.

To subtract what they get from outside and what they already know.

And to teach what they need by the most effective methods.

“Dictation is back!”

I particularly liked Joanna Herbert's talk. She showed us some lively activities for different levels, including a student controlled dictation and a Dictagloss.

Also an amusing activity: dictating a list of words taken from sources learners had previously studied and then getting them to create a little text with a partner, using these words in the same order as they were given.

“7 lesson in search of a Drama activity”

I really liked Daniel Brint's workshop, being a drama enthusiast myself.

Preconceived ideas:

- Drama activities are risky because students feel uncomfortable doing them?
- Drama needs space?
- You need a special training?

Daniel said that no special training is necessary and that drama activities help develop pronunciation, intonation and performance. You can accommodate different kinds of learners as well.

He demonstrated activities with posters, literary tasks and “tableaux” for a kinetic effect. Then dictated a short text – a dilemma – which he called “Conscience alley” and divided the class into two sections, each team member preparing a short phrase giving his point of view on the “dilemma”.

Last but not least that wonderful man, Peter Medgyes.

“Elflies at large – Beware”

The title tells you what to expect.

“Who are elves?” Peter asked us.

What is English as a Lingua Franca?!

“English is not something which native speakers lease out to us while retaining the freehold”, he said. And to quote Peter: “I’ve always managed as a non-native to maintain my identity”.

Should we stick to native speakers rules?. Difference or error? Is it an error if it differs from a native speaker definition? Should we as teachers underline the “s” in “childs” when we see it written by one of our learners? “Yes, we should”, he said, and “in red pencil”. We all laughed.

Should we define Britain and the Others into levels of competence?

1The intermediates – the Italians

2The upper intermediates – the Swedish

3The agents of change – non natives

In Peter’s words: “Everyone is an agent of change”.

However, he did say that standard English will continue as a model but not as a target.

Quoting an Hungarian philosopher: “Blind conviction to a theory is not a virtue but an error”. “Accept criticism in good faith and reflect on it. Disagree with every dogma and spread dissent”. Challenging words to finish on.

Before leaving the stage he told us to “start clapping and don’t stop until you see an Elfy take flight”. Some seconds later he came back..... wearing “Elfy” ears.

A treat for us all on Saturday evening, a delicious dinner at the “Huerto del Cura” hotel. One appetising dish after another. As I have an excellent appetite, I said to myself, ‘La nouvelle cuisine”, looking at the small, but artistically arranged portions. But to tell you the truth, I couldn’t eat any more by the end of the evening.

Next year, I’ll be back again.

TESOL Spain, Madrid here I come.

Gillian Evans

TESOL-France