

A Walk Through the First Conference Experience of a Graduate Student and New Instructor

catesolnews.org/2016/03/walk-first-conference-experience/

CATESOL News

March 19, 2016

By **ASHLEY GULLICK**

—As I approached the site of the CATESOL Los Angeles Regional Conference held at California Polytechnic University, Pomona, I was first surprised by the large number of people who were attending. I had never attended a conference before and with the help of a stipend that CATESOL Education Foundation had generously awarded, I was able to experience a conference for the first time. I didn't know what to expect, but from interacting with CATESOL members at other gatherings, I knew I would be surrounded by people who were also passionate about language teaching and that they would have interesting experiences to share.



Ashley Gullick

Blue and white balloons marked checkpoints along the path, guiding crowds to the building where the conference was being held. Friendly volunteers wished the attendees a “good morning” as we passed each checkpoint. When I arrived inside I found well-organized lines for registration and volunteering. Though waiting in line is never anyone's favorite activity, I found even this usually mundane task to be entertaining and educational as I chatted with a couple of teachers who had experience in teaching at institutions that I was unaware of as options for ESL teaching. One man told me he worked in the K-12 system and the other taught at an adult school. Previously, I had considered teaching ESL as an option only in colleges and overseas because it is all I had experienced. I had not even officially entered the conference yet, and I already had learned something new.

After collecting our badges and a CATESOL tote that would prove to be very useful throughout the day, I started off the day with a volunteer project. Our group of volunteers divided to direct people to rooms and inform them of opportunities to talk with mentors one-on-one about their careers and plans. I was also interested in these one-on-one chats with professionals so near the end of the session, I met with a mentor myself.

The mentor I was paired with was a professor who had received her doctorate in Linguistics. For every question I asked, she had a detailed and helpful answer. When she believed more information could be available, she always knew someone who was knowledgeable in the topic we were discussing and directed me to speak with that person later. As she flipped through my CATESOL schedule, marking names with a pen and talking about what each of these people had done and could discuss with me, I knew I would not be able to find and speak to all of them, but simply knowing these people were around and hearing about their stories made me optimistic about the future. It was the same feeling one gets upon entering a bookstore. There is so much to discover.



Education Foundation President Margaret Teske with stipend awardee Ashley Gullick at her first conference

Though waiting in line is never anyone's favorite activity, I found even this usually mundane task to be entertaining and educational as I chatted with a couple of teachers who had experience in teaching at institutions that I was unaware of as options for ESL teaching. ... I had not even officially entered the conference yet, and I already had learned something new.

After these discussions, we lined up for lunch. Lunch boxes were prepackaged and set up on tables. Everyone lined up, made a selection, and carried on to find a place to sit. It was quick and efficient. I spent the lunch hour bonding with fellow students from my university, talking about the conference, current classes, and our career plans.

After lunch, I helped people find the rooms of their next workshops and then wandered into a room filled with textbooks and representatives. I recognized many books that are used at my work, but I also saw some new textbooks that looked useful and interesting. Several times, instructors in my program had been asked for textbook suggestions. Because I am a fairly new instructor, I had never considered suggesting a textbook change because I did not feel confident in my understanding of the available options, but after discussing the textbooks with the representatives and other teachers, I think I may be able to contribute more to the selections in the future.

Next, I attended a workshop in which the presenter set up activity stations. She told us these active sessions help keep students engaged in the learning activities and give them a chance to move around. I like the idea of having several projects or tasks set up as workstations and believe this can be a useful idea to use in the future.

The final event of the day was listening to the plenary speaker, Marianne Celce-Murcia. She gave a wonderful presentation that included a timeline of language-teaching approaches. She had such positive energy and passion for the field. I'm sure this dedication and love for language teaching is part of what made her so successful. Listening to others talk about her and hearing her presentation motivated me to work harder myself. As soon as I got home, I read a few academic articles that had been sitting in a "to-read" pile on my desk for nearly a month.

Attending this conference has helped me understand the opportunities that are available to English teachers. I learned there are more jobs available than I had previously believed and in more areas than I even knew to look. I also learned about overseas programs that could make teaching English a grand adventure. In addition, I have more confidence in my ability to select materials and was able to add some new teaching techniques to my "teacher toolbox." I am very thankful to everyone involved with the CATESOL Education Foundation and those who support CATESOL for making this possible.

Ashley Gullick is a graduate student and IEP Instructor at California State University, San Bernardino.