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Revisiting Academic Conferences in English Language Teaching (ELT) in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The interest in the value of academic conferences in the field of ELT is steadily increasing in the last decade in Turkey. Despite the increased interest, conferences remain a relatively less researched area. Conference participation has become a demanding process and more and more academics have started to reconsider their participation and the benefits they get from the conferences. Therefore, a questionnaire was created concerning conference participants' opinions on the weak and strong points of ELT conferences in Turkey and 90 participants shared their views on what academic conferences are and what they might entail. The open-ended survey responses were analyzed qualitatively, with a focus on recurrent themes in participants' responses and other responses were analyzed quantitatively based on percentages and frequencies. The present study showed the ongoing need to increase the quality of papers presented in ELT conferences in Turkey. The findings can be fruitful for organizers and presenters.

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As Oxford English Dictionary defines, conference is “a formal meeting of people with a shared interest, typically one that takes over several days”. In this sense, there are various conferences organized in different fields and ELT (English language teaching) conferences are not exceptions in the context of higher education as they bring professionals, academics, students together to exchange new ideas and help them to develop professionally. Attending conferences as a presenter is essential in an academic's career as one can get immediate feedback on their study and learn about the latest developments in ELT. It is also important for novice researchers to see what is going on in their field and build their research upon existing studies. For teachers, attending conferences is also important as they cannot stand still in their career if they

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want to improve their teaching practices and their students' learning outcomes. They also learn how their colleagues at other institutions handle similar problems in their classes and feel that they are not alone in this profession. Mair (2010, p. 181) summarizes that "different motivations will have different relevance at specific types of conferences".

In a rapidly changing world, continuing professional development (CPD) is deemed necessary. Graduation from teaching schools does not mark the end of teacher education but the beginning. As Wichadee (2012, p. 615) puts it, CPD "often involves examining different dimensions of one's own practice as a basis for reflective review". As de Vries, van de Grift, and Jansen (2014, p. 338) summarize "for teachers, CPD can update their knowledge and skills while encouraging reflection and collaboration with colleagues". As de Vries, van de Grift, and Jansen (2014) note, the key in the success of CDP is that teachers engage in CPD activities voluntarily. Academic conferences are one of the means to update one's knowledge and follow the latest developments in their fields and one can contribute others' CPD by exchanging new ideas, activities, etc. As Harrison (2010, p. 265) underpins, there are other ways of professional development to catch up with the new trends but in her terms, "conferences provide the unique benefit, however, of allowing one to learn about many or all current trends in the field in a relatively brief time span".

Hickson (2006) lists the number of benefits one can get from attending conferences. For instance, it creates enthusiasm and excitement when one listens about new research as it incites sparks in people's minds and hearts. Also, one can get immediate evaluation of their study after presenting in conferences while it takes so much time to get a response from a journal. Moreover, one can visit displays of textbooks offered by publishing houses. Lastly, Hickson (2006) emphasizes that they are good for networking opportunities. As Hilliard JD (2006, p. 63) points out "meeting at the convention provides an opportunity for the community members to be visible to one another and to connect in a more personal way". In addition, as Jacobs and McFarlane (2005, p. 319) pinpoint "conferences offer one way for those who are inexperienced to mix with the established members of the community", so they are important especially for novice researchers to introduce themselves to the community.

In the reviewed literature, there are a few studies that investigate the factors in the decision-making process of potential participants regarding their participation in academic conferences. In a recent study done by Terzi, Sakas, and Seimenis (2013a), they investigated one of the factors effective in attending conferences; scientific committee. Terzi, Sakas, and Seimenis (2013a, p. 381) suggested that "in order to ensure high levels of participation, one of the activities that the organizing committee should accomplish is to qualify a competent scientific committee". Also, evaluation criteria used by scientific committees play important roles in participants' decisions. In another study done by the same scholars, Terzi, Sakas, and Seimenis (2013b), the location is taken as a factor shaping the decisions of potential participants. In order to evaluate the attitudes of potential participants, the evaluation criteria such as infrastructure, means of transport, security, hygiene and use of international language were explored regarding the factor of conference location.

In the reviewed literature, there are some studies based on personal experiences that consider what conferences fail to take into account (Skelton,1997; Levin, 2012). Levin (2012) gives specific examples why participants cannot learn at conferences. He claims that there are "too many separate presentations are stuffed into sessions, and there is rarely an attempt to organize thoughtful interaction. In addition, academic conferences suffer from presenters who are unable to stay within a time limit, or who have not prepared the paper they promised, or who have not realized that giving a good talk is a very different thing from writing a good paper" (Levin, 2012, p. 74).

Hilliard JD (2006, p. 50-51) listed the number of challenges prevalent in conferences namely "focus on content over delivery", "focus on information dissemination rather than professional practice" and "loss of learning". It is further argued that participants are generally passive in the conventions and knowledge is poured upon them but they are not actively participated in situated learning in the conventions and after

the conference has finished, participants don't retain what they have learnt (Hilliard JD, 2006). Henderson (2015, p. 915) "posits an analysis of conferences that is located in the concerns of higher education research". She argues that "the conference has its own patterns, its own dress codes and lanyards or badges, its own location. Conferences both exemplify and resist, exist in and exceed, the narratives of chronological change in HEIs, and as such may be regarded as research sites that defy the linear conception of higher education" (Henderson, 2015, p. 916).

The reviewed literature aforementioned shows that there are research studies that are interested in various aspects of academic conferences. Although the research that has been done so far is very valuable, it is limited in its generalizability and its applicability to practitioners in the field of ELT. Research on ELT conferences is very limited. Sadeghi and Modirkhameneh (2013, p. 95), based on their personal experiences, wrote about "first-hand information to conference, especially first-time, organizers in the field of ELT and related disciplines". There is a recent study by Borg (2015) highlighting a range of benefits that the participants report as a result of ELT conferences such as positive impact on professional development, enhanced knowledge of ELT techniques, networking, enhanced professional confidence and belief in their potential, reducing feelings of isolation. Murray (2010, p. 10) mentioned about the transformative effects of ELT conferences in the school community as "participating in a conference can empower teachers to be leaders. When they return from a conference, they can teach their colleagues what they learned there and lead those colleagues to adopt new and helpful teaching practices". In another study about ELT conferences, Salas (2016, p. 3) has highlighted the difficulty of organizing a convention by reminding that "one of the challenges for the organizers of a convention is to provide variety so that the needs of individual teachers are met, whether they are novice or experts".

In Turkey, there is a steady increase in the number of ELT conferences organized by universities and related associations. As Alptekin and Tatar (2011, p. 330) stated, in Turkey "national conferences are normally organized by a university on a rather broad theme, with a few plenary speakers invited from abroad, with the aim of making the conference 'international'" and they pointed out that "these provide a forum for Turkish academics and doctoral candidates to present their research in an intellectual framework" (Alptekin and Tatar, 2011, p. 330). Yet it is a relatively less researched activity in Turkey although it plays an important role in ELT practitioners and academics' hectic schedules. There is a single research that investigated the conference attendance motives of Turkish ELT professionals (Büyükyavuz, 2016). The findings of her study showed that "Turkish ELT professionals attend conferences essentially to obtain new information. However, keynote speakers seem to be another major motive behind their final decision to attend a conference. Although the majority of participants stated that they spend most of their time at sessions the number of sessions that they generally attend was found to be only between 4-6" (Büyükyavuz, 2016, p. 135).

Although conferences in Turkey attract hundreds of ELT professionals, literature lacks studies addressing both their motives and the problems that participants and presenters face in ELT conferences in Turkey. The latter also has utmost importance as not only organization committees spend a lot of time and money on conferences but also participants allocate their time, energy and spend huge amounts of money to attend conferences in terms of registration, travelling and accommodation costs, but in exchange for that, it is controversial whether their needs are met and ELT conferences in Turkey serve as bridges to practitioners' professional development. With this in mind, the present study set out to question the nature of ELT conferences in Turkey and tries to describe the problems evident in ELT conferences in Turkey. This study will contribute to the almost nonexistent pool of research related to ELT conferences from the Turkish context and provide some ideas for future conferences and further studies.

2. Method

In the present research, 90 academics and ELT practitioners participated. The questionnaire used in this study was administered using GoogleDocs from November 28th 2017 to January 6th 2018 as the aim was to reach many ELT academics and practitioners from the different geographic locations of Turkey and it was practical to send them by reaching them through e-mails and forums on social media. Before sending the questionnaire to the potential participants, 3 colleagues took the questionnaire as part of a pilot test and after further revisions, a self-administered mailed questionnaire was prepared to survey. As a result of gap in the reviewed literature, one of the primary aims of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the problems noticed in ELT conferences in Turkey. Another aim is to find out what the potential participants and presenters care about in the decision-making process of attending to ELT conferences in Turkey. There were 12 questions in the survey. The participants were asked about their teaching experience and workplace. Then, to question the effective factors when potential participants choose a conference in Turkey as a presenter and a participant (non-presenting), they were inquired about the most important thing when they attend a conference only as a participant and the most important thing when they attend a conference as a presenter. Furthermore, they were asked to consider what kind of problems they had noticed in ELT conferences in Turkey so far and whether they had complained about those problems to the organizing committee face to face or in a written form. Also, they were asked to mention the most successful side of ELT conferences in Turkey. Their general thoughts about the presenters were also demanded. In the subsequent questions, they were asked whether they thought presenters were chosen well based on a scientific criteria, and whether presenters completed their presentations within time limits with due respect to other presenters and what they thought about the presenters' profile. Their thoughts about the participants were also demanded. Lastly, they were inquired what they would give utmost importance to if they were in the organizing committee. The open-ended survey responses were analyzed qualitatively, with a focus on recurrent themes in participants' responses and other responses were analyzed quantitatively based on percentages and frequencies.

3. Results and Discussions

Salas (2016, p. 2) points out that “a convention can provide an array of options for professional development that can meet teachers' needs in their careers”. As mentioned by Day (1999, p. 59), teachers are in different stages in their careers, namely five stages: “launching a career, stabilization, new challenges and new concerns, reaching a professional plateau and disenchantment”. Between 7-18 years of teaching experience, teachers are looking for new challenges and want to experiment something new. This stage is accompanied by engaging in CPD activities such as conferences. Attending conferences is one of the ways to keep one's continuous professional development ongoing. As can be seen from the Table 1, 36.7 % of the respondents (n=33) have between 11-19 years of experience and 31.1 % of the respondents (n=28) have between 6-10 years of teaching experience.

Table 1. *Teaching Experience of The Respondents*

Years of experience	Number of respondents	Percentage
0-5 years	16	17.8 %
6-10 years	28	31.1 %
11-19 years	33	36.7 %
20 and over	13	14.4 %

When it comes to the questions where the respondents work, 85.6 % of the participants (n=77) work at a university. 6.7 % of the participants (n=6) work at a high school and 4.4 % of the participants (n=4) work

at a secondary school. One participant indicated that s/he does not work but s/he is a graduate student. One participant works in a private course. One participant works in an administrative role, as the principal of a school.

3.1. Factors Affecting Potential Participants' Decision-Making Process

Prospective attendees have a variety of conferences to choose from organized by different universities, associations and organizations. Decision-making process for conferences is influenced by various factors. When one wants to attend a conference only as a participant (non-presenting), some factors are more effective in their choice. As Godovykh and Hahm (2020, p.2) note “it is important for organizers to understand what compels people to participate in one academic conference over others”. In the questionnaire, the most important factor was asked to the respondents. The following table shows the results.

Table 2. *The Most Important Thing While Attending a Conference Only as a Participant (Non-Presenting)*

The most important thing for non-presenters	Number of respondents	Percentage
The theme of the conference and abstracts	49	54.4 %
Plenary speakers	19	21.1 %
Conference fee	9	10 %
Location-venue	7	7.8 %
Scientific committee	3	3.3 %
Whether the conference is on a specific issue or not	1	1.1%
Social events such as gala dinner, city tour	1	1.1%
Time allocated for each session	1	1.1%

The theme of the conference and abstracts appeared to be an important motivational consideration for those who want to attend a conference only as a participant (non-presenting). The theme of the conference and abstracts are important to 54.4 % of the respondents (n=49). Another important thing that potential participants take into consideration is plenary speakers. 21.1 % of the respondents (n=19) consider plenary speakers as the most important criterion. These results show us that participants go to conferences to learn something and keep learning. One of the key issues that emerged from responses is conference fee. This is important to 10 % of the respondents (n=9). Financial side of conferences is an important factor when one decides to attend a conference as institutions support individuals as long as they present a paper affiliated with the institution they are working in. Otherwise, they don't get any financial incentive from their institutions.

Responses change when one wants to attend a conference as a presenter. The following table reports the responses given by the participants.

Table 3. *The Most Important Thing While Attending a Conference as a Presenter*

The most important thing for presenters	The number of respondents	Percentage
Publishing of the proceedings	35	38.9 %
Conference fee	13	14.4 %

Time allocated for each presentation and the number of presenters in each session	11	12.2 %
Previous conferences	11	12.2 %
Scientific committee	8	8.9 %
Location-venue	6	6.7 %
Theme of the conference	2	2.2 %
Whether the conference is international and distinguished one	1	1.1 %
Feeling that one can contribute	1	1.1 %
The dates of the conference	1	1.1 %
Whether it is organized by a non-profit organization	1	1.1 %

According to 38.9 % of the respondents (n=35), the most important thing when one wants to attend a conference as a presenter is publishing of the proceedings. This is important in Turkey as it is one of the criteria for appointments and reappointments as an assistant professor. The attendees want to guarantee their reappointment, so they spend time, money and energy to attend conferences. Also, universities encourage lecturers to publish their work in refereed and international indexed journals and there are financial incentives for that. As Hickson (2006, p. 466) points out “acceptance of a competitively selected conference paper is the first step in eventually getting a paper published”. For 13 respondents, conference fee is an important factor to choose from conferences as financial support from institutions is quite limited. When one wants to attend a conference as a presenter, 12.2 % of the respondents (n=11) appear to be more sensitive to time allocated for each presentation and the number of presenters in each session. There can be three or four presenters in a single session and this makes time management quite difficult. Some of the presenters cannot complete their presentations in 15 minutes and exceed their time limits. This can create problems in the flow of presentations and interest of the participants. Some participants leave early from the sessions without listening to the next presenters. Previous conferences are also important to 11 respondents. They give the prospective attendees some idea about the quality of organization. In line with this finding, from the reviewed literature, Hashemi et al. (2020, p. 12) point out that “it is likely that attendees will have favorable behavioral intentions to re-attend or return to the same conferences after leaving with a good impression of the quality of conference in their mind”.

3.2. Problems Evident in ELT Conferences in Turkey

ELT conferences in Turkey are not problem-free. It is clear from the results of this study that there are many problems prevalent in ELT conferences in Turkey. These problems are not only restricted to the Turkish context. Skelton (1997, p. 69) associates conferences with the following “the flashy conference folder and name tag; the rehearsed smiles and firm handshakes; the raised lectern shining bright with light and authority and, finally, the icons of sponsors surveying me wherever I go”.

Some sort of problems are also evident in the respondents’ replies. Only 5 respondents did not mention any problems or refrained from writing anything. The rest gave similar, overlapping answers to the open-ended question that asks them about the problems they have noticed in ELT conferences in Turkey. Most of the participants indicated multiple problems. We can categorize the problems into two categories; problems about presentations and problems about organization and committees.

3.2.1. Problems about presentations

The highly mentioned problem is related to presentations. 36 out of 90 respondents mentioned that the biggest problem is about oral presentations. They clarify this view by saying that presentations are not engaging or they are on irrelevant topics. Moreover, they mention that most of the presenters speak theoretically and presentations are loaded with too much information and this makes it difficult to follow and there are not real lesson experiences shared. This is in line with Skelton (1997). He argued that conferences “focus on the learning of the relatively small numbers of presenters (which is embedded in their prepared papers), rather than on the learning of the larger mass of people in the audience” (Skelton, 1997, p. 97).

The followings are some extracts from the given responses by the respondents:

“Sometimes presenters couldn’t attract the participants’ attention. Some presentations weren’t good enough to teach new things because of the lack of preparation, speaking skills” (R 26).

“The problem is the quality of works and presentations. People often choose to present a paper that they cannot publish. Especially after the payment done for the presentation to the academics, the tendency for attending conferences is remarkable” (R 41).

Another complaint evident in the responses is that there are too many technology related topics. Respondents have also noticed that presentations’ contents don’t have corresponding titles and abstracts and some topics are not from the field of ELT or they do not overlap with the theme of the conference. This may result from scientific committees as Edelheim et al. (2018, p.97) claim that “it seems that an unfortunately small number of conference organizers have actually read the papers, or cared to critically evaluate what it is they want to achieve at their conferences”.

Respondents have noticed that some presenters read from slides and this is not in line with good presentation techniques. 2 respondents claimed that conference organizers accept all abstracts just for money and this attitude has turned educational conferences into commercial events. 4 out of 90 respondents argue that there are problems with research methodology and analysis evident in the studies presented. 6 respondents also claim that there are problems with time allocations for presentations. Durations are very short and there is not enough time for discussions.

3.2.2. Organizational problems

10 out of 90 respondents mentioned that one must pay high fees to attend conferences. They argued that this gives one the idea that they are not organized for academic purposes, which diminishes the number of potential participants. They mentioned that their institutions cannot support them financially and their own resources remain quite limited to attend more than one conference every semester. As a consequence, there are not enough participants in each session. The ones who attend the sessions are mostly presenters awaiting their session, so they do not show enough interest to the sessions. Some of the given responses are as such:

“I feel they are sometimes organized just for the sake of serving people’s personal benefits-not for academic purposes” (R 21).

“The conference fees are usually high. Many schools don’t provide their members with any financial support to attend the conferences as participants and this makes it difficult for us to attend them” (R 42).

“The problem is the venue of the conference. To say it simply, if the conference is held at a hotel, it is more oriented to gain some money rather than science. Participants (all of the people who sent their abstracts are there by the way) listen to plenary speakers and make their own presentation, then you can see them around pool bar. Therefore, I personally try to apply for the conferences held at the university or institute campus either in Turkey or abroad. They really care about your pleasure of having knowledge” (R 57).

Another problem evident in the respondents’ answers is that there are not any moderators in some of the conferences and this makes timing and flow difficult. Some presenters do not start on time, in some conferences, one of the presenters who shares the session with other presenters dominates the session and does not give enough time for other presenters to share their studies. Another problem evident in the responses is related to scientific committee selection. It is argued that almost all of the academics in the field of ELT are listed in the scientific committee list as if they were in peer-review. Some respondents mention that communication from the organizing committee is not so good. There is not enough information on the conference web-site and reaching the necessary information can sometimes be difficult. Another problem evident in this category is that devices offered in conference halls are sometimes out of order. This creates some problems in the flow of presentations.

The participants were asked whether they had ever complained about the problems to the organization committee orally or in a written form. 60 % of the participants (n=54) said that they hadn’t complained while 38.9 % of the participants (n=35) said that they had complained. One participant indicated that s/he had wanted to but s/he couldn’t complain. It can be seen that most of the participants mentioned at least one problem about conferences, but they didn’t take the necessary actions to complain about them and remained hesitant to inform the organizing committees about them.

3.3. Successful Sides of ELT Conferences in Turkey

Another question that was asked to the respondents was to name any successful side of ELT conferences in Turkey. It is interesting to note that 12 respondents mention that there are not any successful sides of ELT conferences in Turkey. Some participants gave multiple responses. The participants’ responses can be categorized into three categories such as networking, updating knowledge and organization.

3.3.1. Networking

The highly given answer is networking as ELT conferences bring many professionals together. This is in line with the reviewed literature as Edelman et al. (2018, p. 102) state “a commonly stated reason why attendants have chosen to come to one or another conference is to network, to get to meet new people who are active in the same field as one is and who might be working on similar matters as one is right then, or who might be interested in going down that research avenue at a later stage”.

Conference participants meet many colleagues and the English language teaching community at large. This is not surprising as it is in the nature of conventions to engage many practitioners. This gives the participants the opportunity to get to know each other. Hilliard JD (2006, p. 64) also points out that “getting an opportunity to meet members from one’s community face-to-face may even provide motivation for some community members to attend a convention, thus providing additional benefit to the association”. 6 respondents mention that one can reach globally known ELTons and this can also be seen as networking. People find the opportunity to discover other like-minded people and hopefully, have long-lasting contacts with them. They feel themselves as part of a community. Hickson (2006, p. 467) points out that “the value

of networking is that it provides ‘new’ colleagues for coauthoring papers, chapters and books and organizing convention programs”.

3.3.2. Updating knowledge

Another response evident is that ELT conferences in Turkey focus on a variety of themes so they help the participants update their knowledge. Respondents also mention that there is wealth of ELT conferences in Turkey and they are organized frequently. The participants can invest in their professional development and follow current trends in ELT. This is important as “this might lead teachers to do research or get involved in action research in their own contexts by applying the new knowledge acquired in the event” (Salas, 2016, p. 6).

3.3.3. Organization

Although organizational problems exist in the responses, one cannot deny the fact that it depends on a conference. In the responses, organization is also taken as the successful side of ELT conferences in Turkey. Venues, social events and plenary speakers are the sides that respondents are happy with. This is in line with the scholars from the reviewed literature (Choi, 2013; Hashemi et al., 2020) as they underline the attractiveness of conference destination. The respondents also clarified that plenary speakers are well-prepared and enthusiastic. Another successful side is that conferences are held in English.

3.4. Conference Participants’ Views Regarding Presenter Profile and Participant Profile

When the respondents are asked to give their opinion regarding presenter profile at conferences, one can see that almost half of them believe presenters are unprepared and read from slides while the other half states that they are well-prepared.

Table 4. *The Respondents’ Opinions Regarding Presenter Profile*

The respondents’ opinions regarding presenter profile	Number of respondents	Percentage
unprepared and read from his/her slides	40	44.4 %
well-prepared	36	40 %
It depends on a presenter/conference	14	15.6 %

The respondents are asked whether presenters are chosen well based on scientific criteria. 53 out of 90 respondents stated that presenters are not chosen well based on scientific criteria. This result is in line with the respondents’ views about the problems in ELT conferences in Turkey. The belief that presenters are not chosen well based on scientific criteria can be the reason why respondents think presentations need improvement.

Another question related to presenters is also asked. The respondents are asked whether presenters complete their presentations within time limits with due respect to other presenters. 60 % of the respondents (n=54) agreed with the view that presenters complete their presentations within time limits while 40 % of the respondents (n=36) believe that they don’t.

The respondents gave the following answers regarding their views on participant profile. 34.4 % of the respondents (n=31) find the participants interested and attentive. 23.3% of the respondents (n=21)

believe that participants lack background information. 20 % of the respondents (n=18) think that participants are looking forward to the coffee breaks throughout the sessions. In the reviewed literature, Skelton (1997, p. 70) argues that many attendees “enjoy the informal aspects of conferences (talking to other people, time away from the work routine)”. Some attendees are much more concerned with the concrete material outcomes of conferences such as certificates, gifts, raffles, etc. Also, it can sometimes be witnessed that some provincial directorates of national education keep English teachers’ attendance obligatory to some ELT conferences. They ask English teachers to attend the conferences as part of their in-service training. As mentioned in the reviewed literature, outcomes of continuous professional development are higher when it is voluntary. Obligatory attendance can send the message to those attendees that CPD is something they must ‘bear’ the day long. Moreover, 11.1 % of the respondents (n=10) argue that participants ask irrelevant questions at the end of sessions while 4.4 % of the participants (n=4) believe that the participants ask interesting and intriguing questions.

Table 5. *The Respondents’ Opinions Regarding Participant Profile*

The respondents’ opinions regarding participant profile	Number of respondents	Percentage
Interested and attentive	31	34.4 %
Lack background information	21	23.3 %
Looking forward to coffee breaks	18	20 %
Ask irrelevant questions at the end of the session	10	11.1 %
Ask interesting and intriguing questions	4	4.4 %
It depends on the conference	4	4.6 %
Quiet and stay in their comfort zone	1	1.1 %
Mostly undergraduate students dragged to the conference by their instructors	1	1.1 %

Lastly, the respondents are asked what they would give utmost importance to if they were in the organization committee. Some of the respondents gave multiple answers. 47 respondents stated that they would pay more attention to the submitted abstracts and choose original ones. 3 of those 47 respondents pointed out that they would give priority to workshops over theoretical presentations. 4 respondents stated that they would establish a small scientific committee. Some of the suggestions can be seen in the extracts below:

“I could offer more workshops than paper presentations. Also, I’d clearly set standards particularly for paper presentations to improve the quality of time spent in sessions” (R 29).

“The inclusion of various profiles of researchers in a welcoming atmosphere, well-chosen quality of studies, detailed guidelines of presentations for novice presenters” (R 33).

“It might be too utopic, but I would most probably prioritize the relevance of the incoming abstracts with the topics targeted by the conference, in an attempt to create a one-size-fits-all profile of the participants, thereby denying the irrelevant ones” (R 58).

8 respondents mentioned that they would pay attention to the time allocated for each presenter and have less presenters and more time for after discussions. 8 respondents stated that they would keep the conference fee low and thereby increasing participation to the conference. With today’s current economic

conditions, registration fees should be reduced so as to increase the number of participants. 4 respondents mentioned that they would arrange publishing opportunity after the conference. 5 respondents pointed out that they would invite well-known and professional keynote speakers to the conference. 8 respondents mentioned that they would give utmost importance to organization and choose university campuses as location. 4 respondents mentioned that they would choose a conference theme that would be of interest to the participants here in Turkey. Also, there is a suggestion that an award can be given to the best paper or the most active participant at the end of the conference. Also, another important suggestion is that the committee can ask the Ministry of Education staff to attend the conference.

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

Attending conferences helps attendees refresh their knowledge, get in touch with their colleagues, and learn what is going on in their fields. However, this doesn't mean that conferences are problem-free in Turkey and abroad. In the reviewed literature, as Levin (2012, p. 75) pinpoints, unfortunately, conferences can be "essentially about talking, not hearing; about presenting ideas, not exchanging ideas; about putting things on one's CV, not about real learning. Conferences often turn into events where no one is paying attention to and many people are looking forward to coffee breaks, lunch time or social events such as trips, gala dinner, etc.". In Turkey, not much studies are not focused on academic conferences, so there is a need to illuminate the evaluation of academic conferences in the field of ELT. In an attempt to fill the aforementioned research gap, this article can be placed in the growing literature on conference research in higher education. Based on the findings of this study, it is clear that professionals attending conferences do feel that there are similar problems, but one should note that it depends on the conference that one has attended.

Although this study takes a specific stance with regard to the nature of ELT conferences in Turkey, the findings are applicable to other disciplines and professions, as well. Although the setting takes place in Turkey, one can find many similarities in problems prevalent around the world with regard to conferences. This study portrayed a number of common problems and successful sides of ELT conferences in Turkey. Needless to say, every event is unique and in line with Godovykh and Hamh (2020), the individual's satisfaction about a conference is related to their own evaluation of their experience and affected by many different elements throughout the experience. For some people, one element precedes the others. The present study showed the ongoing need to increase the quality of papers presented in ELT conferences in Turkey as one of the key issues that emerged from the study pinpoints the weak and low quality of presentations. Presentations are the core of conferences and need delicate attention. Another key issue to emerge from the questionnaire was the importance of organization. These can make a conference successful. High number of respondents agreed on the networking opportunities as ELT conferences' successful sides. It is obvious that these findings have a broader appeal to other professions.

No matter what their professions are, conference organizers should take many things into consideration to help attendees gain much from the conference experience as attendees spend a lot of time, energy and money on conferences. Arising from the present study, the following suggestions can be put forward for conference organizers to enhance the quality of conferences. The suggestions can be categorized as 'before the conference', 'during the conference' and 'after the conference'. Before the conference, while organization committees are planning their conferences, they should determine lower registration fees so that many attendees can benefit from these continuing professional development opportunities. In the reviewed literature, it has also been underlined that "academic conferences require costly travel for which many institutions have shrinking pots of money to support" (Bos, Sweet-Cushman, and Schneider, 2019, p. 750). Therefore, conference organizers should not see it as a source of making financial profit. Conference organizers should find more sponsors to make conferences as affordable as possible. Further suggestions

might be choosing venues not as hotels but university congress halls, giving the participants the chance to find accommodation at university campuses or bargaining for low hotel prices, thereby keeping registration fees lower. Conference venues should be in such a destination that offers a variety of means of transportation so that it can be easily reached. It should be more about education not economy. Conference organizers should publicize the event as much as possible through conference web-site, social media, posters, etc. In the conference web-site, one should find all the necessary information regarding abstract submission, key dates, registration procedure, contact information, accommodation, transportation options and so on. Having conferences at the weekends will allow more practitioners to participate in the event. Distance, time and money can be taken as conference inhibitors. Therefore, conference organizers should take the necessary steps to prevent those inhibitors. Conference organizers should also avoid other conference overlaps. What is more, conference organizers should try to contribute to the fields with a good selection of papers in the proceedings. They should provide attendees with a good combination of theory and practice by both expert researchers and practitioners allowing presenters and participants to gain hands on experience and theoretical knowledge. Therefore, conference organizers should have well-chosen scientific committees. It is crucial for scientific committees to follow strict peer review process. They should not accept all the abstracts to get the registration fee. Before the event date, presenters should be informed about the expectations from the concurrent sessions and they should be kindly warned not to read from slides through the whole session. As Skelton (1997, p. 70) underlined “speakers concentrate on the confident delivery of their predetermined papers and fail to engage with the existing understandings (and therefore starting points) of their audience”. At the end of their presentations, they feel themselves happy if they have finished listing all the points in their slides. However, presenters should genuinely engage with the audience. First time presenters can be given an experienced mentor during the conference to calm them down and inform them about the procedure. Conference organizers should spare enough time for exchange of views at the end of each session.

During conferences, attendees should be welcome and hosted in the best way possible. Students can be hired as stewards to guide attendees throughout the day in case they have a question or a problem. If a presenter has a problem using the conference technology, wireless connection, etc. for his/her presentation, stewards should be ready to help before the session time. Apart from plenary talks, sessions should also be organized in suitable rooms, not far away from the main hall where the plenary talks are realized. Session tickets can be provided on a ‘first come first served’ basis so as to make sure that there are an equal number of participants in each session. There should be a moderator in each session and presenters should not exceed time limits. Moderators should be in session rooms earlier in case any problem occurs. Conference programmes should be arranged in such a way that none of the presenters would have to rush and skip half of their presentations and moderators should also be responsible for timing and flow of presentations.

After the conference, attendees can be requested to provide quick feedback about the conference to enhance future conferences through e-mail or social media polls during or right after the conference. Organization committees can make publication opportunities available after peer review process and inform the presenters about submission dates. Many of these suggestions arising from this study can be imported to academic conferences in different disciplines and countries.

As with all research, there are a number of limitations that should be acknowledged. In this study, there are the potential limitations of the use of an online survey tool and the difficulty in generalizing these findings to the population of conference participants, and these have implications on the generalizability of the findings. Further research can focus on the reasons why participants attend ELT conferences and what their motivations are. It will also be enlightening to other professions if similar studies are conducted in different fields in Turkey and abroad. The bulk of research on conferences can be utilized to enhance future conferences that will meet the needs of potential participants.

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