

## A Conference of Bridges

From November 1-4 2012, I was honored to represent KOTESOL as our organization's delegate to the Pan-Asia Consortium – Far East English Language Teachers Association (PAC-FEELTA) conference held in Vladivostok, Russia. While there, I had the pleasure of meeting a wonderful group of conference attendees, presenters, organizers, and volunteers. I'd like to share some of my experiences with you.

### The Good

The best thing about the conference was the people. The organizers worked hard to overcome the logistical problems that are inevitable when holding an event in a brand new venue. The Russian attendees were very interested in sharing ideas and learning about new teaching methods and resources (especially online resources) to use with their students. I was impressed with how often I heard them speaking in English with each other. The student volunteers displayed tireless energy and enthusiasm and were always right there when we needed them. When I commented to one of them about how disappointing it must be to work on a Saturday morning, she replied that she was happy to be there practicing her English and wouldn't want to be anywhere else. Finally, the other foreign attendees, invited speakers, and plenary speakers were a joy to bounce ideas (or beanbags in Tim Murphey's case) off of and share experiences with.

The food was another highlight of our visit. The cafeteria at the venue served what was referred to by the Russian teachers as "authentic but not home cooked" Russian food.

Both the portions and the prices were reasonable, and it was a great way to get a taste of the culture. The fare for the "Welcome to Russia" party and the farewell dinner was also delicious.



**FEELTA volunteers at the KOTESOL table**  
Photo by Tim Thompson



**Russian entertainers at the Welcome Party**  
Photo by Michael Jones

Another high point was Stephen Ryan. Stephen is an efficient, unassuming man who served as the conference chair and plenary speaker. He gave two great talks, solved problems, served as MC, and was a great guy to talk to. His talk about taking a year off from teaching got excellent feedback from everyone who attended.

Interacting with Rod Ellis was something else I'll always remember. Dr. Ellis delivered a well-received plenary talk and was a pleasure to speak with on a personal level as well. I heard many people mention how accessible and friendly he was. He certainly didn't restrict himself to the plenary speakers' table or spend all of his time with the conference organizers. It was refreshing to see someone who is held in such high regard in his field be so amenable to chats over coffee or in the hallways between sessions.

Similarly, I was happy to see people like Rose Senior and Eric Reynolds take an interest in some of the attendees' research projects. I saw them dedicate entire coffee breaks to chats about research methods or to helping hand out and collect surveys on behalf of others. Professional development opportunities were plentiful and the overall mood was one of genuine collaboration.

I enjoyed my talk in front of around 40 attendees, mostly Russian English teachers. All of the PAC delegates presented at the same time, so I only had to compete against four other presentations. The downside was that I was unable to see my PAC colleagues' presentations, which was disappointing because all of the delegates chose very interesting topics to speak on. Most English teachers in Russia are women, and the only other man in the room during my talk was a student volunteer. I began by addressing the audience as "Ladies and Ladies" which helped lighten the mood as it was 8:30 in the morning. Despite the early hour and the fact that the sun was still struggling to rise over the bay, we enjoyed a fun session with lots of feedback and questions at the end. The technology worked well and it was a pleasure to share ideas with the entire group.

### The Inspiring

I was very impressed by how keen the Russian English teachers were to learn from foreign professionals, and in their interest in free, online resources. One might say their salaries were inversely proportional to their enthusiasm for teaching and that made free resources even more important. Obviously, many teachers were interested in presentations on internet-based teaching. I noticed that sessions conducted by foreign attendees were particularly well attended, and watched many of the Russians actively search out the presentations given by foreigners in each time slot.

This led to me to conduct a little informal research. I started asking people during the meal and coffee breaks if they would be interested in attending a Skype-based talk by a foreign presenter on a topic they were interested in over a live talk by a Russian presenter on a similar topic. Many teachers responded that they would choose the former. They mentioned that they had heard what many of their Russian counterparts thought and were hungry for fresh perspectives on our industry.

Now I was starting to get excited. This seemed like a great opportunity to help out a lot of people who were very appreciative and eager to try new things. Next, I asked if it would be helpful to talk to some of their students or at local teacher's conferences around Russia via Skype and also received a positive response.

My goal now is to spend the winter break planning ways to organize a database of teachers in Korea who would be willing to donate their time for short culture lessons with Russian classes and longer training sessions at local conferences. I don't know exactly how it will work yet but I do know that I want it to work, and many teachers in Russia are eager for the opportunity to collaborate. Stay tuned for an exciting 2013 English-teaching *Glasnost*.

Vladivostok boasts two beautiful suspension bridges, one of which connects Russian Island to the mainland. Not only did we cross those bridges many times during the conference. we also managed to bridge the divide that saw us start off as strangers but ultimately resulted in us becoming connected as a community of English teaching professionals.

About the Author: Tim Thompson was the KOTESOL PAC representative to the 2012 FEELTA Conference. He is a Visiting Professor at KAIST and the KTT Coordinator.