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How to Conduct an ELT Workshop

In my experience as a teacher and teacher trainer, I have come to realize that in some parts of the world there is no clear line between what constitutes a paper presentation or lecture and what constitutes a workshop. Workshops in some countries are often conducted in much the same manner as a lecture—with the presenter speaking to an audience that sits and listens passively.

The word *work* in *workshop* indicates that participants need to do work rather than just receive ideas and information as they scribble in their notebooks. A workshop should be a platform to engage the audience in activities and provide opportunities to share ideas and experiences with one another. As Portner (2006, ix) says, "presenting a workshop is a form of teaching in which you invite those in attendance (participants) to interact with you and each other in the exploration of a professional issue, curriculum content, or instructional methodology." This does not mean, though, that workshops consist exclusively of engaging in activities—they include both presenting information and facilitating activities and may also include the exploration of ideas (Portner 2006).

While many teachers feel comfortable delivering paper presentations and lecturing in front of a class, they are often unfamiliar with workshops and are therefore fearful of conducting them. However, workshops are a great way for English language teaching (ELT) professionals to share their interests and talents with colleagues at their own institutions or at conferences. As English teaching professionals, we all have areas of interest and expertise; therefore, it would be a shame for us to not share our best practices. Additionally, at some educational institutions, conducting workshops is an expected part of continuing professional development, along with paper presentations and publications. This article, then, serves to give readers a framework for planning, preparing, and delivering a successful workshop, including strategies to keep on pace and anticipate and overcome obstacles.

PLANNING AND PREPARING YOUR WORKSHOP

Choose a topic

First, choose a topic that is workshop-friendly. This means you need a hands-on topic that allows your participants to carry out activities and engage in discussion. For instance, a topic that demonstrates how to conduct interactive reading activities would be good for a workshop. In contrast, a topic such as the history of English language teaching, which is more about delivering information than providing hands-on practice, is less amenable to a workshop and would be better suited for a lecture.

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If presenting at a local or regional conference, you will often need to choose a topic that follows the conference theme. All conferences will list their theme and sub-themes. Some themes will have a specific focus, such as the "Inspire to Write" conference held at the University of Dhaka in 2014 that called for workshops and papers specifically related to the teaching of writing. Other conferences will have a more expansive focus and be open to topics outside their theme, such as the 2014 University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh conference, "The 21st Century Classroom: Directions, Issues and Changes," which invited pertinent workshops and papers but did not limit submission of proposals to only those themes.

Know your audience

In order to engage workshop participants, you need to choose a topic that is relevant to them. Of course, the easiest audience to select a topic for would be the teachers you work with because you are aware of their teaching contexts and interests. If presenting for your colleagues, you could even take an informal survey about topics of interest to them.

When you choose your topic, keep in mind the fundamental characteristics of the adult learner. Adult learners have experiences they can draw upon, are self-motivated and directed, learn best when they view what they are learning as beneficial, and want learning that is immediately useful (Knowles 1984). Therefore, it is important to design your workshop in a way that allows the participants to tap into and share prior experiences and to provide knowledge, skills, and techniques that they can immediately apply to their teaching.

For a workshop at a conference, it is not so easy to predict exactly who will be your audience or how much your audience will know about your topic; you could have a mixed group of participants ranging from elementary school teachers to school principals unless you specify that your topic is for teachers of a certain level, such as young learners or university students. In cases where you have such a mixed group, choose a topic that is fairly universal for all teachers or one that is adaptable to students of all levels. For example, a workshop on giving effective instructions is beneficial as most teachers, even the very experienced, need practice giving effective instructions. An interactive reading activities workshop could use materials that are at an appropriate level for the workshop participants and be followed by a discussion about how to adapt the activities for students of different ages and levels.

If you are going to work with the same group of teachers again, ask the participants for input about workshops they would like to attend and cater to their desires for your next workshop. Your workshops will be more successful when you address your audience's needs and give participants activities, techniques, and strategies that they can apply in their classrooms.

Attend a workshop

One of the best ways to prepare for your workshop is to attend other workshops. Make notes about what went well and why. What did you like or dislike about how the presenter conducted the workshop? What kinds of problems did you see that you would want to avoid in your own workshop? For example, I have liked workshops with well-prepared and confident speakers who knew how to manage time and offered the audience techniques they could add to their teaching repertoire. Some of the things I liked less were ill-prepared speakers, speakers who talked at their audience but failed to engage them, and speakers who could not successfully manage time.

Practice your workshop

Practice your workshop before you deliver it professionally. An ideal practice audience would be other English teachers since they can respond to your content in an authentic fashion. If unable to secure an audience of English teaching professionals, you might be able to coax friends or family members to act as participants for a rehearsal. Run your rehearsal exactly as you plan to conduct your workshop. Encourage your practice audience to ask questions related to your workshop. Time yourself and get feedback on your rehearsal so that you can make adjustments before the actual workshop.

Check your presentation room

Inspect the room where you will conduct your workshop so you know the layout, the seating arrangements, and the kind of multimedia equipment that is available. It is helpful if you can inspect your presentation room before you start preparing your workshop. In reality, though, you might only be able to view your presentation room a few hours before your workshop begins, and, in some cases, you might not have the chance to see your presentation room before you start your workshop.

Consider the seating arrangements

Ideally, you will present in a room with a seating arrangement that is conducive to workshops—i.e., workshop participants are able to work together in pairs or groups and can easily shift from pair to group work and vice versa. However, the ideal is not necessarily the norm, and you might find yourself in a room with fixed chairs and tables that are impossible to move. Keep all possible seating arrangements in mind as you prepare your workshop activities, and be wary of activities that require absolute numbers. For example, some activities might strictly require working in groups of four. If you do not know that you will be able to easily get your workshop participants into groups of four, either adapt your activity or choose an activity that allows for the number combinations you need to accommodate.

Have a backup plan for technology

There is a saying, "Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst," which is how you should approach using technology in your workshop. Although technology can be a wonderful addition to your workshop, it does not always function, and if you decide to use it, make sure you have a backup plan to allow for various technical failures such as an interrupted Internet connection or a sudden power outage. If, for example, you have written discussion questions on PowerPoint slides, also prepare handouts with the same questions. If your PowerPoint presentation has pictures that are essential to your workshop, print them out and have them ready. Also, have something for your audience to do while you set up your equipment in the event that it takes longer than expected. Do not find yourself in a position where you are unable to deliver a good workshop due to technical failure, and never blame an inability to present well on technical considerations. Your audience will not be on your side if you tell them that you had a wonderful workshop prepared that you cannot present because the technology failed.

Provide handouts for workshop participants

Prepare a handout that outlines the activities or processes you will cover so that participants can reenact the activities at a later date. Simply providing a copy of PowerPoint slides is not always enough since much of what you actually do in your workshop will not be on the slides. Make sure you bring more than enough handouts for everyone.

PARTS OF THE WORKSHOP

A workshop (or presentation) should have a clear beginning (introduction and warm-up), middle (body), and end (conclusion and question-answer session) (Lukey-Coutsocostas and Tanner-Bogia 1998). Following is a description of the three parts of a typical workshop.

BEGINNING STAGE OF THE WORKSHOP

Introduction

When you start your workshop, introduce yourself and state your affiliation. Thank your participants for attending your workshop. Present the title of your workshop, and give

a brief introduction of your topic. Let your workshop participants know the expected outcomes of your workshop so that they will have an idea of what learning or skills development they will take away. However, keep your agenda somewhat open-ended to allow for flexibility in your workshop (Garmston and Wellman 1992).

Warm-up

Warm-up activities are ice-breakers that help participants get acquainted and feel more relaxed with one another before the main part of the workshop begins. Warm-ups also serve as a diagnostic for your workshop, helping you to learn a bit about what the participants know about your topic so you can make necessary adjustments to timing and the tasks you have planned. Additionally, warm-up activities introduce your audience to the topic you are about to present and activate any relevant background knowledge they might possess. Warm-ups during the first few minutes also help you with latecomers—you will not need to start and restart as tardy participants filter in, and those who arrived on time will have something to do as you wait for everyone to arrive.

What kind of warm-ups can you do? You can give your participants a few discussion questions or true/false statements related to your topic and have them talk in pairs or small groups, and then have a few participants share with the whole group what they discussed. You could also have participants do a puzzle, such as a crossword, related to your topic. You can also do any kind of ELT warm-up activity—perhaps one that you have had success with and that they can take into their own classrooms.

One energetic and engaging warm-up is "Stand up if … ." For this activity, prepare a list of facts you want to know about the attendees of your workshop. They will stand up for each "Stand up if … " statement that is true for them. For example, you can say, "Stand up if … ":

- you teach in a primary school.
- you teach at a university.
- you teach writing.
- you like writing.

MIDDLE STAGE OF THE WORKSHOP

Group work

Remember that a workshop needs to involve active learning, not just passive listening, and the challenge is to keep participants engaged. According to Garmston and Wellman (1992, 71), "small-group activities (involving two or more persons) are a basic building block for interactive presentation strategies that help participants attend, focus, and construct meaning from experiences." In the body of your workshop, allow time for pair, small-group, and whole-group discussion as you run your activities. It is not enough to explain activities to participants and then expect that they will later be able to carry them out. Learning how to conduct an activity usually comes from actually doing it. To save time, you might need to do an abbreviated version. If, for example, an activity usually takes about 40 minutes in the classroom, you can run your activity for 10 to 15 minutes, or as long as it takes for participants to fully understand how to carry it out. If you have an extremely large audience, you can demonstrate your activities with a few participants in front of the whole group.

It is essential that workshop participants understand the purpose of the activities you show and how they can be used in the

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participants' contexts. After conducting an activity, have participants work together in groups to discuss how they could use the activity in their own classrooms. Would they be able to use the activity just as it is, or would they adapt it? If so, how? If you have a mixed audience, you can group participants together according to institutional type: primary school teachers together, secondary school teachers together, and so on. If time allows, representatives from each small group can share their ideas with the whole group.

Level of materials

What level of materials will you use when demonstrating activities? There is no perfect choice, and what you decide really depends on your purpose and your audience. If you are working with a mixed audience, you might choose to use materials that would be engaging for the entire audience (reminding participants, of course, that the activities would need to be adapted to fit their students), or you could prepare different levels of materials and group teachers according to institutional type, though this could entail a lot of extra work, and teachers would likely still need to adapt materials to fit their students. If you are working with teachers from a single institutional type, such as elementary school teachers, you might choose to run the activities exactly as you would with students. However, teachers still might need to make adaptations to the materials and activities to fit their context. In short, it is easier to use level-appropriate materials that teachers take directly into their classrooms when working with a homogeneous group, and easier to use materials that might be challenging and engaging for the entire audience when you have a heterogeneous group. Remember, however, to emphasize to participants that activities need to be context-appropriate whether adapted or not.

Managing time

It is said that timing is everything, and it is certainly important to the success or failure of your workshop. Before you plan your workshop, check the time allotment carefully. Time allowed for workshops is typically 40 to 50 minutes, but can be as little as 15 to 20 minutes, and you could be asked to deliver a workshop that is an hour or longer. Plan according to the allotted time, but be ready to expand or reduce your workshop to meet the needs of your participants and the fluid workshop schedule. The best way to do this is to plan more activities or discussion sessions than you think you might need. However, make sure that the extra elements will not damage the integrity of your workshop whether you use them or not.

For my interactive reading activities workshops, for example, I have six activities written on a handout. When I do this workshop, I check the time allotment and then choose how many of the activities will fit into the workshop schedule. I also prepare one or more additional activities I can use in case the teachers I am working with happen to be particularly fast in getting through the regularly scheduled activities. No matter how many activities I actually do, I never skip the opening or the closing. And I always have a handout that includes all the interactive reading activities I do in workshops and usually a few more.

When you start an activity, let participants know how much time they have. This will help you schedule accurately and keep the participants on track and focused. If they know, for example, that they have ten minutes to complete a task that has five questions, they will not spend ten minutes on the first question. When time is up, stop the activity. It is often not essential that everyone complete an activity in its entirety, and if you allow all groups or participants to take as much time as they think they need, you will not be managing time, but time will be managing you. You do not want to have a situation where some groups are finished before others and have nothing to do while waiting for the rest to conclude.

Using visuals in the workshop

While using visuals in your workshop is not essential, they are a nice addition that can

aid in transmitting your message. As Garmston and Wellman (1992) say, "Good graphics greatly support the learning process for many participants. On average, only 20 percent of an audience has auditory-processing strengths. This means that most people will remember the imagery you use more than your words" (67). Visuals can be photographs, drawings, flip charts, videos, overhead transparencies, or some kind of presentation software. Among the presentation software available, PowerPoint is currently the most commonly used (Ledden 2013). While PowerPoint is extremely popular, it is not always used effectively. According to Weissman (2011), in an effort to authenticate their ideas, presenters "bulk up their PowerPoint slides with loads of data and jabber away as they click through them. Instead of impressing their audiences, they lose—or, worse, alienate—them" (62). Common problems associated with PowerPoint are too much text on slides, confusing graphics, and presenters who recite their slides verbatim instead of focusing on the audience. Ways to avoid these problems are to limit text on PowerPoint slides, highlight only essential information, use meaningful visuals, and avoid rushing from one slide to the next (Kosslyn 2007).

Answering questions

As a presenter, you will get questions you do not know the answer to. According to Ledden (2013), it is a good practice to try to predict the questions that might come up and to prepare answers to them; it is also advisable to be honest with your audience about what you do not know. If you feel confident, you might also turn the question to the audience to see if anyone else can answer it. Campbell (2002) gives some responses that can be used when faced with questions you do not know how to answer:

- I don't know the answer, but I can find out for you. If you will leave me your email address, I will get back to you.
- I hadn't considered that one. I need to think about it and get back to the question later.
- I'm not sure I know the answer to that. Maybe we could talk about it after the session is finished.
- There are really no right or wrong answers to that question. However, my experience has been … .

Furthermore, Ledden (2013) advises using the following method when asked a question you can answer confidently:

- Take the name of the audience member.
- Repeat or rephrase the question for the rest of the audience.
- Answer it.
- Check the response to your answer with the audience member.
- Thank the audience member.

ENDING STAGE OF THE WORKSHOP

At the end of your workshop, briefly go over what you covered. Make sure participants know the names of the activities presented and how they can conduct them in the future. Allow time for questions and answers and final comments. Get feedback from your participants on how the workshop went. Find out if your proposed outcomes were achieved. Written feedback is, of course, always preferable if you want honest feedback. You can find a myriad of workshop feedback forms and templates through an Internet search, but when you use or prepare a feedback form, think carefully about the specific areas of your workshop you would like to receive feedback on.

Following the closing, make yourself available to your participants for any further questions, comments, or related discussion. It is also a good idea to have business cards to distribute in the event that some of the participants would like to contact you at a later date. Some participants might also ask to take photos with you.

ADVICE ON HOW TO DEAL WITH NERVES

You will likely feel nervous before your workshop—manifested as anxiety for the entire week prior to your workshop or as jitters when you enter your presentation room. Before any kind of public-speaking event, it is common to suddenly wonder why you ever thought that you would be able to do a workshop and to feel you do not have enough experience or knowledge to help your audience. This feeling is referred to as *imposter syndrome* (Clance 1985). In spite of having a lot that you can share with others, you feel that you do not. You may not be able to completely get rid of this feeling, but among the best ways to deal with it are to focus on what you want to convey to the audience, to be well prepared, and to accept that you are not perfect (Campbell 2002).

ADVICE ON HOW TO HANDLE THE AUDIENCE

Generally, workshop participants want to be in your workshop and as such are on your side; however, you might find some individuals who are difficult to handle. Here are potential difficulties you might encounter and ways to deal with them.

Participants who are reluctant to speak out

It can be quite tense and even embarrassing when you ask your audience a question but get no response. In order to preempt this situation, you should give participants time to think individually and discuss their ideas in pairs or small groups before asking them to share with the entire audience. After participants have had time to discuss their thoughts, they will be more comfortable sharing their ideas with everyone.

A participant who wants to speak all the time

Some people love to be heard and will take every available opportunity to speak and answer all your questions. However, as a facilitator, you need to control this. Your focus on only one or two participants will annoy others and make them feel left out. You want the chance to speak to be distributed among as many workshop participants as possible. Try to call on different people and make sure you do not call on the same person repeatedly. If one person keeps insisting that you call on him or her, acknowledge that person's willingness to contribute but emphasize that you want to give opportunities to speak to other participants.

One way to get everyone involved while ensuring that no one person dominates is to put the participants in groups and give them a list of questions or problems to work through. Tell members of each group that they are responsible for one or two questions or problems—so they should focus specifically on the question(s) or problem(s) assigned—but that they should work through other questions or problems if time remains. Once time is called, have a representative from each group briefly explain to everyone what his or her group discussed. You can also have each group work on a different activity related to your central theme and then have group representatives report on what was discussed in their group.

A participant who insists that you are wrong

A participant may strongly disagree with what you say or insist that you have given wrong information. Do not argue with the participant. Thank the participant for expressing the opinion and restate your position. If, however, the participant continues to insist that you are wrong, suggest that you talk over the issue at the end of the workshop. You do not want a situation where you are giving all your attention to only one participant, and you do not want to become angry or out of control with anyone in your workshop.

A participant who brings up an off-topic issue

If a participant makes a comment or asks a question that is completely irrelevant to your topic, thank the participant, but redirect him or her back to the topic at hand. Let the individual know that the point raised is good for a topic in another workshop or

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suggest that you talk about it at the end of the workshop. If you allow for unrelated digressions, the direction of your workshop could go off on a winding road.

A participant who already knows too much

You might find that you have participants in your audience who know a great deal about your topic—in fact, they decided to attend your workshop because it is a topic of interest for them. In their enthusiasm, such participants might want to speak a lot to demonstrate their knowledge. While you certainly do not want to curb their enthusiasm, let them know that you would like to also give time for ideas and responses from other participants. If possible, get the "experts" to work in groups with participants who know less about the topic.

LEARNING FROM DIFFICULTIES OR FAILURE

Your workshop may not go exactly as you want it to, but that is okay. Treat unexpected occurrences as an opportunity to learn and improve for the next workshop. The more you present, the greater the chance that you will become a skilled and confident presenter. However, you have to start from somewhere, and you cannot learn what leading a workshop is like unless you are first willing to do it.

CONCLUSION

Delivering workshops is an important part of an English instructor's professional development and a great way to share with other teachers—whether for colleagues, for local teachers, or for regional or national conferences. However, it is essential that workshops provide interactive sessions and are not delivered in lecture mode. I hope that this article helps more English teachers gain the confidence and know-how to conduct successful workshops and take the initiative to do so. I believe that many English language teachers will discover that delivering workshops can become an enjoyable part of their professional development.

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