

FEELTA 2018 Khabarovsk Proves to Be an Excellent Host

The 2018 FEELTA International Conference was held at Far Eastern State Transport University in Khabarovsk, Russia October 4-6. The theme of the conference was "Teaching English in the Era of Globalization: Bridging Gaps, Meeting Challenges". The conference hosted nearly 86 participants from the region as well as speakers from Moscow, Kamchatka, Japan, and Korea.

The conference kicked off on Thursday morning with welcoming remarks in English from both the rector and vice rector of the university. The first plenary talk was given by Galina Lovtsevich, the president of FEELTA. She spoke on the role of English as an international language and shared several interesting anecdotes from her experiences as an English professor in Russia and her first visit to England. Even though she was over 40 at the time she remembered lessons from her school days that gave directions around London that helped her feel very comfortable navigating the city.

I gave the second plenary talk on Thursday morning. My talk was on the role of subject teachers as mentors. I drew on several of Galina's stories and added my own examples to show how many life lessons we can teach beyond the curriculum through the students' second language to help them become more successful after they graduate.

There were then two hours of concurrent sessions before a wonderful catered lunch that started with borsht and ended with blinis. It was an excellent example of Russian cuisine.

After lunch, featured speaker Natalya Maximova gave a talk on using CLIL with Visual Arts students using resources from the Hermitage museum's website. The students appreciated practicing with the bilingual authentic materials of major cultural significance. This increased both student motivation and professional competence as the web resources spurred the use of all four language skills among the students.

There were then 90 more minutes of concurrent sessions before a wine and cheese party to wrap up the day. We were treated to an excellent array of local dishes and several rounds of singing and dancing from students of the host university.

Friday was National Teachers Day in Russia and we were treated to three plenary talks in the morning. They took place in another building on campus as a group of dignitaries was visiting the campus and needed to use the main building. First, NATE executive director Peter Stepichev gave us a lively talk on challenges and solutions for teaching English in a new era. Peter and his wife took the train from Moscow for seven days to attend the conference and he told us that even though it was 9am in Khabarovsk it was 2am in Moscow, so it was his first time to present in the middle of the night. Peter displayed and demonstrated some of the learning tools that he invented, including a cup that formed different questions and sentences depending on the amount of liquid in it. Using a learning prop like that glass created surprise in the classroom and led to students taking pictures to show their friends and family members what they had done in class today. It made learning fun.

Peter was a tough act to follow but Steve Jugovic from Japan got us off to an interesting start by suggesting that the audience members stand up and introduce themselves to someone new while giving them a shoulder massage. His talk was on the body-brain connection and the importance of

intermittent movement and exercise for learning. One activity demonstrated the negative long-term effects of smartphone use on our necks. He also showed that attention, memory, and motivation can be improved through physical activity.

The third plenary was delivered by Richmond Stroup on the needs of international students in Japan. He explained that increases in diversity can bring about challenges for schools as a whole as well as in individual classes.

After a coffee break there were two concurrent workshops before lunch. I did one on using technology for a current events class and the other was on using “fake news” in English classes. Lunch was excellent again with a salmon appetizer and pork and vegetables and pork in a clay pot with bread baked over the top.

There were two more workshops to choose from after lunch and then we headed out for a guided city tour which includes a walk along the banks of the Amur River and a guided visit to the Museum of the Khabarovsk Region.

Saturday morning began with six poster presentations, including two from participants from Korea. There were then two concurrent workshops. I chose Amanda Gillis-Furutaka’s where she explained the challenges of teaching teenagers and importance of 8-10 hours of sleep per night for them. She also spoke on using music in the language classroom.

After the coffee break, there was a panel Steve and Amanda being joined by three other professors from Japan via Skype to talk about NeuroELT. Predictably, there were numerous technical issues that kept the session from being as effective as the organizers had planned. Honestly, these Skype sessions are a lot like tequila; they seem like a good idea but you end up regretting them later.

Finally, there was a closing ceremony to thank the organizers and overseas participants and I did a teacher training session on presentation skills to wrap up the event. There was plenty of time to make new friends and professional contacts and we were treated to excellent weather that provided many opportunities to get out and explore this welcoming city. I would definitely recommend a visit to Khabarovsk for future conferences or simply for pleasure.