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Reviewing the 59th IATEFL 2026 Conference in Brighton, UK Through a Reflective Practitioner Lens

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Abstract

In this article, I present a reflective review of the 59th IATEFL 2026 Conference, held at Brighton Centre on April 21-24 in Brighton, UK. The event included plenary sessions, workshops, poster presentations, and Special Interest Group Showcases that covered a vast array of English Language Teaching (ELT) topics. Rather than offering a comprehensive account of the conference, I focus on selected sessions and experiences that impacted me and supported my growing understanding of learner-centred ELT pedagogy. The review highlights discussions that I found especially thought-provoking and offers reflections on both the perceived strengths and limitations of the sessions I attended.

Keywords

1. ELT
2. Conference
3. IATEFL
4. UK

AI Declaration

AI-assisted tools were used to support the writing process by suggesting alternative lexical and transitional choices and providing feedback on coherence and flow of paragraphs.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Introduction

The 59th International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) 2026 conference was held in Brighton this year from April 21st to 24th at the Brighton Centre in Southern England. The event united scholars, researchers, teachers, professionals, practitioners, and students from across the globe. Some attendees were experts in their fields. However, others who were at earlier stages of their careers had come to learn about current developments, build professional networks, and engage in the collaborative and intellectually stimulating environment that the conference provided. The event also attracted many sponsors, including international and domestic publishers (e.g. Pearson, Express Publishing and Oxford University Press), university representatives (e.g. Cambridge and Birmingham), educational organizations (e.g. Britannica Education), and language and assessment centres (e.g. Duolingo English Test). The pre-conference events hosted by the Special Interest Groups (SIGs) included plenary talks, participatory workshops, and panel discussions with professors, mentors, and experienced teachers. Although the most prominent theme across parallel sessions was Artificial Intelligence (AI), other recurring topics listed in the 92-page program booklet were social-emotional teaching, inclusivity, pronunciation, grammar, global citizenship, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and World Englishes (WE), decolonial praxis, learner autonomy, agency, and assessment. The social events in the evenings featured music nights with singing and instrumental performances, the sharing of personal stories, folk tales, legends, and lived experiences, and an international quiz. All these were intended to help participants unwind, network, and build community knowledge before and during the four days of the conference.

Overview

Every day began around 7:30 – 8:00 am with registrations and mindfulness sessions offered by the sponsors. These were followed by mini “how-to” workshops about topics that I found to be very interesting and diverse, catering to a wide range of personal and professional needs. Examples of the titles available were: “How to get the best out of LinkedIn and Canva?” and “How to make research part of your professional practice?”. Each conference day included six sessions separated by two coffee breaks and a one-hour lunch break, and ended at 18:30. From my perspective, the conference was at times exhausting due to its intensive schedule, but ultimately satiating and rich with knowledge.

The conference opened with President Christopher Graham introducing the IATEFL board of trustees and welcoming attendees. He reminded the audience that the organisation is an open space for all, regardless of their background or experience, and described it as a global community and a family of professionals. All the speakers following the President further enhanced the warmth of the experience. The first plenary talk was by activist and writer Patricia Angoy. It was one of the most memorable sessions in the conference, perhaps because it was the first, or rather because it addressed a topic close to my heart: the colonial weight of English in English Language Teaching (ELT). This refers to the

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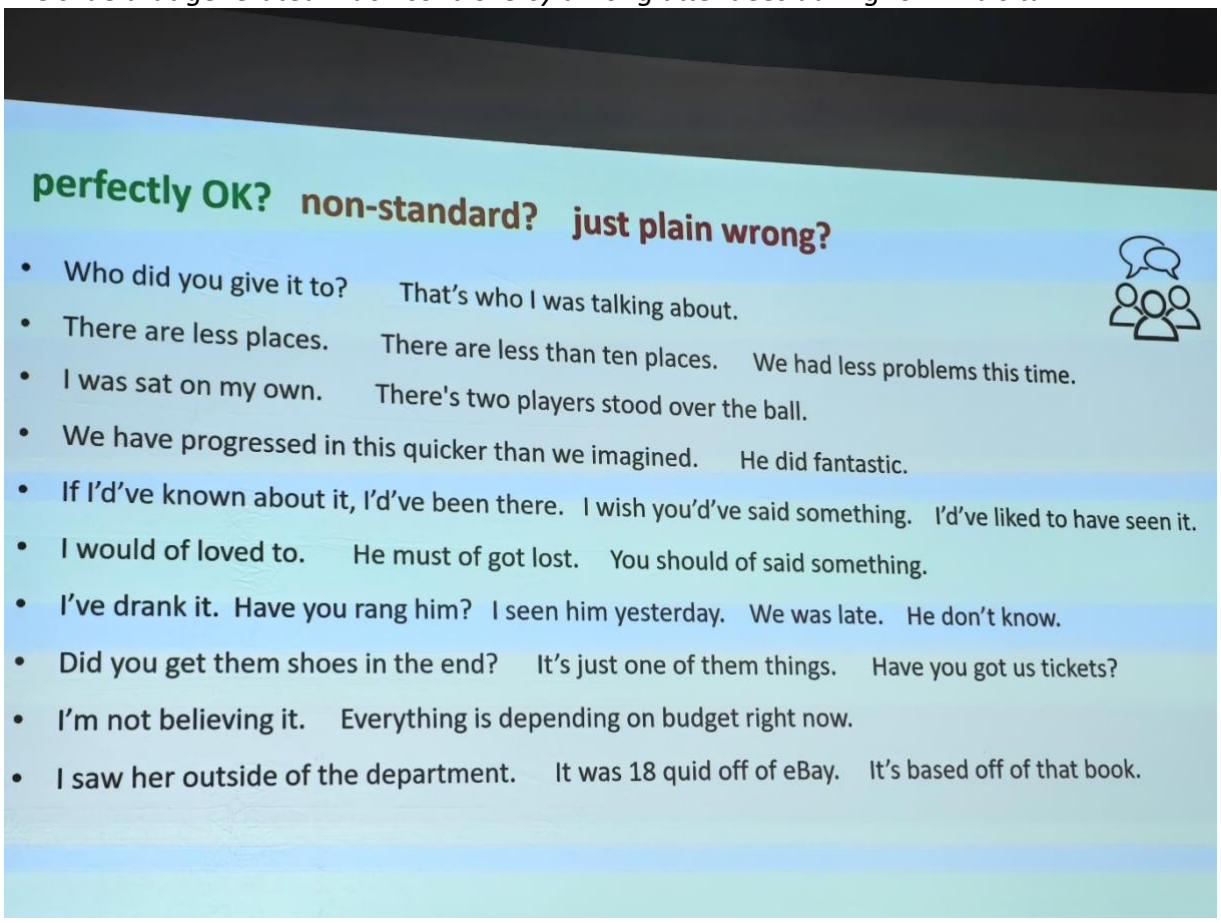
political, economic, and cultural influence that contributed to the global spread of English through British colonialism. Informed by decolonial theory, the talk focused on universities and environmental discourses – the ways people think, talk, and write about environmental issues. These can reproduce colonial and hegemonic logic, despite aiming at sustainability and inclusion. Angoy argued that English has been so entrenched with ideological frameworks, such as native-speakerism, that educators and institutions have become blind to them. The speaker thus called for a social upheaval to "compost the empire", which is a metaphorical expression borrowed from ecological processes. This refers to dismantling dominant (colonial) knowledge systems that have historically marginalised local indigenous languages and cultures. As composting is a slow and messy process of breakdown, regeneration, and transformation of ecological waste, so too is the process of deconstructing colonial systems in English language teaching across different contexts. It is only possible through a collective effort to raise awareness about the harms of ideological baggage within ELT by recognising regional, native, and non-native varieties of English as equally valid and legitimate. Angoy was an engaging speaker, and her slides were emotionally resonant as she described the lived experiences of her colleagues and their struggles with the hegemony of English, each within their own professional context. This discussion was a reminder for me to reconsider how I position different varieties of English in my own teaching context, and to critically examine the assumptions I inadvertently reproduce in classroom interactions.

On Tuesday, I attended a particularly interesting session about grammar practice in the classroom. The speaker, Jon Hird, had a remarkably playful manner and repeatedly asked the audience to evaluate select grammatical structures by labelling them as standard, non-standard, or simply wrong English (See Figure 1). It was an interesting interaction, as people argued from different, and sometimes controversial, viewpoints. He then explained that published ELT materials often perpetuate standard grammatical forms that differ from spoken everyday grammar. He shared authentic examples from his recent book *Spoken Grammar* (2025) and encouraged teachers to rethink their grammar teaching by incorporating the features and messiness of spoken everyday grammar. Overall, the workshop was inspiring and thought-provoking. Jon Hird was a knowledgeable and captivating speaker, and his slides were engaging, clear, and helpful; a combination of qualities I appreciated much. Overall, the session encouraged me to incorporate more colloquial expressions into my grammar lessons.

Figure 1

The slide that generated much controversy among attendees during Jon Hird's talk



The next day, I was struck by Scott Thornbury's presentation on the third person "-s" and the state of ELT (see Figure 2). Thornbury problematised the assumption that language proficiency involves the gradual and cumulative acquisition of discrete grammatical and lexical items through explicit instruction, where accuracy precedes fluency, and non-standard forms are generally discouraged. The talk was interactive and included light-hearted moments as the speaker adopted a humorous approach when discussing the teaching of the third-person singular "-s". Using examples such as "he sweeps" and "she naps", Thornbury highlighted how grammar instruction often relies on sentences that are grammatically correct but relatively uncommon in everyday life as the probability of someone saying "he sweeps" in real life is very low. He contrasted these artificial examples of the third person "-s" in grammar books with the far more frequent and communicatively meaningful patterns found in corpora, including verbs like *has, says, comes, goes,* and expressions such as *it depends.* Although the talk was not directly applicable to my own teaching, I felt it was creative and practical. Thornbury's point was to encourage teachers to incorporate examples from English corpora in their grammar teaching, as they reflect language structures that students are more likely to encounter in authentic communicative contexts.

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Figure 2

Thornbury's session on the third person "-s" and the state of ELT

On the same day, I also attended four forums on pronunciation, identity, and Global Citizenship. These complementary sessions focused on challenging traditionally established, "trickle down" native speaker norms. Rethinking pronunciation goals to prioritise intelligibility and clarity over the mimicking of British or American accents was encouraged. In line with Global Citizenship perspectives, the speakers argued that learners' identities can be better preserved when they are given an opportunity to choose the accent model they want to practice. At the same time, learners should be encouraged to embrace and accept their accents as an integral part of their identity. At the end of the talk, the speakers also reminded us of Jennifer Jenkins' (2000) English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) Core, a set of pronunciation teaching principles that challenge native-speakerism and focus on intelligibility and adaptability. These principles include emphasising crucial consonants (except for th), vowel length distinctions (long vs short), nuclear stress, and connected speech, while placing less importance on rhoticity.

Interestingly, the attendees in these forums asked numerous questions to clarify about how practically these principles can be applied within classroom activities. It was here that I developed the idea for my next IATEFL presentation. I decided that it should focus on the classroom implications of World Englishes and the incorporation of different accent models: how many should be introduced, by what means, and which varieties should be prioritised? Answering these questions is far from straightforward. In some cases, students

may feel more comfortable practicing British or American accents. Discouraging them from doing so might potentially affect their confidence and self-esteem.

On Thursday, the day of my own presentation, I was thrilled to meet Professor Takaaki Hiratsuka from Ryukoku University, Japan in the morning. At first, I was unfamiliar with his work, but I later discovered that he had coined the term “trans-speakerism”, which he frames as an alternative ideology to native-speakerism (Hiratsuka et al., 2023). I think this is a very timely contribution to current discussions in ELT, as native-speakerism remains prevalent. Unlike other theoretical framings of phenomena such as multilingualism and bilingualism (what and how many languages are spoken) or translanguaging (how languages are used), “trans-speakerism” centres users and their linguistic identities. I look forward to deepening my understanding of his ideas, and I was pleased to learn that he had other publications as well. I plan to expand the repertoire of frameworks that could be applied to my future research on World Englishes (WE) in my own Armenian context.

After that, it was time for my presentation on Linguistic Landscape (LL) activities. The process was seamless and smooth. While I heard that some speakers faced technical challenges with either the projector or their microphones, my presentation was not affected by such issues (see Figure 3). The attendees seemed engaged, and their many questions helped me refine certain aspects of the project before submitting it for publication. The one question that stayed with me, however, was whether LL tasks are only suitable for multilingual contexts or whether they can be implemented in monolingual environments. To be honest, I had to think hard before answering. Despite my longstanding engagement with LL research, this question had never crossed my mind. I have now come to realise that although truly monolingual environments are rare, in such places LL activities become even more interesting. These projects may reveal hidden multilingualism when languages are encountered unexpectedly.

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Figure 3

A photograph of me standing in front of my slides

Highlights

Overall, the conference was highly successful. The topics were diverse, interesting, and highly timely. The conference venue was huge and spacious with many floors, offices, spaces, and toilets on every level. There were tables with chairs for short meetings and discussions on the first floor, and comfortable couches on levels two and three which were used by attendees to rest. Additionally, water fountains on both ground level and level one offered free refills for all, and the ushers who showed people the way to go were friendly and helpful.

The organisers did a remarkable job of ensuring that participants had a pleasant and valuable experience. Every detail was well thought out. For example, tea and coffee were served in the Exhibition space during break times and food was available to purchase in a catering area on the first floor. There was a quiet room for rest, reflection, and prayers, as well as another reflection room where speakers practiced their speech. The organisers had developed a conference app intended to support participants in navigating the venue and program, which I found to be a novel and impressive feature in comparison with other conferences I have attended.

Final Comments

While my overall experience of the conference was positive, I found that some aspects were less successful than others. For instance, a small number of the presentations I attended did not match their titles and were therefore somewhat less satisfying than others. Nevertheless, my younger colleague who has different academic interests and attended the same session was satisfied and did not even perceive the titles to be irrelevant. This was interesting to me, as it revealed the importance of the expectations and experiences we bring to sessions.

By and large, the conference planted seeds of knowledge in me. It prompted me to ask deeper questions about pronunciation, accents, language ideologies, and World English varieties. Links between these elements gradually crystallised in my mind, and I have since asked myself whether my teaching of pronunciation reaffirms language ideologies I have long held. If so, could I intentionally incorporate more English varieties and accents to decolonise my classroom instruction? I left the event struck by the scale and diversity of the experience. In closing, I hope to present again the 60th conference, which will be held in Birmingham at International Convention Centre (ICC) between the 6th and the 9th of April 2027.

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