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THE SOUND BITES BETWEEN: A TESOL CONVENTION REFLECTION

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We had received plenty of advice: wear a sweater inside the convention hall, rice is hard to find, be ready to network, and take an extra bag to check—you’ll need it for all the books, souvenirs, and free stuff! With that, a suitcase full of instant noodles, and business cards at the ready, Mbak Elisa and I were prepared. Elisa and I are the same age, so calling her mbak, an Indonesian title meaning sister, has always seemed appropriate. As her sister, I was even more anxious about her first trip to the United States than about the conference itself. Elisa, a policewoman and English instructor at the Indonesian National Police Language Center, is married with two children. As a Muslim woman, she wears a hijab (head scarf) to honor her husband. She is my lifeline in Jakarta, and now was my chance to be hers in the United States. I was nervous for her. Everything was new, from the money, to the bathrooms, to the food. And she was also facing everything in a third language, Javanese being her first and bahasa Indonesian her second. But then, within 24 hours of setting foot on U.S. soil, first a woman in the airport, then our taxi driver, and finally a random man in the hotel all greeted her with the familiar Assalamualaikum, an Islamic phrase meaning “Peace be with you.” I realized that she wasn’t going to need my help.

That first night was one of those restoring-faith-in-humanity kind of nights, and it set the theme for the 2013 TESOL convention as one of all sorts of restoration. It made the nearly 20 hours of flights that Elisa and I took from Jakarta to Dallas completely worth it. Our journey had actually started 2 years earlier when ESP expert-mentor Kay Westerfield visited the Police Language Center where I have worked with Elisa and many other English instructors for the past 3 years. Kay guided us through our first curriculum development project and encouraged us to present our work to the larger ESP community. It was with great honor that we made our debut into the TESOL world!

I had been to conventions before, including the Ohio TESOL convention, and I was prepared to be overwhelmed by my first national TESOL convention—thousands of participants, hundreds of sessions to choose from, and ELT experts from all corners of the globe. But as I reflect back, those parts that stuck with me, the restorative moments, were easy to find.

It’s funny because I think of those moments now as sound bites. Another U.S. colleague and I have a running list of sound bites we collect from various YouTube clips that we have shown students so many times that they get lodged into our brains and enter into our daily vocabulary. When I returned to Indonesia, I found myself sharing more quotes than great websites or innovative new teaching ideas (though there were plenty of these as well) because they made more of an immediate and lasting impression, like the two women I overheard during one of the plenaries talking—not cynically, as many burnt-out teachers do, but in pure appreciation—about what the speaker was sharing. What a refreshing sound! Then there was the keynote speaker who reminded us that his fourth-graders’ ability to solve the world’s problems came from his faith in their collective wisdom, or the invited speaker who brazenly challenged the standing-room-only audience to “teach the students and not the material.” It is an old phrase, I know, but I needed reminding.
The convention, in so many ways, restored my confidence in my students, myself, and my profession. Though surrounded by thousands of strangers, I felt at home because of our shared passion and goals. When I watched a presenter talk with unashamed joy about activities that create “good learner-engaging feelings” to the tune of the Dixie Chicks’ “Goodbye Earl,” I knew at once that I was in the company of kindred spirits. The feeling was reaffirmed as so many TESOL veterans lent hand after helping hand to guide Elisa and me through the maze of ideas, resources, and networks.

So if I may pass on a little of my own advice to newcomers to the 2014 TESOL convention: The sweater is a good idea, what they say about the rice is true, the networking will come naturally, and go ahead and bring that extra suitcase, but you might just find that the sound bites between your ears will refresh and restore your teaching spirit more than a mountain of free expo bags and samples.

Jaclyn Gishbaugher has been a US DoS English Language Fellow at The Indonesian National Police Language Center in Jakarta, Indonesia for the past three years. There she worked with staff to develop a new English for Police curriculum and organize a series of professional development workshops on English for Uniformed Forces. Jaclyn has an MA in Secondary Education with an Endorsement in TESOL. Her professional interests include ESP for police, military, peacekeeping, and other security forces.