

THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF PRESERVICE TEACHERS IN A POSTGRADUATE DIPLOMA IN EDUCATION PROGRAM

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This paper examines the impact of an immersion experience on the professional development of four non-native speaker (NNS) pre-service English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in a one-year full-time Postgraduate Diploma in (Secondary) Education (PGDE) program in Hong Kong. The participants had no or limited teaching experience upon their entry into the program. They received all their education in Hong Kong and did not have any previous study abroad experience; moreover several of them had never travelled to any English-speaking countries before the PGDE sojourn in the UK. During the six-week immersion program, they stayed with a host family and participated in a specially-designed academic program, school visits, and social and cultural activities. Data was collected at strategic intervals throughout their program: in-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews, documents (e.g. reflective writings, personal blogs, Facebook notes/ status, field notes), and survey questionnaires. The analysis and triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data helped trace the development and changes of the participants' self-perceptions as professional NNS EFL teachers, and EFL learners over time. Discussion focuses on their expectations for and noticed/ unnoticed pedagogical knowledge gains from the immersion program in relation to their previous learning experience, their self-perceptions of their English proficiency, and identities as EFL teachers and EFL learners, as well as the formal teacher training they received in Hong Kong and the UK. It was found that their development as professional NNS EFL teachers was influenced by: (1) socio-contextual factors (e.g., community, school, parents); (2) the participants' evolving expectations for themselves as EFL teachers and learners; (3) their learning and teaching experience in the teacher training program; (4) the community/ support group they formed with other preservice teachers; and (5) their perceived roles of professional EFL teachers. Implications for the education of NNS preservice EFL teachers and teacher educators are discussed.

Keywords: overseas immersion, preservice teacher education, teacher training, teacher professional development, NNS EFL teacher/ EFL learner identities, Hong Kong

From a socio-cultural perspective, learning is more than the accumulation of skills and information, but “a process of becoming” and “an experience of identity” (Wenger, 1998) in which our identities are forged (Lave, 1992), and our ideas about “who we are and what we can do” transformed (Wenger, 1998). Under this framework, the process of learning to teach is more than the acquisition of teaching skills or pedagogical knowledge, but also the construction of professional teacher identity within preservice teachers. In this paper, the professional identity development of four preservice teachers in a one-year full-time teacher education program in Hong Kong will be discussed, with the focus on their pedagogical gains, and related professional identity development, during their six-week immersion program in the UK.

An increasing number of language teacher education programs around the world are making an overseas immersion experience part of the program requirements, especially for the preservice English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers who are Non-Native Speakers (NNS) of English. As Canagarajah (1999) estimated, about 80% of English language teachers worldwide are non-native speakers. Such an overseas immersion experience is considered to be able to provide student teachers with opportunities to develop new ideas about teaching methods (McKay, Bowyer, & Kerr, 2001; Quinn, Barr, Jarchow, Powell & McKay, 1995). Research on student teachers in overseas field experiences also showed that the participants could benefit from the exposure to different school systems in the way that they could compare and contrast the school systems in the host and their home country (Clement & Outlaw, 2002), and the attitudes and beliefs about teaching they developed could be tested in the education system of their home country (Quinn, Barr, Jarchow, Powell & McKay, 1995). Bodycott and Crew (2001) proposed in their work that there were self-reported gains at least for a short term in the student teachers’ socio-cultural, language, and educational gains after the immersion.

Tang and Choi (2004) examined the immersion experience of four preservice PGDE (Primary) teachers in Hong Kong, and found that with the opportunities the preservice teachers had for functional interactions in an authentic setting, their language abilities, especially fluency and confidence, could be enhanced. Other studies also reported development in the professional aspects of preservice teachers (Barkhuizen & Freyok, 2006; Willard-Holt, 2001).

Despite the many advantages of the immersion experiences reported in previous studies, some scholars doubted the effectiveness in terms of pedagogical knowledge gains (MacLennan & Tse, 1995) or the language development (Drake, 1997) due to the duration of the short immersion program.

Research questions

This paper focuses on the development of professional identity of four preservice teachers during an immersion program, and aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the expectations the participants had before the immersion?
- 2) What are their gains (noticed and unnoticed) in their pedagogical understanding after the immersion?
- 3) How does the immersion experience impact on their professional identity development?

Method

Participants

The findings of two out of five phases of data collection in a one-year longitudinal multiple case study on the professional identity development of four preservice student teachers will be reported in this paper. These participants were students in a one-year full-time Postgraduate Diploma in (Secondary) Education (PGDE) program in a comprehensive university in Hong Kong in the 2010/2011 academic year. Together with all other students in the program, they were invited to complete a demographic survey questionnaire to collect the demographic and some background information at the beginning of the PGDE program. The information collected was used in the selection of participants for the longitudinal multiple case study.

These four participants are Hong Kong Chinese students who: 1) received all schooling in Hong Kong; 2) learned English as a second/foreign language; and 3) with no or limited formal teaching experience. They were invited to participate in the study for their demographic background, their prior experiences related to language learning and teaching, and their willingness and openness to self-disclose.

The profiles of the participants are summarized in Table One, with their names replaced by pseudonyms.

Table 1. *Profiles of Participants*

Name	Ella	Tina	Lisa	Gary
Sex	F	F	F	M
Age	24	22	22	22
Mother tongue	Cantonese	Cantonese	Cantonese	Cantonese
Major/ Minor	English	Major: Religious studies Minor: Education	English	English language and literature
Teaching experiences (if any)	No	Private tutor for individual students; Part-time tutor for short-term summer English interest classes (with class size around 10)	Private tutor for individual students; Part-time tutor for short-term interest classes (with class size around 10)	Private tutor for individual students; Part-time tutor for short-term English classes (with class size around 10)
Exposure in English-speaking countries prior to the immersion program	No	Yes, two 1-2 week short trips to Europe and the USA	No	No
Place for immersion program	York	Edinburgh	York	York

After receiving two months of teacher training in the PGDE program in Hong Kong in which the participants were introduced to theories and methodologies related to English language teaching, the English curriculum in Hong Kong, and English language teaching skills, they went for a six-week immersion program in the UK from 2 November to 15 December 2010 as part of the PGDE program requirements.

Immersion program structure

The preservice teachers could choose between the immersion programs organized by two universities in Edinburgh and York in the UK. They were provided with more details about the immersion program after they declared their preference for the institution. The students could choose to stay with a local homestay family with native English speakers either by themselves, or together with another PGDE student from the program during their immersion.

The instruction materials, schedules, and coursework for these two immersion programs were at the discretion of the host universities, but they all centered around three main aspects – 1) academic courses/ micro-teaching sessions, 2) school visits, and 3) cultural learning/ visits. The preservice teachers had about five hours of lecture time each weekday with the focus on the three aspects mentioned above, and there were no classes during the weekends. By the time they went for the immersion program, it was near the end of semester in the host universities, so the student teachers had classes with all their PGDE classmates from Hong Kong.

Academic courses/ micro-teaching sessions

In the immersion program, the preservice teachers were introduced to different pedagogical ideas such as teaching methodologies and techniques, classroom management skills, grammar and language analysis, etc. They were also required to prepare for in-class micro-teaching sessions on some English grammar topics in groups of two with their PGDE classmates. In addition, the preservice teachers were required to write a weekly reflective essay (in the form of blogs) in English on topics related to their pedagogical understanding, English language, or cultural knowledge development as part of their coursework.

School visits

Three school visits to different local schools were arranged. The preservice teachers could observe how lessons were conducted in those schools they visited. The level of students, contents, or activities in the lessons observed varied among the preservice teachers, depending on the lessons they observed. They were also given some guidelines on the aspects to focus on before the lesson observation (e.g., sitting arrangement, classroom arrangement, etc).

Apart from the academic courses, micro-teaching sessions, and the school visits, a course on culture and society and some cultural visits were also arranged to introduce participants to the culture, values, and life styles or habits of people in the UK.

Procedures

To help capture the possible impact of the immersion program on their professional identity development, a set of questionnaires, which focused on their language use patterns, teaching approach, perceptions on professional relationships and responsibilities, self-efficacy and self-perceptions as EFL teachers, perceptions of their experiences/gains during the immersion program, etc., were administered before and after their immersion.

The participants were also invited to semi-structured individual interviews prior to and after their immersion program in mid-October 2010 and in late January 2011 respectively. Interviews were conducted in the language which the participants felt most comfortable to express their ideas in (either their mother tongue Cantonese or English). Questions related to their feelings, experiences and perceptions of their immersion experiences, their self-perceived gains in pedagogical knowledge, their perceptions of NS/NNS teachers, and self-perceived changes in EFL teacher identity after the immersion. The participants were invited to elaborate on and explain the answers they gave in the questionnaires.

The duration of the first (entry/ pre-immersion) interview lasted from 116 to 229 minutes, and the second (post-immersion) interview from 98 to 282 minutes. The following are the details of the interviews:

Table 2. *Length of Interviews in minutes*

	Pseudonym				Average
	Ella	Tina	Lisa	Gary	
Interview 1 – Entry/ Pre-immersion	229*	116	158	155	164.5
Interview 2 – Post- immersion	282*	98	128	261*	192
	Total:				1427

**The interview had to be conducted on two separate days in the same week due to the large amount of information and feelings the participant shared*

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Those conducted in Cantonese were translated into English. The reflective narratives, personal blogs, and facebook notes/ status of the participants were analyzed. The data gathered from the quantitative questionnaires were compared within each participant, and then between participants. A comparison of the answers given before and after the immersion program helped to provide an indication of the impact of their experience.

The reflective narratives the participants wrote as part of the coursework for the immersion program were also collected and analyzed. In addition, they shared what they wrote in their personal blogs, facebook notes/ status as part of the data for the present study. This facilitated a deeper understanding of their personal and emotional feelings during the immersion experience.

Findings and analysis

The cases of the four participants – Ella, Lisa, Tina, and Gary will be discussed here together, with the focus on two main issues related to their professional identity development: 1) the expectations they had before the immersion program; and 2) their gains in pedagogical understanding from the immersion program.

Participants' expectations before the immersion program

All the participants had never been to the UK or any English-speaking countries prior to the immersion, except for Tina who had gone on short trips with her family to Europe and the USA. This journey was a completely new experience for all of them. It was the first time they had had a chance to study and live abroad for six weeks.

In the pre-immersion interview, they were asked about what expectations they had for the immersion and they generally responded that they would like to improve their oral English, have more chances to use English, and see how the language was actually used in an English-speaking environment. In particular, they hoped to have their listening skills and oral English proficiency improved so as to prepare themselves as better EFL teachers. Some of them also mentioned that they would like “to learn more about the culture and living habits of people in the UK” so that they could share their experiences with their students in the future.

In terms of their expectations for their pedagogical knowledge development, some of them thought that there was “really nothing much to look forward to in the immersion program”, except the short trips to different places in the UK they were planning to have with their PGDE classmates; while for the others, they hoped “to see how English and English literature classes are conducted in the UK”, to learn more about classroom language in English, and “whatever the [immersion] program can offer”.

The data seem to suggest that the participants generally did not expect to gain much in terms of pedagogical understanding and had not given a lot of thought to their goals. They just believed that the immersion program would help them learn more about classroom language and allow them to see how English and English literature are taught in the UK. According to them, they were “too busy with their coursework in the PGDE program to worry or to spend time to think a lot” about the immersion in the UK. The limited information about the immersion program they were provided with before their departure, their self-perceived English proficiency and identities as an EFL teacher/ learner, their personalities (some may welcome challenges and have a higher tolerance for ambiguity), their lack of practical experiences in studying or living abroad may also contribute to their limited expectations for possible gains from the immersion experience.

Pedagogical knowledge gains from the immersion program

As previously mentioned, as part of their coursework, the participants had to write a weekly reflective journal about what they had learned or observed in the immersion, with topics related to their language, pedagogical knowledge (e.g., teaching ideas, methods/methodologies, etc.), or cultural knowledge. These journal entries were written in the form of blogs so that the instructors could give feedback and comments while they were abroad.

These narratives, together with the triangulation of the interview transcripts and survey questionnaire data, served as very important sources of data for the present study. A review of the data suggested that an awareness of new teaching ideas/concepts by preservice teachers might not necessarily lead to an identification with and application of those ideas in their own teaching.

This section will begin with a discussion of what the participants observed or were introduced to in their school visits or the teaching methodology course. It will then shift to their comments and feelings about these ideas, followed by a discussion of the factors that might contribute to the adoption or rejection of the ideas they were exposed to.

Participants' perceptions of the teaching ideas/ concepts introduced in the immersion program

The limited space in this paper makes it impossible to cover all elements related to the pedagogical understanding development of the participants – for example, the micro-teachings sessions which the participants considered to be “a very valuable learning experience”. Instead, the focus will be on the teaching methodologies course and the school visits they had, i.e., the parts where they were exposed to teaching concepts or ideas in the UK context.

The participants were very familiar with local classroom settings, teaching styles and methodologies, and student learning styles from their experiences as students. They had clear ideas about how a lesson should be conducted, and what was expected from a lesson from a student's position in the Hong Kong context. Such knowledge and understanding about the classroom in Hong Kong served as a lens through which the participants looked at and made sense of the teaching ideas or concepts they were introduced to during the immersion program in the UK. They did not passively take in all the ideas they were taught, instead, they tried to make sense of those ideas, considering what they perceived to be the practicability and feasibility of those ideas in the Hong Kong context, drawing on their knowledge about the EFL classroom in Hong Kong.

Therefore, it is not surprising to see that while the participants valued and planned to adopt certain teaching skills or ideas in their classrooms in the future, they also rejected some due to their concerns about its applicability in Hong Kong.

Teaching ideas/ skills valued by the participants

The data showed that the participants were most interested in classroom management skills (e.g., ways to raise students' attention, arrange students' seats, select students to answer questions, develop a good teacher-student relationship, etc.) in their own teaching. For instance, some participants were amazed at how selecting students to answer questions in class could be “made fun” by tossing a doll to the students, and the student who got the doll would have to answer the teacher's question. These pre-service teachers even went to buy the dolls together before they went for their teaching practicum about four months after their immersion.

Teaching ideas/ skills rejected by the participants

Despite the adoption of some teaching ideas or techniques the participants were exposed to in the immersion program, it was found that they tended to reject the teaching ideas/ methodologies that were more related to students' characteristics or learning styles, considering perceived differences in students in Hong Kong and the UK.

When analyzing the data collected from the interviews and the reflective journals the participants had to submit as part of their coursework, it was not difficult to notice comments such as "I think it [this activity] is very interesting.... However, students have to be very highly motivated and have very good English. Otherwise, they will feel it too difficult and reluctant to do this activity", "the teacher used a very interactive approach to encourage students to involve in the lesson... the situation is completely different from that in Hong Kong. Hong Kong students are usually very shy to answer questions and they take a very passive role in learning".

In addition to comments about local students' learning motivation and limited English proficiency, the participants also expressed concerns about the limited class time, the tight syllabus, the physical space and seat arrangement in the classroom, as well as the potential discipline problems or even "the noise level" that might possibly brought by having activities in the English lessons. In other words, they cited many obstacles to implementing many of the new ideas in local EFL classrooms.

Factors contributing to the rejection in the teaching ideas taught

Apart from the contextual constraints the participants pointed out, another possible reason for their rejection of the teaching ideas they had been taught in the immersion program in the UK was a mismatch in their preferred way of learning and the teaching styles of their instructors there.

According to the participants, the content of the teaching methods course in the immersion program was meant to complement or reinforce what was covered in their PGDE program in Hong Kong. Focused on the same range of topics (e.g., the teaching of the four skills in English), the preservice teachers were put in the place of students to perform a series of tasks or activities in order to experience how certain skills could be learned. They were also asked to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of certain teaching methods, as well as the characteristics of certain teaching techniques.

This way of learning how to teach, however, was not welcomed by all the participants. In their eyes, they considered such an arrangement to be "not well-organized", "lack of planning", "a repetition of what's been taught in Hong Kong, just that it's more superficial and not that in-depth". Gary's comments were representative of their dissatisfaction with the teaching course in the immersion program:

Those teaching methods lessons in the UK were not organized, the instructor often couldn't cover all that had been listed on the handouts she gave us, and she just asked us to read those handouts after class. Sometimes in-class activities we were asked to do take up a lot of time, and her teaching was not clear and lacked a focus. In Hong Kong, our teacher would teach us something about a certain type of teaching methods first before letting us have the group discussions (post-immersion interview, Gary).

All the participants expressed dissatisfaction with the teaching methodology course, noting that the activities and teaching methods introduced in the course were not "applicable or relevant" to the Hong Kong

context. Some of them even commented that, “if it was not for the UK trip and the home stay experience”, there was “no point” for them to have the immersion program in the UK; as they “could actually learn more about teaching skills and methodologies in Hong Kong” in a “more in-depth” and “organized” way, and the things taught will be “more applicable for the Hong Kong classrooms as the instructors in Hong Kong knew the Hong Kong context well”.

While it was possible that the teaching methods course in the immersion program in the UK could have been “disorganized”, “lacked a clear focus”, and “not recognizing the real situation in the Hong Kong context”, it is also possible that the negative comments were related to differences in a gap between the teaching styles they expected and experienced; such a discrepancy may have acted as an affective filter, so that the participants rejected the activities they were introduced to in the teaching methodology course before really considering the possibilities of applying them in their classrooms in Hong Kong.

Recognition of the values of teaching ideas/ methods taught in the immersion program at a later stage

The participants were interviewed again four months after the immersion during their teaching practicum in local secondary schools in Hong Kong. Interestingly, they reported that in their lessons, they had actually started to use the “not useful” or “not applicable” teaching ideas or activities they had been taught in the teaching methodology course in the immersion program.

Some of the participants were assigned to teach in English classes in which students’ English proficiencies were “very low”; some of them “didn’t know any English” and others “could hardly understand simple English”. These groups of students were very different from the ones they observed in the UK in terms of their English proficiency, motivation and discipline. However, when the participants “ran out of ideas about how to teach”, those teaching ideas or methods they were exposed to in the immersion program “popped up”. In their classes, they tried out some with their students and incorporated many activities they had learned in the methodology course in the UK to raise students’ interest in English, enhance their learning motivation, and maintain the classroom discipline.

According to them, though those ideas “couldn’t magically make them [the students] understand all that was taught or draw every one’s attention”, they found that more students were interested in the activities, and for those students who used to “rest their heads on their arms for a nap” during English lessons, “at least they would not fall asleep if they were not participating in those activities”. These teaching ideas or activities taught in the immersion program turned out to be “unexpectedly useful” in the participants’ teaching practicum. Tina’s comments highlighted the possible reason for its importance:

It is quite paradoxical in the way that on one hand, we are told [by the instructors in the PGDE program] to provide our students with different learning experiences, but not just exam-oriented ones; however, on the other hand, I was trained to be very exam-oriented when I was in school. My learning experience was exam-oriented, and it’s all about past-paper drilling in my senior secondary school years.... If we are to provide our students different learning experiences, which I myself didn’t receive any, that takes a lot of creativity and time (an interview conducted after four months of the immersion program, Tina).

Conclusions

This paper examined the participants' expectations for and pedagogical knowledge gains from the six-week immersion program in the UK as these are important elements in the construction of a professional identity. It was found that the participants generally did not have a lot of expectations about the development of their pedagogical understanding, rather they expected for improvement in their classroom language, and learning how to teach English literature (which was made a compulsory part in the new syllabus for secondary schools in Hong Kong).

Findings in the interviews conducted shortly after the completion of the immersion program showed that the participants regarded the teaching ideas/concepts they were exposed to in the UK as "irrelevant" in the Hong Kong context. Despite the fact that the participants were able to articulate the potential benefits of certain teaching methods or ideas in their reflective journals, they seemed to deny the possibilities of applying those teaching methods or ideas in their own classrooms. The reasons they gave for their rejection of those ideas were mainly because of practical considerations related to the perceived characteristics of Hong Kong students.

It was found that knowledge or awareness of differences between the education system/classroom contexts in the UK and Hong Kong could serve as both facilitating and hindering factors for the student teachers. On the one hand, by seriously thinking about the compatibility and practicality of applying what they have observed in the UK classrooms, the participants might learn new concepts about teaching methods and methodologies. On the other hand, there was a risk of having the new ideas being quickly rejected even before the student teachers have tried to experiment with them due to their perceived differences in the Hong Kong or the UK classroom contexts. Therefore, discussions or debriefing sessions after the school visits or the introduction of some teaching ideas in class would help clarify their concerns, and encourage them to seek for possibilities for the application of the new ideas/ concepts in their classrooms in the future.

Generally, the participants considered the teaching methodology lessons in the UK ineffective and "a waste of time", and preferred their Hong Kong's instructor's "more organized" way of teaching – i.e., have the concepts introduced first before having other activities or discussions. An awareness of possible differences in the learning styles of the preservice teachers could help enhance the effectiveness in their learning how to teach, and lower the affective filters the preservice teacher might possibly have due to their dissatisfaction with the performance of the instructor in the UK, thinking that the instructor was not treating the class seriously, and had not prepared enough beforehand.

Interestingly, in an interview conducted four months after their immersion during their first formal classroom teaching experience, the participants' perceptions about the teaching ideas/ methods they were exposed to in the UK changed. Another interesting finding was that the student teachers reported that they had started to use the teaching ideas taught or observed in the immersion program (which they had rejected immediately when they were first introduced) in their classrooms in the teaching practicum. This change in their attitudes towards the pedagogical ideas they were exposed to during the immersion program underscored the importance of encouraging deep reflection before, during and after the immersion experience.

Limitations

Since this paper aimed to explore the impact of the immersion program on the professional identity development of the participants, the focus was on their experiences during the six weeks of immersion in the UK; however, as professional identity development is an on-going and dynamic process, it should be expected that the impact of the immersion experience might be further revealed in the later stage of the PGDE program. For instance, as discussed in the previous section, some of the participants who considered what they observed in the immersion program inapplicable in the Hong Kong context started to apply these notions in their teaching practicum. In this phase of their program, they engaged in real-life teaching experience, providing further evidence that much of teacher knowledge “is learned in context” and “expressed in practice” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004).

Implications for further research

The findings point to the importance of adopting a longitudinal qualitative research design in the study of the professional identity development of the preservice teachers, as the formation of identity is in itself “an ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences”, and the student teachers also have an “active role” to play in its construction process (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004). As they continue to grow professionally, their perceptions and identities may change over time and space.

Due to the time constraints of the present study, the professional identity development of the participants in the one-year full-time PGDE program was limited to the time when they were in session. Ideally it would be better if the construction of their professional identity could be traced from the beginning of the teacher education program to the first two years of their work as full time teachers.

Since the focus of the present study is on the professional identity formation of the participants, data related to what they have experienced in their program and how they interpret and make sense of those experiences was collected, i.e., the focus is on the perspectives of the student teachers. Further studies which aim to measure the impact of teacher education programs on the professional development of preservice teachers, program coordinators, course instructors, teaching practicum supervisors, as well as parents or students could also be valuable sources of information.

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