



# Language Teachers and Their Perceptions of the Impact of “Short-Term” Study Abroad Experiences on Their Teaching Practice

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## Abstract

The benefits of study abroad for language teachers have received little attention in the research literature and yet such sojourns are potentially valuable professional learning opportunities. This article presents results of a study examining the reported impact of a short-term study abroad on teachers’ teaching practice, on their confidence in language teaching, and understanding of student language learning. Whereas teacher study abroad studies have tended to focus on groups of teachers traveling to common destinations for a uniform period to study the same language, this paper contributes by examining the potential of study abroad experiences for improving language teacher practice from the perspective of a diverse range of teachers, travelling to different countries, and teaching different languages. Teachers reported that the sojourns resulted in gains in aspects of teaching practice, and in teacher confidence. However, there was also a sense of missed opportunities, in particular as regards developing an increased understanding of student language learning.

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## 1 Introduction

This paper examines teachers’ views of the impact of study abroad (SA) experiences on their teaching practice, and on two further influences on practice: teacher confidence in language teaching and teachers’ understanding of how students learn an additional language. Opportunities for pre-service teachers and in-service teachers have been referred to variously in the research literature as study abroad programmes (Allen, 2010; Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2013; Gleeson

& Tait, 2012), intensive language in-service and training (Bridges, 2007), and international teaching experiences (Olmedo & Harbon, 2010). The lack of consistency as regards terminology related to study or residence abroad has been noted by Coleman (2015), who points out that this reflects variation in destinations, participant roles and types of study undertaken. In this paper, we use the term ‘study abroad experiences’ since Kinginger’s (2009) definition of Study Abroad as “a temporary sojourn of pre-defined duration, undertaken for educational purposes” (p. 11) encompasses the varied experiences of the teacher participants in our study.

While there are numerous SA studies focusing on students, few studies to date have reported on the impact of SA on the professional learning of language teachers (but see Allen, 2013; East, 2013; Gleeson & Tait, 2012). It is our intention to shed further light on language teacher learning resulting from SA experiences, a need which has been identified by Allen (2013). Our study of in-service teachers, as opposed to pre-service teachers or foreign language students, broadens the range of SA research participant groups. Furthermore, New Zealand (NZ) language teachers in this current study participated in SA in countries in Europe, South America, North America, the Pacific, and Asia, thus adding to the diversity of host countries represented in the literature, as recommended by Kinginger (2013). This focus on in-service teachers, the geographical spread of destinations and the variety of target languages (TLs) are all aspects of the study’s contribution to the SA research domain.

This paper draws on a larger evaluative research study (Harvey, Roskvist, Corder, & Stacey, 2011) which was commissioned by the Ministry of Education and investigated the effectiveness of international ‘language and culture immersion’ experiences, the term used by the Ministry. Our current paper reports on one aspect of the larger study using the lens of effective language teaching principles to explore and analyse the reported impact of the SA experiences on teachers’ teaching practice. The study analyses data on teachers’ perceptions collected through questionnaires and interviews. Based on our findings, we provide recommendations for changes that have the potential to result in greater professional learning for teachers and, thus, better language education for their students.

## 2 Background

Language teaching in a number of countries has undergone significant change in the last decade. The focus of language learning has moved beyond communication dependent largely on linguistic competence to an approach which explicitly incorporates cultural knowledge and the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Alongside the significant paradigm shift, NZ has widened participation in language learning in the compulsory schooling sector. In NZ, all schools with students at Years 7–10 are expected to offer the opportunity to learn a language additional to English (being the de facto national language) and Māori (NZ’s indigenous language and an official language) with the aim that students can participate effectively in multicultural settings both locally and internationally. To ensure the implementation of these curriculum and policy changes (NZ Ministry of Education, 2007a), there is a need for more teachers able to teach languages, as well as more teachers with higher proficiency in the TL. To this end, the NZ government has provided opportunities for language teachers to participate in SA in countries where the TL is spoken as the main language. Teachers have been funded through ‘Language Immersion Awards’ to go on long-term (ten months to one year) or short-term (generally one month) sojourns. The aim of the awards is to “provide authentic opportunities for teachers to develop their language proficiency skills and intercultural competence as well as a professional development experience which will lead to quality language teaching” (“Language Immersion Awards Programme 2015,” 2015, p. 4). This paper focuses on teachers who participated in short-term SA, since this was the largest cohort (n=48), and we were able to gather qualitative data from interviews with ten teachers before and after their SA experience.

The research questions for this particular study were:

1. What did teachers perceive as the impact on their language teaching practice as a result of participating in an SA experience?

2. What did teachers perceive as the impact on their confidence in language teaching as a result of participating in an SA experience?
3. What did teachers perceive as the impact on their understanding of how students learn an additional language as a result of participating in an SA experience?

### 3 Literature review

Two areas of research underpin the research questions and inform this paper. One area relates to principles of effective language teaching on the basis that effective teachers of languages should incorporate these research-informed principles in their classroom practice. The second area relates to study abroad, as this is the context for the professional learning opportunity examined here. We provide a brief overview of these two areas to situate our study.

#### 3.1 *Principles of effective teaching*

An important starting point in looking at the impact of SA experiences on language teaching is determining what constitutes effective teaching. Effective teaching, according to the NZ Ministry of Education (2007b) in a statement about teaching in general, maximises learner outcomes for all students in every situation. It requires knowledge of subject and knowledge of teaching practice, and occurs at the intersection between these two areas. It is generally agreed that there are two broad aspects to effective language teaching: subject/content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, that is, the knowledge (including methodological knowledge) needed to make a foreign language “learnable” (Pachler, Evans, & Lawes, 2007, p. 54). The focus of this paper is on pedagogical content knowledge, specifically teachers’ perceptions of changes to their language teaching practice and, alongside this, two aspects impacting on teaching practice: teachers’ confidence in language teaching and their understanding of student learning of an additional language. However, we are mindful that subject knowledge, including the TL proficiency of teachers, is an integral component of language teaching practice, and so we also discuss this in the context of this study.

It is the capability to apply subject knowledge and make it “accessible and learnable” for students (Pachler, Evans, Redondo, & Fisher, 2014, p. 79) that is at the heart of effective teaching. Richards (2010) has identified core components of expertise involved in effective language teaching. Teachers with pedagogical content knowledge are seen to have the ability, for example, to plan and design lessons, select and use authentic materials, and to evaluate their teaching (Richards, 2010). It is critical too that teachers are able to create opportunities for students to use the TL (Ellis, 2005). Ellis (2005, p. 40), in talking of “ten general principles for successful instructed language learning,” includes, in addition to extensive input, the provision of opportunities for output and the opportunity for students to interact in the TL, the latter being “central to developing L2 proficiency.” In addition, in today’s interconnected world, there is a need for teachers to have the ability to use technology in their teaching, that is, to have technological pedagogical content knowledge, which involves being able to both design materials and to teach effectively using technology (Reinders, 2009; Richards, 2010). The use of technology can facilitate the building of international links and thus opportunities for authentic communication with language users, as well as national networks where teachers can support each other.

Another of the core dimensions of language teacher expertise identified by Richards (2010) is the ability to theorise from practice. This involves the ability to reflect, leading to a deeper awareness and understanding of language learning and teaching (Richards, 2010). The value of reflection in professional learning for language teachers is supported by Harbon (2007, p. 231) who notes that experiences that facilitate reflection, that is, that allow teachers to “reflect on action”, allow for a deeper level of teacher professional development. Teachers’ reflection on their own experiences of learning another language, for example, is seen to be of considerable value (Ellis, 2012; Forman, 2014). This is because understanding how to teach an additional language is facilitated by an understanding of how students learn a language, both in regard to cognitive engagement and through a

developing awareness of the sociocultural aspects of language use. In studies where teachers themselves learned a new language in a short course, it was found that, in their dual role as student and teacher, they developed an enhanced awareness of affective factors and of the challenges learners face in learning another language (Angelova, 2005; Forman, 2014).

Subject knowledge is seen as “the basis of a teacher’s professional experience” (Pachler et al., 2007, p. 10). Subject knowledge for language teachers includes knowledge of the culture(s) of the countries where the language is spoken, an awareness of the structure of the language, as well as, most importantly, the ability to use the TL proficiently (Pachler et al., 2014). It is also now understood to include knowledge of ICC. Indeed, teachers are expected to have the knowledge, skills and attitudes underpinning ICC, that is, to be interculturally competent themselves (Bastos & Araujo e Sá, 2014). Not surprisingly, a high level of proficiency in the TL is considered to be a core element of a teacher’s subject knowledge (Pachler et al., 2007; Richards, 2010; Richards, Conway, Roskvist, & Harvey, 2013; Shin, 2008) because teacher use of the TL is usually the main source of “comprehensible input for students as well as a facilitator of meaningful interaction” (Kim & Elder, 2008, p. 167). How teachers use the TL is viewed as playing a critical role in classroom language learning (Kim & Elder, 2008), with the amount of TL exposure having an effect on how much and how quickly learners learn the TL (Ellis, 2005). Teachers need to be able to explain and instruct students in the TL, use it for classroom management and provide accurate feedback (Richards, 2010), and teachers with higher levels of TL proficiency are more equipped to do this (Richards et al., 2013). Furthermore, teacher confidence appears to be related to TL ability, with teachers who are more proficient being more confident in their use of the language in their teaching (Pachler et al., 2007). Although referring to teachers of English, Murdoch (1994) points out that for “non-native” language teachers (and most language teachers in NZ are not first language speakers of the TL), “language proficiency will always represent the bedrock of their professional confidence” (p. 254).

While it would be unrealistic to expect a short-term SA to have an impact upon all the factors discussed above, it might be expected that TL proficiency, cultural knowledge, and teacher confidence in TL use in particular, would be affected by such an experience. The following section discusses the interaction of SA with these factors.

### 3.2 *Study abroad*

The second strand of research that underpins this paper relates to study abroad. Much of the SA research to date focuses on intentionally designed programmes for students, and these can include a wide range of outcomes including, for example, the development of ICC (see Holmes, Bavieri, & Ganassin, 2015), or gaining a more global perspective (see Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josić & Jon, 2009). For language teachers, the programmes can incorporate whole group structured activities that may focus on TL development, increasing ICC, and cultural activities and are often faculty-led. East’s (2013) study exemplifies this. Alternatively, participants can undertake SA as individuals.

The few studies involving in-service teachers document a range of gains, mainly linguistic, although there is some variation. Increases in TL proficiency were noted in some studies (e.g. East, 2013; Harvey et al., 2011; Thompson, 2002); however in others, gains were less noticeable (Allen, 2010; Plews, Breckenridge, Cambre, & de Freitas Fernandes, 2014). Rather than an increase in TL proficiency in Allen’s study of 30 teachers of French participating in a three-week SA programme, teachers noted an increase in confidence in speaking the TL (Allen, 2010). Other reported benefits included improved cultural knowledge (Allen, 2010; Bridges, 2007; East, 2013; Harvey et al., 2011; Plews et al., 2014) and in ICC (Bridges, 2007; East, 2013).

Although studies demonstrating the effects on teaching practice are considerably fewer, various benefits have been reported. These include an enhanced awareness of pedagogy and new teaching strategies, the acquisition of new resources, an increased empathy for language learners and increased confidence in language teaching. Chinese speaking teachers of English from Hong Kong in Bridges’ (2007) study with twenty participants, for example, identified the pedagogic gains as updating of knowledge relating to methodology and developing awareness of new practices, with

the use of reflective journaling seen as contributing to increased awareness of “learning about teaching” (p. 49). Collecting authentic resources from the host country has been consistently documented by teachers as having an important positive effect on teaching practice (Allen, 2010; Bridges, 2007; Harvey et al., 2011; Plews et al., 2014). It was also noted that there has been a greater understanding of language learning through being in the role of the student (Bridges, 2007) and an empathy for the ‘struggles’ that language learners meet (Allen, 2010). Networking with fellow participants has been identified by teachers as another key benefit. Allen’s (2010) study reported a new network of fellow participants that the teachers established on their return, which provided support and facilitated the sharing of resources and helped avoid “professional isolation” (p. 101). Increased confidence is a recurring theme in studies involving in-service teachers (Allen, 2010; Bridges, 2007; East, 2013) and was identified as a key gain in Llurda’s (2008) large-scale study of just over one hundred Catalan teachers of English. He argued that confidence for “non-native” language teachers played an important role in their teaching and therefore recommended international experiences as “desirable” for teachers in terms of linguistic gains and the growth in self-confidence (p. 111).

A common refrain in a number of studies has been the need for effective preparation before the sojourn begins and supported follow-up on completion. A “coordinated structure of support” was one of the reasons identified by Driscoll, Rowe and Thomae (2014, p. 317) for the sustained positive impact of a teaching placement programme on participants’ teaching practice. This support was available at all stages of the programme for the 49 participants: before departure, during the sojourn and on teachers’ return to the classroom. However, they also identified their earlier university studies as being key in the development of their pedagogic skills in the teaching of languages. In terms of effective preparation, discussions with teachers with an explicit focus on how SA will impact on student learning should take place before the sojourn begins (Harbon, 2005). A far stronger focus on students was also advocated by Timperley (2011) in talking of teacher professional learning in general, with students being seen “at the centre of the process” rather than “a by-product” (p. 5). The “laissez-faire” nature of the SA programme for two teachers of Spanish in Canada and a lack of “targeted SL pedagogical outcomes” was seen as a concern by Plews et al. (2014, p. 68), who believed that, as a result, the teachers were not able to maximise their pedagogical learning. Effective follow-up has also been identified as necessary for teachers to transfer learning to the classroom. Indeed, as Bridges (2007) notes, it is “critical for enduring learning” (p. 42). Ingvarson, Meiers and Beavis (2005) take this further and recommend some kind of post-SA mentoring since it is the “lack of built in provision for ‘at the elbow’ support for teachers in their classrooms” (p. 9), as they implement new learning that has been a common source of criticism in professional development programmes.

In summary then, the relatively limited research literature shows (although with a degree of variability) the potential value of SA experiences for language teachers with gains documented across a range of aspects of effective teaching, including TL proficiency, cultural knowledge, an understanding of language learning and teacher confidence. However, this is tempered by the requirement for effective pre- and post- sojourn support. Many of the studies cited are based on small samples and teachers of the same TLs undertaking the same SA programme. For example, East’s (2013) study involved 20 NZ teachers of French, while Allen’s (2013) study involved 19 North American teachers of French, and Gleeson and Tait’s (2012) study nine teachers of English as a foreign language from Hong Kong. Our research draws on the experiences of 48 NZ language teacher participants (both specialist and generalist teachers) undertaking their SA experiences in different countries with different TLs. It contributes to the SA research field in terms of its greater numbers of participants, variability of country of destinations, as well as the fact that it explores in-service language teachers’ perceptions of the impact of the SA on their language teaching practice (both on their subject and pedagogical knowledge), and alongside this, two factors influencing language teaching practice, namely: teachers’ confidence in language teaching and their understanding of student learning of an additional language.

The research discussed above, both in terms of principles of effective teaching and of study abroad, helped to guide the design and choice of data as well as the analysis of this current study. Questionnaire and interview questions drew on the two areas of research.

## 4 Research methodology

In this section, we provide a background to the participants and context, describe the study design, data collection tools and the data analysis process.

### 4.1 *Participants and context*

In the larger study, 114 teachers who had participated in SA experiences over a four-year period were invited to participate in the research. 55 agreed to do so. 48 of these teachers had experienced short-term SA (mainly one month sojourns) and became part of this smaller study reported here. Ten teachers, eight of whom also later answered the questionnaires, participated in interviews. The ten teachers were purposively chosen to construct a sample that was indicative of the language teaching contexts and language teacher profiles we would expect to see across the country in terms of languages taught in schools, TL levels of proficiency, host countries, localities across NZ and school decile ratings (an indicator of the socio-economic level of the community from which a school draws its students). The majority of the ten teachers ( $n=7$ ) were teachers of European languages; half ( $n=5$ ) were teachers of Years 7–8, that is, generalist teachers and most ( $n=9$ ) had fewer than five years' experience teaching the TL.

The majority of the 48 questionnaire respondents were females and teachers of European languages, with French being the main TL ( $n=18$ ), followed by German ( $n=11$ ) and Japanese ( $n=10$ ). There were also teachers of Spanish, Chinese and Samoan. Around two thirds ( $n=32$ ) were teachers of Years 9–13 (secondary school students aged 13–17), while 15 taught students at Years 7–8 (students aged 10–12 years) and one taught Years 1–6. It is important to note that teachers of languages at secondary schools in NZ are usually specialists in the language they are teaching, are likely to have studied the language at university and usually have language teaching qualifications. In fact, 25 of the 32 teachers teaching at secondary schools had at least an undergraduate degree majoring in the TL and a further five had completed language courses (e.g. a diploma) at university level. 14 of 32 specialist teachers indicated they had language teaching qualifications at postgraduate level. In contrast, teachers of Years 7–8 teach most subjects across the curriculum, with the TL being just one of these, and are likely to have lower levels of TL proficiency and have no university qualification majoring in the language ( $n=12$ ). Although the proportion of teachers with low levels of TL proficiency may seem unusual, this is a feature of the NZ context. The offering of languages to all students at Years 7–8 was a government expectation from 2007 onwards (although not a requirement for schools until 2010), and upskilling generalist teachers was one way of increasing the number of language teachers in order to comply with the new requirements. The majority ( $n=30$ ) of the respondents were experienced teachers with ten or more years of general teaching experience. In terms of experience teaching the TL, a smaller proportion of 33% ( $n=16$ ) had more than ten years' experience, with 27% ( $n=13$ ) having three or fewer years' experience.

A feature of the SA experiences we report on here is that the in-service teachers in our study had what Coleman terms “related but disparate experiences” (2013, p. 27). As mentioned above, the most popular SA language was French and teachers undertook their SA in France ( $n=10$ ), Tahiti ( $n=4$ ), Belgium ( $n=2$ ) and Canada ( $n=2$ ). Teachers also went to Germany ( $n=11$ ) and Japan ( $n=10$ ), Teachers of Spanish went to either Spain ( $n=4$ ) or Argentina ( $n=3$ ). Other SA countries were China and Samoa. Close to half of the questionnaire participants ( $n=26$ ) attended language classes during their SA, a little over one-third ( $n=18$ ) went to pedagogy classes and most respondents ( $n=32$ ) had contact with a host school, ranging from brief visits and class observations to ongoing visits and teaching in the host school. All engaged in cultural activities and had opportunities to be immersed in and to use the TL.

#### **4.2 Methodology approach and design of the study**

This research focuses on the reported impact of participation in a short-term SA for teachers on their language teaching pedagogy. In order to gain as full a picture as possible of the impact on teaching practice, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. The collection of both qualitative and quantitative data permitted a broad view of teachers’ perceptions of the impact of the SA experience through a questionnaire administered after the SA experience (n=48), and a closer and more detailed exploration of language teachers’ views through in-depth interviews (n=10).

Ten teachers were interviewed, allowing participants “to discuss their interpretations of the world ... and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 265). The interviews enabled researchers to gather teachers’ perspectives and attitudes regarding their experiences and learning. The participation of the ten teachers also allowed for the provision of before- and after-data, as they were interviewed before departure and on their return. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University Ethics Committee.

#### **4.3 Data collection instruments and procedures**

Interviews with the ten short-term SA teachers were conducted over an eight-month period. Interviews were with individual teachers, semi-structured and 40–50 minutes in length; they aimed to explore in depth the key research questions. Interview questions included asking the teachers about their perceptions of their current TL proficiency and cultural knowledge before the SA experience and after it, while the second interview also investigated perceived changes in the understanding of teaching a foreign language, and of changes to their classroom practice. Interview data were recorded in note form by the researchers with many teacher comments recorded verbatim and transferred by the researchers into electronic files.

The questionnaire for the larger study, distributed after the SA experience, was designed by the researchers and informed by five broad key research questions derived as a result of consultations with the NZ Ministry of Education. The focus of questions for the larger study included goals teachers had set, the impact of the SA experiences on the development of teachers’ language proficiency and cultural knowledge, their intercultural awareness and competence, second language teaching practice, and how the experiences brought about improved language learning opportunities and outcomes for students. Also guiding the questionnaire were key research literature on language acquisition, principles of effective language teaching and professional development for teachers (e.g. Crozet, 2007; Ellis, 2005; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). In the questionnaire, a number of questions used a 4-point Likert rating scale and some were followed by text boxes requesting comments and examples. The questionnaire also used open-ended questions such as “What are you doing now in your language teaching that you did not do before the language and culture immersion experience?” to elicit a variety of more in-depth qualitative responses. Nine of the original 108 questions used for the larger study are the focus of this smaller study. See Appendix 1 for the list of key questions.

This study has some limitations. As noted above, interviews were not recorded and instead researchers made detailed notes, including recording some verbatim quotes from teachers. Questionnaire and interview data were based on teacher reports and as such could be critiqued for providing a subjective view. However, as stated in previous sections, teachers’ perspectives are an important part of the equation for building better and more language teacher capacity. The findings are not intended to be generalizable. Rather, the insights inform the SA research field “in ways that quantitative research (alone) cannot” (Allen, 2010, p. 103).

#### **4.4 Data analysis**

Researchers read and re-read the interview transcripts and qualitative questionnaire data, ‘immersing’ themselves in the data. Coding of qualitative data was undertaken manually by the researchers. Recurring themes were identified and coded for the larger study. For the current study, qualitative data was reanalysed specifically keeping in mind the three research questions presented earlier. Further sub-themes arising from the data were identified and refined. Researchers were conscious of the need for analysis to be gradual and, at the start, tentative, so as to avoid premature conclusions (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). Non-identifying quotations from the qualitative data are used to provide a more nuanced view of findings. Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS for Windows, 2007) with correlational analysis where appropriate.

### **5 Findings and discussion**

In this section, we describe and discuss the key findings related to perceived changes in teaching practice, in teacher confidence in teaching, and in their understanding of how students learn an additional language.

#### **5.1 Research question 1: What did teachers perceive as the impact on their language teaching practice as a result of participating in a SA experience?**

We begin by briefly describing the perceived impact of SA on teachers’ subject knowledge as reported by the teachers themselves, specifically their TL proficiency and cultural knowledge, since, as discussed in section 3.1, subject knowledge is a key aspect of effective language teaching practice. We then discuss teachers’ views on the impact of the SA on and changes to their language teaching practice. Data were from the 48 questionnaire respondents and interviews with ten teachers.

##### **5.1.1 Teacher language proficiency**

In the questionnaire, teachers were asked about their pre- and post-programme levels of TL proficiency across the four macro-skills. Almost all of the 48 teachers (n=47) reported gains in their TL proficiency, and this was particularly so in speaking. This finding is in line with earlier studies (e.g. Thompson, 2002). Teachers reported increased confidence in using the TL, improvements in fluency, improved pronunciation, and an increase in and ‘broadening’ of vocabulary to include, for example, more colloquial TL. In the post-SA interview, the ten teachers noted linguistic gains with increased confidence, first and foremost, but also enhanced fluency, and the acquisition of additional instructional as well as contemporary TL. One teacher noted in the post SA interview, “my [TL] is fresh and up to date,” while another said, “my increased fluency has been noticed by a native speaker colleague. Before the experience, I couldn’t have carried on an extended conversation.”

##### **5.1.2 Teacher knowledge of culture**

Questionnaire respondents were positive regarding changes to their cultural knowledge (n=46), with all but one of the 46 responses reporting an increase, and 66% (n=33) of teachers noting considerable changes. This finding, like that of increased language proficiency, reflects earlier studies discussed in the review of the literature (e.g. East, 2013). The questionnaire respondents were asked to provide examples of ways in which they believed their cultural knowledge had increased. Many of the examples they gave can be categorised according to what Kramsch (1991) called the four Fs: that is, knowledge related to “food, folklore, festivals and facts” (p. 412). However, some teachers also noted greater awareness of social and political issues, in keeping with Kramsch’s more recent theorising of culture as “associated with ideologies, attitudes and beliefs” (2011, p. 355). One teacher



noted in her questionnaire response, “I have a greater knowledge of the social problems being experienced, e.g. unemployment, racial issues (especially with the younger disaffected youth),” while another acknowledged learning about “the new working trends in Japan.” The ten interviewed teachers noted considerable changes in their understanding of culture, several speaking of attaining a “deeper [cultural] knowledge.” As one teacher said, “my [cultural] knowledge before was superficial – now I understand ...” and she attributed this to “living the culture because you are speaking the language.”

### 5.1.3 *Teacher pedagogy*

Having reported gains in aspects of teacher language proficiency and cultural knowledge as key subject knowledge components of effective language teaching, we now explore, in more detail, teachers’ perceptions of the impact of the SA on and changes to their language teaching practice. Being able to teach the TL requires more than knowledge of the language, as discussed in section 3.1. As Pachler et al. (2014) point out, “subject/content knowledge is essential but not in and of itself enough to being an effective teacher .... You need to apply and use your own subject/content knowledge” (p. 70). The questionnaire asked teachers how their language teaching practice had altered following their SA. Close to 60% (n=29) of questionnaire responses identified an increased use of the TL in class as one of the key changes in their teaching practice. These respondents perceived their pedagogy as changing with their new or renewed understanding of the importance of TL input for their students and reported making more use of the TL for classroom management and instructions. The ability to speak the TL with greater fluency, accuracy and confidence was noted by a number of questionnaire respondents as impacting on their classroom practice. Of the 43 qualitative responses to the question “What are you doing now in your language teaching that you did not do before the immersion experience?”, the majority of responses (n=27) from both specialist and generalist teachers indicated greater use of the TL in the classroom. As one questionnaire respondent (a generalist teacher) noted, “[I now do] much more speaking in class because I have more confidence ... exposing students to target language much more.” Four generalist teachers also indicated they were less reliant on the set textbook and instead were using their own resources. Although not a strong theme in the questionnaire responses, some teachers also noted the positive effects of their increased TL use on their students’ language output: “My expectations and greater use of the language encourages students to take risks.”

Respondents were asked in open-ended questions in the questionnaire to identify aspects of the SA that had an impact on practice related to improving student learning. Key themes in responses included an increase in confidence in speaking the TL, increased TL use in the classroom, the value of resources from the host country, including technology-enhanced resources, the usefulness of language courses, and of homestay especially in providing a TL environment. Themes that arose from the interviews were similar: an increase in TL usage, including “trying to simulate [the TL] environment,” and in confidence in using the TL, the value of new and authentic resources, and, in particular, first-hand experiences that could be shared in the classroom. The most positive responses in the ten interviews came from the five generalist teachers. One reported “I am able to talk knowledgeably.” While one secondary teacher (language specialist) also spoke enthusiastically of how much she had learned and her increased realisation of the need to use the TL far more in the classroom, four other specialist teachers said in interviews that there had been little change in their understanding of teaching a foreign language. While acknowledging considerable gain in cultural information and experiences, one said she “wasn’t exposed to anything different or innovative” from a pedagogical viewpoint and two indicated they were already aware of language teaching pedagogy.

For most of the questionnaire respondents and the ten teachers who participated in interviews, as already mentioned, being able to bring back new teaching resources, perceived to be more authentic and up to date, was one of the greatest identified benefits of the SA. This was reported as increasing confidence in teaching and as having an impact on practice with students, who were seen by teachers to be more engaged. Respondents explained that new resources were used in a variety

of ways, for example, in teaching grammar and to stimulate debate. One teacher used her new resources, in this case, DVDs, to integrate aspects of TL culture into her lessons. Also notable was the reported increased use of technology in teaching. In responses to the questionnaire and in interviews, teachers referred to using their own resources acquired during their SA (e.g. photos) and greater use of technology (e.g. email, websites, YouTube), which some teachers used for ongoing connection with their host school, providing opportunities for authentic student-to-student communication. Teachers' perceptions of changes in how to teach the culture(s) of the host country, as seen in responses to the questionnaire, showed that the majority of teachers noted some change. Just under half ( $n=22$ ) of the 48 questionnaire respondents reported a 'noticeable' or 'considerable increase' in their understanding of teaching culture. This was manifested in teachers describing learning and teaching activities they used after the SA to develop students' cultural knowledge (which they did not use before). Incorporating information and anecdotes of their experiences, and using cultural resources they brought back from the host country were identified by the majority of respondents. Again, an increased use of technology was identified as aiding the teaching of aspects of culture by 46% ( $n=22$ ) of questionnaire respondents. For many, as in Allen's (2010) study, the resources gave the teachers a sense of 'credibility' as they were able to talk knowledgeably about aspects of the culture. As one teacher commented, "I am more effective and appear more authentic to students." However, there was still a proportion of teachers, close to 50% ( $n=24$ ), who perceived there had been 'no' or only 'a little increase' in their understanding of the teaching of culture, a proportion that appears to be at odds with the almost 70% of teachers ( $n=33$ ) who had indicated a noticeable change in their knowledge of culture. This mismatch may be a result of a lack of support in this area after their SA experience.

Finally, in investigating changes to language teaching practice, we draw attention to the fact that 65% ( $n=29$ ) of 44 teachers who responded to the question asking if they had had a debrief/follow-up on their return to the classroom and indicated they had not. When asked what they would have liked, close to half ( $n=20$ ) said either "links to language teacher clusters" or "invitations to join learning/teaching communities." Despite the research literature being clear as to the value of post-SA support to integrate changes in teaching practice, little was available to these teachers. Having discussed the perceived impact on teachers' language teaching practice as a result of participating in the SA programme, we now discuss the impact on teachers' confidence and on their understanding of how students learn an additional language, both of these factors having an influence on effective teaching.

## ***5.2. Research question 2: What did teachers perceive as the impact on their confidence in language teaching as a result of participating in a SA experience?***

Teacher confidence in language teaching, as noted in the preceding review of the literature (Section 3.1), has the potential to have a profound effect on teaching practice. When teachers were asked in the questionnaire the extent to which their level of confidence had changed, all teachers, with one exception, noted an increase in confidence, a finding supported by other studies (e.g. East, 2013; Llorca, 2008). Almost 70% ( $n=33$ ) of teachers reported their confidence had increased by a noticeable amount. It seemed that, for a good number of teachers, this confidence in language teaching was linked to perceived increases in TL proficiency. Correlation of aggregated language proficiency scores (across the four skills) and the perceived increases in confidence in language teaching showed a moderate positive correlation ( $r=0.468$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), indicating that those respondents who reported an improvement in (aggregated) language proficiency were also likely to have reported an increase in confidence in their language teaching. Almost all ( $n=15$ ) of the generalist teachers who responded indicated the extent to which their level of confidence had increased as noticeable or considerable; this was a higher proportion than the specialist teachers (19 of 30 who responded) who said so. Perhaps this is not surprising in light of the fact that the specialist teachers had higher levels of TL proficiency and teaching qualifications in language teaching.

One questionnaire respondent noted in response to the question “What are you doing now in your language teaching that you did not do before the programme?” that they were “using meaningful chunks of language (I lacked confidence pronouncing them before).” Another acknowledged “speaking more because I have more confidence.” Pachler et al. (2007) argue (albeit as regards foreign language teaching in the UK) that teachers who have a “secure grasp of the TL are likely to be more confident in the classroom when using the TL for purposes of instruction and interaction” (p. 30). Three teachers in our study also described in their questionnaire responses that they felt more relaxed about moving away from relying on the teaching texts: “[I am now] teaching with confidence, not using the manual all the time ... all round a better experience for me and my class – it’s fun!” Eight of the ten teachers interviewed spoke in the interviews about their increase in confidence and, in one case, about a renewal in their level of confidence as an outcome of the SA. These teachers also saw the increased confidence manifested in their TL use; they spoke of being more confident with pronunciation and being able to be more spontaneous. The value of enhanced language teacher confidence as an outcome of professional learning should not be underestimated, especially where teachers are not highly proficient in the language (Allen, 2010). Certainly, for the teachers in our study, particularly for the generalist teachers, increased confidence was identified as an important factor contributing to positive changes in their teaching practice.

### **5.3 Research question 3: *What did teachers perceive as the impact on their understanding of how students learn an additional language as a result of participating in a SA experience?***

An understanding of how students learn an additional language can have a positive effect on teaching practice, as was discussed in the literature review (Section 3.2). The questionnaire asked teachers the extent to which their understanding of how students learn an additional language had increased as a result of the SA. Close to 40% (n=18) of teachers believed their understanding had increased noticeably or considerably. Ten of these were generalist teachers. The quantitative data showed there was a moderately high positive relationship between the questionnaire respondents’ increase in understanding of how students learn a second language and their perceived increase in confidence in language teaching ( $r=0.620$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). It seemed that as teachers gained a greater understanding of TL acquisition, this resulted in a positive impact on their own confidence in teaching the TL. Certainly, the majority of the generalist teachers, as indicated previously, believed their confidence in language teaching had increased noticeably or considerably. Qualitative data provided further evidence of teachers’ beliefs that their insights into language learning had increased and suggest that teachers’ reflections on their own language learning experiences in TL classes and in methodology classes, and their observations of classes in host schools had an impact. These insights included an increased awareness of what it is to be a language learner. One teacher commented on being “more aware of some of the pitfalls and challenges of second language learning after being in English (as second language) classrooms in the host country.” One of the generalist teachers who was interviewed and who attended TL classes believes she had a better understanding of the student language learning experience and its realities: “[There is] nothing like being a student sitting still for so long.” Like the teachers in Allen’s (2010) study, further comments suggest that being immersed in the TL helped some teachers to be more empathetic towards the challenges faced by their students.

However, of the 47 respondents to this item in the questionnaire, a little more than half (n=27), noted only a small increase in understanding of how students learn an additional language. Six of these teachers were generalist teachers, while 21 (two-thirds of the specialist teachers who responded) were specialist teachers. The high proportion of teachers who indicated their understanding of how students learn a second language had increased only ‘a little’ may have been due to a range of factors associated with the SA, including their level of understanding of second language acquisition before the SA. It is likely that many of the specialists would have studied second language acquisition as part of their prior university studies. As one specialist teacher commented in the questionnaire, she had “strong prior knowledge” of pedagogy. Moreover, whether participants were able to participate in a language class or language teaching methodology class could have influenced

whether and the degree to which their understanding changed. Awareness of the role of active reflection in comparing and contrasting teachers' own language learning experiences and the experiences of their students could have been another important factor. It seems that some teachers were unable to make the connection between their own experiences as language learners with that of students in their classrooms, or at least they did not consciously articulate this. It is a little surprising that some teachers appeared unaware of how their total language learning experiences, in class but also out of class while on the SA (both positive and negative), could be used as an impetus for reflection and increased understanding of their students' language learning experiences in the classroom. Teachers' insights as a result of their own language learning experience and their awareness of themselves as having dual roles – both language learner and language teacher – could be used to enhance their own language teaching and thus the language learning experiences and outcomes for their students.

## 6 Implications and conclusion

This study was designed to investigate teachers' perceptions of the impact of the SA experience on their teaching practice and, at the same time, the changes they perceived in their confidence in teaching and in their understanding of how students learn an additional language. The latter two factors impact directly on language teaching practice. Although our results are to some extent mixed, they do indicate that the teachers undoubtedly believed they had benefited from their SA experience. Most of all, they perceived positive increases in their TL proficiency and, with this, enhanced confidence in using the TL in class. These two factors were highlighted by the teachers both in responses to the questionnaire and in interviews as two key benefits of the SA experience, and it was these that the teachers reported as resulting in changes to their teaching practice. As teachers sought to use the TL more, they saw themselves as providing enhanced TL input for their students.

For many teachers, the quantity and variety of teaching resources that they were able to bring to their classrooms from the host country (including their own stories as well as increased use of technology-enhanced resources) was seen to impact very positively on their teaching practice. Teachers reported utilising these resources in a range of ways, including to provide authentic TL exposure, stimulate TL discussions, teach grammar points, and enhance cultural knowledge. The ten teachers who were interviewed were highly positive about resources they acquired – resources they saw as making them as teachers more authentic to students and generating considerable student interest and engagement. Despite the majority of teachers in the questionnaire indicating a noticeable increase in their understanding of the culture of the host country, this did not necessarily extend to their teaching, with more than half of the teachers indicating that their understanding of the teaching of culture had increased only minimally. An enhanced understanding of how students learn an additional language was reported by a good number of teachers in the questionnaire and included a greater awareness of the challenges and increased empathy for students. However, there was still a concerning proportion of teachers who reported minimal increased understanding.

The findings highlight an aspect of SA experiences for language teachers that hitherto has received little attention, that is, the potential for such programmes to impact positively on teaching practice, including on teacher confidence in their language teaching and on their understanding of student language learning, and thus on student learning outcomes and experiences. However, we believe opportunities for learning were not harnessed as well as they might have been. The SA experiences of the teachers in this study were characterised by a lack of guidance on reflection and an absence of mentoring and follow-up. Teachers, in their responses, indicated their wish for a post-programme follow-up where they can meet in groups (sometimes referred to as communities of practice/learning; Wenger, 2000). We take this a step further. We recommend a comprehensive post SA support programme where pedagogical learning from SA could be maximised and transfer of learning to the classroom could be supported. These are two key areas where transformation is needed, if opportunities for sustained professional learning are to be achieved. To maximise positive changes in teaching practice, teachers need opportunities to process and reflect on what they have learned and to consider the implications for their classroom practice. A number of researchers agree

that this processing and reflection are best undertaken in a supported community of practice, that is, with colleagues (Timperley et al., 2007; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

Since this study took place, the NZ Ministry of Education has addressed some of these issues by instigating several noteworthy changes to the Language Immersion Awards scheme to gain better outcomes from SA. These initiatives include the appointment of a ‘Language Acquisition Adviser’ to assist teachers before the SA with the setting of goals, both personal and professional. Post-return, teachers are expected to work with the Adviser to write a report on the impact of the SA on their teaching and students’ learning (AFS New Zealand, n.d.). However, it appears there is still no formal follow-up programme for any of the SA teachers where participants come together as a physical or virtual community to support the implementation of learning from the SA.

The results also highlight the need for further research. Future studies using internationally recognised TL assessment instruments would provide an objective measure of gains that could usefully complement this study. Studies leading to a better understanding of the language learning process for teachers on SA, including the mediating factors that might contribute to how that understanding comes about, would be a useful addition to the research literature. The construction of language teacher professional identity in relation to SA (Wernicke-Heinrichs, 2013) is also worthy of further investigation. Finally, exploration of the longer-term effects of SA on in-service teacher professional learning (Ehrenreich, 2006) and subsequently on student learning opportunities and outcomes would be of value to the teacher SA research literature.

### Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the support of the New Zealand Ministry of Education in funding the original study (Harvey et al., 2011). The Ministry provided guidance in the writing of the key research questions but had no role in the study design, collection, analysis or interpretation of data or in the writing of the final report or this article. We would also like to thank the teachers involved in the study who gave their time to the interviews. We are also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

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## Appendix 1

### Specific questions focused on pedagogy from the larger questionnaire.

- How much has your confidence in language teaching increased since your immersion experience?  
No increase [ ]    A little increase [ ]    Noticeable increase [ ]    Considerable increase [ ]
  - How much has your understanding of how students learn a second language increased since your immersion experience?  
No increase [ ]    A little increase [ ]    Noticeable increase [ ]    Considerable increase [ ]
  - What things are you doing now in your language teaching that you did not do before the immersion experience?
- 
- How much has your understanding of the teaching of the culture of the immersion language increased since your immersion experience?  
No increase [ ]    A little increase [ ]    Noticeable increase [ ]    Considerable increase [ ]

5. What learning and teaching activities do you use now to develop your students' cultural knowledge that you did not use before your immersion experience? Please give examples.
- 
6. Did you attend classes on how to teach languages (language pedagogy)?  
 Yes  No
7. How useful were the language teaching pedagogy classes – if applicable?  
 N.A  Not useful  A little useful  Some use  Very useful   
 Please comment on the usefulness of language teaching classes in the immersion country (if applicable).
- 
8. What kind of debrief did you have on your return?  
 No debrief  Face to face interview  Phone call   
 Invitation to meet with other participants   
 Other \_\_\_\_\_
- 
9. What kind of follow-up support would maximise the benefits of the immersion experience for your teaching, and for the learning outcomes for your students?  
 No follow-up  
 Links to language teacher clusters  
 Invitation to join a learning/teaching community  
 Invitation to take part in further professional development  
 Invitation to form part of immersion award alumni group with associated activities  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_
-