

Language Proficiency Development of Non-native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) in an MA TESOL Program: A Case Study

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Abstract

This article presents a case study that examined the perceptions of non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) in relation to their experiences in a one-year study abroad TESOL program in Canada and its potential for enhancing their language proficiency. Sixty nine novice teachers, originally from China, placed in four different cohorts, participated in the study. Data was collected through self-reported proficiency appraisals using the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001) scales, completed at the beginning and end of the program, and a reflective assignment completed at the end of the program that centred on if and how the pre-service teachers' study abroad experience helped them improve their English proficiency. Overall, participants felt that their level of English improved by about half a level on the CEFR scales, largely attributing this increase to the benefits of English-medium courses and learning about language teaching/learning. While many participants embraced the benefits of living abroad for their language development, some acknowledged the struggle to take full advantage of the study abroad experience, noting difficulty in building relationships and social networks outside of their first language group.

Keywords: MA TESOL Program, Non-native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs), Study Abroad, Teacher Language Proficiency

Introduction

With the expanding role for English as the language of global communication comes the demand for more qualified English language teachers. About 80% of English teachers around the world, however, speak English as their second or third language (Moussu, 2018) and their level of language proficiency and their ability to teach English *in English* are generally major concerns for them and their employers who often associate higher levels of language proficiency with more effective teaching skills. These concerns remain paramount in the field of English language teaching (ELT); the benefits of teaching English in English, a skill that is viewed to be influenced by teacher's language proficiency (Richards, 2017), are numerous as teachers can provide valuable language input to their students and also serve as language exemplars for them to emulate. Many non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) opt to study TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) in English-speaking countries to gain teaching credentials and to improve their level of language proficiency. Several TESOL programs advertise that while teachers earn a master's degree and learn language pedagogy, the program will help them enhance their level of language proficiency. Programs often do not provide a language proficiency course, but rather claim that by completing courses in English and with the experience of living in an English-speaking environment, NNESTs will have the opportunity to enhance their level of language proficiency. The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which a one-year study abroad TESOL program in Canada helped NNESTs improve their level of language proficiency in English. The questions guiding the study were:

- 1) To what extent did a one-year study-abroad TESOL program help NNESTs improve their self-perceived language proficiency?
- 2) What aspects of the TESOL program and study abroad experience helped teachers improve their language proficiency?

Teacher Language Proficiency

Even though teacher expertise is difficult to define as there are no commonly acceptable criteria for defining qualified or expert teachers (Tsui, 2009), there is consensus that a high level of English proficiency is significant for teachers (e.g., Butler, 2004; Faez and Karas, 2017). A high level of English proficiency has numerous benefits as it allows teachers to provide valuable and appropriate language input to their students (Richards, Conway, Roskvist, Harvey, 2013) and also helps teachers serve as language exemplars for students to emulate. Teachers' language proficiency can positively or negatively influence their confidence in their teaching ability (Chacon, 2005; Eslami & Fatahi, 2008). On the other hand, teachers' unsatisfactory linguistic ability can limit teachers' ability to teach English in English, detect student errors, and might even result in teachers' consistent incorrect language use (Farrell & Richards, 2007; Richards, 2017).

However, the significance attributed to teacher language proficiency has resulted in valuing native speakers over NNESTs, also referred to as native-speakerism (Holliday, 2006), an ideology which privileges native speakers based on their country of birth and sometimes colour of skin, rather than their teaching qualifications. The native-speakerism ideology and the native/non-native dichotomy have been criticized on many levels including their inadequacy

for capturing multiple and fluid linguistic identities (e.g., Faez 2011a; 2011b), promotion of a deficit view of NNESTs (e.g., Pennycook, 2002) and negative impact on employment opportunities for NNESTs (e.g. Kamhi-Stein, 2018; Mahboob, 2010). Nonetheless, the NNEST term continues to be used in the literature as no other commonly acceptable term exists.

Equally important to note is that in spite of the importance of language proficiency for teachers, discerning its appropriate type or level is a complicated matter. Due to the complications in defining language proficiency itself (Harsch, 2017) and considering the various contexts, cultures, tasks and contents in teaching and learning, teacher language proficiency is best described as mainly elusive (Elder & Kim, 2015). Tsang (2017) reports that teachers' general language proficiency plays a significant role in the classroom but only to a certain level, once a certain threshold is met, other factors such as teachers' pedagogical skills and personality play a more important role. While the notion of general proficiency for teachers is prevalent, and employers and researchers have predominantly looked at general proficiency for teachers and its relationship to teacher efficacy (e.g. Chacon, 2005; Eslami & Fatahi, 2008), there is acknowledgment that teachers need to possess subject-specific terminology and the language required to complete classroom tasks (Elder & Kim, 2015; Freeman 2017). Freeman (2017) challenges the generally accepted view that general proficiency is central to teacher competence, instead, he argues that conventional conceptualizations of teacher language proficiency that emphasize general English proficiency for teachers do not capture teachers' professional language needs. His work emphasizes the notion of *English-for-teaching* (Freeman, Katz, Garcia, Gomez, & Burns, 2015) as a form of language for specific purposes for teachers, especially those in EFL contexts teaching intermediate students and below (Freeman, 2017). The notion of English-for-teaching is particularly useful for NNESTs, for whom, improving general proficiency places strenuous demands in their path of further developing their language proficiency.

Study Abroad Language Teacher Education

Various opportunities now exist for teachers to study in English-speaking countries as a way to improve their language proficiency and have a cultural immersion experience. Different terms have been adopted in the literature, including study abroad, residence abroad, immersion programs (Roskvist, Harvey, Corder, & Stacey, 2015), and even transnational programs (Macalister, 2017), all of which can broadly refer to teachers travelling overseas to earn a degree and/or live in a new language and cultural environment as part of their language teacher preparation/development. There can be differences in terminology, while at times the terms are used interchangeably, but this study adopts the term 'study abroad' to refer to programs for which teachers go overseas to study at a postsecondary institution for a stand-alone language teacher education program. In this study, participants are completing an MA TESOL program in Canada; the program is not jointly run with another postsecondary institution (e.g. like the transnational program described in Macalister, 2017) and students enroll on their own, rather than through any type of government program (e.g. like the program described in Plews, Breckenridge, Cambre, 2010).

While nuances exist across programs, study abroad programs can positively impact teachers' professional development. Short-term study abroad programs, defined as programs that last 4 – 6 weeks and take place in postsecondary institutions, have shown positive linguistic benefits for teachers across different contexts, including Japanese English teachers visiting Canada

(Douglas, Sano, & Rosvold, 2018), Hong Kong English teachers visiting New Zealand (Lee, 2009), American Spanish teachers visiting Mexico (Walker de Felix & Pena, 1992) and a host of other contexts. Longer programs have also garnered attention and have been shown to enhance teachers' intercultural development (Marx & Moss, 2011; Plews, Beckenbridge & Cambre, 2010). Macalister (2012; 2016; 2017) focuses on a transnational program from a Malaysian university where participants complete two years of their teaching degree in New Zealand before returning to Malaysia. Results showed that the teachers' sojourn in New Zealand impacted their views on the role of vocabulary learning and even partially affected their pedagogical choices when they returned to Malaysia, although their prior experiences and the local teaching context are also noted (Macalister, 2012; 2016). Macalister (2017) focuses on two different Malaysian teachers taking part in the same program and found that the pre-service teachers were not satisfied with their language development after two years in New Zealand, although this was not general for the entire 60 student cohort. The large cohort, all from the same language background, is cited as one reason for lack of language development as one participant noted it allowed him to stay in his "comfort zone" (p. 58). Similarly, in a study focusing on two foreign language teachers, while both noted perceived linguistic gains, only one participant noted successful contact with the local community, and the other participant struggled to immerse himself, which served to partially hinder his language development (Roskvist et al., 2015). Much research in this area draws data from interviews and/or self-reports with a large focus on teachers' perceptions of their experience and development. While these data sources limit interpretations, the literature shows that teachers often perceive many benefits from their study abroad experience in terms of their linguistic and intercultural development.

Looking more closely at English language teacher education programs specifically, researchers have discussed language teacher proficiency and the potential for language teacher education programs to enhance teachers' linguistic abilities. In general, teacher preparation programs in EFL contexts place a great emphasis on improving language proficiency for English teachers, but this emphasis on language development is often not found in ESL teacher preparation contexts (Kamhi-Stein, 2009). Many teachers who enroll in teacher education programs in English-speaking countries hope to improve their language proficiency, but this is often accomplished by living in the English-speaking environment, not necessarily through language development classes (Liyanage & Bartlett, 2008). Numerous researchers have argued for teacher education programs to explicitly address issues of proficiency for NNESTs (e.g. Carrier, 2003; Kamhi-Stein, 2009; Liu, 1999; Murdoch, 1994), and teachers themselves also echo this desire (Inbar-Lourie & Gagné, 2016; Murdoch, 1994), but this is still lacking in Inner Circle contexts (Kamhi-Stein, 2009). In a survey of 241 MA TESOL programs worldwide, Stapleton and Shao (2016) note that most programs require some minimum language proficiency, with the average being IELTS 7, but not below IELTS 6, but make no note of any programs including language proficiency elements in their syllabi. Rather, they note that many of these programs do not meet the needs of East Asian learners. Despite calls to address language proficiency issues in MA TESOL programs, it appears NNEST language development is still expected to occur from immersion in the English-speaking environment, with little attention given to deliberate language teaching/learning as part of the program. This is somewhat disconcerting. Increased proficiency can help with teacher confidence (e.g. Chacon, 2005), enhance pre-service teachers' performance on the practicum (Hall Haley & Fox, 2001), and is a crucial element for professional language teacher preparation and competency (Pasternak & Bailey, 2004; Richards, 2010). Furthermore, it appears very little

research has been conducted to see if participants do in fact benefit linguistically from their study abroad experience on MA TESOL programs.

Methodology

The study outlined in this article utilized a case study approach (Merriam, 2001) which is exploratory and descriptive in nature to provide insight into the perceptions of NNESTs in relation to their language learning through a one-year study abroad program in Canada. Case study approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study in its natural real-life context. Sixty-nine pre-service teachers, originally from China, enrolled in a one-year MA TESOL program in Canada participated in the study. In order to get admitted to the program candidates need a four-year degree from an accredited university and an overall minimum average IELTS score of 6.5/9 with no individual score less than 6. The program consists of eight courses focusing on various aspects of the theory and practice of language pedagogy to help teachers develop the required competencies to become a qualified language teacher. Classes start early September and finish in the end of June. Even though the program is designed specifically for international candidates, there is no specific language focus in the program. However, similar to several other universities in North America, limited support is available, on a one-to-one basis for students who seek assistance to enhance their writing and communication skills.

Data Collection

Data was collected through self-reported proficiency appraisals using scales from the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) at the beginning and end of the program as well as a reflective assignment completed at the end of the program. The CEFR provides a conceptualization of language use in a set of ‘can do’ statements using 6 levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2). The CEFR includes a Global Scale which provides reference levels in “single holistic paragraphs” (p. 24) and allows for non-specialists to get an overall assessment of their language proficiency. The Global Scale is broad and covers all of the language skills, but in a less-detailed manner allowing users to quickly assess their overall proficiency. In addition to the Global Scale, the CEFR also includes a Self-Assessment Grid to measure specific language skills: Listening, Reading, Spoken Interaction, Spoken Production, and Writing at a more detailed level. The CEFR also includes scales for assessing Vocabulary, Grammar and Pronunciation competencies. All 9 scales (1 Global, 5 Language Skills and 3 Language Competencies) were adapted and used in the study. For the Global scale, the item statements were maintained almost exactly, but were modified to ‘I can’ statements to make it clear the participants were assessing their own abilities. Furthermore, participants were allowed to choose between levels if they did not feel one level adequately represented their perceived proficiency. The CEFR does not have one scale for vocabulary alone, so the Vocabulary Range and Vocabulary Control scales (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 112) were combined into one scale and used in this study. The Grammar scale is drawn from the CEFR competency scale Grammatical Accuracy (p. 114). Finally, the Pronunciation scale is drawn from the CEFR competency scale Phonological Control (p. 117). Like grammatical competency, it is drawn from the single scale. The original CEFR does not list a unique item for the C2 level on the Phonological Control scale. Thus, in order to keep the Pronunciation scale in line with the other scales, a C2 level descriptor was written by the researchers. Other items were modified to have

'I can' statements and at times changed to be more comprehensible, but changes were minor and the original wording was maintained whenever possible.

For the reflective journal assignments, participants were asked to discuss 1) The impact of the one-year TESOL program, and specifically completing courses in English, on their language proficiency, and 2) The impact of living abroad for a year on their language proficiency. The assignments were part of the final course participants took before graduating from the program. On average, each assignment was two pages double-spaced. Participants were asked to discuss the questions but were given the freedom to address the prompts as they chose.

Data Analysis

Descriptive data from the Global Scale was analyzed to understand where participants' self-perceived proficiency was at the beginning of the program and then at the end, and how many felt their proficiency improved, stayed the same, or potentially even decreased. Next, a series of three t-tests were conducted to see if any significant differences existed between the beginning and at the end of the program. The first t-test used the Global Scale, the second took the mean scores from the five Language Skills scales on the Self-Assessment Grid, and finally, the last t-test took the mean scores from the 3 Language Competency scales. Each proficiency level was assigned a number to allow for statistical analysis. For example, A1 = 1, A1 – A2 = 1.5, A2 = 2, A2 – B1 = 2.5, B1 = 3 and so on.

The reflective journal assignments were reviewed looking for common themes (Creswell, 2008). Coding for common themes is a "classic method" (Holliday, 2010, p. 102) when looking at qualitative data, but it is often poorly described and used haphazardly, with authors offering few details about their thematic process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, it is important to outline our process for determining themes. When analyzing the reflective writing pieces, we read over the reflective papers for general ideas, then created codes which we placed into themes, reviewed these themes and finally produced our report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When deciding on themes, we took active roles as the researchers. In some thematic analysis, the goal may be for the data to 'jump from the page' and allow researchers to determine the common themes simply from the data, but for our purposes, we took a theoretical thematic analysis approach, which is driven by researcher analytic interest (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This allows us to acknowledge our role in the analysis process. Participants were asked to produce the reflective assignments based on guiding questions similar to our research questions. When analyzing the data, we sought to understand how they answered these questions, but did not necessarily seek to fit these responses into individual themes themselves. However, we were still focused on their self-perceived language proficiency development, and what factors may have impacted this development. Thus, we actively searched for such themes when coding the data.

Results

Quantitative Findings

Table 1 shows the frequencies for participants' self-perceived proficiency using the Global Scale at both the beginning and the end of the program. At the start of the program, most participants self-perceived their proficiency to be at the B2 level (33%), and others rated their proficiency around A2-B1 (3%), B1(9%), B1-B2(22%), B2-C1(22%), C1(10%) and C1-

C2(1%). By the end of the program, no participants rated themselves below the B1 level. Most participants (34%) rated their proficiency at the B2-C1 level. Furthermore, more participants assessed themselves at the C1 or above level by the end of the program. In total, 39 participants (60%) indicated an increase in proficiency from the beginning of the program to the end of the program on the Global Scale. However, 20 participants (31%) indicated the same level at the end of the program. Finally, 6 participants (9%) self-reported a lower proficiency on the Global Scale at the end of the program. Four participants did not complete the Global Scale at the end of the program.

Table 1. Participants' self-perceived proficiency according to Global Scale at start and end of program

Proficiency Level	Start - Global Scale	End - Global Scale
A1	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
A1 – A2	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
A2	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
A2 – B1	2 (3%)	0 (0%)
B1	6 (9%)	0 (0%)
B1 – B2	15 (22%)	11 (17%)
B2	23 (33%)	11 (17%)
B2 – C1	15 (22%)	22 (34%)
C1	7 (10%)	17 (26%)
C1 – C2	1 (1%)	4 (6%)
C2	0(0%)	0(0%)
Total	69 (100%)	65(100%)

*All 69 participants completed the Global Scale at the beginning of the program, but 4 did not complete the Global Scale at the end.

Using results from the Global Scale, a significant difference was found between teachers' self-perceived overall proficiency at the beginning of the TESOL program $M = 4.00$ ($SD = .65$) and the end of the program $M = 4.4$ ($SD = .58$), $t(64) = -5.80$, p .

Next, using results from the Self-Assessment Grid, the mean score was taken from the five scales to provide a more nuanced analysis of participants' proficiency of the five Language Skills. At the beginning of the program, participants reported a mean of 3.99 ($SD = .52$), while at the end of the program this had increased to $M = 4.48$ ($SD = .58$). This difference was significant $t(68) = -8.44$, p

Finally, using the 3 Language Competency scales, a t-test was conducted to see if there was a significant difference between the beginning and end of the program. At the beginning, the mean proficiency was 3.97 ($SD = .61$), while at the end, this had increased to $M = 4.37$ ($SD = .56$). This difference was again significant $t(68) = -6.13$, p

Reflective Writing Findings

Overall, the students commented that the TESOL program had helped them improve their level of language proficiency. Experiences both inside and outside the classroom had scaffolded their language learning experience. Three main themes emerged from the analysis: 1) Benefits of English-medium courses, 2) Content of TESOL program for enhancing language proficiency and awareness, and 3) Benefits and limitations of the study abroad experience.

1) Benefits of English-medium Courses

Based on the reflective writing pieces, all participants felt their proficiency had improved in some way over the course of the TESOL program. Many noted the benefits of being immersed in an English-speaking program with lectures, readings and assignments all in English as particularly helpful. “Since English is used as medium of instruction, my academic English is improved obviously” noted one participant. Another remarked:

I have taken advantage of the English immersion during the course study, including considerable English journal reading, discussing with peers and instructors, writing essays, and more. All of these points have contributed to my enhancement of TL proficiency. [1]

Another student noted:

Completing course related tasks, such as attending classes, giving presentations, writing assignments [helped improve my English]. Though none of these tasks have been designed with the explicit and solid goal of improving language proficiency, the consistent exposure and use of the language indeed facilitate my gradual command of English.

All participants noted similar ideas in their reflective pieces. Studying in English, in their view, enhanced their language proficiency.

2) Content of TESOL Program for Enhancing Language Proficiency and Awareness

The second theme noted in the reflective data was that many participants discussed the benefit of the subject matter of the program for enhancing their language proficiency and awareness. Specifically, learning about teaching English and language acquisition theories, and from instructors who are experts and former language teachers themselves, served to help them with their own language learning. One teacher noted:

For example, since I took the course [course name removed], I have noticed how extensive reading helps learning vocabulary and grammar. Therefore, I have cultivated a reading habit to read stories at least five minutes each day, listening the audio of the stories at the same time. During the learning process, I have learned not only how to teach English as a potential teacher, but also how to improve my English as a language learner

Another teacher remarked:

After learning the 4-strand stated by Nation, I started to value meaningful input in daily life which I used to ignore before. Also, I noticed that some ‘fancy’ words that I learned before were not frequently used neither in daily life nor in academic area, which reminds me to focus on high frequency vocabulary after I took the vocabulary course

The value of learning about teaching English appeared to help many with their own learning. As one participant noted “TESOL courses also help me understand how to acquire English effectively and efficiently.” Others noted the value of learning second language acquisition (SLA) theories for their own language learning: “Additionally, knowing the SLA theories of TESOL is part of the study, which allows me to adjust my language learning strategies.”

Beyond their own language proficiency, many teachers appeared more aware of their own language capabilities and the elements needed to improve language proficiency showing an enhanced language awareness. For example, some participants emphasized the input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) and the output hypothesis (Swain, 1995) to describe their language learning: “Through the cycle of effective input and productive output, my language proficiency gradually increased”. “I am able to receive lots of comprehensible input from professors and course resources, especially when the input I have gained is slightly beyond my current language level”. Others showed increased awareness about the types of proficiency, especially noting the difference between academic language proficiency and general language proficiency as outlined by Cummins (1979). “I have found that the TESOL program has positive impacts on my Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) more than my Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)” stated one participant. Finally, another participant noted her enhanced metalinguistic knowledge as beneficial:

Studying these courses increased my metalinguistic awareness, enabled me to notice and bridge the gaps in my English language knowledge and skill and thus helped me improve my overall English proficiency

Thus, while the first theme emphasized the benefits of studying through the medium of English, the second theme emphasizes the course content itself as helpful. The participants discovered many ways to enhance their language development through more focused and calculated language learning strategies. Furthermore, their language awareness increased as they noted the benefits of language input and output and the different types of language proficiency.

3) Benefits and Limitations of the Study Abroad Experience

Finally, the third main theme drawn from the reflective data was in regard to teachers’ study abroad experience in terms of living in an English-speaking environment in Canada. While theme one and two emphasize the academic elements of the study abroad experience (e.g. taking courses in English, reading articles etc.), this theme discusses the benefits and limitations of living in an English-speaking environment, which is also a crucial element to their study abroad experience. While participants unanimously noted the benefits of studying in an English-speaking program, their experiences living in Canada were more mixed. Many participants appeared to embrace living abroad and noted its benefit for their own language development. For example, one participant noted her language proficiency improved “...because I have lots of opportunities to communicate with locals, such as during shopping, studying, going to hospital and so on”. Another mentioned: “Living abroad helps my

proficiency development as well since I could experience practical situations in real life, solve problems, and have face-to-face conversations....I could learn about English and western culture in this immersion environment”. And another similarly stated: “The experience of living abroad helped me a lot in language learning. I am immersed in the English-speaking environment, learning opportunities are everywhere”. Others emphasized the improvement of English in terms of being able to accomplish basic tasks like answering the phone or ordering food: “After living here for one year, my social language proficiency is improved and I will not fear to answer the phone!”. Another noted the significance of using English for all daily chores and its impact on enhancing her proficiency in English:

Living and studying in Canada where English serves as the language of communication helped improve English language proficiency- due to vast exposure and using English is necessary to survive- using English to complete all required daily chores (reading labels and instruction for using a product, asking for information, watching movies, talking with friends) and exposure to culture [helps improve my English].

However, for others, the experience appeared less beneficial. One participant bluntly stated: “we seldom use it (English) outside the school, so our communicative proficiency is not as good as we think”. Participants’ social circle appeared to be a major issue in limiting their target language use outside the classroom: “The experience of living abroad does not help improve my proficiency level significantly. My major social circle here is made up of my classmates...most of my classmates are Chinese and we share the same first language”. Another participant spoke of her challenges in socializing with target language speakers: “As a Chinese student, I hang out mostly with Chinese people so I did not get many chance to practice my English speaking out of classes”. Thus, while some did appear to benefit from living in an English-speaking environment, others noted that they spent much of their free time with their classmates who also spoke Mandarin. One participant summed up the experience well: “Living abroad doesn’t guarantee language fluency...learners will not make great achievements regarding language proficiency unless they take an active part in language acquisition. Personally, I benefitted from this experience because I actively sought learning opportunities in different social occasions”. However, it appears some of the participants did not, and found living in the English-speaking environment less beneficial than their classmates.

Discussion and Limitations

Both sources of data show that pre-service teachers felt the study abroad experience helped them improve their level of language proficiency in some fashion. The quantitative data showed that overall, participants felt that their proficiency increased by half a level on the various CEFR scales. While this level of increase may be viewed as small, it is important to recognize that language development is a lengthy procedure and especially at higher levels of proficiency, it is more difficult to feel progress in language development. This finding is in line with previous research that has examined the impact of study abroad experiences of teachers on their perceived language development (e.g. Douglas, Sano & Rosvald, 2018; Lee, 2009). On the other hand, Macalister (2017) reported that the language development of the two participants in his study did not occur to the participants’ satisfaction level. In this study, however, it is not clear if this level of increase is satisfactory to the participants and on par with their expectations. It is also important not to generalize the findings broadly. While the overall findings showed that participants felt that the study abroad experience facilitated their language development,

as was evident through the Global Scale descriptive data, 31% of participants felt that their proficiency remained unchanged and 9% felt that in fact their proficiency had decreased. In interpreting the findings it is important to recognize that individual variation exists and opportunities to enhance one's proficiency depended on students' willingness to engage as the program provided no explicit attention to language development (see also Macalister, 2017). For the few participants who reported that their level of proficiency had decreased, one interpretation might be that as a result of the study abroad experience and the content of the language teacher education program, these teachers had become more aware of the limitations in their proficiency compared to when they started the program, thereby rating their proficiency slightly lower at the end of the program.

In particular, the findings showed that participants found English-medium instruction and the content of language teacher education programs useful for their language development. NNEST participants reported that, similar to language learners, they benefitted from English-medium instruction (see also Hu & Lei, 2014) since they received appropriate input and were required to complete presentations and assignments in English, a requirement of the program which was not common in their previous educational experience. The content of the courses, in particular, was also useful as they provided opportunities for reflection on their proficiency and allowed NNESTs to acquire language learning strategies. Several NNESTs reported that as a result of the content of the courses, they had become more attentive to the type of input that was useful for language learning, the value of output and other nuances of language learning such as type of useful vocabulary, fluency, accuracy as well as level and type of proficiency required for different contexts. The study abroad experience, however, exerted different opportunities for NNESTs. While some reported that living abroad provided ample opportunities for real language use in different real-life contexts which was useful for their language development, some reported that there were certain constraints that limited opportunities for language development. These constraints included the challenges of integrating into the local community and finding social networks.

All of the data in this study were self-reported, which is a notable limitation. Self-assessments of any kind can be inaccurate and self-proficiency appraisals have also been shown to be inconsistent with more objective measures (e.g. Denies & Janssen, 2016; Trofimovich, Isaacs, Kennedy, Saito & Crowther, 2014). However, while self-perceived proficiency appraisals should never be used for high stakes placement, they still have major benefits as a developmental tool (Borg & Edmett, 2018). For these participants, it allowed them to become more familiar with the CEFR and its terminology and consider how their own proficiency developed over the course of a year in Canada. Also, worth noting is that the CEFR, with its emphasis on language use in social contexts with can do descriptors, is designed to be used by both students and instructors.

Implications and Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that in spite of the TESOL program's lack of focus on language development, participants still felt that the English-medium instruction, the content of the TESOL program, and to some extent, living in an English-speaking environment, helped them develop their language proficiency. Even though this finding is positive, it does not mean that NNESTs do not benefit from explicit language development programs as part of MA TESOL programs. In fact, the findings of the study, and the voices of the NNEST participants,

speak volumes to the significance of language development courses/modules as part of language teacher preparation programs, especially programs that are specifically designed for NNESTs. As noted in the literature, NNESTs would specifically benefit from language training that emphasizes English-for-teaching (Freeman, 2017; Freeman et al., 2015). Another issue worth noting is the diversity of the student population in these programs. Class make up is important as many participants noted the homogenous group of MA TESOL students and the tendency to ‘stick together’ as a barrier to their language development. While having students from a variety of language backgrounds would be useful in promoting target language use for NNESTs, having native speakers would also be valuable as both NESTs and NNESTs would benefit from working together. Furthermore, MA TESOL programs with large contingents of international NNESTs may need to assist teacher candidates with integrating into the local community and creating social networks outside of their first language groups. Combined with deliberate language learning components in the MA program, NNESTs would have ample opportunities to enhance their language proficiency during their study abroad teacher preparation.

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