

Short-term international experiences and teacher language awareness

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This research study had as its focus the impact of a short-term international experience on teacher language awareness (TLA). In-country intensive immersion experiences were considered beneficial for language teacher professional development. This project examined the Australian teachers' perceptions of their teaching and home-stay experiences during a three week short-term international teaching and homestay experience in South Korea. Findings suggested that teacher language awareness was indeed heightened through the extra metalinguistic awareness gained through systematic reflection on teaching and learning events.

Short-term international experiences; teacher language awareness (TLA); teacher reflection, homestay experience, South Korea

INTRODUCTION

Reported in this article are findings from a research project conducted in Seoul, South Korea by the Australian researcher in late 2005 (see also Harbon, 2006, for more general findings of the project). The research study had as its focus the impact of a short-term international experience for language teachers and their learners. Twelve Australian preservice teachers participated in a teaching, home-stay and cross-cultural experience at Myongji College, in Seoul, South Korea, for a three-week period in November and December 2005. Myongji College invited the participation of the Australian teachers with the guidelines that teachers conducted a conversational English program within an informal *English Camp* scenario. The idea was that the College English students would participate in these non-compulsory English language sessions, specifically to practise listening and speaking.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The teachers from Australia, all in their final years of their teaching degree programs at the University of Sydney, considered themselves native speakers of Australian English. All were preparing to become language teachers in future primary or secondary teacher positions. The listening and speaking sessions focused on the theme of *Getting to know Sydney*. The twelve teachers prepared teaching materials for their adult learners with authentic listening and viewing materials from Australian film, television, radio, internet and news media.

The study examined a research question concerning the perceived value of a short-term international language teaching experience for Australian teachers' professional development, particularly their teacher language awareness (TLA) and knowledge about language teaching.

THE RESEARCH LITERATURE

Research on short-term international experiences can be said to sit within the 'study abroad' literature more generally. Participants in study abroad may not be language teachers, however

they are often, in a similar way to language teachers, individuals who are keen to develop language proficiency and awareness. Although careful to say that there is “no one-to-one direct link between SA [study abroad] and superior linguistic gain” (Freed, 2005), Freed cites research (much of it her own) that study abroad has a positive impact on participants’ acquisition of fluency, accuracy, lexis, phonology, sociolinguistics, cognitive skills and literacy skills.

Research undertaken in the area of short-term international experiences for language teachers is not extensive, first recognisable as a discrete research area in the research literature around the beginning of the 1990s (for example, Wilson, 1993). In his literature review for the encyclopaedia entry on the topic, Byram (2000, pp. 211-212) noted the value of in-country programs for language teacher development:

exchanges... study abroad programmes of up to a year, and short study visits of a few days, have come to be central phases in the process of language and culture learning since the late nineteenth century... [and] are not only profitable for students, but also for teachers in pre- and in-service training.

Bodycott and Crew’s (2000; 2001) publications focused on English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in Hong Kong. ESL preservice teachers in Hong Kong undertake short-term overseas language immersion programs (called STOLIP at that time) in English speaking countries, in the belief of the benefits and positive results of language and cultural immersion during their teacher preparation degree programs.

Also reporting on Hong Kong students who were completing a short-term international experience in both Australia and New Zealand, Barkhuizen and Feryok (2006) have contributed to the research literature. Their research findings focused on (a) the participants’ experiences, (b) the importance of suitable organisation on the part of the coordinators, and (c) the successful (or otherwise) strategies by the participants to gain the most from the experience.

Harbon and Atmazaki (2002) found that although the language teachers in the short-term international experience possessed a language proficiency (all had passed two years at least of undergraduate Indonesian language units at the University of Tasmania) they were, due to what the researchers termed “cultural mismatch”, reluctant to use their language facility to solve so-called ‘problems’ during their short-term international experience in Indonesia in late 1998. McGill and Harbon (2006) found an awareness among language teachers, reported by those who participated in a short-term international teaching experience in Indonesia in early 2001, that opportunities to reflect caused new realisations of pedagogy. Teachers were stepping out of their comfort zone and forced to reflect on what they knew from experience in a new light compared to what they were learning through the overseas teaching experience.

In a consultancy report to the Ministry of Education in New Zealand during the time that New Zealand prepared to fund short-term international experiences for the preservice and inservice preparation of their language teachers, Harbon (2005) found no conclusive evidence about the success or otherwise of short-term international experiences on language teacher language awareness or on subsequent student learning outcomes. Harbon’s (2005) conclusion was that despite the dearth of research, the study-abroad research literature (Freed, 1995; Kaufmann, Martin, Weaver and Weaver, 1992) indicated that such short-term international experiences had a positive impact on participants’ personal and professional development. With high level financial support in Australia (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2006) and New Zealand (see, for example, Asia New Zealand Foundation, 2006) for such programs, there is, the researcher believes, a growing amount of evidence to indicate the worth of further examination of short-term international experiences for language teacher professional development.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS AND RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research on short-term international experiences for language teachers has seen opportunities afforded particularly to language teachers to reflect deeply about their developing language awareness. Underpinning this research is the exploration of teacher experience and reflective practice (Schön, 1987). Activities that can enable teachers to “reflect on action” are arguably allowing a more in-depth teacher professional development.

Adopted also for the conceptualisation of this research is what Lawless and Roth (2001) saw (as they adopted Heidegger’s idea of ‘being’ or ‘*dasein*’) as “reflection in problematic situations” being the most beneficial for teacher learning and development. Gorodetsky and Barak (2004, p. 267) called this reflection in problematic situations process “a valued representational process with potential impact on change in ways of teacher *being* in the classroom”. Gorodetsky and Barak traced teacher development as a result of teaching in different “habitats”, finding that “involving prospective teachers in diverse experiential habitats” — allowing teachers to construct meaning from problematic situations, allowing them to compare and analyse situations through reflection — helps prepare teachers for contemporary classrooms. The researcher believes that the “different habitats” experienced during short-term international experiences offered very suitable contexts upon which language teachers can reflect on or about “problematic situations”.

Alongside teacher “reflection in problematic situations” in the conceptual frame underpinning this paper sits the notions of language proficiency of teachers (knowledge **of** language) and language teacher subject-matter knowledge (knowledge **about** language) (Andrews, 2003, p. 82). Andrews uses the term “teacher language awareness” in his research in the Hong Kong context (2001; 2003). Andrews described (2001, p. 76) teacher language awareness as language teacher “subject-matter knowledge and its impact on teaching”. It was an area, according to Andrews (2001, p. 77) that was complex and where notions of “content and medium of instruction are inextricably intertwined.” Andrews (2001, p. 79) also discussed “communicative language ability” and “pedagogical content knowledge” as linked notions. He theorised that a language teacher’s language (and metalinguistic) awareness could “filter” classroom language input. Following on from the 2001 paper, Andrews’ 2003 project examined subject-matter knowledge and focused also on teacher language awareness as “encompassing an awareness of language from the learner perspective” (Andrews, 2003, p. 81). Figure 1 describes the relationships between these notions as adapted from Andrews (2001) and Gorodetsky and Barak (2004).

This conceptual frame (see Figure 1) attempts to depict the broader scope of language teacher reflection due to the teachers’ vantage point for reflection from another “habitat” or international teaching context. In a short-term international experience, teachers can compare their usual, ‘at home’ teaching experiences (conceived by this researcher as one **layer** of established pedagogic content knowledge and language awareness) with the ‘other habitat’ or international teaching experience. For pre-service teachers those ‘at home’ experiences have been largely very controlled and closely linked to passing or failing a teaching practicum. When afforded the opportunity to teach in a short-term international experience during their teacher preparation period (another ‘habitat’), there may be more of a freedom for the teachers to gain teaching experience and build on their language awareness without assessment pressure. In a short-term international experience there are always points of comparison: at least two habitats, including two languages, two cultures, two sets of customs, two sets of teacher and learner behaviours. That is, existing teacher awareness from previous ‘at home’ experiences form one layer of awareness, and the international experiences form another layer superimposed on top create the possibility of teachers becoming more aware of language, learning and other educational issues.

In late November and the first two weeks of December 2005, these Australian teachers participated in a home-stay, teaching and cross-cultural experience at Myongji College in Seoul. The teachers were placed with families in the Myongji community, living in apartments and

houses anywhere between 20 minutes and two hours from campus. The agreement was that in exchange for full bed and board for the Australian teachers, the Korean families would have a native-English speaker in the household for the family's English practice for a three-week period. The Australian teachers reported cross-cultural communication becoming a focus in their daily living.

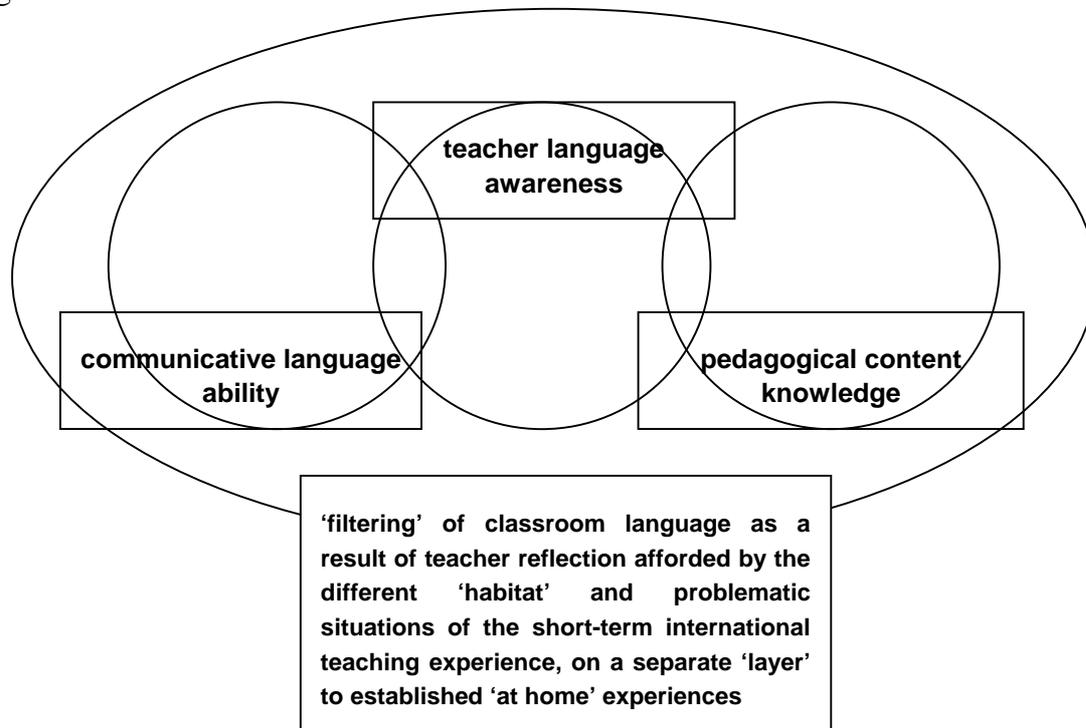


Figure 1. Teacher language awareness filtering classroom language due to reflection afforded through experience and reflection on problems in “other habitats” (adapted from Andrews, 2001 and Gorodetsky and Barak, 2004)

Learners in the *English Camp* classrooms were College English students who wanted to gain listening and speaking skills in this short-term, non-test based, conversational English program. The group of Australian teachers prepared games (physical movement games, board games), listening and viewing tasks (CD, radio, TV, DVD, film), songs, food tasting, role plays, dance step instructions, as well as the plan for a Final Presentation Night performance, eventually scripted by the College English students themselves and presented in English. The opportunity existed for Korean students to listen to Australian English, different in many ways to the American English that dominated Seoul's English classrooms, textbook materials and television media.

The researcher, who had completed research on short-term international experiences in the Indonesian context (Harbon, 2002; Harbon and Atmazaki, 2002; McGill and Harbon, 2006), chose to base the Korean program on the premise that teacher learning about language and language teaching will occur when teachers participate in, and are given the opportunity to reflect, during international experiences: that is, when taken out of their familiar environment, placed in another “habitat”, and required to systematically reflect on the meaning of all events, including problematic ones (Gorodetsky and Barak, 2004), teachers develop a “versatile repertoire of ways of ‘being’”.

The guiding questions for the teachers in the front page of their data collection journals were “What do you know you know about language?” and “What do you know you know now about language that you didn't know prior to this overseas teaching experience?” Answers to the research question (the value of the teaching program for teachers' developing knowledge about

language) are reported in the data below. A case method included data collected (a) in written reflective journals of the 12 participants; and (b) during a post-program Focus Group with the 12 participants. There was subsequent thematic content analysis of comments made by teachers. The teachers' names below are pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF SHORT-TERM INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE TEACHING EXPERIENCES FOR AUSTRALIAN TEACHERS

Data were gathered from the examination and analysis of the teachers' reflective journals and Focus Group reports as teachers commented particularly on their developing teacher language awareness (TLA) and knowledge about language teaching resulting from their short-term international experience.

Teacher Language Awareness (TLA)

The teachers reported a development in their language awareness, and also about dimensions of language, for example about language as meaning-making; about English; and about the language-culture link.

Teacher awareness about language as meaning-making

By participating in the research and writing a journal, the teachers were afforded the opportunity to reflect on language in general. The teachers realised that language was a social practice and a process of making meaning. Kara expressed her awareness of the way languages expressed meanings, saying "My host father said 'How about your family?' and he meant, 'Who is in your family?' I find myself thinking more and more about why certain things are said in certain ways." Veronica said:

So I guess that was the first thing I realised that I knew about language – extensive language is not necessary when you can communicate your thoughts and feelings through another means, such as body language and facial expression. A simple "Hi!" which both parties can understand can still give you the ability to communicate to each other and convey the sense of welcoming.

Melody linked her reflections on language to her language teaching:

I think... learning English is a social process. Most of our students had a reasonable English vocab but little reason to use the words that they knew. They all knew how to write English but few had had much experience at using English to communicate verbally. I now realise that language teaching must first be about interaction, with systematic teaching of grammar and vocabulary as a support to these interactions. I hope that my students realise that too! There is no point in knowing a lot about English if you cannot use it. So basically I hope that my students are keen to keep learning English, but even more so, that they're keen to **use** English.

That so much meaning is conveyed in the way language is delivered came as a new understanding for one teacher. Sandra said:

I am so amazed at how I am able to follow a conversation even when that conversation is in another language. Over the last three weeks I have gradually come to recognise how a change in pitch, tone or body language is so important to language. Words only make up the tiniest part of language. I have watched many Korean documentaries and game shows quite happily without understanding a single word spoken. I now know that language and language teaching involves so many elements such as the written word, but more so what is not written, eg. image, body gesture, eye contact, tone, pitch.

The teachers had the opportunity to reflect on the idiomatic and colloquial language they used to make meaning. Rachel said that she realised she spoke “so much in idiom and colloquial language.” Melody mentioned that the experience gave her a reason to think about how much idiom existed in her everyday language use.

The second reflection today is about idioms. They are everywhere in our language! And they don't always translate well. It took me until the third lesson to realise that not all students understand the phrase “Take a break”, and now that I think about it, why should Koreans understand that? It's a fairly abstract use of the verb “take”; and the word “break” has many meanings. Since realising how commonly I use idioms when I speak, I keep noticing myself as I say them. It's difficult and frustrating to constantly change your sentences half way through! Some common ones I say include “That's gold!” and “A piece of cake” and “I'll give you a hand.”

Teacher comments about English

The teachers reported how during the short-term international experience they had the chance to think about English *per se* and the different Englishes that exist in the world. Emma said:

One thing I didn't expect was that the students' English would be based on American English! Spelling is therefore sometimes an issue and they get confused if we write a word on the board that is not spelled how they were shown. Words like ‘biscuits’ are met with blank faces, as the American word is ‘cookie’.

Teachers realised the respected position of the English language outside English-speaking countries. Kara noted, “English is so highly valued here. There is at least one tv channel totally devoted to foreign language learning... the Korean Herald is translated into English. English is so revered.”

For one teacher, examining the issue of the status of English was significant for her as she took her reflection to a deeper level. Melody linked the status of English to the issue of power and said (perhaps not liking what she saw), “I almost feel like a cultural imperialist -- **you** have to learn **my** language.”

Written English in commercial publications for English learning and displayed around the Seoul city-scape became a source for concern for the Australian teachers. Sandra noticed, “Some of the English in the textbooks we've seen is very bizarre.” Similarly Anna commented:

We have looked at the kinds of English that are in the Seoul environment, in shops, in songs, on game shows. Much is American. Some of the t-shirt language is ridiculous. And these are models that these students might follow.

Jane gave an example of some English that made her realise that all publicly displayed English might not be grammatically correct, yet still represented ‘meaning-making’: “Yes, like ‘No use flash’ to mean ‘No flash photography’.” Another teacher, Julie, reported to be quite dismayed at having found this example: “... ‘Not do the cheat’ or ‘Not cunning’ to mean ‘No student cheating allowed’ ...” as she wondered about the origins of the phrase.

Teacher comments about the language-culture link

Purely by being in South Korea, teachers had an immediate point of comparison of languages, cultures, customs and traditions. Jane examined her language and culture awareness as she was able to reflect on different cultural understandings through experiencing the foods brought in to lessons.

[T]he students responded well to guessing the taste of the foods. Of course the students didn't like the Vegemite but did like the Anzac biscuits. Being able to taste

Vegemite and Anzac biscuits and discuss whether they liked it or not and why, worked very well. One of the students, Adrian told us that he would bring some Korean biscuits in that they used to send to the men in the Armed Forces.

Merely by producing Anzac biscuits that had a link to Australian cultural history, the students and teachers seized the opportunity not only to compare the Korean biscuits but to continue their discussions by comparing war traditions.

Understandably there were teacher comments about how culture was inextricably linked to language. Suzette said, “Concepts are so different across cultures ... one word has many meanings. Literal translations don’t help.”

Jane became aware of her growing knowledge of, and awareness about, Australian culture, because she could compare it with Korea’s. She wrote, “[T]he students have also learnt quite a bit about Australia and I have learnt more about Australian culture. I have also learnt about Korean culture from staying with my host family.”

The 12 teachers shared this new awareness about language and the English language as they evaluated the teaching experience at the Focus Group at the close of the program. Emma’s comments on the issue were insightful.

A lot of my understandings of language teaching and learning have not actually come from classroom interactions. Being immersed in the culture of a country is the best way to understand how language is best taught. From a trip to the post office to interactions with host families, I have had to think of ways to express myself and to also teach English.

Melody realised what she now knows about the language-culture nexus:

I’ve just flipped through the pages of my journal and realised I haven’t written about the most obvious thing I’m learning about language and language teaching – cultural exchange! Language is the way we learn about and interact with and are influenced by our culture... When Koreans learn English, they don’t only learn English but also Western values and life experiences. When I teach English, I don’t only practise my teaching skills, but I learn about Korea and especially how it is different from Australia... When we share language we necessarily share cultures.

Concerning teacher language awareness, it would appear that the short-term international teaching experience provided the teachers with opportunities to reflect on language generally, which the teachers wholeheartedly endorsed as a valuable part of the program. There were also perceptions among the teachers that there were new understandings of language teaching as is explored below.

Language Teacher Knowledge about Language Teaching

On the question of whether the Australian teachers perceive that they gain knowledge about language teaching, their comments can be summarised into five separate areas: (a) about language teacher best practice, (b) about teacher roles and characteristics, (c) about learner needs and characteristics, (d) about the relationship between teachers and learners, and (e) about language teaching generally.

Teacher perceptions about best practice language teaching

The teachers variously commented on what strategies, methods and materials they knew to work well for their teaching in Seoul. Some teachers’ knowledge about language teaching was such that they could provide labels for those aspects. Other teachers could not define those aspects with labels.

Peer teaching and utilising mixed-ability group strategies worked well for them. Veronica said, “It was interesting for us to mix the ability levels, say, putting a competent speaker with a less competent speaker. Students gained a lot from that I think.” Similarly, Emma’s comments showed her growth in understanding of the peer teaching strategy, when she wrote, “We had an ‘English only’ rule at first. Then we realised that if we did allow some Korean, they could help each other understand. There was peer teaching and learning going on.”

A trusted strategy shared among all the 12 teachers by the end of the Camp was to make more use of non-verbal communication. Emma said, “I go through every variation of a word until one registers (with the other person) as familiar. For example: ‘messy’ = dirty; unclean; untidy; not neat; not tidy, etc.”

In mentioning how she conveyed the meaning of ‘messy’ to her students (dirty, unclean etc), Emma is clearly referring to her ‘strategic competence’ (Canale and Swain, 1980; Dörnyei and Thurrell, 1991). This issue is taken up later in this article.

Scaffolding was a label that the teachers were able to use to define their strategies. Melody said:

EFL techniques and primary techniques overlap quite a lot. You have simple and defined objectives for each lesson, you plan a variety of activities for students to practise the skills you want them to develop, you scaffold, scaffold, scaffold, and you make sure the activities are meaningful (in a real context) and incorporate a lot of fun.

In a similar comment Anna said:

Another factor in our classes is trying to encourage the students to speak, and to speak in full sentences. Some of our students are very shy and are very hesitant to speak. When they do speak, it is in such a quiet voice that we can’t hear them. We are trying to encourage the students through different means of scaffolding: giving prompts, both written and spoken; working with the “think, pair, share” system where a student is to think of ideas alone, then discuss and share with a partner, then for the partners to share with another group of two, then whole class discussion. We also make time to hear every student talk and contribute, not to embarrass them but to build up their confidence without threatening them.

Another label the teachers used for their strategy choice was “use of authentic materials”. The teachers took with them to Seoul a wealth of teaching resources and learning materials and found that they used these resources in some way during the three week Camp. Suzette found the materials she took to be useful and said:

I also found that the use of visuals and authentic materials is effective in language teaching. These resources help students understand and grasp concepts which may be difficult to comprehend. Therefore, these proved to be extremely helpful in my language teaching.

Engaging learning materials and meaningful learning were two further labels the teachers used to discuss best practice and their choices. Veronica commented on the importance to her of materials being engaging, commenting, “[v]isuals are so important in teaching language, especially on topics that are unfamiliar to the students because of cultural differences. They also serve as a stimulus for discussion, and are often engaging.”

Kara links good teacher use of materials to good student learning, saying:

In order to move past the language barrier I have found that visual aids have been extremely useful. By using visuals, students are able to link words/ideas with pictures making it easier to understand them (and remember them). I think this also makes learning more meaningful to them.

Teachers labelled non-verbal communication, in this case use of body language to express meaning, as important as a focus for both teaching and learning. Veronica said: "I have realised that I use body language more often to teach English. I will use my hands to gesture and to create a picture for them in order to get my meaning across." Emma commented on her strategy too: "I also use gestures and whatever visual cues are on hand to express myself. Explaining something is almost like a process of elimination!"

Kara recounted her own foreign language learning at school.

Unlike when I was learning German at school, we cannot communicate to our students in Korean (their first language) to help clarify ideas. In my German class, my teacher would speak in German to us, but could switch to English when we needed help. In Korea we do not have this luxury.

The Australian teachers did not share a common first language with their Korean students and the teachers had to ponder what strategies they needed to engage in order to communicate.

The teachers chose games or practical activities to engage their learners and considered this approach best practice. Teachers spoke positively of their experiences in doing "practical" language tasks with their classes to make lessons more meaningful. Veronica said:

The practical activities were the ones that engaged the students and they were fun as well as beneficial for their language development. It was also a good way to break up the reading and writing activities that required a lot of thought and concentration. Games were enjoyable and also beneficial for their English because they had to interact with each other in conversation...I've learned how much the 'practical' is important. Such as games. These tasks "break the ice", but students are learning.

For Jane, best practice included games. She stated, "Starting each day with warm-up games been good. Increases students' confidence, breaks the ice and gets them into the mindset of speaking English again."

During the Focus Group, the Australian teachers agreed that best practice was not only scaffolding, use of visuals, and setting practical activities, but also "pacing" lessons, and allowing "silent" periods. Rachel commented, "We don't like 'silence' in our Australian classrooms, but students need this processing time." On the topic of pace, Melody said, "To accommodate the linguistic barrier, you need to slow down. You need to slow down and allow them time to process the language."

For the teachers, best practice was based on doing practical tasks, stress-free games, with well-paced sessions, broken with regular breaks, punctuated by silent periods for learner thinking time. The teachers also commented on the teacher's key role in the process of language teaching and made some fresh realisations as are outlined below.

Teacher comments about teacher roles and characteristics

Interestingly the teachers commented on their own weaknesses. They noticed that they spoke louder when learners did not understand. They found they completed the learners' sentences for them by jumping in with responses. Jane reported that she realised that she, "... tended to speak louder when they didn't understand."

Sandra reported having to stop herself from her habit of using telegraphic speech (the form of speech found in young children's language development where, for example, conjunctions or articles were left out).

When teaching yesterday, it occurred to me that I was simplifying my sentences in order to help the students understand eg. "Where you go on weekend?". This

simplification is detrimental to their language learning but I could not help doing it... I had to pull myself up and speak proper English.

She reflected that language teaching:

...takes a lot of patience. It is so easy to butt in and help the Korean students with their sentences. So I often find myself finishing their sentences because I want to keep the flow – I realised that it may not be helpful to continue to do this. I need to wait and give the student time to articulate what they are thinking.

In fact, Sandra observed that among her colleagues:

It appears that we are not good listeners; we are so worried about keeping the conversation flowing that we don't stop to listen. I find that I need to physically hold myself back from speaking for my Korean students.

Commenting on the same habit, Emma commented:

I often put words in the mouths of my students and Korean people I'm having a conversation with. While they are trying to find the right words or sayings, I often jump in and try to fill in the blanks for them. I've found that non-English speakers learn a lot more when they find the correct words themselves. It's a lot more meaningful if they make connections themselves.

Kara labelled this style as impatience, saying:

I have found that I often start to become impatient and help the students too much. When teaching a language I think it is important to be patient and provide the students with plenty of time, in order to comprehend what we are saying.

For Sandra, "...finding the students' strengths and weaknesses and building on this" is important. She stated: "[Language teaching] involves intense listening on the teacher's behalf. There is also a lot of patience involved..."

The teachers made summary statements about good language teacher characteristics, and the examples they gave to illustrate their points showed that they were engaging with the notions during the short-term international experience in South Korea. The teachers also reflected on the needs and characteristics of their learners.

Teacher comments about learner needs and characteristics

All teachers reported being aware at the start that their learners were frightened of making mistakes. Louise said:

Today in class students were asking their partner questions about transport. One student... got very flustered trying to answer a question. Many students have seemed to get very nervous and anxious when answering questions, no matter how much we try and emphasise how OK it is to make mistakes. They are scared to give the wrong answer.

Teachers reported to have become aware during the teaching experience in Seoul that their learners were real people, with needs and fears like them. Teachers reported to have realised that their adult learners were intelligent adults. Emma said that the realisation came as quite a shock to her.

I have noticed that a language barrier often makes you jump to conclusions about their intellect. Because you are constantly simplifying things and speaking slowly, you subconsciously start to think your students are not as smart as they actually are. That got driven home when I saw the Actuarial Studies questions one student had. I realised

they are all smarter than me because I only speak English, but they will have two languages! So I've found out that you must never underestimate your students abilities to learn. Activities we plan we sometimes say "this will be too hard" and then the students do it in around 5 minutes! I've now learnt to respect the intellect and dedication of Korean students and never underestimate them... It's sometimes easy to forget that when we are using relatively "baby" language with them. These students are highly intelligent and capable of more than baby talking.

The Australian teachers became aware that their students have full lives outside their English learning. Veronica said:

Even though students aren't always able to express themselves well in English, it doesn't mean that they are not intelligent. They can come up with the most interesting and well-thought up questions and we sometimes overlook that they are college students who are intelligent but are held back by the language barrier.

Teachers variously commented on the English learners.

Molly, from an Australo-Chinese heritage family background in Sydney commented on how she engaged with her learners by exploring similarities and differences between cultural practices:

This opportunity to participate in this Korea program has helped me to understand not only differences between Australian-Korean culture and Chinese-Korean culture, but also to get a feel of what it is like teaching English in an EFL environment where the predominant culture is not an English one.

Melody mentioned that one way to engage the students was to teach empathically. She said:

I do not speak any other languages, so I cannot sympathise with their exhaustion, but I think I understand it a little. I guess the students have to hear the English words, translate them in their minds (some words are probably automatic and some require more thought), think about their response, then translate it into English with the appropriate grammar.

Teachers responded by giving more breaks during lessons. Jane implied that she had developed an empathy when she said, "It's exhausting for me here communicating across to the Koreans in my house and in school. This must be the same for my English learners, and I'll know that now." Without the empathy with their learners, teachers might not have taken this step.

Learners' needs were apparent to the Australian teachers as they observed their learners. One further aspect realised during the reflective processes was about themselves and their relationship with their learners as is described below.

Teacher comments on the importance of the relationship between teachers and learners

Seeing themselves as learners who made mistakes and who found language learning difficult and exhausting, and conveying that to their students, was a strategy that they became aware of. Jane said:

We've found that our poor attempts at speaking Korean and finding the Korean term for English words they don't understand makes them feel more at ease and more willing to try speaking in English. It communicates that learning a new language is hard and we all make mistakes but that's normal and okay.

The teachers' reflective journal writing allowed them to become aware of their relationship with their learners. The teachers realised that learners would often respond to the hard work and efforts

of their teachers. Kara said, “I also realised that students were more comfortable speaking English to us, if we tried Korean.” Veronica wrote that effort was needed from both teachers and learners.

[W]hat I’ve learnt about language learning today is that it is an ongoing process that takes effort from both parties, and when each of us makes the effort to learn each other’s language, we can all appreciate each other and strengthen that bond between us.

Anna commented:

I am aware of the difficulties the learners experience when learning English. This is more real to me as I notice my difficulty in learning Korean. Even the smallest of phrases seem so hard to remember, even after I have heard it or had someone tell it to me 5 or 10 times!

Jane’s strategy was to share some of her personal story with her students.

I then showed photos of my family and where I live... Sharing personal things communicates closely with students and helps them connect in their learning, while also providing insight into families, homes and culture in Australia.

As can be seen from the quotations cited above, there was a large amount of learning and explicit awareness raised by the teachers’ reflection about their relationship with their students.

Learning about Language as a Result of the International Experience

Whether these realisations would have occurred anyway, or are directly attributable to the teachers being in an overseas context outside their own cultural context, was a theme discussed by some of the teachers.

There were teacher comments that specifically noted learning due to being in another context, for example, Gorodetsky and Barak’s (2004) “other habitat”. One teacher said that she was now more explicitly aware of the differences between languages, because this experience in South Korea had given her a basis for comparison. Jane said that she learned generally about, “... languages related in families. That because Korean is so totally different in the language family tree to English, I cannot have guessed anything... unlike French, or Italian or German.”

Sandra concluded her journaling by saying:

It is only through the complete immersion in a foreign language that I am able to recognise the multi-faceted nature of language and language teaching. I know that I will carry these new ideas into my classrooms. I am looking forward to it! ...These understandings will definitely carry on with my teaching back in Sydney.

Kara summed up her thoughts:

I think that I’m learning a lot more teaching English as a second language in Korea than what I would in Australia. Being immersed in a different culture and experiencing what it is like to be restricted by a different language has made me realise just how difficult it must be for our students...I have learnt so much whilst I have been here and its hard to explain exactly what, but I know this whole experience has been beneficial.

For one teacher, the opportunity arose to link her knowledge of theory to practice. Jane linked her previous textbook knowledge of theory to the learning she was doing in Korean classroom, saying “Lots of this I’ve learnt through TESOL course and reading Pauline Gibbons’ works, but this is enabling me to see evidence of theory...first hand.” She added:

This experience which has given me a big idea about the prime importance of an education, and the hard work ethic, will let me understand the parent aspect back home in my Australian classrooms... We can understand how new arrivals might feel as regards having no language. You really feel quite desperate. So we might have an empathy for our new arrival learners.

Changes in Teachers as a Result of the International Experiences

Two teachers reported personal change as a result their participation in the short-term international experience. Kara explained, "The way that I speak English has definitely changed a little bit. And I look at what I want to say from all different ways." For Suzette, the three-week teaching and home-stay experience has resulted in a questioning of her identity and a decision to move to Seoul. Born in Australia to Korean parents, and only ever having travelled back to Korea for a short holiday during her early teens, Suzette stated, "This is an experience I will never forget and it has surely made a huge difference in my life and career!" Suzette has since graduated and taken up a full time teaching position, living in Seoul.

DISCUSSION AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Australian teachers seemed to adapt easily to the notion of semi-regular written reflection in their journals as the requirement for participation in the research. The practice of systematic reflection was part of the pre-service teacher professional development process, especially emphasised during school experience practicum periods. It was pleasing to note that the reflections were being written even though there was no assessed grade attached to the teaching tasks.

The study abroad literature had reported findings from participants who were mainly focused on the learning **of** the target language. But it was still clear that study abroad participants learnt **about** the target language during the international experience (Freed, 2005). In the same way as the study abroad participants, the teachers in this international experience were developing a language awareness about certain aspects of language and language teaching.

Certainly it might be said that the teachers' developing awareness about language and language teaching might have been made in **any** context, not just because they were in Korea. However, sufficient comment was made by the teachers to indicate that it was due to the fact that there were so many more points of comparison in the short-term international experience than existed in their usual 'at home' teaching contexts, that the systematic reflection did underpin their developing awareness.

The Australian teachers wrote journal entries on what they considered were "problematic situations" (Lawless and Roth, 2001). The developing awareness the teachers reported did actually change their 'being' in the classroom (Gorodetsky and Barak, 2004). The short-term international experience became the different "habitat" teachers needed to be able to compare their understandings from their existing 'at home' level of awareness, to the international experience.

Andrews (2001) had noted the links between teacher language awareness, pedagogical content knowledge and communicative language ability in language teachers. The language awareness, and inherent metalinguistic awareness language teachers demonstrate, Andrews suggested that language could be "filtered" in the language classroom. It would appear that the Australian teachers were developing a language awareness and demonstrating it through the reflective processes required for participation in the research project. They demonstrated subject matter knowledge: knowledge about language as meaning making, about English, and about the language-culture link. They demonstrated subject matter knowledge in other aspects of language teaching too: about best language teaching practice, about teaching, about learning and about the

relationship between teachers and learners. Moreover, within this teaching context, they were undertaking this reflection in another ‘habitat’, some teachers stating definitively that the points of comparison (the two groups of people, the two languages, the two cultures with their inherent customs and traditions) enabled a type of reflection that was not afforded before in their lives. It would appear that the teachers’ metalinguistic awareness was further heightened by being stimulated in the superimposed layer of the international context.

Some of the 12 teachers could explicitly label their understandings and developing awareness. Others described their developing awareness in their journal entries or Focus Group responses, and it has been the researcher who has been able to categorise and label these notions. For example, Emma was one teacher who seemed to be aware of her strategy in attempting to find other words for ‘messy’. Teachers and students in second language contexts need to call upon “verbal and non-verbal communication strategies... to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence” (Canale and Swain, 1980, p. 30). Strategic competence, is, as Dornyei and Thurrell noted, the need of language users to have an ability to express themselves “in the face of difficulties or limited language knowledge” (1991, p. 16). In order to communicate better with her students and make herself understood, Emma needed to have found synonyms for her word, and to have paraphrased its meaning in as many different ways as could be said to ‘make meaning’ for her students. Although she could not explicitly label her understanding as strategic competence, reflection on her teaching enabled her to realise her strategy.

CONCLUSIONS

In sum, the data indicated that the Australian teachers perceived their own growth in language awareness and knowledge about language teaching, some attributing their knowledge directly to the overseas experience and the meaningful contexts that were presented to them through the teaching and reflection.

The teachers were not undertaking this practicum experience as a supervised assessed practicum and the teachers did not have a mentor teacher prescribing how the teaching was to be implemented as had been their experience in the school experience practicum periods during their years of teacher training prior to them being in South Korea. There was therefore the opportunity to experiment a little. The only guidelines from the Myongji College was that the English Camp program was to emphasise speaking and listening to Australian English. With fewer pressures on them in the international ‘habitat’, if compared to their previous ‘at home’ teaching experiences, the Australian teachers were free to plan, to choose resources and texts, and to strategise.

As meaningful as the findings of this research may appear to be however, it must be acknowledged that the project is only a small-scale study, and the claims are based on perceptions. The next step will be to conduct further research on further programs to attempt to make clear links between the teaching program and the student learning outcomes.

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