

# Impacts of an Exchange Program on In-Service English Language Teachers

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## Abstract

Studies involving pre-service English language teachers have shown positive effects of exchange programs. However, to date, no research has focused on the impact of teach-abroad exchange programs involving in-service English language teachers. This study investigated the impacts of an exchange program on in-service English language teachers. Twenty exchange program alumni completed a survey focused on the impact of the exchange, and five of those twenty participated in follow-up interviews. Most of the participants reported developing professionally and personally as a result of participating in the exchange program. In terms of professional development, many participants reported having developed a deeper awareness of their teaching practices, and many indicated increased flexibility and adaptability in their teaching practices. The overall impacts included a deeper sense of cultural awareness and an expanded worldview. The results suggest that participation in an exchange program can be a useful form of professional development for in-service English language teachers.

**Keywords:** teaching practices, exchange programs, in-service teacher education, cultural awareness

As the world becomes more globalized, there is a growing need for educators at all levels and disciplines to help their students develop global competence, which is described by Zhao (2010) as “the knowledge and skills needed to function competently in the globalized world” (p. 427). Globally competent individuals more effectively communicate, collaborate, and interact with people from diverse backgrounds (Boix-Mansilla & Jackson, 2011; Longview Foundation, 2008; Zhao, 2010). In order to guide students towards global competence, teachers and teacher educators themselves need to be globally competent (Garii, 2009; Zhao, 2010). Globally competent educators are equipped with the knowledge and skills to provide instruction that meets the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Biraimah & Jotia, 2013). Research has indicated that international exchange experiences have been one of the most effective methods for developing multicultural educators (Cushner, 2007; Hadis, 2005; Stachowski & Sparks, 2007). While a number of studies have addressed the impact of exchange programs on pre-service teachers, thus far, no research has focused on the impact of exchange programs on in-service English language instructors.



## **Operational Definitions of Cultural Awareness and Expanded Worldview**

Although *cultural awareness* and *expanded worldview* are not completely distinct categories, for the purpose of this study, *cultural awareness* is understood as appreciation and respect for other cultures, greater understanding and respect for diversity, and an increased understanding of the self vis-à-vis the other (including privileges) while *expanded worldview* is understood as a better understanding of what is happening in the world beyond one's own context.

### **Literature Review**

#### **What is an Exchange Program?**

An exchange program sends participants to a country outside their own for a designated period of time in order to take part in scholarship or work in some capacity (Danico & Ocampo, 2014). Many exchanges are for students, but there are also several programs for researchers and instructors (Sevin, 2010; Singer et al., 2019). Exchange programs do not necessarily have direct reciprocity whereby a participant from one country changes places with a participant from another country (Danico & Ocampo, 2014). However, reciprocity across programs might be part of the overall design. For example, a government might send participants to countries outside their own on a specific exchange program and simultaneously receive participants for different programs. Through exchanges, public diplomacy is carried out by regular citizens of a country who interact with regular citizens of another country (Danico & Ocampo, 2014). Exchanges strengthen networks between countries that could result in a clearer understanding of the country represented (Danico & Ocampo, 2014; Sevin, 2010).

#### **Impact of Study Abroad Programs on Pre-service Teacher Candidates of Various Disciplines**

Research on the impact of study abroad programs for pre-service teacher candidates planning to teach in various subject areas has shown that participants developed both personally and professionally. These programs were designed with various components, such as language courses, classroom observations, methods courses, and residence with a host family. Depending on the design of the program, teacher candidates may or may not have actually engaged in teaching practice. Two early studies by Barnhart (1989) and Willard-Holt (2001) showed that, following an exchange experience, participants developed flexibility, adaptability, knowledge of pedagogy, empathy, and self-efficacy. Recent studies have shown similar results. Through a survey of 50 returnees who had participated in various overseas student-teaching programs lasting 9-15 weeks, Cushner and Mahon (2002) found that participants developed increased cultural sensitivity, which included increased empathy for others, and specifically included empathy for language development struggles; heightened self-efficacy in which participants became more resilient and persistent in the face of challenges; and a greater sense of global mindedness and diversity, which included a better understanding of other cultures and one's own culture. Zhao et al.'s (2009) study of 10 pre-service teachers' four-week experience in China showed that participants developed understanding and respect of another culture and greater empathy for language learners. In a study of 15 pre-service teachers who took part in a four-week study abroad

program, Pence and Macgillivray (2008) found that participants became more confident and developed a better understanding and appreciation of other cultures. In a study of a semester-long project with 26 American pre-service teacher candidates who took part in a virtual exchange with Turkish counterparts, Lin (2018) found that participants gained a better understanding of their privileges and preconceived notions and ultimately expanded their worldview.

### **Impact of Exchange Programs on Pre-service English Language Teachers**

Similar to the results of studies that included pre-service teachers of various disciplines, research focused specifically on teacher candidates preparing to become English language instructors has shown that exchange programs result in personal and professional development. Many of these studies focused on pre-service candidates' development of empathy regarding the cultural and language needs of English language learners (e.g., Jiang & DeVillar, 2011; Malewski et al., 2012; Marx & Pray, 2011; Palmer & Menard-Warwick, 2012; Pilonieta et al., 2017). Participants also developed a heightened sense of cultural awareness and an expanded worldview. In a study of eight pre-service teachers who spent four weeks in Mexico, Kasun and Lee (2017) reported that pre-service English teachers developed an expanded worldview and a better understanding of their privileges. Similarly, Vatalaro et al.'s (2015) study of five pre-service teachers' experience in a study abroad program revealed that participants became more aware of their privilege and developed an appreciation for cultural diversity. A six-year study of pre-service teachers who took part in a short-time study abroad program in Honduras showed that teacher candidates developed cross-cultural awareness (Malewski et al., 2012). In a study of four pre-service English language teachers who took part in a one-month study-and-teach abroad program, Barrow (2017) found that participants developed more nuanced intercultural competence. However, this transformation was just as dependent on the cognitive and affective dispositions, which were influenced by participants' life histories (Holland & Lave, 2001), as it was on the influence of the program.

### **Impact of Exchange Programs on In-service English Language Teachers**

To date, few studies have explored the impact of an exchange program on in-service teachers (e.g., Biraimah & Jotia, 2013; He et al., 2017). Biraimah and Jotia's (2013) longitudinal study of 24 American exchange participants in Botswana, Malaysia, and Singapore found that participants' knowledge base of the countries they carried out their exchanges in increased and showed sustained growth over time. Furthermore, the participants in Biraimah and Jotia's study deepened their knowledge of teaching methodologies and curricular content along with developing a greater sense of cultural awareness. He et al.'s (2017) study of 12 teachers from various disciplines showed that following participation in an exchange program, practicing teachers developed empathy for language learners and a new-found desire to create more linguistically and culturally responsive teaching practices. Until now, no study has focused specifically on the impact of an exchange program on in-service English language teachers' professional and personal developments following participation in the program. The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the impact of an exchange program on in-service English language teachers.

## Theoretical Framework

The data for this paper were analyzed through the lens of transformative learning theory. *Transformative learning theory* (also, transformation theory) was first established by Mezirow (1978) while researching adult women returning to the workforce. Mezirow (1978, 1991, 1999, 2000, 2012) describes transformative learning as a particular type of learning in which the learner modifies existing perspectives, ideas, or assumptions as the result of a certain experience. Mezirow has adapted his model of transformative learning from the original, but all iterations include the following basic steps. The learner is engaged in some sort of activity or activities that could lead to a different meaning perspective. A meaning perspective (also, frame of reference, mindset, or habits of mind) is a basic belief one holds about the world (Mezirow, 1978, 1991, 1999, 2000). The learner investigates the self vis-à-vis the experience or incident. The learner then engages with others through rational discourse. Finally, the learner integrates the new meaning perspective into their existing frame of reference (Mezirow, 1978, 1991, 2000, 2012). The learner does not necessarily have to progress through all steps, and the steps taken may not necessarily be carried out in a linear order. Transformative learning is “individualistic, fluid, and recursive” (Taylor, 2000, p. 292).

In transformative learning theory, a transformation is a change in the perspective of meaning of a person that is non-reversible. According to Mezirow’s theory, transformation occurs when a person engages in an experience (or series of experiences) that causes them to adopt a different perspective. For learning to be transformative, the learner must integrate the new perspective into their existing mindset, thereby developing a different way of seeing the world, which includes a different view of the self (Mezirow, 1978, 1991, 1999, 2000, 2012). An experience might have the potential to be transformative, but may not become so depending on how the individual processes it. As Taylor (1994) explains, “When an individual has an experience that cannot be assimilated into his or her meaning perspective, either the experience is rejected or the perspective changes to accommodate the new experience” (p. 159). The data from this paper were analyzed through the lens of transformative learning theory to determine whether the participants experienced transformative learning as a result of the exchange programs they took part in. I did not look at particular incidents that occurred during the exchange project but rather at the overall impact of the program as reported by participants.

## Methods

### Participants

#### *Participant Eligibility*

Participants were required to have a career based on English language teaching to be eligible to participate in the study. All participants had taken part in an exchange program that had lasted at least ten months. Study participants could have participated in multiple exchange programs and could have done the same program more than once or a combination hereof. Participants were required to have at least five years of total teaching experience to participate in the study (this could include time in an exchange program). Participants were not required to have returned to the same institution in which they had worked

prior to participation in the exchange program. For the protection of the identities of the participants, the exchange program(s) participants took part in are not named.

### ***Participant Recruitment***

To recruit participants for the first round of data collection, which was a virtual survey, I sent email invitations to exchange program alumni in my professional network. I also posted an invitation to the study on a closed site exclusively for exchange program alumni. The survey was open from April 21, 2020 to August 6, 2020. As of August 6, 2020, there were 30 responses. However, 10 responses were incomplete. All incomplete surveys were discarded before analysis of the completed 20 surveys began (Hittleman & Simon, 2006). At the end of the survey, I invited participants to take part in a follow-up interview. Fourteen survey participants agreed to be interviewed. I contacted seven participants for interviews. Five of the seven invited participants responded and were interviewed.

### **Consent Process**

For the first stage of the data collection, the first question of the survey explained the study. Participants gave their consent through a positive response. Participants who took part in the interview strand signed an additional consent form.

### **Research Design**

Data collection and analysis were guided by the following two research questions (RQs):

1. How has the exchange program impacted the participants professionally?
2. How has the exchange program impacted the participants overall?

A convergent sequential mixed methods design was used from which data in different strands are collected independently but interpreted in one analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Patten & Newhart, 2017; Polio & Friedman, 2017). Findings from the quantitative phase were corroborated and elaborated with findings in the qualitative phase (Johnson & Onwuebuze, 2004).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Before collecting data, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board of my home institution. In the first stage of the study, data was collected via a virtual survey. The survey contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended survey questions were analyzed with descriptive statistics through SPSS software. For the second round of data collection, semi-structured interviews were carried out via Zoom software. Transcriptions were edited for accuracy prior to analysis. I first read the transcripts to get a general understanding of the data, making notes of major themes. Then I conducted a selective reading approach, identifying responses that aligned with the research questions (Van Manen, 2018). Data from the interview questions were merged with data from the open-ended survey questions and analyzed in response to the research questions. Open-ended survey questions from the survey and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Van Manen, 2018). Themes were developed from an examination of the data rather than *a priori*, or pre-determined, codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

## Results and Analysis

Overall, participants in this study reported transformational learning in both professional and personal areas as a result of the exchange program they took part in, suggesting that participation in an exchange program can be an important form of professional development. This finding aligns with previous studies on pre-service teacher candidates of various disciplines (e.g., Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Lin, 2018; Zhao et al., 2009); previous studies specifically focused on pre-service English language teachers (e.g., Jiang & DeVillar, 2011; Kasun & Lee, 2017; Malewski et al., 2012; Marx & Pray, 2011; Palmer & Menard-Warwick, 2012; Vatalaro et al., 2015); and a study on in-service teachers (He et al., 2017) – all of which found that participants reported transformation learning as the result of taking part in an exchange program. Although professional and overall impacts are treated separately in this study, it is understood that professional and personal impacts are often intertwined. For instance, the increased flexibility one might have developed professionally could allow for more nuanced cultural awareness; simultaneously, enhanced cultural awareness could lead to increased flexibility in carrying out work assignments. Nonetheless, in this study, the findings related to work-focused content have been categorized as professional impacts, and the findings related to other impacts are categorized as overall impacts.

### Demographic Data

The first part of the survey gathered demographic data. Responses showed that the majority of participants (75%) in this study had more than ten years of teaching experience (See Fig. 1). Additionally, exchanges were carried out in a number of countries (See Fig. 2). The most common duties reported included providing teacher training, teaching general English classes, and developing curriculum (See Table 1).

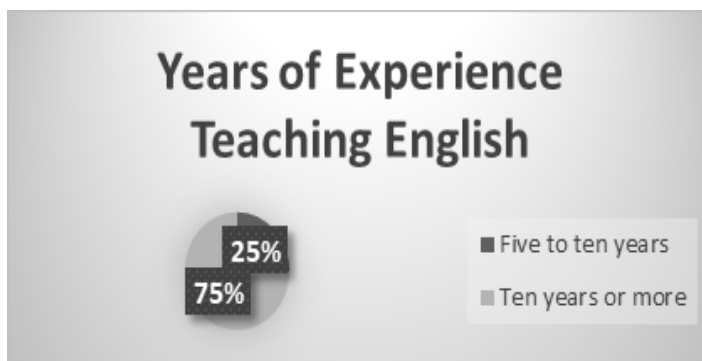
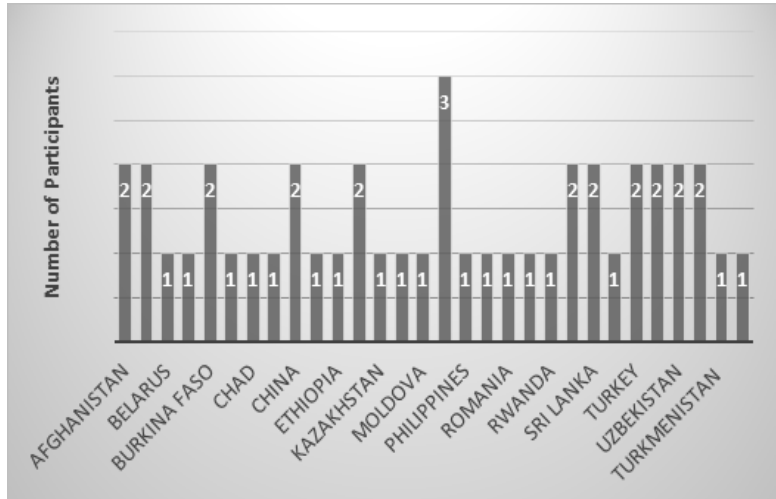


Fig. 1: Years of experience teaching English



**Fig. 2: Countries where participants carried out their exchanges**

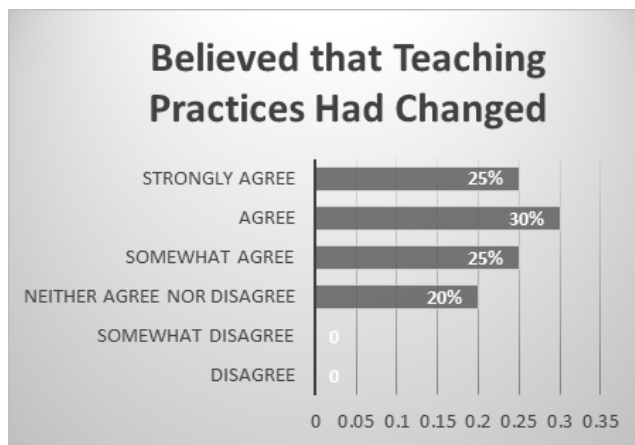
| Duty  | Number of times mentioned |
|---|---------------------------|
| Provided teacher mentoring  | 3                         |
| Taught general English classes  | 12                        |
| Taught ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses (law, travel English, etc.)  | 3                         |
| Provided short-term training to pre-service and in-service teachers (workshops, seminars, conference presentations, etc.) | 19                        |
| Provided long-term training for teacher candidates (TESOL methods course)   | 2                         |
| Taught research methods   | 3                         |
| Developed a language lab  | 1                         |
| Developed curriculum  | 9                         |
| Developed a webinar   | 1                         |
| Started a Writing Center  | 1                         |
| Led English clubs   | 1                         |
| Gave presentations on American culture  | 1                         |
| Served as project coordinator   | 1                         |
| Carried out an administrative role  | 1                         |
| Provided training of trainers (TOT) sessions to in-service teachers   | 2                         |

**Table 1. Main duties participants carried out during their exchange**

### Impact on Teaching Practices

The first goal of this study was to find out how the exchange program had impacted the participants professionally.

When asked in the survey to respond to the statement “My classroom teaching practices have changed following the exchange program,” the majority, 55% of participants, either strongly agreed (25%) or agreed (30%). Twenty-five percent somewhat agreed; 20 percent neither agreed nor disagreed. This finding aligns with transformational learning theory, as most participants indicated that their teaching practices had changed as a result of the exchange program.



**Fig. 3: Believed that classroom teaching practices had changed**

### **Developed a Deeper Awareness of Teaching Practices**

“Developed a deeper awareness of teaching practices” was the code that garnered the most responses in the open-ended data related to teaching practices. For several participants, the program seemed to serve as a catalyst for reflection that they may not have achieved otherwise. As Bolton and Delderfield (2018) explain, “Many [theories, frameworks, and models of reflection] require us to attempt to stand outside ourselves and our culture in order to critique it” (p. 60). One participant explained: “This experience made me reconsider some of my previous assumptions about best teaching practices and made me think about my cultural conceptualization of what learning is and what a ‘good’ classroom looks like.” A respondent who had only somewhat agreed that the program had influenced their teaching practices said: “I became more confident that the communicative, student-centered techniques that I had been using in my teaching were effective. My techniques didn’t actually change. I recommitted myself to reducing my TTT (teacher talk time) even more.” For some study participants, the program provided the opportunity to examine existing beliefs, assumptions, and theories-in-use for effectiveness in different contexts (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018); for other participants, it reiterated and reinforced existing beliefs.

### **Increased Flexibility, Adaptability, and Improved Confidence**

Several participants indicated that they had become more flexible and adaptable in their teaching as a result of participating in the exchange program. These findings align with the



several previous studies (Barnhart, 1989; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Willard-Holt, 2001). For many participants, the inherent challenges of work assignments in a new context provided a platform to enhance flexibility and adaptability. One participant explained: “I learned to make do and change my plans quickly based on the situation, like technology problems, varying attendance of students, and the inability to make photocopies.”

### **Became More Confident in Teaching**

Several participants described developing more confidence in their teaching skills as a result of participating in the exchange program. This aligns with Pence and Macgillivray’s (2008) findings in which exchange program participants indicated increased confidence. Some responses related to confidence gained through the experience of working transculturally: “Working with various groups of people in different countries has strengthened my teaching skills and my confidence in my teaching.” Others mentioned the ability to overcome a difficulty: “I was able to conquer my fear of speaking in public.”

### **Developed New Skills or Enhanced Existing Ones**

Several participants indicated that the program had provided the opportunity to develop professional skills. One participant said: “I have developed new skills that I have never had before: teacher training, organizing conferences, and developing programs.” Other participants indicated that the program had provided the opportunity to enhance existing skills: “The sheer number of presentations and experiences that I had propelled me to become better at public speaking, explaining information, and understanding my audience (student or teachers or administrators) better.” Another participant said: “Co-teaching and collaborating with other teachers strengthened my own skill set and bag of tools.”

### **Career Development Opportunities**

For several participants, the experience gained in the exchange program served as a stepping stone to career advancement opportunities they may not have achieved otherwise. The skills participants developed and enhanced in the exchange program along with increased self-efficacy could have been instrumental in these achievements. Several participants indicated that they had either moved into more senior roles upon returning to their home institution or that they had secured new opportunities, such as a more specialized teaching appointment or administrative role. One participant explained: “I was hired here at the college, and I was the academic coordinator. I think the impact of working with teachers [in the exchange program] and then helping them to think about their skills really is partly why I could be good.”

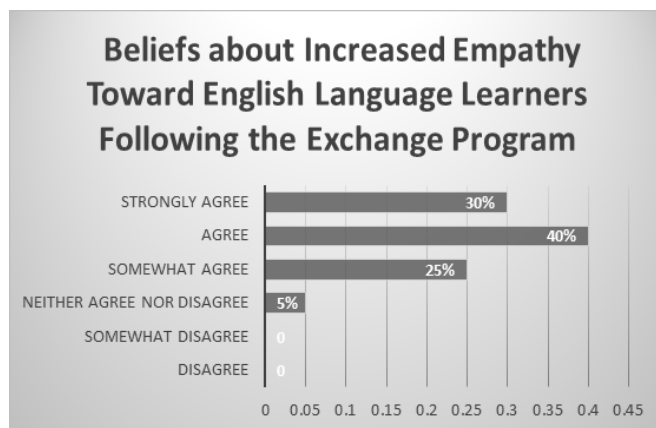
### **Little or No Change to Teaching Practices**

Although most of the participants in this study indicated transformational learning experiences, some participants did not feel that their teaching practices had changed or were uncertain whether they had experienced any growth. One participant said: “My teaching practices have largely remained the same.” Another participant reported: “I’m not sure how my teaching practices have shifted as a result of the program. I feel like the information was quite one-way. [...] My colleagues [local instructors] did not take initiative (or perhaps feel comfortable) to teach me about their practices and pedagogies.”

In addition to the impact of the program, participants were also influenced by their own life histories (Holland & Lave, 2001), including their own education, previous teaching experiences, and beliefs about teacher education. Participants who viewed themselves as the “knowers” or “experts” vis-à-vis the teachers and students they worked with during their exchange program might not have been receptive to considering how their experiences in the exchange program might have influenced their teaching practices. Having potential for transformation is not enough to make an experience transformative (Taylor, 1994). If the participant was not willing to assimilate the new experience into their existing mindset, then no transformation could have occurred.

### Empathy for Language Learners

Because increased empathy had featured predominately in previous studies on exchange programs, I sought to find out about how participants in this study regarded empathy and English language learners. Participants responded to the following statement: “Following my exchange program experience, I have greater empathy for my students’ challenges in learning a new language and/or adjusting to a new culture.” The majority of respondents (70 percent) agreed with this statement, with 30 percent strongly agreeing, and 40 percent agreeing.



**Fig. 4: Beliefs about increased empathy toward English language learners**

Like the previous studies involving pre-service English language teachers’ exchange experiences (Jiang & DeVillar, 2011; Marx & Pray, 2011; Palmer & Menard-Warwick, 2012; Pilonieta, et al., 2017) and in-service teachers of various disciplines (He et al., 2017), many participants in this study indicated increased empathy for English language learners. Follow-up responses to this survey item provided nuanced perspectives regarding participants’ perceptions of empathy for English language learners.

Participants in this study had a number of years of experience as English teaching professionals before engaging in the exchange program, and many of them might have had prior overseas experience. A participant, who strongly agreed that their empathy had increased, explained: “It [the exchange program] has really made me appreciate the challenges our

international students face as they enter my current school.” Some respondents felt they had empathy for English language learners before the exchange program: “I have lived and worked abroad before these experiences, so while my understanding of these challenges may have increased a little, I think I was already at a higher level than I would have been if this were my first experience.” However, some respondents recognized that the exchange program could be a reminder of what it is like to be a language learner even though they might have already had multiple experiences in various contexts: “Having direct contact and experiences through exchanges with those learners of varied cultures provides an immediate empathy. Also, I have been an L2 learner in every country I have worked in.” Some respondents seemed to believe that empathy for language learners is fixed: once you have attained it, you always have it. Others, however, seemed to believe that empathy for language learners could continually be renewed through ongoing experiences.

### **Overall Impact of the Exchange Program**

The second goal of this study was to find out about the overall impact of the exchange program.

In this study, more data was gathered related to the impact of the exchange program on teaching practices than the impact of the program overall. This could have resulted from the design of the survey and interview questions, but it could also have been related to the fact that teaching and related professional activities were the prime focus of the exchange program.

### **Development of Cultural Awareness and New Relationships**

The themes related to the overall impact of the program with the most responses were “developed a deeper sense of cultural awareness” and “developed new relationships and connections.” Participants’ responses demonstrated greater awareness of the similarities and differences between participants’ own culture and the culture of the host country, a finding which aligns with previous research (e.g., Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Zhao et al., 2009). These findings are related to Hanvey’s (1982) concept of perspective consciousness, which is the awareness that one’s view of the world is not universal and could be quite different from others’ views. One’s perspective about the world are often shaped by cultural influences that one might not be consciously aware of until an outside experience provides the opportunity to view the self from a different perspective. One participant said: “I think, you know, we don’t realize how American we are until we leave, and then we’re like, oh, these are American tendencies, like, you know, timeliness is very American.” For some participants, the exchange program helped increase feelings of connection to others: “I enjoy meeting people from other countries and cultures and working with them and learning about them and their professional and personal lives.”

### **Expanded Worldview**

In line with previous studies (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Kasan & Lee, 2017; Lee, 2017; Lin, 2018), many participant responses also indicated that the exchange program had led to an expanded worldview. One participant pointed out that the exchange program itself had provided a link to learning more about the world during the program: “Living and

working in another country provides a wealth of knowledge about economics, geography, history, etc.” Another participant indicated that experience in the exchange program had fostered more interest in current events globally: “I read the world news. I mean, I’m following what’s happening in Belarus, because I saw the same thing in Kyrgyzstan, you know, and I’m following what’s happening with Brexit, because I’ve been there many times. I’m following what’s happening in Hong Kong and so on.”

### **Life-altering Decisions**

A few participants mentioned that the program led to life-altering decisions. Two participants mentioned finding a spouse during the program, and another participant decided to start a family following participation in the program: “I was very lonely during the exchange program. The isolation motivated me to start my own family after returning to the US. I got married and had two children within five years of returning home.”

### **Personal Growth**

For some participants, the program had spurred personal growth. For one participant, the exchange program increased their self-efficacy to engage in new and difficult challenges: “At the time, it was one of the most difficult things I have done, but I have gone on to do things that were even more challenging.” This aligns with the findings of the Cusher and Mahon (2002) study, which shows that transformational learning experiences can lead to greater resilience and persistence in the face of challenges. For another participant, the exchange program helped to achieve perspective: “I think my program also gave me a new perspective on ‘letting things go’ and trying to focus on my priorities.” Another realized success is not always measured by grand achievements: “I learned to accept small successes.”

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research**

This study was limited by the number of participants. The experiences and opinions of those who participated in the study do not necessarily reflect the experiences of English language teaching alumni of exchange programs as a whole. A larger data set could provide more insight. Furthermore, this study did not collect pre-departure data that could have provided information on changes from pre-departure beliefs and attitudes to post-exchange life. An intervention study could provide more insight into the impact of the program. A longitudinal study could provide a better understanding of whether such programs have a long-term impact and what that impact might be.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this study has shown that participation in an exchange program can be an effective method of professional development for in-service English language teachers. The majority of participants indicated both professional and personal growth as the result of participation in an exchange program. On the professional level, most of the participants indicated that the exchange program had an impact on their teaching practice and provided the opportunity to investigate existing beliefs and practices. For many, the exchange program created or renewed empathy towards English language learners. Participants further reported developing new skills or enhancing existing ones over the course of their exchange, and for some participants, experiences gained in the program led

to career development opportunities. On a personal level, participants reported developing a deeper perspective on cultural awareness, and for some, participation in the program led to life-altering decisions. Given that participation in an exchange program can lead to such transformational learning experiences for in-service English language teachers, such programs should be highly recommended for English language teachers. As such, administrators should consider promoting exchange programs for in-service English language teaching professionals.

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