



Language Teacher's Experience When Teaching in International Contexts

Evelyn Cano

University of Guanajuato, Language Department, Guanajuato, MEXICO

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Abstract

This qualitative research explores the experience of four language teachers working in international settings in order to learn how this practice can contribute to their teaching perspective and competence. Teachers from countries such as Canada, Mexico and Italy who have taught English, Portuguese and Italian in different countries in the Americas, Europe and Asia participated in this study. For this purpose, the study inquiries into the beneficial aspects and challenges they have faced and how this has become a factor of progress in their professional trajectory. Aspects related to the motivation to teach in international contexts, the language barrier and culture shock are also approached. The results suggest that language teaching in international contexts is an enriching experience that has contributed to broadening their knowledge, abilities and viewpoints, and becoming aware of the multicultural and linguistic diversity of our world.

Keywords: International education, language teaching in international settings, language barrier, culture, teacher experiences.

1. Introduction

Language teaching in international contexts can be an enriching and interesting experience that can lead language teachers to learn from and interact with students of different nationalities and cultures. Through international teaching, teachers can also learn about different educational systems, strategies and methodologies that can be useful and innovative in their teaching practice. According to Potts (2015), both studying and working abroad offer exploration beyond the standard classroom experience. This type of experience involves not only practice but the person's thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Through international experiences, teachers acquire new skills and knowledge that can contribute to their teaching vision and practice, as King (2004, cited in Hamza, 2010) states, such experiences can lead to the reconfirmation of their current perspectives or to the development of new ways of understanding leading to transformative learning. That is, these experiences abroad can have a positive impact on their practice by applying what they have learned in a different context from the one in which they were developed, thus implementing new strategies, and activities or seeing everything from a different perspective.

2. Literature review

The following section will present the main concept of the research which involves subthemes linked to culture, advantages, limitations, and issues that will be throughout the study.

2.1 *Internationalization in education*

According to Jibeen and Khan (2015), the definition of internationalization in education refers to the process of integrating an international or intercultural aspect into teaching and research. Some activities linked to internationalization range from overseas programmes, online courses with other universities or institutions, international partnerships or courses that emphasize the advancement of international students and international faculty perspectives and competencies, such as the promotion of foreign language programmes and access to international education and access to intercultural understanding.

Cook (2007, cited in Frederiksen, 2014) found that internationalization in teachers permitted them to acquire wider cultural awareness, learn new teaching strategies, acquire more international connections and furthermore, learn to appreciate other cultures as well as gain a greater appreciation of their own culture. By working in a different context, teachers would develop greater adaptability, as well as openness to other practices, customs and ideologies, which would benefit them not only professionally, but also personally. Allen (2010) agrees that by gaining international experience, teachers’ confidence in their command of the language and enthusiasm for teaching it increases. They also become more aware of the diversity in their classrooms and communities. As Byker and Putman (2019) point out, studying abroad has helped teacher candidates develop an awareness of different perspectives, as they can provide an enriching experience when participating in the teaching and learning process in another country.

Internationalization in education also facilitates and benefits the international characteristics that are sought to be fostered in citizens and that are desirable in the global economy, such as international-mindedness and open-mindedness, second language competence, the flexibility of thought, tolerance and respect for others (Jibeen & Khan, 2015).

2.2 *Culture shock in teaching abroad*

The term culture shock is often used to describe how a person feels when moving to a new country. It applies to people who move abroad for any reason, be it for work or study. Cooper (2023) mentions that culture shock is a kind of adjustment one may feel when subjected to a new way of life and unfamiliar surroundings around them. To some extent, it is a normal process as it is a process of adaptation of the individual to the new society to which he or she has moved. *When one is suddenly immersed in a foreign culture, one may tend not to recognize the idea of what is actually considered quite normal in that culture. One could not be familiar with the cues used in that society* (Miller, 1993: 4). In the educational setting, when a teacher moves to a new country, culture shock may be reflected in the new teaching methods and work modality, students’ behaviours, traditions or customs, and even language differences within the classroom.

2.3 *Language barrier*

The language barrier can be described as the difficulty in communicating due to the different mother tongues and contexts of the speakers. Ahmad (2019) explains that language barriers are elements that prevent people from understanding each other. They are a common challenge for individuals, groups, international companies, governments, nations and the world as a whole. While language barriers are present in normal educational contexts, they become more

common in international environments where the relocating teacher must adapt not only to the culture and society but also to the language in order to function in activities both inside and outside the classroom. Within the classroom, the language teacher may face problems in explaining to his or her students if they have a very different mother tongue. Language barriers can create miscommunication problems such as misunderstanding, misinterpretation of messages, distorted messages, misinformation, confusion, mistrust, uncertainty, frustration, weak and misleading feedback, etc. (Ahmad, 2019: 3). In the international academic area, Watkins, Razee and Richerts (2012) state that “the language barrier is the biggest challenge.”

3. Methodology

As main objectives, the present work aims to inquire into the experiences of teachers who have taught different languages in international settings to explore these *experiences* in order to learn their personal stories and to understand the benefits and possible challenges they face and how this contributes to their teaching competence. From there, this project aims to answer the following research questions:

Research question 1: What are the experiences of language teachers working in international settings?

Research question 2: How can teaching in an international context benefit the teacher’s teaching practice?

3.1 Paradigm and method

Since the focus area in this project is individuals and their experiences, the research paradigm is qualitative. According to Farrugia (2019), the qualitative paradigm allows the exploration of the detail and richness of the data collected. That is, focused on exploring, investigating, and inquiring into personal aspects.

In order to delve into the anecdotes and stories related to the objectives of the project, the method used was narrative inquiry. The interweaving of narrative views of phenomena and narrative inquiry marks the emerging field that draws attention to the need for careful uses and distinctions of terms (Clandinin, 2006).

3.2 Context and participants

The participants of this research were four teachers from three different countries who have worked teaching foreign languages in various countries on three continents, America, Europe and Asia.

Teacher name	Country of origin	Countries where work or have worked	Language teaching	Teachings context
Grayson	Canada	Canada, Vietnam, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Peru	English	10 years of teaching experience. He teaches young adults in the Highschool and University level.
Vanesa	Mexico	Mexico and China	English	9 yrs. teaching experience, She taught young learners at a Kindergarten in China.
Isaiah	Mexico	Austria	Portuguese	Teaching Portuguese to young adults from at the University of Salzburg.

Luca	Italy	Mexico and Italy	Italian	10 years of teaching experience. He teaches Italian to Mexican students at the University of Guanajuato.
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3.3 Data collection techniques and Tools

A semi-structured interview method was used in this study to collect information and experiences from the teachers. The interviews were conducted virtually. Prior to the interviews, a Google form was created to collect general data from the teachers. The information collected in the form was useful for the interviews, as the context of the teachers, the languages they taught, the countries they had worked in, and their years of experience were already known. Nine open-ended questions were asked for the interviews, covering topics such as the reasons for teaching in international settings, the positive aspects they have benefited from and the challenges they have faced. In addition, cultural issues such as culture shock and language barrier were included.

Both the interview and the form were revised and corrected before being used. Teachers were contacted via email and WhatsApp.

The interviews and the forms were addressed to the 4 participants, who gave their consent to be recorded. Before the start of each interview, the participant was informed about the aim of the present study, how the interview would be conducted and the importance and significance of the recordings. The languages used for the questions and during the interviews were English and Spanish. The average duration of each interview was 45 minutes per participant via the Zoom platform.

3.4 Data analysis

The recordings of each interview were transcribed and these in turn were examined by coding the information. In the next step, the most relevant information related to the research questions was filtered out. Afterwards, an attempt was made to assign codes and keywords that would help the next step of finding patterns among the participants' replies. The patterns were grouped for better organization and information processing. Finally, from the extracted excerpts of participants' experiences and narratives, the study was studied and analyzed.

4. Findings and results

In the next section, the results of the study will be presented with the objective of answering the research question: What are the experiences of language teachers teaching in international contexts? Four themes were identified: motivations, benefits, challenges, and finally, teachers' recommendations regarding their experience abroad.

4.1 Motivations to move abroad

Participants stated that they made the decision to teach in intercultural contexts as a result of curiosity and exploration of other places, a desire to travel, personal growth, to get out of their comfort zone, etc. For one of the teachers, it was a personal challenge to face such a radical change in order to improve his own language skills:

“I wanted to test myself with the language in a country where Spanish was spoken.”
(Luca, Int., 4)

For Luca, moving abroad started as a personal objective to improve his Spanish skills; his main motivation was intrinsic and led him to live in a Spanish native speaker country. Later on, he found his passion in teaching and since then, he lives in Mexico not only learning the language but also teaching his native language which is Italian.

A pattern was also found among the two other teachers, related to the desire to travel:

"I wanted to travel, I thought it was going to be exciting to live somewhere else."
(Grayson, Int. 1)

Grayson always had the goal of travelling, for that reason, he quit his old job as a journalist and decided to start exploring new horizons. Later on, he realized that as a native English speaker, he was able to teach English as a foreign language in the countries he wanted to visit. In addition, he also found he enjoyed teaching and learning.

Similar to Grayson's dreams, Vanesa also demonstrated a desire to move abroad to explore other countries and places:

"The truth is that I always had the desire to go abroad. That was my main motivation, to go abroad, to leave Mexico, to get to know somewhere else." (Vanesa, Int. 3).

In the beginning, Vanesa had plans to move to an English-speaking country to improve her language skills and be able to teach it. She could not find opportunities to go to the US or the UK; however, she found an offer to go to Asia, and her motivation to go somewhere else led her to move to the other side of the world and teach at a Chinese kindergarten for two years.

For Isaiah, however, it was very different. He started his journey as a musician looking for opportunities in his field; however, over time, he started getting interested in language learning and then, language teaching too.

"I'm a musician. My dream has always been the Big School that is Germany, especially for classical music. That was my main motivation, the music." (Isaiah, Int. 2)

Although his motivation to go to Germany started as part of his career as a musician, Isaiah also discovered he liked learning languages, and his progress in learning three more languages took him to inquire into teaching as well.

As Baker (2000) stated, teaching abroad provides teachers with the opportunity to acquire a more global perspective not only in the academic field but also by travelling, living, and participating professionally in another country. As can be analyzed from the previous experiences, they become not only teachers abroad but also got involved in a new society and culture. Moreover, it can be perceived interest in internationalization. According to Byker and Putman (2019), internationalization involves initiatives to foster a deeper sense of global awareness, i.e., issues such as cultural understanding, and language learning and teaching are involved.

4.2 Benefits of teaching internationally

International environments can offer great advantages to teachers, from the opportunity to learn about other educational systems and adapt to new methodologies to developing strategies that are in concordance with students from around the world and improving their practice. However, the teachers interviewed also highlighted the impact of this international practice on a personal level. Through teaching in other systems and environments, teachers stated that they learned, improved, and were constantly inquiring about other cultures, people, traditions, and practices. Isaiah explained that:

“The positives are relative to measuring up; however, confronting people with different ideas can offer a lot academically, but also personally. Meeting people in an international environment is a very big growth factor. It is a positive influence to grow not only teaching the language but also spreading knowledge, culture and lifestyles.” (Isaiah, Int. 2)

Being a teacher means not only sharing knowledge with students but also learning from them day-to-day. As Isaiah stated, he had the opportunity to learn about his learners’ cultures, mainly German and Austrian, which made him improve professionally as well as personally by getting to know other perspectives and mindsets.

For Vanesa, working abroad was also beneficial not only for her teaching practice but also on an individual level, as she stated:

“I always felt welcomed and valued, which is not always the case in Mexico. I also felt valued personally and financially. A salary in Mexico is not the same as in China. There (in China), a teacher is respected, well paid, loved and welcomed.” (Vanesa, Int. 3)

Vanesa was able to contrast the two academic environments where she has worked and could reflect on big differences such as pay and treatment. For her, those aspects made her feel valued and motivated her to adapt to the new international setting.

Cook (2007, cited in Frederiksen 2014) found that by working in international settings, teachers gained broader cultural awareness, learned new teaching strategies, gained more international connections, and learned to appreciate other cultures. Grayson, for his part, explained that one cannot know every place in the world, but travelling gives you the opportunity to meet people from other places and, at the same time, that gives you the feeling of knowing a small part of every place in the world, as he expressed:

“It’s impossible to know a place until a person from that part tells you about it. I feel like I get to know more about a country with the people. For me, the biggest advantage as a teacher is that I learn things.” (Grayson, Int. 1)

By working in a different context, teachers must develop a greater ability to adapt, as well as an openness to other practices, customs and ideologies, which will benefit them not only professionally, but also personally. Allen (2010), states that by acquiring international experiences, the teacher's confidence in their command of the language and their enthusiasm for teaching it increases. In addition, they become more aware of the diversity in their classrooms and communities.

Teaching abroad not only provides teachers with new strategies and methodologies but also offered them the opportunity to reflect on aspects such as valuing their people and their jobs, culture and different ways of life, making this practice a meaningful experience in their career.

4.3 Challenges of the international teaching practice

4.3.1 *The language barrier*

One of the main challenges highlighted in the teachers’ anecdotes was the language barrier, which can be described as the difficulty to communicate due to speakers’ different languages. Walkins, Razee and Richters (2012) addressed the language barrier as the biggest challenge when moving and working abroad. In Luca’s experience:

“One of the challenges was being surrounded by people who don’t speak my native language, having to explain cultural things that are difficult to understand in contexts.” (Luca, Int. 4)

Vanessa also expressed that:

“At first, it was difficult and frustrating, it took me a while to learn Chinese phrases.”

At the very beginning, none of the teachers were conversationally fluent in the language of the countries they had moved to, and although they taught languages such as English, Italian and Portuguese, they recognized that the official language was always necessary for the rest of their activities. Isaiah shared how his international experience made him develop switching skills:

“I now have the ability to change language fast and all the languages I know, were because of these human connections, I left Mexico without knowing English and only an A1 in German.” (Isaiah, Int. 4)

Inside the classroom, the use of the language they taught predominated, although as expected questions arose and sometimes students did not understand, without having a common language to communicate, patience, empathy and kindness became necessary. Watkins, Raze, and Richters (2012) suggest that education programs need to provide greater access to bilingual assistants in classes where teachers do not speak their students' native language since it can be hard and frustrating for teachers trying to communicate with their students without having a common language to express themselves. From her experience in Asia, Vanesa said:

“In China, teachers are never left alone, and having an assistant was a great support. The assistant translated the more complicated things so that they could follow me, but what mattered a lot was your body expression and the activities. You needed to be supported by everything external. The three keys for me were body language, facial gestures and the assistant.” (Vanesa, Int. 3)

Grayson who has worked in countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia with students whose native language is different from English also shared what is his key to the language barrier:

“Patience, that's the key. Be super patient and super friendly. If you can be patient all the time, you can overcome those problems. That's the way to success.” (Grayson, Int. 1)

Grayson responded from the perspective of the learner in the classroom to communicate with his or her teacher who speaks a different language; therefore, he points to patience and kindness as strategies for teachers to communicate with their students by being empathetic and kind.

4.3.2 Culture shock

Culture shock is a form of emotional moves created by stimulating of a new culture to someone's own culture having no sense and considered as a new experience (Sulaiman & Saputri, 2019). On their way through teaching in international environments, each teacher faced certain culture shocks that in some way led them to learn more about the cultures that surrounded them, their students and even themselves. From small differences in how students address teachers in the classroom such as Grayson's experience:

“In Vietnam, students do this (shows his arm up) and say emoe, emoe... and that's it for you to come over. And the first time someone do that I was like... don't call me over like that... cause in Canada I will never do that, it's so rude.” (Grayson, Int. 1)

For Grayson, it was a culture shock since in his country, it would be considered disrespectful to talk like that to a teacher; however, he was in another country where students were able to do it to ask their teachers for help. Thus, he needed to get used to it and accept these differences within the classroom.

Culture shock can be seen also in terms of personality, adaptation and spontaneity. Isaiah, who has lived in countries like Germany and Austria for over 6 years now, commented:

“I think that something very different is his way of structuring things. And you can see, I think, from their language, German, which is something very structured. It is that degree of structuring, there are very complex shocks to adapt, the adaptation, the little spontaneity that in Latin America there is.” (Isaiah, Int. 2)

Isaiah links the German language, which tends to follow a complex and strict structure, to the way German people are, that is, very structured when talking about plans and ideas. For him, it was a significant culture shock and also a challenge to adapt, coming from a country like Mexico whose culture is more spontaneous and spur-of-the-moment.

For her part, Vanesa spoke of the adjustments she had to make not only in her teaching practice but also in her personality in order to adapt to the Chinese preschool education system:

“The discipline is different, the approach... the parents always wanted to take photos of you, it took me a bit of work to adjust to this. In China there is a lot of closeness with the children, the parents are happy if they see you hug the children, so what I adjusted the most was my personality. In the beginning, they told me, “the parents say that sometimes you are not so close to the children”... there they always wanted to see you happy. After two classes, I had already given everything. It was using a lot of energy. And well, in the end, I realized that I don't like teaching children, because it is very draining.” (Vanesa, Int. 3)

Victoria was surprised when she realizes that in China, parents ask the teachers to be very close to their children; it indicates that young learners feel comfortable and happy at school. In addition, in Chinese education, it is essential that teachers demonstrate energy and happiness. For Victoria, it was a big challenge in the beginning since she was asked to be energetic and active the whole day; thus, she needed to adapt her personality to fit the Chinese requirements.

Luca also shared the cultural differences he found with his Mexican students and how at first it was a shock to find certain attitudes:

“It is common for students to give gifts to teachers, whether it is for Teachers’ Day, birthdays or friendship days, and it is rude not to accept them. In Italy, this practice is not common and it is not impolite not to accept a gift, once here (in Mexico) I was forced to accept a gift that was honestly of no use to me because otherwise, the person who was going to give it to me would have been offended.” (Luca, Int. 4)

According to Hornby (2010, cited in Sulaiman and Saputri, 2019), the process of acculturation can be defined as the act of learning to live successfully in a different culture. Despite the differences encountered at the beginning, the teachers were able to adapt and understand these cultural contrasts. Grayson concluded that:

“I do think everyone is kind of the same, it just takes different methods to unlock them. Mexican students, for example, respond to like kindness very fast. And maybe some other cultures are more reserved. Every country and every place has its own people that are going to be different.” (Grayson, Int. 1)

His international experience of travelling and working in different countries has led Grayson to understand and appreciate the cultural differences within his classrooms. It has also led him to learn about people’s different ways of being and thus better adapt to his students. As he calls it, “unlocking people” in terms of their cultural background, something he has learned from long experience interacting with students from many different places.

4.4 Discussion, results, and recommendations

According to the participants, teaching in multicultural environments is not only related to teaching a language abroad. It is a constant learning experience and, therefore, a process in which the teacher can be enriched by new techniques, methodologies and strategies while learning about your students and their cultures.

“It is an opportunity to do good. You can teach people to respect each other and learn. And yes, if they feel like travelling, travelling is a little bit of work, right? conditions can be harder, but overall if someone wants to do so, I say yes, go for it.” (Grayson, Int. 1)

“It’s very beautiful, it’s very interesting, it’s a very intense experience. Maybe it’s not for everyone, but I would recommend it. There are many aspects, it can be in other contexts, not necessarily with children, but I highly recommend it. It is very satisfying to see how the children are learning, and how the parents thank you. Whenever you leave your country, you feel more appreciated in other places, I don’t know, it’s strange, but that’s how it happens.” (Vanesa, Int. 3)

The teachers expressed that this experience has been of great value in their career and that it could be beneficial for future language teachers as an experience to improve and master their language skills in different settings.

“Obviously for a language learner it is essential to go out, isn’t it? And going out to a country of the language you are learning, is unquestionably vital. You have to be alive to these changes, and by that I mean to keep learning and practicing every day. That’s why an experience abroad would be very good, but I think we also have to rely on the language teaching of our countries.” (Isaiah, Int. 3)

“I would recommend it to all people who are willing to accept that there are different cultures and views of the world and life different from their own, it is an enriching experience that adds up and from which you can take and see aspects of life that you would not have been able to grasp being in your home country.” (Luca, Int. 4)

As it was analyzed through teachers’ experiences, there are great advantages and opportunities to teach internationally. According to Byker and Putman (2019), teaching has been described as a “global profession”; thus, it seems a natural extension to integrate international teaching experiences into the teaching practice. However, it is also important to consider that it might not be an experience for everyone, since it requires an open mind, the ability to adapt to a new culture, break stereotypes and prejudices and, above all, the will to get out of the comfort zone.

5. Conclusion

The research questions have been answered with insights into the different experiences of teachers who have worked in different countries and cultures. Through their experiences, patterns were found that indicate that teaching in international environments can bring both positive and challenging aspects. However, the positive aspects were greater. The advantages highlighted were the opportunity to explore, broaden one’s perspective and vision, acquire new skills, enrich one’s knowledge and test oneself. It was also possible to analyze that teaching abroad requires more than just adapting to new educational systems. It is a process that requires a great deal of commitment and willingness to fit into a new place, work with students from other cultures, overcome prejudices and stereotypes, and develop awareness and empathy for global issues. Finally, it can be concluded that language teaching in international settings is a process of constant exchange between teachers and learners which brings great academic and personal benefits.

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