

“Why did I speak English to the cat?”: The Impact of An Immersion Experience on The English Language Development of Preservice PGDE (English) Teachers in Hong Kong.

Wai-nga Gloria CHAN

Department of English, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

chan_gloria@cuhk.edu.hk

Abstract

This paper discusses the English language development of four non-native speaker (NNS) English as a foreign language (EFL) student teachers in a one-year full-time Postgraduate Diploma in (Secondary) Education (PGDE) program in Hong Kong. The participants received all of their education in Hong Kong, and had no or limited teaching experience before the program. Three of them had never been to any English-speaking countries prior to the PGDE immersion program in the UK. In their six-week stay, they lived with their host families and participated in a specially-designed immersion program.

Findings of two phases of data collected in an in-progress longitudinal research were reported. Data collection included: in-depth individual semi-structured interviews, documents (e.g. reflective writings, personal blogs, Facebook notes/status, field notes), and survey questionnaires. It was found that while the homestay experience could enhance the informal English skills and self-confidence in the use of English for some participants, some might have doubted about their English proficiency and become less confident about their English proficiency because of the experience. Implications for the education of NNS preservice EFL teachers and teacher educators are suggested.

Keywords

overseas immersion, homestay experience, preservice teacher, second language acquisition, EFL teacher/ learner identity, teacher training

Introduction

Overseas immersion experience is gaining more and more popularity in language teacher education programs worldwide, particularly for the preservice English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers who are Non-Native Speakers (NNS) of English. It is

believed that such an overseas immersion experience could provide student teachers with opportunities to have sociocultural, language, and educational development (Bodycott and Crew, 2001; McKay, Bowyer, & Kerr, 2001). In their study of four preservice PGDE (Primary) teachers in Hong Kong, Tang & Choi (2004) found that the immersion experience could provide preservice teachers with the opportunities to have functional interactions in an authentic setting, so that their language abilities, especially fluency and confidence, could be enhanced.

Some scholars, however, doubted the effectiveness in terms of the language development (Drake, 1997) due to the duration of the short immersion program.

As shown in the literature, factors influencing the language development in overseas immersion programs are rich and complex – e.g., the individual differences in personalities, language proficiencies, learning experiences, demographic background, host environment, etc (Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg, 1995; Revers, 1998; Tanaka, 2007). Due to the limited space in this paper, these factors will not be discussed.

Instead, the impact of the homestay experiences on the preservice teachers' English language development will be looked into in this paper, with the focus on the following questions:

- 1) What are the expectations the participants had regarding their English language development before the immersion?
- 2) What are their perceived gains in their English language development after the immersion?

1 The Study

Findings of two phases of data collection of an in-progress one-year longitudinal research on the professional identity development of four non-native speaker (NNS) English as a foreign language (EFL) student teachers in a one-year full-time Postgraduate Diploma in (Secondary)

Education (PGDE) program in Hong Kong in the academic year 2010 to 2011 will be reported in this paper, with the focus on the English language development of the participants.

1.1 The participants

The four participants, together with all other students in the program, were invited to complete a demographic survey questionnaire to collect the demographic and background information at the beginning of the PGDE program in September 2010.

The four participants were then selected for following criteria: 1) Hong Kong Chinese students 2) full-time PGDE students; 3) received all schooling in Hong Kong; 4) learned English as a second/foreign language; 5) with no or limited formal teaching experience; 6) their demographic background, their prior experiences related to language learning and teaching; and 7) their willingness and openness to self-disclose.

Table One shows the profile of the case participants, with their names replaced by pseudonyms.

Table 1: Profile of case participants

	Ella	Tina	Lisa	Gary
Sex	F	F	F	M
Age	24	22	22	22
Mother tongue	Cantonese	Cantonese	Cantonese	Cantonese
Exposure in English-speaking countries prior to the immersion program	Nil	Two 1-2 week short trips to Europe and the USA	Nil	Nil

1.2 The immersion program

After receiving two months of teacher training in the PGDE program Hong Kong, the participants went for a six-week immersion program in the UK from 2 November to 15 December 2010 as part of the PGDE program requirements. They could choose to stay with a local homestay family with native English speakers either by themselves, or together with another PGDE student from the program during their immersion.

The immersion programs centered around three main aspects – 1) academic courses, 2) school visits, and 3) cultural learning/ visits. The participants attended five hours of lecture each weekday, and had no classes during the weekends.

1.3 Data collection and analysis

The participants were invited to complete a set of

questionnaires and took part in a semi-structured individual interview prior to and after their immersion program in mid-October 2010 and in late January 2011 respectively. Questions were focused on EFL teaching and learning and their language use patterns; their feelings, experiences and perceptions of their English language development during the immersion; as well as self-efficacy and self-perceptions as EFL teachers/ learners, etc. They were also invited to elaborate on and explain the answers they gave in the questionnaires.

Quantitative and qualitative data collected were then triangulated and analyzed to reflect the impact of the immersion experience on their English language development.

2 Findings and analysis

During the six-week of their stay in the UK, the participants attended language enhancement and other academic courses, participated in different school and cultural visits, stayed with the native speakers of English in their host family. These experiences have impacted on their English language development, and their perceptions of their own English proficiencies and their identities as EFL teachers/ learners. Due to the limited space in this paper, only the impact of their homestay experience, which was the first time when they lived together with native speakers of English, will be focused on.

2.1 Expectations for English language development before the immersion

All the participants, except Tina, had never been to any English-speaking countries prior to the immersion program. This journey was the first time when they had a chance to study and live abroad for six weeks, and to live together with a host family.

When asked about what expectations they have for the immersion in the pre-immersion interviews, the participants generally responded that they would like to have their oral English improved, to have more chances to use English, and to see how English was actually used in an English-speaking world. With the exposure to the English-speaking context, they hoped to have their listening and oral English proficiencies improved so as to prepare themselves as better EFL teachers.

Data collected also reflected that their expectations for the immersion experience varied according to their background, personal experiences, self-perceived English proficiencies, and self-perceptions as EFL teacher/ student.

2.2 Impact of the immersion experience on the participants' English language development

After the six-week stay with their host families, all participants reported an improvement in their informal conversational English, oral and listening skills, while there were not much change in their formal English, reading and writing skills, and their grammatical knowledge.

Interestingly, some participants responded that they tended to focus more on meaning instead of grammatical correctness after the intensive interaction with the host family in the immersion.

2.2.1 Increased awareness of the differences in textbook and real-life English

Living in an English-speaking context provided the participants with more opportunities to use English in their daily lives. The participants reported that their awareness in the differences between textbook and real-life English, as well as the different word choices, and registers in different contexts were raised.

Lisa wrote in her reflective journal about her learning of the different uses of the terms “dinner”, “supper” or “tea” in referring to the evening meals from her host family. Other participants also cited examples demonstrating their awareness of the differences between the English they learned from textbooks and their daily lives in the UK.

2.2.2 Improved question-asking skills

Having learned English mostly in a classroom context, where “students are usually the ones who answer questions”, some of the participants were surprised to find their question-asking skills improved after the immersion.

To them, such a skill not only enabled to start having conversations more easily with native speakers, but also make them more competent EFL teachers in the future, as “teachers often have to ask questions”.

2.2.3 Increased use of English and the self-assessment and reassessment of English proficiencies

Despite the fact that all the participants reported that they used their mother tongue, Cantonese, with other PGDE classmates most of their time in the UK, except with the presence of the host family or the course instructors; they regarded the six weeks they spent with their homestay experience a valuable opportunity for them to use English in their daily lives, and be exposed to different varieties, accents, and uses of English.

All the participants reported an increased use of English during their homestay. They became

more used to using English, finding it “more natural to speak English” in their daily lives. Tina remarked a “funny” thing she did one day in her facebook status: “Why did I talk to the cat in English just then?” Lisa also noticed that she had more code-switching from Cantonese to English when she was talking with her PGDE classmates after the immersion programme.

The interview and questionnaire survey data showed that Lisa, Gary, and Tina became more confident of their language proficiency and less worried about making mistakes when using English with their hosts. Their self-confidence in the use of English was also enhanced with an increased exposure to different accents and varieties of English, and the experiences of communicating effectively with different native English speakers.

In spite of these positive impact of the homestay experiences on their English development by three of the participants, the intensive interactions with the host family actually made Ella reassessed and doubted her proficiency in the language.

Being dissatisfied with her own English proficiencies before the immersion program, Ella saw the immersion and homestay experiences as valuable opportunities for her to improve her vocabulary and oral English skills. In a pre-departure interview, she expressed her strong desire to “use as much English as possible”, and chose to live together with the host family by herself so that she could force herself to speak English all the time in the UK; however, as she revealed in the post-immersion interview, she was not able to have as much contact as she would like to have with her host family. Sometimes she felt like “chicken talking with ducks” [Cantonese slang, meaning “people cannot understand each other”], and she had to use body language and gestures to communicate with her host family. She also made the following comments in the interview: “the more chances I [Ella] had to talk with them [the host family], the more I [she] understand how poor my [her] English was.”

Despite her plan to have her oral English improved before the immersion, Ella recalled that sometimes she would not bother to clarify the meaning when there was confusion in her communication with the host family to “save trouble”.

3 Conclusions

This paper explores the impact of the immersion experience of four preservice teachers on their English language development. Due to the limited space in this paper, only the impact of the homestay experiences are discussed.

Generally, the participants reported improvement in their informal English skills, as well as listening and oral English skills after the immersion and homestay experiences. Most of them felt more confident in their own use of English, except for one participant, Ella, who felt less certain about her English proficiency after the intensive interaction with her host family due to her limited oral skills and English vocabulary.

Ella's case underscores the need for more personal assistance and support for individual students in the pre-, during, and post- stages of their immersion and homestay experiences. Feeling not very sure about their English proficiencies or their abilities to communicate in the host language, some of the participants might become demotivated to improve their language especially when they encounter difficulties or frustration in communicating with the native speakers on a daily basis.

Sharing sessions or individual consultation session could be arranged before, during, and after their immersion and homestay experiences, so that participants could have a chance to talk about their expectations (and more realistic expectations about the possible gains from the experiences), clarify their concerns, be provided with practical help and suggestions on ways to achieve their goals, and be encouraged to put in more efforts to achieve their goals when they encounter difficulties.

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