Effects of Study Abroad on Teachers' Self-perceptions: A Study of Chinese EFL Teachers

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Abstract—This study reports on an enquiry into a group of 91 Chinese secondary EFL teachers with SA experience in the UK. Drawing on questionnaire data and 20 teachers' interview narratives, the study examines how SA (study abroad) influenced their self-perceptions on EFL teaching in three aspects, namely, language proficiency, teaching ideology and NES (native English speaking)-NNES (nonnative English speaking) teacher debate. The enquiry revealed that the length of SA was a powerful factor in determining teachers' attitudes toward their jobs and their own capacities to perform them successfully. These findings were discussed with suggestions for making SA experience an effective and sustainable path for EFL teachers' professional development. Based on the findings, implications and suggestions are proposed, which are applicable not only to Chinese EFL teachers but beyond.

Index Terms—study abroad, EFL teacher, self-perception

I. INTRODUCTION

English language education has become a subject of paramount importance in China, and proficiency in English has been widely regarded as a national as well as a personal asset (Shen & Wang, 2009; Xu & Liu, 2009). The teaching of English as a foreign language in China has become a nationwide endeavour pursued at all academic levels, especially at the elementary and secondary level. Meanwhile administrators and teachers themselves are increasingly aware that it is well-trained teachers who hold the key to the outcome of high-quality ELT education (Xu & Liu, 2009; Wen, 2012). In recent years, the Ministry of Education has undertaken commendable measures to improve the quality of English teacher training programmes. One measure is the provision of SA experience. Under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, the local government and their respective institutions, more and more Chinese EFL teachers have been sent to English-speaking countries (e.g., UK, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) to improve their English proficiency and fluency. During the decade of 2000 to 2010, more than 3,000 Chinese EFL teachers have been sent to various UK institutions to study TESOL and nearly half of them are secondary school teachers (Xu & Liu 2009; Wen, 2012).

The potential benefits of study abroad are considerable, but its effects do not appear to be uniform across individuals. For Chinese EFL teachers in the UK, they have to adapt to an entirely new environment. They have to change from a language teacher in China to a language learner/user in the UK, which is a great challenge for them. It would be useful for EFL teachers themselves, EFL teacher educators, and study abroad program designers to understand the impact of study abroad on these teachers' language proficiency. It would be valuable as well to understand the ways in which SA experience impacts other aspects of teachers' professional lives. For example, as a result of participating in a study abroad program, do they change their teaching practices? Are they inspired to pursue other avenues of professional development? However, there has been little attention paid to the impact of SA programmes since they were implemented. The present study seeks to investigate this issue, focusing on the effects of living in the UK for a period of time on Chinese EFL teachers' self-perceptions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Global English Teaching

The role of the English language in the process of globalization and the issues surrounding the ubiquitous teaching of English as an international language have attracted much attention from teachers in the field of English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) working in various parts of the world (Richards, 2008; Kang, 2012). Several researchers (Lee, 2009; Allen, 2010; Llurda, 2004) have analysed the role currently played by English worldwide as well as the implications of the international status of English on language teaching. This has amounted to a considerable change of paradigm from considering English the exclusive right and property of native speakers of the language to accepting its transformation into a language of global use, the ownership of which can be claimed by all its speakers, both native and non-native. The English language teaching research community has also felt the impact of this paradigm change. However, one is left with the impression that language teachers are not entirely aware of the paradigm change that is under way, and many may act as though English were still the exclusive property of either British or American native-born citizens. As a consequence, these teachers disregard any recommendations addressing the need to contemplate

English as a global language, which implies that English may actually be learned from many different purposes and in different contexts of the world.

Focusing specifically on English as a foreign language context, and particularly on countries (e.g., China, Japan) in which English is now easily found outside language classrooms; one finds that teachers and learners do not have an urgent need to address communication functions (Allen, 2010; Llurda, 2004; Wen, 2012), unlike in an English as a second language (ESL) program. In these countries, there is a general tendency among EFL teachers to focus on several grammatical aspects accompanied by some cultural information that normally refers to an idealised stereotype of whatever English-speaking country is considered to constitute the model for that class. In China, and probably more so in East Asia, the country of reference is the United Kingdom (Zhang, 2007). Therefore, British English has been the unquestioned language model, despite the gradual use of English for international communication in formal and informal meetings involving officials or citizens of different countries. This is partly supported by the unquestioned assumption of many Chinese EFL teachers that British English, in particular the standard variety with a RP (Received Pronunciation) is the most intelligible and to some extent the most legitimate variety worldwide. In addition, the geographic proximity of Hong Kong, a former colony of the UK, makes it natural for many Chinese teachers to rely on British English as their model for teaching (Zhang 2007).

B. Study Abroad

On the national level, English language education has been viewed by the Chinese leadership as having a vital role to play in national modernization and development. The last several decades has seen persistent efforts to provide English language education in the formal system. Policies on ELT were driven by the perceived importance of English to national modernization, a desire to catch up with developed countries and a pressing sense of urgency. During the mid-1980s, there were increasing criticisms levelled at the low quality of ELT. These criticisms, together with the educational reform launched in 1985, led to a large scale survey conducted under the aegis of the State Education Commission (Shen & Wang, 2009; Zhang, 2007). The study involved 1715 secondary school teachers and more than 57,000 students from 139 schools in 15 provinces. About two-thirds of the schools were key schools and represented the upper end of the educational quality in China. The study revealed that a majority of the teachers had a weak grounding in pedagogy, lacked professional competence for the subject and knew very little about recent developments in foreign language education both home and abroad. Based on the findings, the research team made a number of suggestions for improving the quality of ELT, including teacher development, curriculum reform, syllabus updating and promotion of ELT research. These suggestions were endorsed by the SEC, subsequently; efforts were focused on revamping the curriculums, updating the syllabuses, producing new textbooks and updating teachers' professional training. One of the important means for teachers to improve their professional competence is to study in an English-speaking country. Curriculum and Teaching Materials Reform Commission (1988) states that in order develop language proficiency at the advanced levels, studying abroad in a country in which the language is spoken is essential. This SA initiative has several aims. First, the SA experience is designed to help EFL teachers to sharpen their English language skills in an authentic language environment. Second, it aims to increase their understanding of the culture from which the English language draws its vitality. Third, it intends to widen the teachers' perspective in teaching the target language (Kang, 2012; Lee, 2009; Allen, 2010).

Chinese EFL teachers themselves also experience the need to go to an English-speaking country to improve their proficiency. Most of them do so supported by the Ministry of Education, the local government and their respective institutions. Generally speaking, there are two major types of SA programmes for EFL teachers: year-long (12 months) and one-semester (6 months). The SA application process was selective and competitive. Applicants were required to submit a résumé writing sample in English, why they applied for the SA program and how they planned to use the SA experience to benefit themselves both personally and professionally. Evidence of the following criteria guided the selection process: commitment to teaching (e.g., at least 5 years teaching experience), intellectual curiosity, enthusiasm for English language and culture and a level of proficiency high enough to permit them to fully participate in and benefit from the program (Kang, 2012; Allen, 2010).

Much empirical research (Lee, 2009; Allen, 2010; Sasaki, 2011) has been done to investigate on the effects of studying abroad on language learning which generally points to the conclusion that time spent abroad positively affects the development of language proficiency and that such improvement is also perceived by learners. This is most clearly observable in the case of oral-aural skills (Lee, 2009), whereas reading and writing skills not to improve to the same extent (Sasaki, 2011). Many studies (Lee, 2009; Allen, 2010; Isabelli, 2004) also indicate that the effect of studying abroad goes beyond greater language proficiency, that is enhances intercultural competence as well.

In contrast to the bulk of research on study abroad involves undergraduate students, very few researches have been conducted with experienced teachers. This study discusses the effect of stays abroad on a particular group of language learners, that is, experienced Chinese EFL teachers who had been sent to UK institutions to study. The overall language and culture change that is thought to be produced in learners who stay abroad should also be relevant to these teachers as their experiences with the language determine their vision of the language itself and the language learning process. Many Chinese EFL teachers strongly believe that British English is the preferred variety to use in their classes. A natural consequence of that belief is that the culture incorporated into their language classes should be British. Some studies (Allen, 2010; Isabelli, 2004; Kang, 2012) indicate that long stays in English-speaking countries made

nonnative-speaking-teachers more attached to native speaker ideology, such as preferring nonnative speakers as teachers. Thus, it would appear logical to expect that NNES teachers who spent a few months in UK would develop a higher level of preference for British English and British culture and a generally higher preference for all native varieties of English.

Drawing on a group of Chinese secondary school EFL teachers' SA experience, the present study explores the relationships between length of SA and professional development by answering the following research questions:

- 1) What is the effect of different lengths of SA in UK on English teachers' language proficiency?
- 2) What are the teachers' conception of the target language variety and attitudes regarding the role of English as an international language (EIL) as opposed to English as a native language (ENL), and how are they affected by the length of SA in UK?
- 3) What are their positions on the native-English-speaking (NES)-NNES teacher debate, particularly in terms of which they would prefer as a language teacher and their views on the strengths and weaknesses of NES teachers compared with those of NNES teachers?

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Participants

The participants in this study comprised a convenience sample since they had been asked to voluntarily fill out the questionnaire by their colleagues or co-workers who kindly cooperated in the research. In this, a snowball sampling strategy (whereas several key informants were identified and then were asked to further introduce other potential participants, such as their colleagues, friends or the members of their study groups) was implemented to reach as many SA teachers in UK as possible. Most of the actual questionnaires collected were subject to careful screening, and thereby those found to be either improperly filled or incomplete were eliminated from the sample. This left 91 English teachers as a final sample. All of them had been studied in UK for some time during 2004-2009. The distribution of sexes was unbalanced: 63 of the teachers were women, and 28 were men. The teachers' ages ranged from 25 to 51 years, the mean age was 33.8 years. All the participants' first language is Chinese, teaching English as a foreign language in secondary schools.

Two groups were established based on the declared total length of stays in English-speaking countries. 45 teachers who had been in the UK 6 months or less at the time of the study were assigned to the short-stay group (Group 1), whereas 46 teachers who had been in the UK more than 6 months but less than 15 months were assigned to the long-stay group (Group 2). The average length of stay was 5.11 months for the first group and 9.19 months for the second group. The 6-month dividing point was used because researchers have argued that significantly more language development can occur in a year-long study abroad experience than in a one-semester experience (Isabelli, 2004; Kang, 2012). The detailed composition of each group is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1:
AGE, YEARS OF ENGLISH TEACHING, AND MONTHS IN ENGLISH-SPEAKING COUNTRIES

Groups		M	SD	Min.	Max.
Group 1	Age	31.39	5.55	26	49
	Years of teaching	8.66	4.66	5	23
	Months of SA	5.31	0.07	5.15	6
Group 2	Age	36.27	6.5	25	51
	Years of teaching	9.78	7.1	5	26
	Months of SA	11.19	0.24	10.16	14.18

B. Questionnaire

Significant time was invested in the development of the questionnaire, in the belief that research findings are of little value unless the means through which they are generated are sound. I drew on a range of sources in constructing the instrument. I reviewed the literature on study abroad in order to identify the salient debates in the field. Besides I held intense discussions with two secondary school teachers. The questionnaire consisted of two types of questions: 5-point Likert scales and closed sets of categories (see Appendix I). It was made available to all participants both online and via email attachment. The questions were partially inspired by Llurda (2008) and were designed to focus on the data related to determine the teachers' self-awareness in the following three respects:

- 1) The participants were asked to reflect on their own language skills and their perceptions of how their language skills had evolved over time (Questions 6-10).
- 2) The teachers were asked about their teaching ideology, including aspects such as their perception of the relevance of past teacher training experiences and the target language variety they prefer to use as the model for learners to follow (Questions 11-12).
- 3) They were asked about their views on the native-English-speaking (NES)-NNES teacher debate, particularly in terms of which they would prefer as a language teacher and their views on the strengths and weaknesses of NES teachers compared with those of NNES (Questions 13-18).

The focus of our study's questionnaire on language proficiency and teaching orientations, as well as on the emphasis on NES-NNES issues owes much to previous studies (Lee, 2009; Allen, 2010; Sasaki, 2011).

A version of the questionnaire was piloted with 5 secondary EFL teachers where the author had existing contacts. They were asked to respond in writing to the questions and at the same time provide feedback on unclear or confusing statements. A second version of the questionnaire that took their suggestions into consideration was then produced.

The questionnaire results were analysed by chi-square (χ^2) and analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistical tests to find significant differences between groups. Chi-square tests were used to evaluate frequency data from questions that asked respondents to choose one of a closed set of categories. ANOVA was used for numerical data from Likert-scale questions. The level of significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

C. Interview

In the questionnaires, participants were asked if they would like to participate in a follow-up interview and 69 of them agreed. 20 of them were chosen as our interviewees. 10 of them belonged to Group 1 (Number 1-10) while another 10 of them belonged to Group 2 (Number 11-20). Interviewees were chosen using stratified random sampling. In a stratified sample the criteria for selection are represented in the same proportions as they are in the larger group the sample comes from. This makes the sample more representative of the larger group. Thus, for example, in the larger sample of teachers in the study of Group 1, 18 teachers had nine years of teaching experience, in the sample of 10 interviewees; there were 3 teachers with this range of experience. The purpose of the interviews was to explore in more detail issues addressed in the questionnaire. The interview was semi-structured, which had a structured overall framework but allowed for greater flexibility within that. A semi-structured interview was adopted because it had the advantages of using questions specified in advance and the flexibility for more extensive follow-up of responses. 12 interviews were conducted face-to-face and a further 8 through email interview. The interviews lasted on average 30 minutes. All the interviews were recorded (with permission), transcribed, and later translated into English for analysis.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Perceptions of Their Own Language Skills

Unlike their counterparts in ESL settings, Chinese EFL teachers face unique challenges in negotiating the conflicts and tensions in their dual identities: they are not just English teachers but also English learners themselves (Shen & Wang, 2009; Zhang, 2007). Earlier NNES studies (Lee, 2009; Allen, 2010; Sasaki, 2011) show that target language proficiency is a crucial aspect of NNES professional identity and self-esteem for NNES teachers need to attain a certain threshold level of proficiency in English to be able to teach effectively in it. Question 6 has nine subquestions, which were all related to language proficiency. In all the nine questions, the participants chose a scalar response from 1 to 5. The first dealt with the teachers' general proficiency, while the others referred to a particular aspect of language proficiency. Length of SA in English-speaking countries appeared to be an important factor in the self-assessment of language proficiency. Teachers who had longer SA tended to rate their level of language proficiency higher than those who had shorter SA periods. Table 2 shows statistically significant differences between the two groups in ratings of general proficiency, oral fluency, listening comprehension, reading competence, writing ability, vocabulary size and grammatical development. The difference in response suggests that a minimum period of SA may be required for non-native English speakers to gain the sense of security associated with the experience of having lived in an English-speaking country. In other words, longer periods of SA may significantly contribute to higher levels of self-confidence and help these teachers feel reassured that they are competent users of the English language.

TABLE 2:
SELF-ASSESSMENT OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY VERSUS LENGTH OF SA

	Group 1	Group 2
General proficiency	3.495	4.102
Pronunciation	3.465	3.967
Oral fluency	3.214	4.027
Listening comprehension	3.769	4.258
Reading comprehension	4.273	4.701
Writing	3.542	3.875
Vocabulary size	3.437	3.687
Grammatical accuracy	3.476	4.268
Knowledge of grammar rules	3.934	4.352

Note: 1=very weak; 5=very good. $p < 0.05$

The language proficiency improvement was further confirmed by the fact that the 20 participants in the enquiry provided stories about their effective activities in the interviews. Teachers who had spent longer time in UK tended to think that time abroad was of paramount importance in their language development. When asked about what activities were credited as being the most useful in their own language development, most of them (80%) mentioned the SA

experience directly or indirectly helped them most in reaching their current proficiency level. Examples of such research findings could be illustrated by the following teachers' interview.

When I was in Britain, I tried to make every opportunity to improve my English, I attended classes and lectures, I talked to different English speakers every day, to my landlady, shop assistants, making friends with speakers from different countries. I learned a lot of idiomatic expressions and culture loaded words—and this increased my confidence in my language proficiency. I think overseas study experience helped me most to reach my current level, especially in the aspect of oral fluency and listening comprehension (Teacher 4).

I have rediscovered my love for learning English. My chance to use English in a very practical setting, beyond the classroom, and dealing with the exciting challenge of only being allowed to use this language in UK for an extended period of time, has regrown my love for just speaking, listening, reading and writing in the language (Teacher 9).

I truly feel that living and learning in another country is extremely important to our personal and professional growth. It is so rewarding to be able to discuss the why with my students and to give them a deeper understanding of life in the country that they are studying. And for me, it is a renewal of why have so much passion and love for this beautiful language and culture (Teacher 15).

For these teachers, it seems that studying in UK goes beyond language proficiency—it enhances intercultural competence as well. In contrast, teachers who never went to an English-speaking country usually claimed that teaching practice as the most effective activity in reaching their current level of proficiency (Shen & Wang, 2009; Cross, 2010; Zhang, 2007).

B. Conceptions of Teaching Preferences and English Varieties

Question 11 contained five subquestions in which participants had to rate from 1 (not relevant at all) to 5 (very relevant) the relevance of five aspects of their training as language teachers: university course, book readings, training sessions, teaching practice and studying abroad. The teachers valued teaching practice as the most useful activity in contributing to their personality as language teachers ($\chi^2=4.812$). On the other end were university courses, which was poorly valued ($\chi^2=2.354$). The second best rating was for studying abroad, which provides them with opportunities to “to use English in natural settings” ($\chi^2=3.617$). Practice-oriented activities were the most highly valued, whereas the more theoretical activities received low scores. A regular pattern relating usefulness with practice-oriented activities can be inferred. The mean rating of the relevance of training sessions given by teachers who had spent up to 6 months abroad was 3.7, whereas those with longer stay-abroad experience gave a mean response of 3.1. An ANOVA test confirmed the significant difference between these two groups ($p < 0.05$).

As mentioned above (Wen, 2012; Zhang, 2007), Chinese EFL teachers usually rely on British English as their model for teaching. They believed that British English, in particular the standard variety with a RP is the most intelligible and to some extent the most legitimate variety. The aim of ELT should be native-like competence and, learning English from a NES teacher is better, forming the so-called “the native-teacher myth” (Shen & Wang, 2009; Freeman, 2002). However, the rising status of English as an international language has aroused considerable interest from TESOL professionals in the past 20 years. Faced with the reality that English language and its users are becoming more diverse, TESOL professionals are beginning to explore how to prepare English language learners better for their future uses of English, a future marked by a greater diversity of English forms, users, communicative goals, and speech communities than traditionally believed (Allen, 2010; Freeman, 2007; Seidhofer, 2011). As a result of these changes, English language teachers face many difficult questions on a day-to-day basis. Is it appropriate to continue to use British English or American English as the instructional model in our classes when we know that there are multiple standard varieties of English around the world? Question 12 asked teachers to choose which variety they would like their students to use. Three options were given: British English (RP); American English; and English as an International Language (EIL), even with a clearly non-native accent. Results show that only 38.5% of all the respondents preferred EIL, 56% chose British English. However of teachers who had stayed abroad for more than 6 months, more than 49.1% preferred the EIL variety, whereas 75% of teachers with shorter stays preferred national varieties, mainly British but also American English (see Table 3). It seems that staying abroad, in addition to having a beneficial effect on learners' language proficiency and positively contributing to teachers' self-confidence, incidentally give these teachers more open views on issues relating to the choice of the target language model and cultural values.

These EFL teachers asserted their authority over the language by incorporating their local identity into English and refusing to be ashamed of their nonnative accents. But when asked which variety they would follow in their teaching, they were either “not sure” or “still think British English is more natural, original and open.” The following teacher's interview is a typical example.

In the future, communication will take place mainly between NNSE to NNSE, such as Chinese to Japanese; English is used more and more as a lingua franca. Everyone in the world can communicate on equal grounds. EIL has a higher potential of communication in every part of the world. As language teachers, we should not only familiar with English culture, but Chinese culture as well. In our teaching, I am not sure, maybe British English is still the standard for us to follow (Teacher 12).

Our research indicates that these EFL teachers seem to recognize the usefulness of EIL-based skills mentioned in NS-NNS communication, but are prone to taking up an NS-oriented perspective when asked specifically about language

teaching. English as an EIL is expected to be flexible enough to present Chinese cultural identity when used by the Chinese (Shen & Wang, 2009; Jenkins, 2007). Scholars such as Wen (2012) proposes a pedagogical model for the teaching of English as an international language for meeting the current challenge for English teaching in China. As stated (Shen & Wang 2009; Richards, 2008), teachers' views have direct implications for their classes and more obviously for the presentation and discussion of the cultural aspects related to the English language speech community. If we wish to empower English learners and help them overcome the native-speaker bias, we need to do the same for their teachers (Allen, 2010; Zhang, 2007). If we believe the users of English as an international language should respect and accept the linguistic and functional diversity that exists in English today, we first need to ensure that teachers who work directly with them are respectful and accepting of such diversity.

TABLE 3:
PREFERENCE FOR ENGLISH VARIETIES

	British English	American English	English as an International Language (EIL)
Group 1	66.7	8.3	25
Group 2	47.5	3.3	49.1

Note: Numbers shown are percentages. $\chi^2=6.357$ (degree of freedom=2, $p < 0.05$)

C. The NES-NNES Teacher Debate

Question 13 asked whether the participants would hire more NES teachers or NNES teachers, or an equal number of both, if they had the responsibility for recruiting the teaching staff for a foreign language school. A majority of participants opted for the balanced option of hiring an equal number of NES and NNES teachers. However, almost one third said that they would prefer to have more NES teachers than NNES teachers. Contrary to Medgyes' (1999) claim that "the longer a non-NEST had spent in an English-speaking country, the more he/she would favour an NEST majority", no relationship was found between the length of stay and a preference for a great number of either NES or NNES teachers in a language school. Neither did this variable have a significant effect on responses to question 15, which asked participants to agree or disagree with the idea that NNES teachers have an intrinsic advantage over NES teachers as EFL teachers.

It has been claimed (Llurda, 2004; Shen & Wang, 2009; Borg, 2006) that NNES teachers are somehow in a better position to teach a foreign language than NES teachers as the latter may not have experienced the process of learning the language in the same manner as their students. The argument stresses that NNES teachers have gone through the same difficulties and have most likely used learning strategies that would benefit their students, which places them in a better position to be more empathetic to their learners' needs and thus successfully teach the language. This idea is supported by the answers to question 15, which showed that almost two thirds of participants thought their NNES status gave them a special advantage over NES teachers. It was also further confirmed by the interview.

Nonnative teachers are more understanding as they knew what it like to learn a new language for a learner in the EFL setting. They have been through the process of learning the same language and have most likely used learning strategies that would benefit their students. They can find the topics with which the students are familiar with. These advantages place them in a better position to be more empathetic to their learners' needs and thus successfully teach the language (Teacher 11).

TABLE 4:
PREFERENCE FOR NES OR NNES TEACHERS

	NES who can speak Chinese	NES who cannot speak Chinese	NNES who can speak Chinese	NNES who cannot speak Chinese
Group 1	45.8	4.1	6.3	43.7
Group 2	80.3	1.6	3.3	14.8

Note: Numbers shown are percentages. $\chi^2=8.764$ (degree of freedom=2, $p < 0.05$)

On question 14 which was designed to provide support for 13, teachers were asked to say whether they would prefer being taught by an NES teacher or an NNES teacher (see Table 4). The question did not offer the choice of choosing a Chinese EFL (NNES) teacher. Instead, they were given four choices: a) an NES teacher who can speak Chinese; b) an NES teacher who cannot speak Chinese; c) an NNES teacher from a different country who can speak Chinese (e.g., French, Spanish); d) an NNES teacher from a different country who cannot speak Chinese (e.g., French, Spanish). It was thought by avoiding the easy answer (a Chinese EFL teacher), participants would be forced to choose between an NES teacher and an NNES teacher under equivalent conditions. Both groups (NES and NNES) were further subdivided: those who knew and those who did not know the students' L1. Hypothetically, the participants who had answered that NNES teachers had the advantage of having learned the L2 as a foreign language should in principle choose nonnative English speakers as their own teachers. Results show that the participants almost exclusively preferred an NES teacher. Two thirds would choose an NES teacher who knows Chinese, and nearly one third would be more inclined to have an NES who has no knowledge of Chinese. Only a very small portion 4.6% would select an NNES teacher who knows Chinese and a negligible 2.8% thought they would like to have an NNES teacher who does not know Chinese.

Considering the two groups of teacher under analysis, short SA teachers were almost evenly divided between those who preferred NES teachers who were familiar with L1 and those who would rather have NES teachers without any L1 knowledge (45.8% and 43.7% respectively). Most long SA teachers (80.3%), on the other hand, chose the NES teacher with knowledge of Chinese, a result that could be interpreted as indicative of having an open position with regard to the use of L1 in the classroom. In contrast, of the short SA teachers, only 45.8% preferred the option of having NES teachers who could not use their L1, which implies that they subscribe to the principles of exclusive use of English in the classroom.

The paradox in these results is that teachers who could make a stronger claim for the exclusive use of the L2 based on their longer SA were precisely the ones who seemed to oppose such a practice and be more open to some use of the L1. This position seems to acknowledge the advantages of being highly proficient bilingual speakers who could use the learners' L1 or the target language as required by the pedagogical situation. The tactical use of L1 and code switching should be considered as a beneficial teaching strategy, it is crucial to develop specific guidelines for the proper integration of the mother tongue in the EFL context (Medgyes, 1999; Liu, 1999; Tusi, 2007). The short stay teachers' preference for exclusive use of the target language in the classroom probably has to do with a tendency toward rather radical positions by those professionals who feel more exposed to criticism and who therefore experience higher degrees of anxiety. This tendency can also be observed in the phenomenon that NNES teachers are generally stricter than NES teachers in correcting learners' errors and assessing gravity (Widdowson, 1994; Wen, 2012).

D. Implications for Teacher Education

All this is perhaps not a phenomenon exclusively pertaining to Chinese EFL teachers with SA experience but one that characterizes many educational contexts in which English is a foreign language (Llurda, 2008; Allen, 2010; Sasaki, 2011). Based on the results of this study, I put forward the following implications: First, one desirable action for EFL teacher education programs in countries where English is a foreign language would be to give incentives for SA as part of teacher preparation or in-service training. Such SA experiences are bound to be effective in developing prospective teacher' language skills. Second, these SA programs can also offer an even more useful, although seldom acknowledged advantage, that is, developing NNES teachers' self-confidence and providing a more mature perspective on language teaching. Besides, appreciating the value of building on previous knowledge is a natural consequence of long stays in English-speaking countries. Third, these programs may contribute to NNES teachers' professional development if they help them reflect on their process of learning (Lee, 2009), including language proficiency, knowledge of cultural aspects, and pedagogical training, in such a way that makes it clear to themselves that they are perfectly capable of becoming good language teachers.

E. Limitations of the Study

Despite the consistencies in the qualitative and quantitative findings, one needs to be cautious about the interpretation of the results. First, the sample size of the questionnaire survey is rather small. Second, the interview is not free from problems. The interview study revealed the response bias and concerns inherent in a self-reporting questionnaire, a social desirability bias (Lee, 2009), such that participants tend to describe their behaviour as better than they actually are, which may affect the reliability of the data.

This study, as most do, leaves more questions unanswered and reveals areas in need of further investigation. These results touched on but did not investigate in detail how different lengths of living in English-speaking countries would facilitate EFL teachers' professional development. Another potential area for further study could focus on how teachers get better prepared to study abroad both in language proficiency and professional development. Thus, a longitudinal study investigating the effect of studying in English-speaking countries might be able to better capture the dynamic changes by SA teachers.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have examined a group of secondary school EFL teachers' SA experience on their professional development. The overall data obtained from this survey indicate that the length of SA is a powerful factor in determining teachers' attitudes toward their jobs and their own capacities to perform them successfully. As language teacher educators, we were encouraged to see that SA has become an important professional activity, at least among the participants in the enquiry. As has been stated (Willis & Willis 2007; Allen, 2010; Sasaki, 2011), the language component is essential in the training of nonnative-speaking language teachers. These teachers must possess a high proficiency level in order to attain an optimum level of quality in language teaching (Kang, 2012; Xu & Liu, 2009), and SA clearly can contribute to that. Another relevant finding that emerged from this study comparing teachers with short and long SA is their attitude toward EIL and their perception of the pedagogical contribution of NNES teachers who share a great deal of knowledge with their students. One might expect that NNES teachers with longer SA would feel more attached to the NES speaker model and the preference of native varieties as well as the exclusive use of English in the classroom. Instead, this study provides evidence of an unexpected advantage of staying abroad, that is, teachers with longer SA appear to develop a higher awareness of the current role of EIL and have a deeper appreciation of the enhanced possibilities offered by the use of both L1 and L2 as resources in the L2 classroom.

APPENDIX. QUESTIONNAIRE FOR EFL TEACHERS WITH SA EXPERIENCES

The goal of the study is to investigate the effects of study abroad on EFL teachers' professional development. Participation is voluntary. Your responses are important as they will inform the later stages of the study. There are no right or wrong answers here. Confidentiality and anonymity are assured. What we are interested in are your views about study abroad. Thank you.

Section 1: About yourself

1. Gender: Male ☐ Female ☐

2. Age:

3. How many years have you been teaching English in primary or secondary schools?

4. Have you spent some time at an English-speaking country?

YES ☐ NO ☐

5. Only for those who have answered YES to question 4 above, please specify the country where you spent and indicate the total amount of months.

Section 2: About your English proficiency

6. How would you qualify your level of proficiency in English? (You answer should be based on what you consider the ideal situation for an English language teacher)

	Very weak					Very good				
1) General proficiency	1	2	3	4	5					
2) Pronunciation	1	2	3	4	5					
3) Oral fluency	1	2	3	4	5					
4) Listening comprehension	1	2	3	4	5					
5) Reading comprehension	1	2	3	4	5					
6) Knowledge of grammar rules	1	2	3	4	5					
7) Grammatical accuracy in use	1	2	3	4	5					
8) Writing	1	2	3	4	5					
9) Breadth of vocabulary	1	2	3	4	5					

7. Some colleagues think that their English proficiency has stabilised, and can't improve any more. Do you share this feeling?

YES ☐ NO ☐

8. Your level of proficiency in English has.....since graduation from university.

A. improved

B. stayed unchanged/improved in some aspects and worsened in some others

C. worsened → Why?

9. Only for those who have answered A to question 8 above, what do you think is the most effective activity for improving English? (Choose only one answer)

A. Stays in English-speaking countries

B. Contact with NSs of English in China

C. Contact with NNSs of English in China

D. Watching TV-video

E. Reading books and magazines

F. Keeping on studying the language

G. Teaching practice

10. Besides possible long stays in an English-speaking country, what other activity has helped you more in reaching your current proficiency level? Choose only one option:

A. Interacting with NSs of English

B. Watching TV and films in English

C. Reading books and magazines in English

D. Consciously study the language

E. Others. Specify.

Section 3: About English teaching ideology

11. How have you learned to teach English? What have been the most relevant elements in the making of your personality as a teacher? Classify from 1 to 5 the following questions (1-not relevant at all; 5-very relevant):

A. Courses taken in your university studies	1	2	3	4	5
B. Reading of language teaching methodology books (If you answered 4 or 5, mention one particular title:.....)	1	2	3	4	5
C. Training sessions	1	2	3	4	5
D. Teaching practice	1	2	3	4	5
E. Studying abroad	1	2	3	4	5

12. What English variety would you like your students to use?

A. British English (RP)

B. American English

C. I would like them to be able to speak English efficiently for international communication, even though they speak with a Chinese accent, and they use a mixture of elements from British and American English

Section 4: About NES-NNES teacher debate

13. If you were the director of a language school and were responsible for hiring teachers, what would you prefer?

- A. To hire more NSs than NNSs
- B. To hire as many NSs as NNSs
- C. To hire more NNSs than NSs

☐ Explain your preference:

14. If you had to take English classes, what teacher would you prefer to have?

- A. A NNS from a different country (e.g. German, Japan, ...) who can speak Chinese
- B. A NNS from a different country (e.g. German, Japan, ...) who cannot speak Chinese
- C. A NS of English who can speak Chinese
- D. A NS of English who cannot speak Chinese

15. Do you think that having learned English as a foreign language provides you with a special advantage to teach EFL over NSs, as NSs have not gone through the process of learning the language in adulthood?

YES ☐ NO ☐

Section 5: Further participation

16. In the next stage of the study we would like to talk to individual teachers to learn more about their views on staying/studying abroad. Would you be interested in discussing this issue further with us?

YES ☐ NO ☐

17. If you answered YES to question 16 above, please write your name and email address here so that we can arrange an interview for you at your convenience.

Name:

Email:

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