

# *Chapter 9*

## *Teacher language learning and residence abroad: What makes a difference?*

### *Perspectives from two case studies*

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This chapter reports on the experiences and views of two New Zealand language teachers who participated in one-year overseas immersion programmes and the ways in which these experiences were seen to impact on their target language (TL) proficiency. Following Wang's (2010) recommendation, the chapter seeks to contribute to study and residence abroad research by focusing on the process of language learning alongside the gains achieved. We take a case study approach using data from questionnaires and interviews to provide an in-depth understanding of the teachers' contexts, their views of changes in their TL proficiency and factors they saw as facilitating and hindering learning while on their immersion programme. Milroy's (1987) social network framework provides a way to analyse the meaning and utility of interactional opportunities experienced by the two teachers while overseas. Findings indicate overall positive outcomes for the two teachers, but the study also uncovered a sense of missed opportunities for learning. This chapter provides insights for future immersion programmes and makes suggestions that seek to optimise teachers' learning and thus enhance positive outcomes for their students. We expect this chapter to be of interest to the academic community concerned with language teacher professional development, as well as to language teachers wishing to undertake an immersion programme.

## **1. Introduction**

To increase the capability of language teachers in the country, the New Zealand (NZ) government has, since 2005, provided them with the opportunity to spend time in countries where the target language (TL) is spoken as the primary language. In NZ these awards are called *immersion awards*, reflecting the expectation that teachers will be "immersed in" the TL and culture. Teachers are funded to live over-

seas for periods of a few weeks to up to a year. The aim is for them to develop their language proficiency and intercultural competence in authentic settings, so they can apply the knowledge and skills they have gained to improve student language learning experiences and outcomes (NZ Ministry of Education, 2010). The research literature focuses mainly on university students and often uses the term *study abroad* (SA) which is defined by Kinginger (2009) as “a temporary sojourn of pre-defined duration, undertaken for educational purposes” (p. 11). Another term used, and sometimes interchangeably with study abroad, is *residence abroad* (RA), referring to students either studying for part of their degree in the country where the TL is spoken, or undertaking a work placement in an overseas country. RA is usually over an extended period of time and may or may not include TL instruction (Coleman, 1997). Both terms can be applied to the experiences of NZ teachers, since they both study and work as part of their immersion programme. In this study the term *immersion programme* (IP) is used, as this is the term used by the NZ Ministry of Education.

The work reported here comes from a larger research project (Harvey, Roskvist, Corder, & Stacey, 2011) commissioned by the NZ Ministry of Education, which gathered both quantitative and qualitative data to determine the effectiveness of teachers’ language and culture immersion experiences. Here, we present qualitative case studies of two teachers on long-term (one-year) IPs, so as to gain a more in-depth understanding of their immersion contexts and their experiences as participants in the IP. The teachers’ perceptions of changes to their TL proficiency and their views on the factors that contributed to, or hindered, their TL development are explored in detail, in order to identify what made a difference to their learning. A social network framework (Milroy, 1987) has been used, albeit in an exploratory way, to analyse and contrast the interactional opportunities in which the two teachers engaged.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 *Study/residence abroad*

Much of the research literature on SA/RA to date has focused on programmes for students and their effects on students’ TL proficiency, cultural knowledge and more recently their pragmatic development and intercultural competence. Research in the field is characterised by a “high level of variation within and across studies” (Coleman & Chafer, 2011, p. 68); however, there does appear to be general support for the value of SA/RA in increasing TL proficiency, in particular oral skills (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Llanes & Muñoz, 2009). Social perspectives on TL acquisition see engaging with communities of language users and their social and

cultural practices as critical to language acquisition (Lantolf & Johnson, 2007), and while this is less straightforward to demonstrate than might be supposed, interaction with host community members is widely assumed to assist TL development in the SA/ RA context (Isabelli-García, 2006).

We view interaction from both a cognitivist perspective and as a social process and believe both have a role to play in TL acquisition. The uptake of opportunities for interaction is considered to be one of the essential requirements for successful language learning (Ellis, 2005; Gass, 1997). Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis views acquisition as being most effective when learners are involved in the negotiation of meaning, since it is through this negotiation that learners gain further information about the TL. Research suggests that this interactional feedback can act as a prompt to learners to *notice* TL forms, and this can lead to *modified output* and TL development (Gass & Mackey, 2006, p. 3). Conversation in particular is central to the acquisition of language, being "not only a medium of practice; ... [but] also the means by which learning occurs" (Gass, 1997, p. 104).

In SA/ RA contexts, there is some empirical support for the assumption that use of the TL outside the classroom must assist the development of the immersion language (Dewey, Bown, & Eggett, 2012; Isabelli-García, 2006). Dewey et al. (2012, p. 126) use the term *dispersion* to refer to the number of social groups with which a learner engages during SA/RA, and they claim this to be a significant predictor of perceived gains in TL speaking proficiency. In particular, homestay, as one example of a specific social group context, has been credited with facilitating language and cultural gains (H.W. Allen, 2010; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004). However, some reservations have also been expressed with regard to homestay experiences (Diao, Freed, & Smith, 2011; Freed, 2008). Regarding linguistic gains, Trentman (2013) argues that there is a need to look at the quality (p. 460) of a particular living arrangement rather than whether people stay in homestay or dormitory/hostel accommodation. In this chapter, interaction is viewed through a social network lens in order to explore the concept of dispersion more fully in respect of our case study teachers.

Milroy defines social networks as "informal social relationships contracted by an individual" (1987, p. 178) and social network analysis as looking at the "differing structures and perspectives of these relationships" (2002, p. 549). Milroy's social network research in Belfast looking at first language communities is pertinent to our study as it explains how language use and interaction in one's community are symbiotically related. With clear implications for language learning, Milroy notes that: "The closer an individual's network ties are with his local community, the closer his language approximates to localised vernacular norms" (1980, p. 175). Milroy (1987) evaluates ties in terms of *density* and *plexity*. A dense network is one where a number of people with whom an individual is

linked, are also linked to each other. Plexity measures the various ways people might be involved with each other. While a *uniplex* relationship is characterised by a person having links to another in just one area, for example, as a colleague, a *multiplex* or “many-stranded” (Milroy, 1987, p. 21) network has a person interacting with others in multiple ways: for example, as a colleague, friend, and sports team member. Effective use of Milroy’s work was made by Isabelli-García (2006) in her analysis of the informal relationships formed by four students from the United States learning Spanish in Argentina. Her study showed that social networks with TL speakers (developed through such activities as voluntary work) provided varying interactional and learning opportunities for the SA participants, thus helping to explain both linguistic development and variation among learners (2006, p. 231). (See also Chapter 8 in this volume.)

The influence of individuals’ TL proficiency level at the time of SA/RA on the extent of linguistic gains has also been investigated. However, again, findings are mixed. While some studies show greater linguistic gains by advanced learners (for example, Magnan and Back’s 2007 study), others indicate that learners with lower levels of TL proficiency may make greater gains (see overview by Regan, Howard and Lemée, 2009). However, it does seem that a “functional level” (DeKeyser, 2007, p. 217) of competence is necessary in order to take advantage of interaction opportunities with expert users. DeKeyser’s (2010) study of US students of Spanish living in Argentina, for example, found that students whose knowledge of Spanish grammar was weak, tended to avoid interaction opportunities and made less progress. DeKeyser (2010) concluded: “The more they know, the more they can get better at using what they know through practice and add new knowledge through input and interaction” (p. 90). Trentman (2013) also notes in her study of American students learning Arabic in Egypt that “inadequate linguistic preparation” was a key reason for failure to access opportunities to use the TL (p. 468).

## 2.2 SA/RA research involving language teachers

The vast majority of SA/RA studies involve undergraduate students, with a paucity of studies focusing on teachers (but see Gleeson & Tait, 2012; Harbon, 2007; Wernicke, 2010). The value of SA/RA programmes as professional development for language teachers, however, has long been advocated. Müller-Hartmann (2000) for example described them as “central phases in the process of language and culture learning” (pp. 211–212) and as “profitable” not only for students but also for teachers both pre- and in-service. Benefits reported in teacher studies to date include TL improvement and enhanced awareness of pedagogy (Bridges, 2007), as well as increased confidence in TL speaking, growth in cultural knowledge and the establishment of valuable networks (L.Q. Allen,

2010). Our own study extends the limited research base on immersion programmes for language teachers by documenting participating teachers' perspectives on their TL gains, and on factors facilitating or hindering these gains.

### **3. Research questions and research approach**

The two research questions addressed in this chapter are: (1) What linguistic gains did the two teachers believe they had made? and (2) What factors did they see as facilitating or hindering these gains? A qualitative case study approach has been chosen because of the "richness of description and detailed contextualization" that it can produce (Duff, 2008, p. 59), including information "to which we would not otherwise have access" (Merriam, 2009, p. 46).

## **4. Methodology**

### *4.1 Instruments*

The perceptions of the two case study teachers were collected by means of a questionnaire and three 40–50 minute semi-structured individual interviews, all administered following the IP. Interview data were recorded in note form, with teachers' responses written verbatim. The contemporaneous handwritten record was then typed and transferred into electronic scripts by the researchers themselves.

The interview questions elicited participants' perceptions of changes in their TL proficiency and factors they saw as facilitating or hindering their TL development. We used a thematic analysis approach to analyse the interview and qualitative questionnaire data. Such an approach, according to Braun and Clarke (2006) can "potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data" (p. 5). Coding was undertaken manually using themes derived from the two research questions; these themes were further refined during analysis. Quotations from the data have been extracted to highlight findings.

### *4.2 Participants*

Stake (1995) observes that in selecting cases, "the first criterion should be to maximise what we can learn" (p. 4). The two case study participants were selected to represent the two groups of teachers from the original larger study: that is, secondary school teachers (teaching students in Years 9–13, i.e. students aged about 13–17 years), and the generalist teachers who teach at primary and inter-

mediate schools. (In NZ, many students in Years 7–8 attend an intermediate school between primary and secondary.) One case study teacher is thus a secondary school teacher, while the other is an intermediate and therefore generalist teacher.

Teachers of languages at secondary school in NZ are very likely to be specialists in their subject area, i.e. they will probably have majored in their teaching language at university and will likely have specialist language teaching qualifications. In contrast, NZ intermediate school teachers teach most subjects across the curriculum, with the TL being just one of these, and are therefore likely to have lower levels of TL proficiency. The NZ government's 2007 initiative to increase the teaching of foreign languages in schools has been concentrated to a large degree in Years 7–8 which have traditionally not offered languages other than English (the *de facto* national language) and Māori (NZ's indigenous language and one of the two official languages). Hence it was of particular importance to include an IP participant from this background.

## 5. Case studies

### 5.1 Case study teacher one

Patricia (pseudonym) was a secondary school teacher with 15 years' language teaching experience at the time of the IP. She taught a European language<sup>1</sup> as her main teaching subject at a large NZ urban secondary school, and had a postgraduate qualification in the teaching language. Prior to beginning the IP, she perceived herself as having an "intermediate" level of proficiency in listening, speaking and writing, and "advanced" in reading. "Intermediate" was a level on a five-point scale of proficiency provided to respondents, which included beginner, elementary, intermediate, advanced and expert user. We interpret it to be close to B2 (*Independent User*) on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR: Council of Europe, 2001). (We acknowledge that direct use of the CEFR in our research to determine levels would have been more informative.)

Patricia's linguistic goal was first and foremost to improve her speaking, followed by developing her cultural knowledge and her understanding of grammar. Her IP was spent for the most part in a small city in the main TL-using country.

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1 The number of New Zealand language teachers who have participated in one year immersion programmes is small. To ensure the confidentiality of participants is maintained, the target language and host country are not identified.

She lived in an apartment initially with another English-speaking teacher and then on her own. She taught English regularly at a local secondary school for most of her stay. For the first ten weeks she taught just five hours a week while she followed an intensive TL course, and then taught 20 hours weekly for most of the remainder of the year. In addition to the TL course she also attended a course focused on language pedagogy. She reported in the questionnaire that being able to study and experience the role of a student not only improved her TL skills but also enhanced her teaching skills. On her return from the IP, Patricia saw herself as having made “significant” gains in language proficiency and assessed herself as being at CEFR Level C1 (*Proficient User with Effective Operational Proficiency*). (During the IP, Patricia developed familiarity with the CEFR which in turn provided her with an improved means of self-assessing her language proficiency.)

When asked in the questionnaire what she believed helped her most to improve her language proficiency, Patricia professed a strong belief in the importance of interaction: “To improve proficiency, you have to mix with [TL] speakers and that is one of the reasons why I loved working practically full time at the school.” It seems her professional involvement in teaching and association with a host school provided direct access to native speaker communities, carrying linguistic, cultural and social benefits. She said:

I loved it. Being part of the school community ... meeting lots of people, being invited into peoples' homes, on holiday, even going with teachers on a marking panel to another city for three days, going on school trips. It gave me real purpose. I was useful and could contribute.

Patricia's social network can be described informally as multiplex. As can be seen in the statement above, she interacted with TL speakers frequently and in a variety of contexts, both professional and personal. She assisted in professional activities with local teachers and this involved time away with them; she was invited to teachers' homes and met their family and friends. Thus, she interacted with people in more than one capacity – as colleague, and as friend. Isabelli-García (2006) notes that “social networks with native speakers allow the SA learner expanded opportunities for interaction” (p. 257), and this certainly was the case for Patricia. In addition to TL input and interaction provided through professional contact with colleagues and students at school, Patricia gained opportunities for further TL interaction outside the school setting through her friendships with local teachers. On the other hand, given that she lived for the most part by herself, her accommodation did not provide much in the way of opportunities for interaction. When asked what factors hindered her linguistic gains, none were identified.

### 5.2 Case study teacher two

Bob (pseudonym) was a teacher of students in Years 7–8 (aged about 11–13 years). He was an experienced generalist teacher, responsible for all subjects including the TL, which he taught for two hours a week throughout the year in his NZ school.

Although Bob had five years' experience teaching the TL at the time of the IP, his initial level of TL proficiency was rather basic. He had taken an internationally recognised language proficiency test prior to the IP, achieving a level equating to Level A1 (*Basic User*) on the CEFR. On the five-point scale provided to questionnaire respondents, he recorded himself as having an elementary level of proficiency. His main linguistic goal for the IP was to improve his TL speaking, in particular pronunciation. Like Patricia, Bob spent his IP in a small European city, completing two intensive TL courses, each of four weeks' duration. He was also associated with a school where he reportedly spent a high number of hours each week teaching English. Toward the end of his IP, Bob passed a language proficiency test equating to Level B1 (*Independent User*) on the CEFR. He spoke positively of his linguistic gains and noted in particular, improvements in TL fluency and in confidence. In his questionnaire response, Bob largely credited the two intensive TL courses for these gains: "Most of my improvement in language proficiency was made during these courses." Interacting with TL speakers was also identified as a factor underpinning gains. He saw himself as highly motivated to improve his proficiency but also thwarted to some extent.

While Patricia reported no negative factors impacting on her language gains, Bob acknowledged several, with "not enough immersion" as the key negative factor. This was explained with regard to his teaching role, insufficient access to TL classes, and his accommodation. Bob reported teaching English for 25+ hours per week which he saw as "too much". In addition, although he was able to attend two months of classes, he believed longer intensive courses would have been useful, and the lack of pre-IP assistance from the IP organisers in locating suitable courses was also considered a negative factor. Additionally, he identified several aspects related to his accommodation as hindering linguistic gains, and regretted not living with a host family. Bob had lived in an apartment with a fellow English speaker for the first two months. As he said: "X was fluent but I struggled so we ended up speaking English ... hardly immersion." On the other hand, however, they provided emotional support for each other in the first two months, including encouraging each other to take advantage of interaction opportunities with TL speakers. However, after two months Bob's family arrived and they moved into an apartment together for eight months; despite intentions to speak the TL, Bob emphatically noted "we spoke English." Also noted by Bob in the first interview



was that invitations to participate in out-of-school social activities “dried up” once his family arrived.

A qualitative analysis of Bob’s self-reported social networks suggests that his main network was largely composed of other members of his first language community (although not entirely as he did claim some friendships with TL speakers). This English-speaking network was made up mainly of those he lived with: a fellow native speaker of English initially, and later his family. It seems that this fairly closed personal network structure, while providing emotional support for Bob, reduced the opportunities for developing networks with TL communities and ongoing interaction with TL speakers. In particular, Bob’s professional life did not lead to networking with local colleagues beyond the professional world of the school, to the same extent as Patricia’s did. Rather than a single, multiplex network involving TL in different domains, his were more uniplex (an English speaking network at home, a largely professional-only network at school). Bob also reported that he lacked confidence in using the TL in the beginning of his IP experience; coupled with his lower level of TL proficiency, it seems likely that this impacted on interactional opportunities, in line with the suggestions of DeKeyser (2007) and Trentman (2013).

## 6. Discussion

The two teachers had disparate teaching backgrounds, and had different immersion experiences; however both noted considerable gains in their TL proficiency. The case studies shed light on factors they perceived as influencing their TL progress, and on the role of social networking in particular. Patricia arrived in the target language setting with a self-reported intermediate level of proficiency. While she had a professional teaching role, her workload was not excessive (a maximum of 20 hours per week). She was highly motivated to make the most of every social and professional opportunity and made further linguistic gains, partly through instruction but attributed largely by Patricia herself to a multiplex social network developed through her association with teachers in a local school. Pertinent here is the view by Dewey et al. (2012) of a “symbiotic relationship” (p. 126) between networks and linguistic gains. That is to say: “those who make friendships with natives tend to use the language and therefore make gains, and those who make greater gains are more capable of making friendships with locals” (p. 126).

Bob, too, was highly motivated and also saw himself as having considerably improved his TL proficiency (a view supported by test evidence). He was pleased with his progress, and acknowledged a crucial role for TL instruction in this, but at the same time acknowledged his frequent use of English with an English speak-

ing colleague initially, and later with family. He also made friends with local teachers, some of whom he maintained contact with after the IP, but it seems that unlike Patricia, for whom the school and teaching English provided considerable TL interactional opportunities beyond the school setting, such interactional opportunities were fewer for Bob after his family arrived. Bob's workload was greater than Patricia's (25+ hours per week), and he was clear too that such a heavy workload was not conducive to improving his TL proficiency, perhaps because these professional duties took time away from other activities that could have led to TL interaction. In terms of social networks, therefore, at least initially, it appears that Bob had neither the time, the confidence nor the opportunities to form the kinds of multiplex relationships that Patricia enjoyed. It appears that Patricia, with her combination of a higher initial level of TL proficiency and her social availability, was more accessible to the TL community. Churchill and DuFon (2006) make the point that:

Building a social network is more easily achieved by some learners than others. Success in this endeavor is related to learner characteristics such as openness, ability to make oneself socially salient, persistence in working to gain access, and tolerance for and attention to unmodified input ... the last trait appears to be related not only to personality, but also to the learner's level of proficiency. (p. 20)

Certainly, both Patricia and Bob were well motivated and open to new experiences, and benefited linguistically from the IP. But it is unsurprising that Bob's lesser availability and lower level of TL proficiency impacted on his ability to make connections outside the classroom, and that a metaphor of lost opportunities to some extent underpins his experience, highlighting the need for better calibration of immersion programmes to the needs of individual learners, and in general for more structure around immersion experiences (Plews, Breckenridge, Cambre & de Freitas Fernandes, 2014).

Milroy's (1987) work with social networks has provided useful insights into what was occurring for the two teachers in this study in terms of their linguistic development, their integration into the TL community, and their subsequent opportunities for TL use and proficiency development. It is helpful in partially explaining the difference between the two teachers' experiences and perspectives. As shown in Dewey et al.'s (2012) study, social networks play a clear role in shaping TL use, and can promote language gains (p. 118). For Patricia: "People and relationships are the key to the success of the whole experience." From Patricia's success, but more particularly from Bob's more limited experience, it seems that the design of the IP would benefit from incorporating more structured opportunities for engagement in host community activities. This engagement, as

Trentman (2013) points out, “is often dependent on the value (often non-linguistic) that the learners provide” (p. 470). For teachers, such opportunities could centre round a school, but expectations should ideally go beyond playing the role of an English language instructor (conscientiously fulfilled by Bob as well as by Patricia). An expectation of involvement in the wider life of the school, including extracurricular activities, could well lead more routinely to expanded social networks, as we saw in the particular case of Patricia. Interactional opportunities with expert users could also be enhanced through an expectation that IP participants undertake ethnographic projects involving interaction with TL speakers in the local community (Jackson, 2006; Trentman, 2013). Certainly opportunities for immersion exist in the host country but what is apparently needed are “opportunities for engagement” (Trentman, 2013, p. 470), and structured support for less-proficient and less confident participants to take these up.

## 7. Conclusion and directions for further research

The overall aim of the study was to explore in greater depth the perspectives of the two teachers in terms of their linguistic gains, and their perceptions of the factors facilitating and hindering these gains. One of the advantages of case study research is being able to address “how” and “why” questions (Yin, 2009, p. 13). Applying a social network lens to the case studies, albeit in an exploratory way, has been illuminating in gaining further understanding of how different types of networks are formed, and interactional opportunities gained. Thus Patricia (already an intermediate TL speaker and also a lone sojourner), could develop a multiplex social network with TL speakers, largely through her association with the host school, which had a positive impact on her TL development. On the other hand, Bob’s lower level of initial TL proficiency and confidence, his family responsibilities and very high teaching workload, deterred the development of multiplex networks despite being in an apparently similar professional workplace, and left him more dependent on instruction for linguistic progress.

These highly-contextualised case studies contribute to the rather sparse knowledge base on IPs as professional development for language teachers. This study is based on just two teachers, so caution needs to be exercised regarding conclusions. However, it has resulted in new insights, in particular the varying value of activities that require professional engagement with the TL community, such as working in local schools. The study points to areas for further research. More information is needed as to the quality of the interactions teachers had with TL speakers, in the host school setting. Also worthy of further investigation is the value that the teachers provide as perceived by the host community schools (Trentman, 2013), and the impact this might have on the formation of social networks with

TL speakers and on IP teachers' TL gains. These would contribute further insights into the complex nature of learning for teachers on IPs. A final word from one of the two teachers provides a fitting end:

I feel so very fortunate to have been able to be part of this ... . I am grateful for the opportunity and think that the programme has enormous potential; it will make a real positive change to language teaching and learning in NZ.

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