

Internationalisation

Teaching English in the People's Republic of China

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Abstract: Internationalisation of the curriculum at the tertiary level is important as students train for careers which require an understanding of global citizenship. The potential benefits of gaining experience overseas include cultural sensitivity and the ability to see themselves as 'other' (Hibler 1998). The experience of an overseas practicum helps students to identify their own concept of culture and nationality. Data are drawn from interviews, journals and correspondence of students who attended a teaching practicum in Kunming, PRC in 2005. The paper proposes that the experience of teaching and living overseas fosters skills that can be utilised in future careers (both locally or abroad). Their experiences provide useful indicators for those who intend to teach English overseas, in particular, in schools in China.

Keywords: ESL education, Overseas practicum, Teaching English

Introduction

Purpose and Aim of Research

THIS STUDY INVESTIGATES the experience of beginning/pre-service Australian teachers engaged in a practicum in the People's Republic of China. Professional experience overseas is seen as valuable in an increasingly global world since it contributes both to a beginning teachers' job profile and importantly, to his/her personal development. In a knowledge-based, high-technology economy, teachers face new challenges and need new skills and knowledge to cope with change (Stewart & Kagan, 2005). It focuses on the teaching experience in a culture that is different from the teachers' own, exploring the effect of broadening their outlook and making them more confident of their future abilities both at home and abroad.

The aim of the research is to contribute to data in the field of intercultural studies, namely, to shed light on what benefits accrue from a teaching practicum overseas and any possible negative outcomes. This topic is important in a global era where people move across borders and across cultures. Significantly, the lived experience of the practicum gives a depth of meaning to the beginning teachers' global outlook. While there are many general articles addressing the issue of the value of 'working abroad', and many focus on the area of teaching English, only limited attention has been given to the teaching of English in the primary school setting in the People's Republic of China.

Background to Research and Research Foci

Beginning, pre-service teachers from the University of Technology have visited a primary school in Kunming, PRC, on four occasions in 1999, 2001, 2003 and 2005. These biannual teaching practicums have been for a period of 2 weeks of teaching and one week of cultural visits and the response of the teachers concerned has been very positive. The school involved was the primary school attached to Yunnan Normal University (Wenling Street 162, Kunming, PRC).

Background to the paper: the 6 students (male/female) who took part in a 3-week practicum in Kunming, PRC. Their perceptions before they went and later.

The impetus behind these visits was the internalisation focus of the University of Technology Sydney, based on a belief (amongst others) that:

- individuals are enriched through their cultural interactions
- graduates will be mobile in their careers (UTS, 2006).
- The broad objectives of internationalisation (in relation to this study) are therefore to:
- contribute to 's social and economic interactions with other countries and to 's growing cultural diversity
- prepare graduates for professional practice in a global environment.

The foci of the study are:



- the perceived positive effects of the practicum experience in the People's Republic of
- the perceived negative effects on the beginning teachers
- the teachers' experience and the concept of the 'other'.

This paper seeks to make a useful contribution by showing how the process of seeing themselves as the 'other' paradoxically helps them to identify with the students that they teach. Seeing themselves as 'other', 'puts their own culture to crisis' (Hibler 1998). The above themes, which are relevant to the issues of internationalisation and language learning, will be addressed throughout the paper.

Literature Review

The multidimensional and complex nature of globalisation is the background to this study (Tomlinson 1999). Practical and theoretical issues which have informed this research are the need to internationalise curriculum in higher education institutions and to provide the opportunity for international, professional experience in a global era. As Banks (2001, p.5) points out: 'Teachers must develop reflective cultural national and global identifications themselves if they are to help students become thoughtful caring and reflective citizens in a multicultural world society'. Globalisation involves cultural, economic, environmental and technological domains (Held 1998). Internationalisation can also be viewed as neo-colonisation that aggravates divisions amongst nations (Khor 1995). While there is the potential for the 'McDonaldization of society' (Ritzer 1998) and various negative aspects (Giddens 2000), a more optimistic view sees global and local forces working together and leading to hybridisation, not homogeneity. Worldwide interconnectedness (Bottery 2006) is revealed through technological globalization, the Internet, proliferation of media and the exchange of information and access to ideas through computers, emails.

Theories and Research Studies

Theoretical perspectives and research studies, which are relevant to this study, are drawn from two main areas: internationalisation and intercultural understandings; and English language teaching.

'Internationalisation', in higher education institutions, can be defined as the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into its functions and policies, while 'globalisation' is the flow of information, people, commerce across countries, is the world environment in which internationalisation takes place (Knight 2004, 11). The aim of the university in sending the beginning

teachers on an overseas practicum was to contribute to their professional experience, to broaden their horizons, but there was also the expectation that the strategy would have a ripple effect affecting others on their return. Marketing the university overseas was an unstated assumption with the aim of strengthening the link with Yunnan Normal University. University education in an age of globalization has forced university policy-makers to consider the implications for its students (Ruby 2005). There is a change in universities to take into account rapid globalization through transforming their mission to focus on internationalisation (Scott 2006).

Studies by Stewart & Kagan (2005) and Hibler (1998) have convincingly demonstrated that teachers need new skills and knowledge to cope with the challenges of an increasingly global world. Global citizenship can appear like 'weasel words' (Tsolidis 2002; Watson 2002) but nonetheless it is a worthy aim to make teachers more tolerant, able to deal with diverse perspectives, and with developing intercultural competence (Edwards & Tudball 2002). The university wishes to encourage the capacity of the teachers to engage positively with students from many cultures.

Intercultural communication theory (Giddens 2000) underpins how cultural understandings are gained providing a perspective on cross-cultural adaptation and the importance of divergent value premises. Teachers of the future have a responsibility to contest discrimination and racism, negative stereotypes and cultural conflicts. In their teaching in multicultural classrooms they need appropriate pedagogical processes, and realistic assessments of the abilities of their students. In a world of communication networks, communication of ideas, relationships in trade and commerce and the mobility of people as they travel for pleasure and profit. China is a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Students have diverse aspirations that include working overseas, recognising that they need to have knowledge across cultures.

Communicative language teaching had to be curtailed because of the constraints of large classes (c.70 children) in comparison to numbers in Australian classrooms (c.32) (Savignon 1997). Cautions about the cultural appropriateness of teaching methods and the applicability of communicative language teaching and interactive teaching styles in China are constructive (Hu 2002).

The spread of English in the twenty-first century as a global language of communication, research and commerce meant that the teaching role in the Chinese school was welcomed English is increasingly being learnt as a compulsory second language by Chinese children from the kindergarten years in the PRC

school system. While the dominance of the English results in the threat to or death of some languages (Crystal 2003; Ljungdahl 2003; Phillipson 2006), it can also facilitate communication and mutual understandings between individuals and nations.

Methodology

Qualitative data are drawn from semi-structured interviews, student learning journals and correspondence of students. The researcher also kept a diary of observations as a data collection tool. Through ethnographic methods such as participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to collect first-hand information about the teachers' perceptions of their China teaching practicum. Relating their everyday experiences and opinions contributed to findings, which yielded valuable meanings for research and ideas, which could be adopted for future practicums. The ethnographic method is effective because it reveals what people think from close involvement and provides insight into

The study population consists of 6 Australian-born teacher trainees, aged between 20 and 24. One male and five females participated, the median age being 21. All pre-service teachers were enrolled in the Bachelor of Education program at the University of Technology Sydney. No significant differences in perception were noted in student's responses based on age or gender. A previous study on Australian teachers in Kunming, PRC (Ljungdahl 2004) looked at 10 students (2 males and 8 females).

Research questions involve:

1. What are the benefits of a practicum experience in the People's Republic of China on Australian beginning teachers?
2. What are the negative effects on the beginning teachers?
3. How did the practicum affect the teachers' concept of themselves as the cultural 'other'?

Data Collection

This section examines selected *verbatim* excerpts (in italics) from the semi-structured interviews and journals on what the beginning teachers perceived as the positive and negative impacts of their teaching practicum in China. It concludes with a synthesis of the data.

The following data were collated from the beginning teachers' observation. The *verbatim* comments are given from the participants (listed as Student 1 – Student 6):

Student 1

The overseas practicum in China is the most amazing and varied teaching experience I could ask for. I am learning so much about my own style of teaching, and also how children learn differently in different cultures. I am able to experiment with teaching techniques that I know I will use in Australian classrooms, especially those with ESL students...a strong possibility in today's society. Every day presents a new challenge. I think that the strategy of peer teaching is also a worthwhile experience. I am learning a lot about teaching from my partner, including different teaching styles, strategies and techniques. I would definitely urge all UTS teaching students to consider this option for practicum in third year.

Comment by researcher: Teachers appreciated the opportunity to teach in pairs, using their peer as a model for what to do, and what not to do, in some cases. This teaching partnership allowed them to teach with more confidence and competence in the large classrooms.

Student 2

Through the international practicum, I have gained a greater appreciation for culture, and the way in which culture affects teaching and learning. Chinese culture and education is so different from Australia, and therefore we have had to design learning experiences, and vary teaching strategies to break through cultural barriers and to make all the learning experiences appropriate and beneficial. It has also been a great opportunity to develop skills which are going to be so useful for the Australian classroom. For example, I have developed more effective classroom management skills, as the class sizes are so large. I have also developed skills in working as a team of teachers, as we have been team-teaching. As well as teaching together, we have had to assess and evaluate each other, providing support for each other when needed. I feel as if I will be better prepared to teach children from different cultural backgrounds in the future, and this is such a necessary skill for teachers to have today as we live in such a multicultural country. I would strongly recommend that all Primary Education students consider this practicum experience. As well as learning so much, it is also an incredibly fun and exciting experience to live in another country and experience different ways, customs, meet lots of wonderful people, and see so much at the same time!

Comment by researcher: Teachers were able to relate their perceptions of the culture of China to the teaching environment. Any stereotype of a Chinese teacher-centred classroom and a textbook approach to learning English was found to be false. Chinese

students enthusiastically embraced aspects of the communicative approach, joining in songs and participating in games and role-plays. There was a clear indication of how their teaching experience in China could contribute to increased proficiency in the Australian multicultural classroom.

Student 3

The China practicum is absolutely awesome. It has been challenging, tremendous and awe-inspiring. It has been an unprecedented opportunity to expand my teaching repertoire and gain invaluable knowledge and skills pertaining to a plethora of educational situations. Specifically, the overseas practicum has helped me to hone my teaching skills in the following areas: ESL/EFL, TEOS (Teaching English to Overseas Students); understanding cultural differences; classroom management and organization; non-verbal communication; liaising with other staff members; clear instruction giving; improvisation; team teaching; and lesson planning and reflecting.

The internationalisation of my degree has opened up many opportunities that an Australian-based practicum simply cannot. As the teaching context is very different to Australia, this prac. has given me a vast array of skills that will be advantageous in all aspects of primary teaching in any country. I would encourage the Faculty of Education to ensure that the experience of an overseas practicum is available to future cohorts of Bachelor of Education undergraduates. The China Practicum is an incredible experience, one that I would highly recommend for any education student.

Comment by researcher: Reflection on the teaching practicum was seen as invaluable, encouraging teachers to discuss the relative success of their teaching with their peer partner. The challenge of teaching in a new situation meant that teachers were often required to improvise strategies and this was seen as character building and contributing to individual personality development. An overseas practicum allowed teachers to practise their teaching skills in a different environment. In addition teachers could enjoy aspects of the unique culture of China.

Student 4

I believe that this overseas practicum has been a challenging, educational and worthwhile experience. It has provided me with opportunities to work with other educators, both from Australia and China, to improve my own teaching and to learn alternate teaching styles. The team teaching aspect of this practicum has also broadened my knowledge and

skills by showing me other teaching methods and ways of planning and implementing lessons.

This experience will play a significant role in my future teaching success, especially in regard to teaching students who have English as a second language in Australian schools. Since the number of ESL students is on the rise, having such experience and skills will help me to work more effectively with such students. The skills I have developed over the course of this practicum include: the use of teacher modeling and gestures to assist in explanations and instructions; adapting lesson material so it is suitable for a large number of students with varying abilities and interests and making all instructions clear and explicit. These skills are not only vital when teaching ESL students but also for proficient English speaking students.

Comment by researcher: The Australian teachers appreciated the input of the Chinese teachers and every opportunity was taken to observe each other in the teaching environment. Teaching skills practised in China were seen to be readily transferable to the Australian context.

Student 5

I took the option to partake in the overseas practicum for a number of reasons. The foremost being that I had been contemplating the possibility of teaching English abroad after completing my studies. This practicum therefore provided me with the chance to see first hand what a school system looked like in a foreign country and also to practise and observe skills that are necessary for effective teaching in this context. Further, this experience has enabled me to reflect on the skills that I have developed over the first two years of learning, to refine them, and adapt them and to see whether teaching English abroad would be a future career option I would be able to look into further.

In summary this practicum has been invaluable and I believe it to be a program which provides students of UTS with an option to further extend and enhance their teacher training experience.

Comment by researcher: In a world where job mobility is increasing, teachers had the opportunity to see if they enjoyed the experience. To have first-hand experience was seen as invaluable, impossible to attain in Australia, even though many classrooms are multicultural.

Student 6

This Practicum experience has proved to be so valuable in all areas of my life. The travelling and opportunity to speak, see, taste and hear things in a country such as China has truly been an experience I will never forget and will never take for granted.

However, the most important part of this trip was for teaching. The practicum experience has delivered so many challenges and delights that I have yet to experience back home in an Australian school. I have gained so much knowledge from this trip that will definitely improve my teaching skills and attitudes in future teaching experiences. I would be happy to be an ambassador for the university to publicise and promote this practicum experience for students considering this in the future.

Comment by researcher: The teaching experience was important but the cultural experience of living

in another culture was also highly regarded. The recognition that it was not only the combination of 'skills of teaching which had been improved but also 'attitudes', a more broad-minded, culturally embracing perspective to bring home.

Discussion & Analysis

The teaching practicum in China was seen as a personal and professional investment. In general, there were four major benefits perceived by the beginning teachers (figure 1):

1. Personality growth
2. New perspectives on Australia
3. Improved job prospects
4. Knowledge of the culture of a different country

Figure 1: Perceived Benefits of Teaching in China (in order of importance)

Personality growth was seen as the most important benefit of the China practicum. This closely related to the other benefits perceived. They saw that a development in their tolerance and respect for other cultures was contributing to their skills in intercultural competence (Banks 2001). These beginning teachers were highly motivated and relatively well prepared for the challenges encountered. A level of determination was evident through their earlier perseverance in persevering with the application process and travel requirements. Explanations for student satisfaction can also be related to the teachers' financial means and to their age (c. 21). All teachers were able to afford the airfare, accommodation and living expenses and did not complain about financial difficulties. Their practicum was independently financed, not by their parents.

New perspectives were gained on the Australian teachers' identity and culture. Concepts of culture were challenged by their experiences and they began to see culture as a more fluid entity than they had believed. There was the recognition that their own language skills were mono-cultural. Grappling with the Chinese language showed the beginning teachers what it was like to be a student.

Improved job prospects for an international career and for a teaching job in Australia were seen as a major benefit. The practicum led to increased job competence in teamwork and problem solving. There was a building of trust and morale between partners, which led to increased zeal, and levels of confidence. One of the main contributions of the Australian teachers was to give native-speaker input to students who may only have heard English through their

Chinese teachers or through television. Students often used the textbook used in the classroom as a springboard for authentic language. They were encouraged by the Chinese teachers to adapt and expand on the information in the textbook so that the actual lesson given was not shackled to a book-centred or a grammar translation with emphasis on rote memory. This gave some continuity with the Chinese teachers' programs but extended the vocabulary and gave vividness to the accurate but stilted language of the textbook. Complementing the instructional methods of the Chinese teachers was seen as essential mainly through an emphasis on speaking, pronunciation and oral communication in English. They tried to emphasise final consonants and the beginning teachers tried to introduce innovative forms of instruction building on those practised by the Chinese teachers who are well aware of innovative approaches through their teacher training and English language text-books (Hu, 2002; Savignon 1997). Both the Australian and Chinese teachers used aspects of the communicative language teaching approach.

In their communicative language teaching, peer interactions could still be used, as students spoke in dyads but there was less physical room for group work. Negotiating meaning with interlocutors and working in small groups was often not possible to achieve. The beginning teachers achieved the repetition of language forms but they clearly wanted the students to have more practice with speaking.

First-hand, empirical knowledge of the culture of a different country The cultural assumptions of the teachers were challenged and modified through the real experience of teaching in a Chinese primary

school. After completing the practicum in China, the Australian teachers believed that they were more respectful of other cultures and felt they could empathise more freely with students from another culture they might encounter in their future teaching careers.

While there were negative aspects of the practicum such as those outlined in figure 2, these were seen as temporary and relatively inconsequential. The short period of time (3 weeks) spent in the PRC meant that teachers did not attach high importance to these features:

1. difficulties in language communication
2. accommodation problems
3. cultural misunderstandings
4. loneliness

Figure 2: Perceptions of the Negative Aspects of Teaching in China (in order of importance)

Difficulties in language communication were encountered both in and out of the classroom. The differences in English pronunciation were sometimes exacerbated by the Australian accent with its emphasis on 'drawn out vowels' and by colloquialisms unfamiliar to the Chinese students. Misunderstandings sometimes arose because of this but teachers then used visual aids, gestures or writing on the board to communicate meaning. Language problems were sometimes evident in their discussions about teaching with the Chinese teachers but these were generally overcome with humour, good will and resort to the dictionary. The Chinese teachers also helped them with local pronunciation and vocabulary associated with shopping and restaurants e.g. *pianyidiar* (cheaper), *bu la* (not hot). They taught the Australian teachers how to count to ten through hand sign language (e.g. 10 = 1st two fingers of both hands crossed).

Accommodation problems of the Australian teachers were put into perspective when they observed the conditions of their Chinese counterparts. The teachers were cushioned from some of the problems of living in a foreign culture to some extent. The accommodation was arranged for them and they were generally satisfied with the facilities.

Cultural misunderstandings occurred but, in general, the degree of cultural distance between Australia and China was seen as a factor of interest, not as a negative feature. They did not suffer discrimination in China nor did culture shock lead to discontent - in fact they revelled in 'difference' and tried to understand it. They absorbed the aspects of the culture of China such as the cooking, different kinds of food, playing of mah-jong, the art of calligraphy tai chi. The practicum helped teachers to think about ideas about equity and social justice as they compared the culture of China with their experiences in Australia. They had few troubles with adjustment in an unfamiliar environment of their initial preparation of lessons, their use of the current

Chinese textbook and the assistance and advice of the Chinese teachers.

Problems of loneliness and missing friends and relatives were mitigated by their group solidarity, by partner teaching and by the warm welcome of the Chinese teachers and students. The short period of time, combined with the cohesive nature of the group, meant that the teachers rarely suffered separation anxiety.

While the Australian teachers saw themselves as 'other', they recognised that the following factors outweighed this sense of cultural difference:

- interest in teaching in another country
- love of adventure
- desire to practise teaching skills
- desire to experience a different culture
- desire to get a different perspective on
- interest in the culture of , in particular.
- desire to learn a language/improve language skills.

All participants expressed the belief that the experience of being the 'other' was not necessarily negative. In fact, their firsthand experience of being culturally different could give them empathy with students from a multicultural background as future teachers in the Australian context.

Conclusions

The beginning teachers had mainly positive experiences in their China practicum. Teachers in their leadership role need cognitive and interpersonal skills in a world of technology and globalisation, socialisation, and culture (Bottery 2006; Tsolidis 2002).

There are, however, various constraints on this modest study. It is unwise to generalize from the findings to other pre-service teacher populations. The small size of the sample group and the unique

setting of the Kunming school experience do not claim to represent the views of other groups of English teachers in the People's Republic of China. While the Chinese teachers were not interviewed about their perceptions, the researcher observed their positive feedback to the Australian teachers.

There are significant implications related to the positive and negative aspects of the practicum, which can assist educational planners who wish to internationalise their activities (Ruby 2005; Edwards & Tudball 2002). These are listed below:

1. Participants experience personality growth and development, particularly in their commitment to issues of equity and social justice. They develop the ability to work cooperatively with a partner, helping with learning and problem solving, negotiation and forming relationships.
2. New critical perspectives of their own country are gained based on their real experience of another culture (Schon 1983). Knowledge of alternative cultural, social and pedagogical perspectives was a crucial benefit. Participants believed this comparison developed the capability to engage in deeper learning. Unexpected connections energized them and contributed to creative teaching ideas.
3. Increased confidence in professional skills. The experience of teaching and living overseas fosters skills that can be utilised in future careers (both locally or abroad). This professional capital was treasured as it came from first-hand experience of another culture (Savignon 1997). Participants gained an international frame of reference.

4. Knowledge of and respect for the culture of a different country prepares participants to actively engage with another culture and respond flexibly to diversity issues (Giddens 2000). They learnt how to accommodate their behaviours and teaching styles to a different culture and to develop strategies for dealing with intercultural misunderstanding. The practicum gave them the time and space for a reconception of their role as a teacher and their responsibilities towards students from multilingual backgrounds (Hu 2002). Many of the teachers believed that their strategies would transfer to other areas such as religious or ethnic groupings. A more global sense of social responsibility was gained as their curiosity was aroused about another culture and different forms of learning.

In conclusion, the teachers believed that they had gained a perspective on their own culture by their eagerness to understand aspects of the culture of China (Hibler 1998). This window of experience encouraged them to take an interest in other cultures, which they believed would enhance their contribution as teachers on their return home, making them more curious and knowledgeable about the 'other' in matters of race, religion, language, customs and traditions, and social behaviour (Ljungdahl 2004). The experience of teaching in the People's Republic of China opened the beginning teachers' minds about multiculturalism and the benefits of internationalisation in their home culture.

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