

## Research Article

# Teaching without boundaries: How global experiences shape future English language educators?

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International and cross-cultural experiences are critical to effectively prepare language teachers for the increasingly diverse classroom, as they promote language proficiency and cultural awareness and sensitivity. This research captures the multi-national engagements of pre-service language teachers enrolled at a Turkish university. Participants with extensive global experiences (e.g., mobility programs, multicultural projects, and local or virtual immersion opportunities) were interviewed in a focus group setting to explore the impact of their cross-cultural experiences and interactions on their linguistic and cultural skills, and on their overall professional development and pedagogical perspectives. Regardless of background or nature of experience, the participating non-native English language teacher candidates reported increased linguistic skills and intercultural competence, as well as boosted confidence and enhanced adaptability in their instructional approaches and practices. These findings and the skills outlined underscore the critical role of cross-cultural experiences in shaping future educators' abilities to understand and respond to the complexities of language teaching in a globalized world. This study offers practical implications for language teacher educators as well as curriculum and program developers to effectively train educators with a broader mindset and empathetic cultural perspective for addressing the varied needs of students in multicultural and multilingual classrooms.

Keywords: English language teacher candidates; Intercultural competence; Multicultural classrooms; Pre-service English language teachers

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## 1. Introduction

The recent scientific and technological advances have made the world into a more interconnected and interdependent place. This situation has significantly increased the importance of intercultural interactions in language education, just like in other areas of education, and made intercultural competence a critical component of effective teaching (Byram, 1997; Cushner & Mahon, 2009; Çelik & Erbay-Çetinkaya, 2020; Jackson, 2008; Sercu et al., 2005). While proficiency in the target language remains an essential skill for language teachers, the ability to manage diverse cultural contexts is now equally important. Global experiences such as student mobility, study abroad, virtual exchange, work-and-travel, service learning, overseas volunteering, and other programs and opportunities offering cross-cultural interactions are increasingly recognized for their potential to meet the changing needs of today's teachers and classrooms (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Deardorff, 2006).

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These experiences equip pre-service teachers with first-hand opportunities to engage in intercultural communication, and increase cultural sensitivity and awareness, build global perspectives, adapt pedagogical strategies, develop flexibility and adaptability, boost confidence and self-efficacy, and develop resilience (Ateşkan, 2016; Auliya et al., 2020; Bernardes et al., 2021; Cinelli & Johns, 2017; Cruickshank & Westbrook, 2013; Hasymi & Nurkamto, 2023; Hiratsuka, 2014; Kabilan, 2013; King et al., 2022; Lee, 2011; Lindahl et al., 2020; Parmigiani et al., 2023; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Tambyah, 2019). All these skills are essential to be successful in diverse settings that are the norm in education today. As a result, the value of intercultural competence in preparing language educators to effectively deal with the challenges of a globalized classroom is increasingly emphasized (Bernardes et al., 2021; Byram, 2009; Çelik, 2021; Çelik & Erbay-Çetinkaya, 2020; Matsuda, 2017; Serçu et al., 2005; Tambyah, 2019).

Accordingly, this research addresses a critical gap by exploring the role of international and cross-cultural experiences beyond the commonly studied international practicum, internship, and short-term overseas teaching (e.g., Ateşkan, 2016; Auliya et al., 2020; Bernardes et al., 2021; Cinelli & Jones, 2017; Cruickshank & Westbrook, 2013; Hasymi & Nurkamto, 2023; Kabilan, 2013; Lee, 2011; Parmigiani et al., 2023; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Tambyah, 2019), uncovering diverse experiences that contribute to pre-service teachers' professional development and intercultural competence. The study focuses on understanding how global experiences shape the perspectives and practices of non-native English-speaking student teachers and how these experiences influence their approaches to language teaching in increasingly diverse educational environments. Exploring the role of cross-cultural experiences in the preparation of language educators is critical because such encounters and interactions have the potential to provide valuable information about different linguistic and cultural spheres, and it can, by promoting shared understanding across cultural boundaries, significantly shape teachers' classroom dynamics and influence their teaching methods, fostering a more inclusive and adaptable approach to language teaching.

## **2. The Importance of Intercultural Experiences and Interactions in Language Education**

Research shows that cross-cultural experiences play a significant role in language teacher education. Encountering different cultures and educational systems allows to thoroughly develop both language skills and cultural understanding (Byram, 1997; Cinelli & Johns, 2017; Driscoll et al., 2014; Hasymi & Nurkamto, 2023; Lee, 2011; Lindahl et al., 2020; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Tambyah, 2019). Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence highlights that efficient communication in a second or foreign language requires not only linguistic ability, but also an increased knowledge and awareness of, and sensitivity to, (inter)cultural differences. Language teachers today must demonstrate a variety of skills to thrive in a multicultural environment. As Byram (1997) argues, these skills include the ability to learn about cultural practices; openly engaging in cultural interactions; interpreting and relating experiences from other cultures; critically evaluating cultural perspectives; understanding how social identities function and change across different cultures; viewing one's beliefs and behaviors from an outsider's perspective; and cultivating curiosity and openness.

Previous studies emphasize the role of international mobility and cross-cultural exchange opportunities in encouraging teachers to adapt their respective teaching approaches to suit diverse cultural contexts (Jackson, 2008). Adaptability is particularly important in today's culturally diverse classrooms, where students and teachers come from a variety of backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences that influence individual learning and communication styles. Teacher candidates with extensive cross-cultural experiences develop empathy, adaptability, and a broadened worldview by immersing themselves with other cultures (Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Dearnorff, 2006; Hasymi & Nurkamto, 2023). According to Matsuda (2017), culturally experienced teachers also develop a deep understanding of the connection between culture and linguistic systems and the impact of diverse cultural perspectives on communication. This, in turn, shapes their teaching methods, with many teachers becoming better prepared to incorporate specific

cultural elements and diverse perspectives into their lessons to effectively communicate and connect with their students on an individual level.

Additionally, studies on global engagements and international exposure reveal that cross-cultural interactions contribute significantly to personal development and emotional well-being, particularly resulting in increased self-confidence and autonomy (Cinelli & Johns, 2017; Driscoll et al., 2014; Hasymi & Nurkamto, 2023; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Shoffner, 2019). As supported by research, non-native English teachers participating in international programs often report feeling more competent and stronger in their language skills after sustained intercultural encounters (e.g., Hasymi & Nurkamto, 2023; Parmigiani et al., 2023). Such experiences improve teachers' pedagogical decisions and enable them to bring unique perspectives and diverse teaching strategies to their classrooms, which ultimately benefits their students and promotes a more inclusive educational environment (Duff & Uchida, 1997).

### 3. Methodology

This study used a qualitative research design to explore the perspectives and personal accounts of non-native English teacher candidates regarding their cross-cultural encounters. Qualitative research, especially in educational contexts, provides an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), and allows for a thorough analysis of the complexities of human experiences, such as social interactions, perspectives, and lived realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Additionally, qualitative research enables the identification of emerging themes and patterns across different participants' experiences and provides a nuanced understanding that cannot be achieved through quantitative approaches (Creswell, 2014) in a study aiming to collect and reflect on the personal accounts and perspectives of non-native English teacher candidates regarding their global experiences to reveal the impact of these experiences on their language proficiency, intercultural competence, and pedagogical perspectives.

#### 3.1. Setting and Participants

The research was conducted with senior students enrolled in the English Language Teaching [ELT] program at the Foreign Language Education Department of a Turkish university. The ELT program was designed to train non-native English teachers for language instruction, and therefore, this specific setting was deemed to be an ideal environment to examine the effects of cross-cultural experiences on educators in training.

Purposeful criterion sampling was utilized to ensure that participants had extensive experience and exposure to varied intercultural contexts and interactions (Patton, 2014). As Patton argues, "the logic and power of qualitative purposeful sampling derives from the emphasis on in-depth understanding of specific cases" (p. 53), information-rich cases from which one can learn more about issues of central importance to the inquiry, and as a type of purposeful sampling, criterion sampling requires, in the selection of these cases, "some predetermined criterion of importance" (p. 281). More specifically, participants were selected based on their substantive involvement in prior global activities and exchanges. These included a variety of experiences, as outlined below:

1. Cross-cultural interactions including language exchange programs and participation in multicultural classes where students interact with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds.
2. International collaborations involving joint projects with international peers or institutions, such as presenting at conferences or attending seminars with global participants.
3. Mobility programs like Erasmus+ exchange and similar initiatives encompassing long-term training and education abroad.
4. Virtual and local immersion opportunities consisting of online programs, simulated events and local multicultural interactions that provide valuable cultural undertakings for students who are unable to travel internationally.

The final sample consisted of eight senior students (five females and three males) in their early twenties, who met the selection criteria and agreed to participate in the study. Informed consent

was obtained from all participants. For the confidentiality of their responses, the data were reported using anonymized participant identifiers (e.g., P1, P2) rather than names.

### 3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through two semi-structured focus group interviews. Focus group interviews usually offer researchers flexibility while allowing them to explore the participants' experiences in depth (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Focus group discussions were preferred, as they encourage an organic dialogue and elaborated discourse where participants interact with each other's perspectives and experiences directly through conversation and discussion. Such dynamic interactions help create a more comprehensive understanding of issues such as the impact of international experiences on participants' language development, cultural awareness, and pedagogical development. In this study, the semi-structured format created an open-ended but still guided environment for participants to share personal stories, give details of major events, and reflect on their evolving views of the subtle ways in which intercultural interactions shaped their personal and professional development.

Semi-structured questions provided a balance between structure and flexibility, allowing emerging themes to develop naturally as they guided the conversation. Interview questions were carefully devised to align with the research objectives and to yield rich data to capture the multifaceted nature of the participants' experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). The question development process was based on existing literature regarding the effects of international experiences on language proficiency, intercultural competence, and teaching practices (see Appendix 1). The questions were divided into thematic sections to ensure coverage of each area of interest. These sections included experiences on intercultural and multicultural environments, reflections on language proficiency, the impact of international experiences on teaching philosophies, and challenges and adaptation processes encountered in various classroom environments. This thematic structure allowed for a focused examination while also allowing participants to highlight specific aspects of their experiences they found most meaningful.

Each focus group interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. The first was conducted face-to-face and the second via video conferencing based on participants' availability. This hybrid format ensured full participation of all participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim to facilitate accurate analysis.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a specific thematic analysis framework, which included familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final write-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke, this approach requires "an ongoing reflexive dialogue on the part of the researcher ... throughout the analytic process" (p. 9) to uncover the nuances and real meanings of participants' experiences and perceptions hidden in recurring patterns and themes.

Specifically, the first phase of data analysis involved transcribing the audio recordings verbatim, and reviewing the data by reading and rereading the transcripts, and developing a deep understanding of the content. During the second phase, initial codes were generated by systematically coding the entire dataset, identifying meaningful ideas and patterns, and organizing these into preliminary codes. These initial codes were then grouped into broader, overarching themes. This third phase utilized mind maps to manually cluster and devise themes that emerged from the data to see the interrelations. The next phase entailed reviewing and refining the themes against the coded data extracts and the entire data set to ensure they are coherent. In the fifth phase, further analysis was carried out to consider and articulate the essence of each theme. This process of defining and naming themes helped ensure their originality and relevance to the research questions and objectives. Finally, in the last phase, supporting extracts and quotes were selected, and the findings were contextualized in relation to the research questions through a narrative to accurately represent the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). As Braun and

Clarke argued, this analysis was “not a linear process of simply moving from one phase to the next” but instead, a “more recursive process ... back and forth as needed, throughout the phases.” (p. 86)

Following the analysis, four main themes emerged: improved linguistic proficiency, expanded intercultural competence, increased pedagogical adaptability, and enhanced professional confidence and autonomy. These themes will be presented below, after an initial thorough analysis of the responses to the ten individual questions.

#### **4. Results**

In answering the first question about their cross-cultural interactions and experiences in international contexts, participants described their encounters as both challenging and rewarding. For participants, this meant a period of adjustment with initial difficulties of adapting to new environments and cultures that led to personal growth and learning. P3 exemplified this view by stating that adapting required effort, but “once I embraced the local context without constant comparisons to my home country, the experience became much easier.” To help with the difficulties of adapting to a new culture or educational system, participants emphasized the role of learning the customs and specifics to increase one’s cultural awareness and understanding. For many participants, this included pre-departure language and culture training on the specifics and potential issues students might encounter in their respective destinations. Such groundwork gave students the proper background to help their adjustment, as highlighted by P5: “Thanks to this preparation, I was able to handle the difficulties I faced while studying in Poland with minimal stress.”

Regarding the second question, the participants expressed that their international experiences had a significant impact specifically on their linguistic proficiency and intercultural competence. They highlighted improvements particularly in speech fluency, listening comprehension, and vocabulary acquisition, as well as exposure to different accents and colloquial expressions not often taught in classroom settings. As P5 noted, cultural and linguistic immersion provided “constant opportunities to practice” in “real-life contexts.” The connection with locals, along with a first-hand understanding of linguistic and cultural norms associated with everyday life, lead participants to develop greater feelings of tolerance, understanding, empathy, and appreciation for cultural differences. Developing both linguistic and cultural understanding was key for participants, as P7 put it, “even if you can understand ... because you know the language, sometimes it is hard to get what they mean because of the cultural differences.”

In the third question, participants discussed how cross-cultural experiences shaped their understanding of ELT pedagogy and practices. In their responses, they underscored the importance of creating supportive, inclusive, and creative learning environments; being more resourceful to suit diverse cultural backgrounds and proficiency levels of their students; prioritizing cultural sensitivity and awareness in teaching; and, to make themselves more approachable to students, incorporating authentic materials and genuine contexts and experiences into their instructional practices. P5 noted that immersion into diverse cultural settings and experiencing the importance of adaptability and awareness reflected the need to be equally innovative and efficient to address different learning styles. This required a deeper understanding of students’ needs, backgrounds, and interests to accurately assess learning behaviors and plan the best way to promote cultural awareness and a collaborative, communicative learning environment for all students. As P7 highlighted, “we cannot separate culture from language” and stressed that cultural awareness is needed on the part of both teachers and students.

Next, the participants were asked to share any challenges or obstacles faced in their journey of studying and/or teaching English in multicultural settings, and how they navigated them. Core challenges were communication barriers, cultural differences, discrimination, and isolation. Given the complexity of language instruction in a heterogenous environment, likelihood of confusion was, as P6 stated, often a main blocker for the participants, especially when they “showed cultural

elements or explained what a specific movement meant." To combat these challenges, participants reported a variety of strategies, including seeking assistance from program coordinators and staff, embracing cultural differences with patience and acceptance, and building a closer support network with fellow international students and teachers. As P5 stated, building a network with peers, in particular, created a sense of mutual understanding and support by sharing similar experiences, and prompted them to make a "conscious effort to be open-minded and patient," facilitating their adaptation skills and process.

In response to question five, participants provided examples of cases in which their intercultural experiences helped them adapt better to diverse English language classrooms and pedagogical approaches. The examples included more student-centered approaches tailored to the individual rather than collective needs, improved problem-solving strategies, further contextualization for cultural information, additional techniques to introduce concrete, hands-on cultural scenarios and content, and, most importantly, innovative plans to engage and directly integrate students from diverse backgrounds into classroom procedures and practices. This focus on closer cultural learning emphasized the importance of flexibility, collaboration, and understanding cultural nuances on the part of both the instructor and the student. For P6, the use of real-life scenarios helped make language instruction more engaging and dynamic for students, stating that it motivated them more. Ultimately, this focus on diverse cultural spaces and content, drawn directly from their personal immersion experiences, fostered what P5 described as "a more inclusive learning environment" that was welcoming to all individuals. Participants were then prompted to discuss how they perceived the role of cross-cultural interactions on their skills in communicating effectively with diverse students.

As of the next question, participants highlighted that their cross-cultural interactions fostered a greater sense of empathy and understanding through heightened cultural awareness. As P6 argued, this, in turn, made them more adept to accommodate their communication styles and teaching pedagogies to suit their students' individual needs and specific challenges. For many, like P8, this was tied to the value of language practice and cultural exchanges in an organic environment, given that "cross-cultural interactions offered a unique out-of-school learning opportunity for professional development." As P5 explained, such experiences were beneficial, as they, at the very least, exposed them to "cultural perspectives, communication styles, and social norms" that they could integrate into their own teachings to better connect with their students.

Subsequently, as international experiences and intercultural exchanges are highly individual, participants were urged, in question seven, to voice how such experiences influenced, if at all, their own pedagogical outlooks and teaching philosophies. As P5 stated, one of the key areas of impact was a heightened awareness of the "importance of cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in education." As P8 described, prioritizing inclusivity and ensuring that diverse linguistic and cultural identities are appreciated is particularly important in language instruction, as it enables language learners to communicate skillfully and respectfully in multicultural settings and contexts. They argue that this practice also reflected the constantly evolving nature and role of language and language education in a globalized world in making it an equitable and interconnected place for all. Apart from this, P1 discussed the significance of creating a culturally rich and stress-free language learning environment for teachers and maintained that interacting with people from diverse backgrounds during their international and cross-cultural encounters had a transformative effect on their pedagogical skills in this domain.

With the next question, participants were given the opportunity to dialogue on the strategies or techniques they acquired and deemed to be most effective in fostering cultural understanding and inclusivity in the classroom setting. They mentioned developing and maintaining regular communication with students in the styles most suitable to their individual needs (P1), directly incorporating cultural stories into lessons (P2), integrating cultural exchange activities and collaborative projects into the teaching program (P5), and introducing small group work to simulate authentic intercultural interaction (P8). All these strategies focused on exploring cultural

exchange opportunities, traditions, or customs directly, which, as P5 described, encouraged students to share their own views and perspectives, and actively listen, appreciate, and learn from each other. All participants stated that they would further incorporate lessons learnt from their international experiences into future teaching practices.

Following question eight, participants were invited to engage in a discussion regarding the key benefits of global experiences for non-native pre-service English teachers, and how teacher education programs could utilize them. Reflecting on the preparatory nature of such experiences, participants reported several benefits, the most important of which was the exposure to and familiarity with distinct cultures, which they thought led to a greater capacity to be adaptable and global-minded. As P1 described, "joining unfamiliar groups, leading conversations, and working towards the same goals" in culturally diverse settings "were the most important parts of these exchanges." This exposure to diverse cultures also provided the benefit of ample language practice, which, as P5 asserted, contributed to the further development of intercultural competence, empathy, and growth. For P6, cultural experiences also introduced them to innovative approaches and methods that challenged their own understandings, graining, and sense of professional self. Above all, participants stated that taking part in cross-cultural exchanges in various capacities should be more of a central requirement in language teacher education programs to further prepare teacher candidates for multicultural classrooms and encourage candidates to use "better approaches and techniques" observed abroad.

Finally, connecting back to the primary focus of this study, participants were asked to describe how their cultural experiences prepared them to address the challenges of language instruction in today's culturally diverse world. One core takeaway reported was a deeper understanding of language and the relationship between language and culture. As P5 asserted, the exposure to cultural interactions through diverse contexts broadened their understanding of meanings and references that language carries beyond itself "as a dynamic process, influenced by social, cultural, and historical factors." As P6 reflected, this accumulated wisdom enabled them to approach students more sensitively and feel increasingly comfortable applying innovative teaching methods in their own lessons. This profound understanding of language as a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon, was perceived as critical to sensitive and effective language instruction, prompting more flexibility and adaptability on the parts of prospective teachers.

After an analysis of the individual responses to each interview question, it is important to examine broader patterns that emerge. The following section will address these general themes and highlight key issues and concepts consistently reflected in participants' responses.

#### **4.1. Emerging Themes and Insights**

Drawing from the individual responses offering unique insights, and the group discussions and exchanges, some common themes emerged that provided a deeper understanding of overall trends and shared perspectives among participants. These themes will be reviewed below, with supporting participant quotes, adding depth to the findings. For a quick overview of these themes and subthemes, you can see Table 1 at the end of the results section.

##### *4.1.1. Improved linguistic proficiency*

A consistent finding was the reported progress in the participants' English language proficiency, particularly in spoken interaction and production (including fluency), listening, and vocabulary development. According to the participants, what helped with this linguistic improvement and made their language more versatile was being constantly surrounded by native English speakers and frequent interactions with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Many participants noted that interacting with both native and non-native English speakers provided a unique, authentic opportunity to practice the language outside the traditional classroom setting. As P1 elaborated, despite not having much prior English experience in real-life situations, cross-cultural experiences allowed them to understand how to "communicate more naturally and to put into practice casual talk that you don't usually learn in school." P7 echoed this

benefit, stating that it boosted their confidence in their language skills and helped them to stop “overthinking or constantly translating” in their head when speaking in English. P2 shared a similar experience by saying “speaking with people from different backgrounds was challenging at first, but after some time, I found myself thinking in English more, using conversational language I wouldn’t normally use, and being more articulate and fluent.”

Likewise, P5 argued that idiomatic expressions and slang helped them understand how English was used in everyday settings, which they thought would make them “more relatable and accessible to students.” They further added that this was particularly important for making instruction more dynamic and, most importantly, applicable to real-life language use. Finally, as reported by the participants, exposure to different accents and dialects improved their listening skills and ability to comprehend both formal and colloquial English, helping them to identify authentic language practice as an important skill for themselves as future educators and their students.

#### *4.1.2. Expanded intercultural competence*

Intercultural competence also stood out as an important area of development. Participants’ cross-cultural experiences caused them to question their own views and approaches before adopting a more inclusive worldview. Developing a greater understanding of and appreciation for diverse cultural norms and values in their interactions, even through simple group work activities, prompted participants to incorporate empathy, openness, patience, and compassion as critical skills into their own learning and their classroom environments as future teachers in preparation. P2 revealed that, while they initially had some biases against other cultures, encountering a multicultural setting helped shift their preconceptions and taught them “a lot about respect, tolerance, and compromise” by introducing them to “different ways of thinking, communicating, and even teaching.”

Similarly, P7, drawing from their experiences working with people from various backgrounds, emphasized the role of understanding cultural context and deciphering cultural cues in grasping messages correctly without any misunderstandings and communication breakdowns. As they put it, “sometimes people aren’t being rude; it’s just a cultural difference or nuance,” and therefore, in P4’s word, “you have to openly talk about things and try to find ways to clear up any confusions and conflicts.”

P3 and P5, too, talked about how their international experiences enhanced their intercultural communicative competence, making specific references to the skills of adaptability and flexibility, which they thought were necessary for effective appropriate communication. Overall, the participants believed that they had to integrate attitudes such as respect, openness, and curiosity, with skills of adaptability to and flexibility with different communication styles, behaviors, and cultural environments, for a higher degree of intercultural competence so they could successfully manage today’s culturally diverse classrooms and implement inclusive teaching practices.

#### *4.1.3. Increased pedagogical adaptability*

The exposure to different educational settings, classroom dynamics, and teaching methods helped participants broaden their views on culture, which, in turn, influenced their pedagogical approaches. Most of the participants mentioned witnessing diverse instructional practices that caused them to question their own beliefs regarding effective teaching and encouraged them to embrace a more adaptable and flexible mindset. They noted that becoming more reflective about their own education and teacher beliefs enabled them to make adjustments, facilitating their professional growth.

For many participants, this reassessment and refinement of their own teaching philosophies highlighted gaps in their training and respective educational systems, as well as how their international experiences and cross-cultural interactions could help address those shortcomings. For instance, As P5 explained, he observed more of student-centered learning during their



exchange program abroad, as compared to Türkiye, and found it “inspiring to see students taking responsibility for their own learning.”

Similarly, P2 discussed their experience with an immersion setting during a practicum in a European school, where they were pleasantly surprised to see “the value of creating an English-only environment,” altering their beliefs about language teaching and encouraging them to be more creative as a future language teacher.” They believed that immersion allowed learners to identify and evaluate their own cultural norms as well as the target culture in ways that led to a reconstruction of their self and identity, and therefore, was a powerful approach they would integrate into their future teaching.

Finally, the participants emphasized the impact of their experiences on their enhanced understanding of culturally responsive teaching practices to connect with culturally and linguistically diverse learners. They thought the idea of utilizing students’ backgrounds, prior knowledge, cultural traits, and life experiences as resources resonated with them as teacher candidates. As P6 argued, incorporating these elements into their skill set would give them the flexibility to tailor instruction to improve student engagement, autonomy, and outcomes in increasingly multicultural classrooms.

#### *4.1.4. Enhanced professional confidence and autonomy*

Exploring new environments, handling language barriers, and familiarizing with diverse educational settings altogether contributed to a sense of self-efficacy, as reported by most of the participants. The challenges and revelations encouraged innovation, risk-taking, and, more importantly, confidence in their skills and abilities. This increased self-confidence was often linked to an expanded professional identity and recognition of success, as well as a heightened willingness to diversify their approaches and differentiate teaching to address the learning needs of their students.

However, getting out of their comfort zones and connecting with different people in varied contexts was not a straightforward task. As P3 emphasized, there were times when they “felt frustrated due to language and cultural differences but learned to be patient and view these challenges as part of the learning process.” Similarly, as P7 revealed, “presenting at an international conference in front of a large audience was nerve-wracking,” but it gave them “a sense of accomplishment and confidence at the end.” Likewise, P2 shared that, although they were initially nervous about teaching students who did not share their first language or culture, the experience forced them to rely on their skills and adapt as needed, leading to feeling “more capable and less intimidated by working with students from diverse backgrounds.” For future classroom practices, this all meant extensive learning for participants beyond their teacher education programs and further understanding and adaptability to incorporate their broadened cultural awareness into their instruction to operate smoothly in the classroom.

Drawing from their international encounters, participants also reported feeling more autonomous, indicating that their experiences empowered them to take on the ownership and leadership of their learning and teaching, and to trust in their abilities more to make better and informed instructional decisions. For instance, P8 described how adapting lesson plans in a foreign classroom by counting on their own skills led to increased creativity and resourcefulness. As they did not have access to the same resources, they had to envision new ways to teach the material, which they stated helped them realize how resourceful they could be as a teacher. This self-assurance and independence, as P5 argued, made them more confident in effective classroom management skills.

Lastly, participants noted the importance of professional networks they built in fostering collaboration, support, and growth. As P1 highlighted, having a support network that extended beyond one’s home country was invaluable, yielding access to latest information and skills, opportunities for collaboration, exposure to role models, and increased pathways for professional development. All these reflections and insights collectively emphasize how stepping into

unfamiliar cross-cultural contexts not only challenged participants but also empowered them in ways to enhance their confidence and autonomy, and reinforced their professional identities as future language teachers.

Overall, these results illustrated that international experiences had a significant and multifaceted impact on non-native English teacher candidates in this study in areas such as language skills, cultural understanding, teaching adaptability, and professional self-confidence. The self-reported experiences of the participants suggested that intercultural exposure improved empathy, fostered resilience, and broadened teaching methods and competencies, all of which contributed to the development of a balanced global perspective needed for today's teachers.

Table 1

*Overview of Key Themes and Subthemes*

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Subthemes</i>
Improved Linguistic Proficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased fluency in spoken interaction</li> <li>• Expanded lexical repertoire</li> <li>• Enhanced pronunciation and grammatical accuracy</li> <li>• Strengthened listening comprehension, including understanding idiomatic expressions</li> </ul>
Expanded Intercultural Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heightened cultural awareness and understanding of communication styles</li> <li>• Enhanced adaptability in diverse cultural contexts</li> <li>• Improved ability to engage in multicultural communication</li> </ul>
Increased Pedagogical Adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater flexibility in adapting instructional methods</li> <li>• Enhanced reflective practices for continuous professional growth</li> </ul>
Enhanced Professional Confidence and Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthened self-efficacy in managing classroom dynamics</li> <li>• Improved leadership and decision-making capabilities</li> <li>• Elevated sense of autonomy and responsibility in teaching practices</li> <li>• Broader professional networks fostering collaboration and support</li> </ul>

## 5. Discussion

These findings indicate that international experiences play a transformative role in the professional and personal development of pre-service teachers, confirming the findings of previous studies (e.g., Ateşkan, 2016; Hasymi & Nurkamto, 2023; Hiratsuka, 2014; King et al., 2022; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Parmigiani et al., 2023). While the participants reported initially facing numerous challenges, particularly with respect to authentic language use and cultural adaptation (Hasymi & Nurkamto, 2023), they observed and revealed significant personal and professional progress and growth at the end of the process.

As reflected in the participants' narratives, international experiences serve as an invaluable and influential resource for pre-service English as a foreign language teachers whose native language is not English. With increased cultural understanding and awareness (Cinelli & Johns, 2017; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Tambyah, 2019), language proficiency (Parmigiani et al., 2023), independence (Shoffner, 2019), self-confidence (Driscoll et al., 2014; Hasymi & Nurkamto, 2023; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008), self-efficacy (Cinelli & Johns, 2017), and adaptability (Hasymi & Nurkamto, 2023), these cross-cultural experiences offered participants the broadened perspectives and

pedagogical development necessary to effectively address the complexities of language teaching in today's multifaced educational landscape.

Their experiences and engagement in numerous learning and teaching activities created many opportunities for the participants to reflect on their skills (Parmigiani et al., 2023; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008), leading to enhanced instructional competencies and readiness for the classroom (Cinelli & Johns, 2017; Parmigiani et al., 2023; Tambyah, 2019). More precisely, improved language proficiency (e.g., Cinelli & Johns, 2017) and intercultural competence (e.g., Tambyah, 2019) emerge as the two critical benefits cited by the participants in this study as skills needed to teach, manage, and support linguistically and culturally diverse students.

A heightened mastery in the English language not only corresponds to the mere ability to understand language subtleties (e.g., slang, cultural references), but also correlates with confidence in using English fluently in various contexts, and thereby, with confidence in teaching. Moreover, a refined intercultural competence means more than being mindful of cultural norms and resolving any potential misunderstandings or conflicts; it helps participants alter their methods to accommodate various learning styles and needs, and connect with their students on an individual level to optimize the learning process and outcomes.

Similarly, the acknowledged improvement in their pedagogical adaptability suggests that exposure to, and active participation in, different teaching practices encourages pre-service teachers to adopt a more flexible and inclusive approach, allowing them to better address students' unique individual needs. By understanding and welcoming students' diverse backgrounds, they can create a supportive atmosphere that facilitates mutual respect and understanding and a more dynamic and engaging learning experience for both students and teachers themselves. Additionally, participants' elevated self-confidence and autonomy implies that international experiences encourage pre-service teachers to innovate and adopt new methods in their classrooms, which can lead to a more dynamic and engaging learning experience for their students.

Overall, the results highlight the significance of international and intercultural learning opportunities for pre-service English language teachers and offer insights into the impact of such experiences on the participants' linguistic and cultural competence, personal and professional identities, personal agency, resourcefulness, and instructional skills. Ultimately, as documented, these experiences include many chances to grow and learn, and empower future teachers to manage the intricacies of language teaching confidently and effectively in an increasingly globalized world.

## **6. Conclusion and Implications**

In this study, the global experiences reflect the diversity of opportunities for collaborative learning and intercultural exchange. Through these engagements, participants increased their language proficiency and authentic language use, and enhanced their intercultural communication and competence. They also gained valuable knowledge and perspectives regarding different pedagogical approaches and sustainability practices, cultivated teaching confidence and autonomy, and developed pedagogical versatility and responsive teaching skills. These outcomes form an integral part of their professional preparation as non-native English language teachers.

These findings highlight the importance and implication of incorporating global experiences into language teacher preparation to better equip future educators with the linguistic, cultural, and professional skills necessary to manage the complexities of today's multicultural classrooms. Accordingly, teacher education programs can offer mobility and exchange opportunities through partnerships with foreign institutions, and encourage, or even require, semester-long or short-term overseas fieldwork placements, tailored to increase teacher candidates' exposure to diverse teaching contexts. In addition, the programs can create and implement virtual courses and projects that facilitate international student collaboration and foster cross-cultural partnerships, allowing students to engage with different cultures and perspectives even when traveling is not feasible.

Integrating global themes into the curriculum by designing courses that focus on global education topics such as teaching English as a global language, and multicultural education is another key step that teacher education programs can take. When this is not practical, offering cross-cultural competence training through various means can be considered a viable alternative. For example, programs can conduct regular seminars or workshops on intercultural communication, global citizenship, and adapting to diverse classroom environments, organize multilingual and multicultural events such as international week or global language fairs where students can interact with peers from various cultural backgrounds, or invite educators or researchers from other countries as guest speakers to share insights and best practices with students. All these unique opportunities are critical for pre-service teachers to nurture qualities such as resilience, empathy, and adaptability, which are vital for effective instruction in diverse educational settings in a global landscape.

On the other hand, to support the efforts of institutions and programs, policy makers should provide financial support or scholarships for teacher candidates to engage in global experiences. For instance, they can support students in attending or presenting at international events focused on language teaching and learning. Additionally, they can ease certification or recognition processes for nonnative English language teachers to study or teach in other countries, and advocate for policies that recognize and value the unique contributions of teachers with global experience.

Similarly, schools and employers should acknowledge the added value of globally experienced teachers in creating culturally inclusive classrooms and provide opportunities for such teachers to share their experiences and insights through workshops and mentoring roles. This can inspire other teachers, and the schools themselves, to implement innovative approaches, methods, and strategies to benefit diverse student populations.

Finally, this study has implications for non-native preservice and in-service teachers. The insights gained through this study should guide their professional development efforts, by encouraging their active participation in global events, conferences, webinars, or professional learning communities, where they can interact with and learn from international peers. Language teachers should highlight the value of their multilingual and multicultural skills and perspectives, sustaining willingness to incorporate these global perspectives into their teaching philosophy and practice, and growing confidence and self-efficacy in their roles as global educators.

While this study underlines the role of international experiences in equipping teachers with skills to address global issues and reinforces the importance of linguistic and cultural diversity in language teaching, further research can investigate the long-term effects of international and cross-cultural experiences on teaching practices, professional identities, and student outcomes, with a focus on broader implications such as curriculum and policy integration, global competence and citizenship, and equity and inclusivity in education. Moreover, exploring the experiences of nonnative teacher candidates from different socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds can ensure diverse perspectives in teacher education. Additional studies on how global experiences contribute to teacher resilience, confidence, and employability in competitive markets can also be insightful. Ultimately, it is worth noting that embracing global experiences in language teacher education not only empowers teacher candidates to excel professionally but also paves the way for transformative, inclusive, and globally responsive educational practices that benefit students and societies alike.

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## Appendix 1. Focus Group Interview Questions

- 1) Can you share with us your experiences of studying or teaching English in international contexts?
- 2) How do you think these international experiences have influenced your linguistic proficiency and intercultural competence?
- 3) In what specific ways, if any, have your international experiences influenced your understanding of English language teaching practices?
- 4) What challenges or obstacles have you faced, if any, while teaching or studying English in a multicultural setting, and what strategies or approaches did you use to overcome them?
- 5) Can you provide examples of instances where your international experiences have helped you adapt to diverse pedagogical approaches in English language teaching?
- 6) How do you perceive the role of cross-cultural interactions in enhancing your ability to effectively communicate with students from diverse backgrounds?
- 7) In what ways, if any, have your international experiences influenced your pedagogical perspectives or teaching philosophy?
- 8) What strategies or techniques have you found effective in fostering intercultural understanding and promoting inclusivity in your classroom?
- 9) In your opinion, what, if any, are the key benefits of international experiences for non-native pre-service English teachers, and how can teacher education programs utilize these experiences to better prepare future educators?
- 10) How, if at all, do you believe your international experiences have contributed to your ability to address the complexities of language instruction in an increasingly globalized world?