"You Speak English, No?":
The Expectations and Experiences of Asian in-service Teachers of English in Australia

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ABSTRACT

In this era of globalisation, many bilingual teachers of English are pursuing their postgraduate degrees in English-speaking contexts. However, most teacher training programmes concentrate on providing academic qualifications to these in-service teachers of English, while neglecting their expectations and lived experiences outside class. The current study examines this gap by interviewing and emailing Asian in-service teachers of English who were enrolled in a Master of TESOL programme in Australia. It explores how these in-service teachers' expectations to improve their spoken English influenced their experiences outside class. This study seeks to understand how these in-service teachers developed as users and teachers of English. Findings suggest that when the participants were in Australia, they actively connected their expectations and their pursuit of content knowledge inside class with their experiences outside class. They also exercised agency in order to achieve their expectations of increasing their English proficiency. Moreover, the participants demonstrated how they developed as users and teachers of English through their strategic thinking and actions. The findings of this study suggest that teacher educators and teacher training programmes need to provide support to enhance Asian in-service teachers' language proficiency, as well as incorporate empowering discourses and different varieties of English into the courses offered.

KEYWORDS: expectations, agency, teacher education

Introduction

As a result of globalisation, there is an increasing market for English-language education. As a response to this demand, many bilingual teachers of English from non-English-speaking contexts are pursuing their postgraduate degrees in English-speaking contexts. These bilingual teachers make up a total of 80% of English teachers worldwide (Canagarajah, 1999). These in-service teachers' relocation in order to study abroad raises a few questions worth investigating. Why are these in-service teachers willing to spend so much money to pursue their studies overseas? What are their expectations and are these expectations met? Do these teachers take specific steps to ensure that their expectations are fulfilled? What are their experiences in relation to their expectations in English-speaking countries? What are the implications of these in-service teachers' expectations and experiences?

Literature review

A review of literature in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) suggests that most teacher training programmes in English-speaking countries focus on providing academic and professional qualifications (Reid, 1996) to Asian in-service bilingual teachers, without paying much attention to their expectations (Kamhi-Stein, 2009) and lived experiences outside class (Kong, 2014). However, these in-service teachers' expectations and experiences outside the classroom play a part in their development as English-teaching professionals.

As indicated earlier, there seems to be a gap in research in English-speaking settings with regard to Asian in-service bilingual teachers' expectations and lived experiences outside class. One exception is research that was carried out by Lavender (2002) on two groups of Korean in-service teachers' expectations and experiences concerning their language improvement in the United Kingdom (UK). Most of these in-service teachers noted that they lacked opportunities to improve their English language skills after they had completed their undergraduate degrees in English in Korea. As it was the first time for many of them to study overseas, they were anxious about having English as a medium of instruction while pursuing their postgraduate studies in the UK. Findings suggest that these in-service teachers' key expectation while in the UK was to improve their language, specifically their speaking skills, in order to survive in the UK. Consequently, they aimed to increase their English proficiency for personal growth, while some of their courses were designed to increase their language proficiency for their professional development. They also sought to improve their English during sessions that were not aimed at language improvement. They made notes of their weaknesses in grammar, and considered how their tutors used certain lexical items and expressions during classes on teaching methodology. They also noticed differences between American and British accents. They positioned themselves as language learners while studying abroad, and sensed a loss of status as teachers of the language.

In addition, the Asian in-service teachers expected to have grammatical input and classroom discussions, learn new vocabulary and language expressions, and work on their listening skills during their language enhancement sessions. However, the in-service teachers reported that classroom discussions were not beneficial to them because proficient speakers dominated these discussions and the in-service teachers tended to use familiar language expressions. Although the in-service teachers felt that they had more opportunities for listening and speaking outside the classroom, Lavender (2002) does not provide any elaboration on these opportunities.

Furthermore, at the beginning of the course, Lavender (2002) asserts that the in-service teachers "…appeared to take responsibility themselves for language improvement…" when they wrote in their diaries to "please help me make contact with foreigner so I use my English,…I think the best solution is to make much opportunity to speak English [*sic*]" (p. 241). Lavender claims that the in-service teachers made the comments optimistically and possessed high expectations of language improvement. However, there were no clear indications on how Lavender made the connections because she did not provide any data to show that the in-service teachers actually took the initiative or exercised agency in order to "contact with foreigner[s]" (p. 241). For the purposes of this article, agency is viewed as a "...socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112).

In the middle of the course, the in-service teachers became pessimistic when their travel plans distracted them from improving their language and when they faced difficulties in comprehension and listening. Despite their pessimism, they still perceived language enhancement to be of central significance. They also expressed their concerns that the course was ending. At the completion of their course, they sensed that they enjoyed the language improvement component and found the component most beneficial and most likely to affect their future teaching.

From the findings of her study, Lavender (2002) emphasises that language improvement should be seen as a key component of a short course and of Asian in-service teachers' overall experience overseas. She recommends some principles for the organisation and structure of language advancement for teacher development, and proposes integrating Asian in-service teachers' experiences outside the classroom into the course. She also suggests that "[the course] should provide coherence amongst the taught components by preparing teachers within the language component for their other components" (p. 247). Among others, the current study aims to provide data to support Lavender's assertions concerning how Asian in-service teachers fulfil their expectations of increasing their speaking skills outside the classroom in an English-speaking context.

Data collection

The four participants presented in this article are participants of a larger doctoral research that I carried out in 2010. The research aimed to investigate, among others, Asian in-service teachers' expectations concerning language improvement and their personal experiences outside class in Australia. The four participants were pursuing their Master of TESOL at a world-ranked university in a multicultural city in Australia. They were chosen for the purposes of this article because their experiences illustrate how they exercised agency outside class in an English-speaking country in order to fulfil their expectations to improve their spoken English. The following table provides a summary of their background information.

Table 1
Summary of participants' background information

Participant (Pseudonyms)	Country	Gender	Age	Languages (Written and Spoken)	Undergraduate Degree	Length of Teaching Experience	Level of Teaching
Thinh	Vietnam	F	26	Vietnamese and English	B.A. in English Teaching Methodology	3 years	University
Suharto	Indonesia	M	33	Bahasa Indonesia and English	B.A. in English Literature	5 years (on and off – 3 months teaching and 6 months not teaching)	Elementary and intermediate levels at a military institution
Mei	Taiwan	F	32	Mandarin and English	B.A. in Foreign Language Literature (Majoring in English)	8 years	Junior High School
Faye	China	F	32	Mandarin and English	B.A. in English Language and Literature	5 years	Tutored Middle School students

Two main questions that guide me for this article are:

(1) What are Asian in-service teachers' language-related experiences outside class in Australia?
(2) Are their expectations to improve their spoken English fulfilled? If so, how are their expectations fulfilled?

For the purposes of this study, a qualitative approach is more suitable than a quantitative research paradigm. This is because this exploration aims to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences. A qualitative methodology allows such an investigation since it concentrates on meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and includes studies on participants' feelings and experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Qualitative research differs from quantitative studies which focus on frequency, quantity and numeric description of views or trends (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Creswell, 2009).

Data were collected from each participant through three individual semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and correspondence in four emails over six months during the participants' final semester. One-to-one interviews were employed because they were valuable in getting in-depth information and probing each participant's perceptions and the "… meaning [that s/he] has constructed, that is how [s/he makes] sense of [his/her] world and the experiences [s/he has] in the world" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6).

After the interview data were transcribed, they were analysed with data from the emails, and these data were subsequently coded. Initial insights and interpretations from the analysis of data were brought back to the participants for clarification and confirmation. Case studies were written for all the participants. Emergent themes and patterns were compiled from commonalities among codes across the participants. These emerging themes were discussed with conference audience as well as PhD supervisors and peers for the purposes of critical reviewing and

debriefing. Moreover, these themes exemplify central issues from the review of literature in the previous section.

Findings, discussion and interpretation

Data analysis for how the participants met their language-related expectations suggested that they encountered different difficulties. Most of them had to strive to develop sustained relationships and/or friendships with their local Australia coursemates. Nevertheless, Mei, Faye, Thinh and Suharto were resolved to enhance their speaking skills by looking for opportunities to use English outside the classroom. The measures that they took can be linked to their investments, expectations and agency. Their actions will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

The first example can be seen in the steps taken by Mei, a Taiwanese high school teacher who took leave from work in order to pursue her Master's degree in Australia. Mei invested a considerable amount of money with the expectation of improving her spoken English. However, she was silenced in class because she was "really quite shameful" after raising her hand as a response to a lecturer's question concerning international students' experiences in attending a bridging programme. Mei felt that the lecturer "made me think I am really stupid students [*sic*]". This is because after Mei raised her hand, the lecturer explained to the whole class that the bridging programme was for international students who "cannot pass IELTS (International English Language Testing System)" (Interview One, June 9, 2011). Mei's agency is suggested in her taking active steps to be connected to a local Australian undergraduate student in a "Buddy Programme" that was organised by the university where she was studying (Email One, July 30, 2011). The purpose of the programme was so that international students could have weekly discussions on travels and cultures with local Australian students who were called "tutors". Mei had more confidence in interacting with her "tutor" when compared to her local Australian coursemates although she thought that her "tutor" had better English proficiency than her. This could be because she felt more comfortable communicating with local Australians in one-to-one conversations and she thought that her "tutor" was younger than her. Mei's agency can be seen in her suggesting that her "tutor" discuss certain topics that Mei herself perceived was significant and in her requesting that her "tutor" proofread her assignments.

Like Mei, Faye invested a big amount of money in order to fulfil her expectations of enhancing her spoken English and achieving "native-like proficiency". However, she failed to "have many opportunities to interact with [her] classmates" (Interview Three, December 4, 2011). Moreover, she did not manage to develop sustained relationships with her local Australian coursemates in order to practise speaking English. She moaned that she had to struggle very hard just to find opportunities to speak English outside class in Australia. Her agency can be seen in her final semester when she became a member of a "special" religious group so that she could speak English with local Australians. She stressed, "If I were local, I won't join [them]" because the group was considered as "a special [non-conventional] group in [the] Australian society" (Interview Three, December 4, 2011).

Different from Mei and Faye, Thinh went to Australia on a scholarship and did not need to invest financially in her postgraduate studies. However, like Mei and Faye, she was unable to learn more English from her local Australian coursemates by developing sustained relationships with them. Thinh's agency is suggested in her taking actions to work part-time as a waitress in an Italian restaurant. She emphasised that she worked at the restaurant in order to learn more about the English language and Australian culture, rather than to support herself financially. Furthermore, she positioned herself positively as a language learner and viewed her world as a

learner when an Italian cook mocked her by asking her, "You know English, no?"; when Thinh could not understand her Italian English. Thinh's goal was to reap the most benefits by having "more exposure" and learning as much as possible regarding the use of English in non-academic contexts while she was in Australia. Her example shows how she exercised agency to a certain degree by her strategic thinking and action so that her time in Australia was fully utilised. She expected and took actions not only to obtain a Master's degree but also to improve her English proficiency by learning how to use the language in the "outside world" (Interview Two, August 5, 2011).

The participants had different degrees of perceptions concerning the need to actively "…seek out opportunities [to use English] by looking for native speakers [of the language]" (Rubin, 1975). While Mei and Thinh took various agentive actions to socialise with local Australians outside class (albeit with various degrees of success), Suharto felt that it was sufficient for him to speak English with other users of the language who possess different first languages since he failed to find suitable opportunities to socialise with local Australians. It can be interpreted that he also exercised agency to meet his expectation of improving his spoken English, albeit in his own terms. When he faced challenges in socialising with local Australians, he chose to use the "better internet facilities" in Australia (compared to the poor facilities in his hometown in Indonesia) to "…analyse different varieties of English on Youtube" (Interview Three, November 19, 2011). He also took part in the current research in order to fulfil his expectation of improving his spoken English so that he could be a "professional teacher" (Clarification Email for Email Four, October 23, 2011).

It should be noted that the participants' perception of how important it was to socialise with local Australians was affected by their expectations, the subjects that they took during their postgraduate studies in Australia, their religious and cultural backgrounds, and their reflections. These aspects will be illustrated in the paragraphs that follow.

Mei, Faye and Thinh had the expectation of improving their English-speaking skills by socialising with local Australians. In particular, Thinh and Faye had the expectation of achieving "native-like competency". However, after taking a subject, Teaching English in International Contexts (TEIC), that includes, among others, discussions on "native speaker fallacy" (Phillipson, 1992, p. 185), the advantages of being bilingual users and teachers of English as well as different varieties of English, Thinh changed her initial expectation of having to socialise solely with local Australians to achieve native-like proficiency. She began to appreciate the benefits of learning about different varieties of English. Consequently, she also desired to be exposed to other varieties of English at the Italian restaurant where she was working part-time. Unlike Thinh, Mei and Faye did not take TEIC and were still affected by discourse surrounding "native speaker fallacy" (Phillipson, 1992, p. 185) at the end of the course.

Like Mei, Faye and Thinh, Suharto had the expectation of improving his spoken English. However, his expectation was slightly different from the expectations of Mei, Faye and Thinh because he only wanted to learn "formal" spoken English "in a good setting, a good environment,…" outside the classroom (Interview One, June 8, 2011). His expectation can be interpreted as connected closely to his religious and cultural background as a practising Muslim man. Consequently, he chose not to socialise with local Australians because he did not want to be involved in activities that he assumed are linked to local Australians. For example, he did not want to go to pubs and "drink beer" so that he could socialise with local Australians and speak English (Interview One, June 8, 2011). One feasible interpretation is that being involved in such activities is against his religious beliefs and cultural practice. Another plausible explanation is

that he could learn how to speak English from other users of English who could use the language proficiently. For instance, Suharto stated that he "learnt new vocabulary" from me during my interviews with him (Interview Three, November 19, 2011). Furthermore, although he admired users of Australian English, Suharto realised through his reflections that he had to understand various accents (e.g. Singaporean, Indian, British and American accents). He remarked that his coursemate from Brunei has a heavy accent and it is difficult for his coursemate to change his Bruneian accent. Suharto viewed proficient users of English as those who have exposure to different varieties of English and accents. Consequently, he has been analysing and making notes of the differences among varieties of English and accents.

Although some participants were mindful of the benefits of socialising with local Australians, there were drawbacks as well. This is suggested in Faye's comments after taking the agentive action of joining "a special [religious] group in [the] Australian society" just to socialise with local Australians and speak English with them. She emphasised, "I am just interested in English" (Interview Two, August 16, 2011). Despite Faye's interest in speaking English with local Australians from the group, she still felt more relaxed when speaking the language with other Asian users of English. Her sense of discomfort can be inferred from her feeling that she was an "outsider" when she was with the group (Interview Three, December 4, 2011). She also perceived that the local Australians whom she socialised with had to give her special attention because she could not comprehend everything that they said.

The findings from this study provide evidence to confirm Lavender's (2002) claims by illustrating how Asian in-service teachers can exercise their agency by taking active steps to fulfil their expectation of enhancing their spoken English outside the classroom in an English-speaking country. Additionally, data from the current study support the suggestion of McDonald and Kasule (2005) and Murdoch (1994) that in-service teachers from non-English-speaking countries view language enhancement as central to their professional confidence.

Implications and conclusions

As indicated by previous sections, the current study provides data to support Lavender's (2002) claims regarding how Asian in-service teachers took agentive steps to improve their spoken English. This finding suggests that Asian in-service teachers who pursue their studies abroad should have continuous language enhancement (Lee, 2004) and be given enough assistance to develop their English proficiency (Matsuda, 2003). Such support can include incorporating a language component into professional enhancement courses (Murdoch, 1994) that focus on improving these in-service teachers' communicative command of the English language (Cullen, 1994). In this component, in-service teachers can be requested to set personal objectives, identify their linguistic needs and consider various language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990) that can help them increase their English language proficiency. For example, they can explore ways to apply different social strategies to communicate with others as well as using communication strategies to remain in interactions (Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1987). These strategies may assist them in improving their English usage as they explore various pragmatic processes for expressing personal opinions and for producing and exchanging information.

Additionally, the findings of the current research suggest that Asian in-service teachers' empowerment outside the classroom in an English-speaking country was affected by their pursuit of content knowledge that consisted of discussions on different Englishes and empowering discourses that involve linguistic diversity, multicompetence and debates on native-speakerness (Pavlenko, 2003). One implication is that teacher educators and teacher training programmes

should offer subjects that incorporate these discourses in order to offer alternative new positive identities for Asian in-service teachers (e.g. as multicompetent teachers and users of English). Such subjects can create "…a fertile space for re-imagination of professional identities…" (Pavlenko, 2003, p. 261).

In order to assist Asian in-service teachers in appropriating positive professional identities as multicompetent teachers and users of English, another implication is that teacher trainers can integrate issues pertaining to different Englishes into the contents and curriculum of courses. Teacher educators can also use teaching materials that exemplify different Englishes and the functions of English in various geographical regions. Moreover, they can design activities that compare the linguistic features of different varieties of English while promoting the attainment of communicative effectiveness among various users of English, instead of the achievement of native-like proficiency (Matsuda, 2005).

In addition, since some Asian in-service teachers expected to learn non-academic related discourse outside the classroom in an English-speaking country, teacher trainers can encourage them to bring non-standard and non-academic discourses into academic settings. Such encouragement may help these in-service teachers who are enrolled as international students to develop competencies for crossing community boundaries and in examining techniques and methodologies for interdisciplinary work. These competencies are becoming more significant in assisting these international students, users of English and in-service teachers to function socially as they move in and out of different communities in modern societies (Canagarajah, 2004), as globalisation imposes increasing mobility on populations throughout the world.

In line with features of case studies, it is not the aim of the current research to generalise its findings to other settings. The participants' cases exemplify the development of Asian in-service teachers who arrived in an English-speaking country with language-related expectations and how they dealt with different challenges outside class. The findings indicate that the participants' expectations affected their experiences when they were in the English-speaking setting. All the participants exercised various types and degrees of agency so that their expectations would be fulfilled. The manner in which the in-service teachers exercised their agency can be linked to how they took steps to invest in their English-teaching careers by fulfilling their expectations of improving their spoken English.

As discussed in the preceding paragraphs, the findings of this study have significant implications for teacher training programmes in English-speaking contexts. Specifically, the findings assist teacher educators in practically designing their courses to help Asian in-service teachers develop as international students and as users and teachers of English.

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