

MASTER'S FINAL DISSERTATION

Ensenyament i Aprenentatge de l'Anglès a Educació Infantil i Primària

2018-2019

How does internationalisation shape the professional identity of Additional Language teachers?

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Date 18-09-2019

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ABSTRACT

It has been argued that professionals of education who have an overseas experience to live and work as teachers for an extended period of time return home with their personal and professional identities changed. After their experiential learning through the intercultural immersion teachers develop some knowledge, competences and attitudes that might be helpful for their professional careers and consequently, the Catalan school system. The aims of the study reported in this article were to discover what a teacher with international experience can provide to a Catalan school in terms of plurilingual competence and intercultural competence; to analyze how the professional identity of a teacher with experience abroad is created, developed and/or modified as well as to suggest improvements that can be made in the Catalan school system. To gather all the information needed for the purposes of this article, three experts were interviewed and a questionnaire was answered by teachers with at least a year of international experience. The results of the research revealed a significant development of competences such as interculturality, plurilingualism and reflective practice. These findings seem essential to take into account in the Catalan school system as returnees from an overseas experience feel more prepared and confident to teach in multicultural contexts.

Keywords: international experience, teachers' professional identity, reflective practice, agency.

RESUM

S'ha argumentat que els professionals de l'educació que han tingut una experiència internacional vivint i treballant com a mestres durant un llarg període de temps retornen amb identitats personals i professionals diferents. Un cop finalitzada la seva experiència d'immersió cultural, molts són els mestres que adquireixen coneixements, competències i actituds que els poden ajudar al llarg de la seva carrera professional i de les quals es pot beneficiar el sistema educatiu Català. Els objectius de la recerca duta a terme en aquest article eren descobrir què pot aportar un mestre amb experiència internacional a les escoles catalanes en termes de plurilingüisme i interculturalitat; analitzar com la identitat professional dels mestres amb experiència a l'estranger és creada, desenvolupada i/o modificada i suggerir propostes de millora per el sistema educatiu

Català. Per tal de recollir la informació necessària per els objectius d'aquest article, es va entrevistar a tres experts i es va demanar a mestres amb un mínim d'un any d'experiència internacional que realitzessin un qüestionari. Els resultats de la recerca evidencien un desenvolupament significatiu de competències com la interculturalitat, el plurilingüisme i la pràctica reflexiva. Així doncs, els mestres que han tingut una experiència internacional es senten més capaços i segurs a l'hora de treballar en contextos multiculturals com el que es presenta actualment en el sistema educatiu Català.

Paraules clau: experiència internacional, identitat professional de mestres de llengües addicionals, pràctica reflexiva, agència.

INTRODUCTION

If you analyse a classroom in a state school of Catalonia, you will observe a huge number of immigrant students and probably most of them have an additional language apart from Catalan or Spanish. This reality triggered the *Departament d'Ensenyament* to conceive the *Linguistic model of the educative system in Catalonia* (2018), which gives especial importance to multilingualism and multiculturalism. One of the aims of this new approach in education is to make every immigrant student in Catalonia feel welcomed, integrated and respected in the school community because of their culture, ethnicity and spoken languages.

Are our teachers prepared to teach according according the *Linguistic model of the educative system in Catalonia* (2018)?

According to Cushner (2007), if we consider the importance of preparing teachers and students to effectively interact with people from different cultural backgrounds and to understand the world, where what happens on one side of the ocean matters on the other side and where cultures are truly interconnected, then it becomes essential to understand how people learn about other cultures. When it comes to culture learning, two concepts seem interconnected: cognition and experiential learning.

Nowadays, a huge number of professionals of education decide to have an intercultural immersion overseas working as teachers. When living an intercultural immersion

teachers meet, work and live with people from very different culture backgrounds, face new realities far away from their comfort zones, make sense of cultural differences, accommodate to them and, in most cases of long-term abroad experiences, start gaining a feeling of being at home, even though they are far away from their home-countries.

Moreover, during this experience abroad teachers might learn about new approaches, methodologies and techniques, new material resources and different ways to put into practice what they have learnt during their degrees and/or professional experience in their home-countries. Teachers with international experience might develop different abilities, competences and attitudes. The questions are: What happens to their professional identities when they are away from their comfort zones? What abilities, competences and attitudes do they develop? How can they apply their new knowledge in our schools? How does this internationalisation shape their professional identity? What improvements can teachers with international experience make to the Catalan school system?

Therefore, the aims this article seeks to achieve are (1) to understand and describe what a teacher with international experience can provide to a Catalan school in terms of plurilingual competence and intercultural competence (2) to analyze and understand how the professional identity of a teacher with experience abroad is created, developed and/or modified as well as (3) to suggest improvements that can be made in the Catalan school system.

In order to achieve these aims, three interviews are made to three experts on teacher internationalisation and a questionnaire is answered by 21 teachers with at least a year of international experience.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

International experience

According to Yee Fan Tang & Lin Choi (2004, pg 50-51), teachers' international experience is "the process in which a student teacher gradually becomes a competent teacher through cross-cultural experiences (including school experiences) in settings beyond the culture of his/her home-country". Yee Fan Tang & Lin Choi (2004), affirm that despite the fact that there are many different international programs for teachers, most of them have two main objectives. According to these researchers, the first objective is to prepare teachers to learn an additional language and the second one is to prepare teachers to teach in multicultural contexts. To achieve these goals, most of the international programs for teachers include the following components: a language course, cultural immersion activities, residence and classroom teaching which usually consists in being an assistant to a tutor teacher.

Cushner (2007), is another author who defines "international experience" as an experience that provides the opportunity of stepping out of one's comfort zone by having a direct intercultural immersion, living and working in a different country for an extended period of time. According to him, while having an international immersion experiential learning occurs, which links experience to cognition.

Cushner (2007) defines the 3 general benefits of student teachers participating in teaching international programs:

The first benefit is learning about self and others and the development of empathy. In his researches it is affirmed that as a result of participating in such programs, student teachers learn about themselves and others by trying to understand others' points of view. Moreover, teachers become more critical because they begin to examine their own culture and the stereotypes that they have about others.

The second benefit is increased self-confidence and efficacy. While living and working in host-country with a different culture and probably in a different language from the teacher's mother tongue, the teacher has to adapt to a different school culture without

the help of the usual support networks. The teacher might have to overcome certain difficulties or situations without help, which will increase his/her self-confidence and efficacy as well as increased adaptability, resourcefulness and persistence. Thus, self-confidence and efficacy leads to better teaching practices.

The third benefit is the impact of global mindedness, intercultural sensitivity and domestic diversity. As well as teachers knowing better themselves and others, with an international experience they develop a sense of their own culture, having the opportunity to reflect upon their culture from another country and point of view, which increases the understanding of global concerns. Moreover, teachers are better able to understand how one culture relates to other cultures. Because teachers having an international experience make international contacts and friendships their prejudices are hugely reduced. Related to that, Cushner (2007), points out that cultural knowledge is developed as well as broadened global perspective and through interaction with children and professionals from different cultural backgrounds the understanding of the value of multicultural education increases.

In this article the term “international experience” is understood as an experience working as a teacher in a host-country for at least one school year.

Teachers’ professional identity

Beijaard (2004), identified four essential features of teachers’ professional identity based on his research of literature about this theme.

The first aspect that should be taken into account is that teachers’ professional identity “is an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences” (Beijaard, pg.122). Therefore, professional identity is a dynamic process in which teachers learn during all their professional lives and take into account the personal and professional sides of themselves.

The second feature makes reference to how the context shapes the professional identity of teachers. It is affirmed that external expectations and the school culture influences how teachers create their own teaching culture.

Thirdly, accordingly to Mishler (1999) and Beijaard (2004) teachers' professional identities are composed by many sub-identities, which can be professional and personal. According to these authors, teachers with years of experience can experiment conflict with this sub-identities in times of educational change or change in the working environment. Agency is the last component that the author takes into account, which will be described posteriorly in this framework.

There are different authors who studied foreign language teachers' professional identity further such as Doctor of Linguistics specialized in Second Language Acquisition, Lies Sercu. Lies Sercu (2006) defends that teaching an Additional Language is no longer completely related to promoting a communicative competence but promoting an **intercultural communicative competence**. The author points out that because teaching an Additional Language is no longer a mainly linguistic task, foreign language teachers should be better prepared and trained to carry out this task. According to Sercu (2006), there are three components that an Additional Language teacher should possess in his/her professional identity related to teaching intercultural communicative competence:

The first component is **knowledge**. Additional Language teachers should be familiar with the cultures related to the target language as well as their own culture in order to explain cultural similarities and differences to their students. Of course, the Additional Language teacher should have an appropriate linguistic knowledge of the target language.

The second component is **skills**. As regards skills, Sercu (2006) defends that teachers should be able to promote empathetic skills among their students so they can have a more accurate understanding of the target culture. Also, teachers should be able to select materials, tasks and content that helps students become interculturally and communicatively competent in another language apart from the L1 and a different culture of their home-country. In addition to that, teachers should be able to propose real-life situations and tasks.

The third component is **attitudes**. With respect to attitudes, Additional Language teachers should be willing to work to achieve the integration of the intercultural

communicative competence in Additional Language education as well as target language learning. In consequence, teachers should choose material resources that help students to achieve this goal.

Although there are many authors who distinguish more dimensions to promote intercultural competence such as Cui & Awa (1992) who defend that teachers should have interpersonal skills, social interaction, managerial ability, cultural empathy and personality traits, from Sercu's article (2006), it can be assumed that Additional Language teachers should be intercultural and plurilingual.

- **Interculturality:** considered by many authors as an essential competence for teachers but specially for Additional Language teachers. According to Taylor (1994, pg. 154), intercultural competency is an “adaptive capacity based on an inclusive and integrative worldview which allows participants to effectively accommodate the demands of living in a host culture”. Other authors such as James (2007), added more information to the explanation of this concept, asserting that interculturality is a dynamic process that leads people from different cultures to interact in order to learn about each other cultures as well of questioning them. According to this author, this process may lead to cultural change over the time.

If foreign language teachers are willing to promote empathy towards the target cultures among their students, it is essential to teach similarities and differences between cultures and to understand how cultures interact with other cultures. In other words, interculturality seems an essential competency for Additional Language teachers interested in promoting knowledge about foreign cultures among their students.

In this article, the term “intercultural competence” is understood as the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behavior and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions.

- **Plurilingualism** was defined by the Council of Europe (2001, pg. 4), as

“as an individual person’s experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact”.

In this article, the term “plurilingual competence” is understood as the capacity of integrating and combining a repertoire of varieties of different languages.

Reflective practice

According to Johnston & Badley (1996, pg.4), reflective practice is “the acquisition of a critical stance or attitude towards one’s own practice and that of one’s peers”.

Over the time, other authors such as Day & Leitch (2006, pg.181), have developed the definition of this concept, adding than what defines an effective reflective practitioner “is more a set of attitudes towards practice based upon broader understanding of self, society and moral purposes” or Larrivee (2000), who added that to function in the role of reflective practitioner terms like “self-awareness”, “self-inquiry” and “self-reflection” should be present in teachers’ styles or Busquets & Esteve & Ràfols (2006), who stated that reflective practice usually emerges from a critical incident in classroom. From these authors it can be assumed that the base of reflective practice is taking teachers’ actions as experimental, always reflecting upon the practice and its consequences with the objective of increasing efficiency in classrooms. In other words, reflective practitioners engage in problem-based learning to improve their teaching styles.

Schön (1983) defined two essential forms for reflective thinking: “reflect-in-action” and “reflect-on-action”. On one hand, reflect-in-action is understood as the the evaluation of a problem and the improvisation of a solution on the spot to solve the problem or to improve teaching practices. On the other hand, reflection-on-action is understood as the

teacher's retrospective analysis of her/his performance with the objective to learn knowledge from experience and improve his/her own teaching practice.

Larraivee (2000), defined three essential practices for becoming a reflective practitioner:

1. **Making time for solitary reflection** is suggested as a method for teachers to engage in systematic reflection in order to reflect upon their actions and its consequences on students. The author proposes to keep a reflective journal as a vehicle for teachers to develop their reflective process, in which teachers can look more objectively at their behaviours in classroom, record critical incidents, posing questions, naming issues, solving problems and identifying patterns over time.
2. **Becoming a perpetual problem-solver.** When teachers make all aspects of their practice object of systematic inquiry, they begin to identify and confront the dilemmas they face in their classrooms. According to the author, becoming a perpetual problem solver involves "synthesizing experiences, integrating information and feedback, uncovering underlying reasons, and discovering new meaning".
3. **Questioning the Status Quo.** When challenging the status quo, teachers might consequently challenge school policies and classroom procedures in which other colleagues feel comfortable. Thus, the reflective practice teacher can engage others in change through invitational ways rather than confrontational.

Day & Leitch (2000), described three reasons why reflective practice should be considered essential for good teaching:

1. Without the capacity of evaluating assumptions on education, teachers will never improve. As stated by these authors, there is not one right approach on teaching so teachers should deliberate among versions of good teaching, recast past assumptions and evaluate current practices to lead to professional effectiveness.
2. According to these authors, engaging in reflective practice develops greater self-knowledge and self-challenge.

3. Usually, those who engage in reflective practice also engage in collaborative research with other professionals. As a result, reflective practitioners generate knowledge of practice.

To sum up, in this article the term “reflective practice” is understood as a set of attitudes towards teaching practices that emerge from a difficulty or problem in the classroom and lead teachers to be aware and reflect upon their teaching actions in order to integrate, improve and/or modify skills to fit specific contexts and improve or invent new teaching strategies.

Agency

The term *Agency* comes from the latin *Agentia* and means “that by which something is done; means; instrumentally.” (*Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, 2010).

In psychology, agency has been defined as ¹“the capability of act intentionally and therefore, to achieve goals or purposes guided by reason” (Zavala&Castañeda, 2014). Prawat (1996, pg. 215) defined in more detail this term: “Individuals practise agency while they construct knowledge, and they use meta-cognitive and reflective processes that operate via self-control and self-management in their learning and problem-solving”.

In modern psychology, it is believed that components such as self-management, self-determination and autonomy build agency (Bratman, 2007). The psychologist Bandura (2006), expanded this knowledge by including and analyzing four components that intervene in the competence of agency:

1. **Intentionality**, which means that a person with the competence of agency plans the actions and strategies that are needed to be executed in order to achieve a purpose.
2. **Prevision**. To forecast the possible results of one's actions gives perspective and coherence to the plan of action.

¹ My translation

3. **Self-regulation**, which implies autoregulation in one's thinking processes and the plan of action. It also implies the ability to assign more relevance and significance to some teaching-learning processes components than other components.
4. **Self-reflection**, which allows the individual to adjust its actions, plans, intrinsic motivation, initiative and to improve or change one's objectives, strategies, knowledge and interests. Self-reflection is an important tool to auto-regulate conduct and behaviour.

Regarding agency and its projection to education, the psychologist Evans (2015. p.105) carried out a research study which described teachers' agency as "a type of learning activism that can be both shared or individual experience". As she explains in her research study the freedom to choose and direct teachers' learning leads to improvement in teaching practices that can benefit the whole school community. There are other authors who defend the idea that shared agency benefits the community such as Darling-Hammond and Richardson who affirmed (2009. p. 49) "active learning opportunities allow teachers to transform their teaching."

Agency should be considered as an important interpersonal capacity and an element of teachers' professional identity because it implies that teachers are active in the process of their professional development and they become responsible for their own learning.

According to the definitions given before, teachers' agency can be defined as a competence that allows teachers to set their professional goals, plan an action method taking into account the possible results of their actions and to regulate their actions and thinking processes. Likewise, active teacher agency can be viewed as a vehicle for change and a tool to improve the school system and to make a difference in the education reality because teachers are carrying reflective practice, being active in their professional learning, being more autonomous, making individual choices, being participants of the process of learning and teaching and effectively applying their knowledge in their lessons. An author that defines this point of view is Van Lier (2008), who considers "agency" as an umbrella term for concepts such as volition, intentionality, initiative, intrinsic motivation and autonomy.

The terms “reflective practice” and “agency” can be easily confused because are very interrelated:

On the one hand, as “reflective practice” is understood as a set of attitudes that lead the teacher to reflect upon their teaching actions it can be considered as an essential element of agency. On the other hand, agency implies many more actions, such as set professional goals, plan an action method taking into account the possible results of their actions and to regulate actions and thinking processes.

During an experience working as a teacher in a host-country for at least a school year or longer some competences previously described - interculturality, plurilingualism, reflective practice and agency - may be developed. These competences may be interrelated and nourish each other when it comes to professional identity development as reflective practice and agency have the aims of improving and/or modify skills to fit specific contexts and improving or inventing new teaching strategies. These two competences seem crucial when facing educational contexts in which teachers find a wide range of different cultures and additional languages among their students.

For this reason, the design of the research is made around the concepts of international experience, plurilingual and intercultural competence, agency and reflective practice.

DESIGN

Method: This research is carried out using the qualitative and the quantitative methods, using the following instruments to gather all the information needed: three interviews and a questionnaire.

Instruments: On the one hand, the three interviews are semi-structured interviews, with a list of questions as interview guide but leaving space for interviewer and experts to improvise. The three interviews were done face-to-face. The aim of the interviews is to discover what a teacher with international experience can provide to a Catalan school in terms of plurilingual competence and intercultural competence.

On the other hand, a questionnaire was designed mixing open-ended and close-ended questions, leaving space to participants to explain some answers in detail. The

questionnaire was passed and answered online. The aim of the questionnaire was to analyze how the professional identity of a teacher with international experience abroad is created, developed and/or modified.

Participants: Three experts on International Experiences working abroad as teachers during a school year or longer were interviewed for this research. Two of the participants, Alberto Vilches (AV), Laura Sans (LS) are Spanish and had their international experiences in Russia, Germany, the United States of America and England, respectively. The third participant, DL, is from the Netherlands and has been working abroad as an English teacher for the past 9 years. DL is still working in Spain.

The participants on the questionnaire are 21 teachers from all over the world who are having or have had an international experience working abroad as teachers for a school year or longer.

Ethical considerations: All ethical considerations have been taken into account. The three experts have been informed about the project and its aims as well as the participants on the questionnaire. All of the participants accepted to participate in this research but only the three experts on International experiences were asked permission to publicate their names and surnames in this article.

Procedure: The procedure carried out was as follows:

1. In order to develop this article, first some research was made.
2. Later, the questions of the interview were designed as well as the questions of the questionnaire.
3. Three experts on international experiences working abroad as a teacher for a school year or longer were interviewed.
4. 21 teachers from all over the world who are having or had an international experience working abroad as teachers for a school year or longer answered the questionnaire.
5. After having the interviews and the questionnaire done and analysed, the results and answers were used as a source of information to complement and contrast the aims of this research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results presented in this article respond to the aims of this research. After the qualitative analysis of the three interviews and the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the questionnaire and its corresponding categorisation, the different categories emerged and its correlation among each other were analysed.

Regarding to the first aim, (1) **To discover what a teacher with international experience can provide to a Catalan school in terms of plurilingual competence and intercultural competence**; different categories were analysed: international experience, plurilingual competence and languages, intercultural competence and cultures.

First of all, the three experts interviewed for this article stated that they decided to work abroad to gain more **experience** and to develop themselves professionally.

All of them declared that their international experience working abroad as teachers was really positive to **grow personally and professionally**; “I think it’s one of the greatest experiences you can have in your life” (AV). Although all experts mentioned small trouble regarding loneliness, to learn a new language and culture and money wise all experts agree on that every challenge was a learning opportunity. Only one expert, AV, mentioned the drawback of feeling confused for some time when he came back, something that he assumed it was part of the Reverse cultural shock. This term is defined by Gaw (2000, pg. 83-84) as “the process of readjusting, reacculturating and reassimilating into one’s own home culture after living in a different culture for significant period of time”.

Regarding the **plurilingual competence** of the experts it should be mentioned that it was developed in the three cases, in different ways; “It’s very interesting how when we travel and live in another culture we grow as speakers with a plurilingual surround” (AV).

All experts interviewed for this article **have learnt or improved their skills of an additional language** “We get help from other languages to construct our repertoire of

meanings”(AV)”. This is coherent with with Yee Fang Tang & Lin Choi (2004), previously mentioned in the framework, who affirm that most international programs for teachers have the objective to prepare teachers to learn an additional language.

Apart from that, two experts explicitly mentioned that the concept they had about plurilingual competence was modified during and after their international experiences working abroad. The extended definition about plurilingualism for these two experts includes the following aspects:

- First, plurilingual competence goes further than being able to communicate in different languages, it also includes the ability to reason about these target languages so the speaker can help others to understand the target language.
- Second, plurilingual competence is something that Additional Language teachers should really aim at developing in classrooms.
- Third, plurilingual competence is viewed by these experts as a “powerful tool to help students reflect on languages” (DL).
- Finally, the plurilingual competence is different for each individual and according to these two experts, it should be viewed as something very enriching for the classrooms.

The experts’ expanded definition of plurilingualism is coherent with the description made by the *Common European Framework of References for Languages* (2001, pg. 168), in which is described as:

“the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent, has proficiency of varying degrees, in several languages, and experience of several cultures. This is not seen as the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather as the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the user may draw”

(Council of Europe, 2001: 168).

According to the definition of the Council of Europe and the definition of these two experts, it can be assumed that a competent person in plurilingualism can switch between languages when appropriate or necessary, taking into account the culture in which he or she is in and mediate cultural conflict. If the ability of speaking more than one language helps understanding other languages and cultures, plurilingualism is an important concept to include in the Catalan school syllabus.

All experts stated that improving their plurilingual competence and learning an additional language has a big amount of personal benefits:

Firstly, according to the experts interviewed, it **makes the learner feel part of the culture**; “It makes you closer to the culture you’re learning the language from” (LS). Furthermore, two experts stated that the more they liked the new culture, the bigger the effort they made to learn the additional language from the target culture; “In Russia I met a lot of people but I never felt really connected to them. I never had this big connection because I was not speaking their language. Something was missing there with my personal relationship to people. But then I moved to Germany, I loved Germany and I studied German a lot” (AV).

Secondly, it **broadens the mind** to be able to speak languages that make the speaker **communicate** with people from around the world and understand their cultural backgrounds as well as having a developed **intercultural awareness**; “Nowadays, it’s very obvious that when you speak more than one language you can communicate with people and understand others’ cultural background. It makes things easier, personally and professionally” (AV).

The personal benefits that the experts stated are supported by Cushner’s (2007) theories, which defend that by having an international experience teachers learn about others, develop intercultural awareness, develop empathy and become more critical because they begin to examine their own culture and the stereotypes that they have about others.

Experts also reported the professional benefits of developing their plurilingual competence and learning or improving their skills in an Additional Language:

First of all, to learn an additional language **helps teachers to understand the position of the learners**. “As a teacher abroad, I know how it is to be a student, to learn a

language ... Not only by putting myself in the role of the students cognitively, how the language works, but also emotionally”. (DL)

Secondly, related to the last benefit mentioned, it seems that those Additional Language teachers who have some knowledge of students’ mother tongue have **less difficulty on understanding how their learners reason about the target language**; “Whenever we learn a new language, how we reason and think about the language is all based on how we think in our own language. As a teacher is important to try to understand how a certain culture reasons about the language” (DL). More than that, if the Additional Language teacher has its intercultural awareness and plurilingual competence developed, it seems that it is easier for the teacher to **help students make connections** between their mother tongues and the target language they are learning. Also, teachers might be able to make a **pedagogical use of the students’ home language** in class which seems to make **students feel more confident** in learning a new language; “...you make connections and you know where your students are going to have more trouble. Sometimes you can refer to this grammatical, lexical, pragmatic use of language and relate it to their mother tongue. If the students make the connection it’s easier for them, sometimes” (AV); “When you make these connections with their language is very helpful as a teacher and for them as students, they feel very confident when they see that you have some knowledge about their language” (AV).

This pedagogical use of the first language as scaffolding is supported by Macaro (2001), who stated about the Optimal position - there are three positions regarding the use of students’ First Language in additional language learning: Virtual, Maximal and Optimal- that “some aspects of learning might be enhanced by the use of L1; therefore, there should be a constant exploration of pedagogical principles regarding whether and in what ways the first language is justified” (pg. 535).

There’s other authors who support the pedagogical use of students’ first languages in additional language lessons, such as Binh (2015), who defends that it provides scaffolded help for tasks completion and task management and interpersonal relationship establishment as well as to solve cognitively difficult problems arising from tasks. Binh (2015), also highlighted social benefits of using the students’ first language in additional language lessons, such as “the establishment of socially favorable environments that facilitate interpersonal relationships” (p. 36).

After their international experience working abroad, all experts interviewed for this article feel that they have a lot to offer to Catalan schools in terms of plurilingual competence. All of them have **adapted to new teaching settings** and **selected methods** to apply in their home countries or current job positions in order to develop their students' communicative competence in different languages.

For instance, after a year of observing how teachers from England use story books, LS brings her host country's culture to Barcelona through children's literature.

In AV's case, who taught in Russia, Germany and the USA, he affirms that what he can offer to Catalan schools is **adaptability to upcoming teaching methods**; "I know how to read situations, how to adapt, how to listen, how to improve based on my experiences" (AV). This seems coherent with one of the three general benefits of teachers participating in international programs defined by Cushner (2007): increased self-confidence and efficacy.

In DL's case, who is still working abroad as an Additional Language teacher and has been teaching English for the last 9 years, he has developed a method in order to develop his students' communicative competence. This method consists on involving the student's reasoning about the language with a **well-informed approach based upon research**. The objective of this method is that students can find their own voice in the language that they are learning, through mediation of meanings, communication between student-teacher and reasoning about the language so every student can create an idea on how the language works, "by developing your plurilingual competence you develop your way of knowing how to express yourself and stay true to yourself" (DL).

Regarding to what a teacher with international experience can offer to the Catalan school system in terms of intercultural competence is their own **experience**. During their abroad experiences, these experts have faced several situations in which they needed intercultural mediation. In consequence, they believe that it is essential to have interculturality and to **teach interculturality** in schools, not only in Barcelona but around the world. They are aware of the need of teaching intercultural competence when teaching an additional language so the speaker can find their own way of expressing himself or herself based on the culture in which he or she is in.

"if you do a foreign language class without taking into account intercultural differences, what are you doing? Grammar has no sense at all if it's not connected with intercultural competence. There is an effect-cause relationship in the use of language

and the perception of intercultural differences because if you are aware of what's going on in this situation, you probably would use one way of saying things or another” (AV). This declaration denotes an impact on the intercultural sensitivity of AV, a benefit of teachers participating in teaching international programs according to Cushner (2007).

Finally, after their international experiences the experts interviewed for this article affirm that they feel more prepared and **confident to teach a group of intercultural students**. According to Yee Fan Tang & Lin Choi (2004), to be prepared to teach in multicultural contexts is one of the main objectives of most international programs for teachers.

The teachers interviewed stated that they can **easily relate to immigrant students** “I can understand the cultural shock” (AV). Furthermore, experts feel more **open-minded to cultural differences** and that they feel eager to integrate them in their teaching style if they work for their students; “Now I’m more aware of cultural differences and cultural awareness so I can help my students better” (AV). After their international experiences all these experts embrace plurilingualism in class and affirm that their students hugely value it; “I travelled to most of the countries that were in class. I know their countries and know things about their languages and this connection helps students feel comfortable and safe in class, somehow” (AV).

In regards to the second aim, (2) **To analyze how the professional identity of a teacher with professional experience abroad is created, developed and/or modified**; a questionnaire answered by 21 teachers with at least a school year of experience abroad was analysed. Out of this questionnaire different categories were taken into account: knowledge, plurilingual competence, intercultural competence, abilities and attitudes.

In relation to the **knowledge** gained during their international experiences (see figure 1), teachers consider that the most important knowledge acquired is learning new educational methodologies, approaches and techniques (81%), developing intercultural competence (71,4%) and developing plurilingual competence (66,7%), among other knowledge such as knowing themselves better (61,9%), broadening one's mind (61,9%) and feeling more prepared to adapt to new school contexts (57,1%).

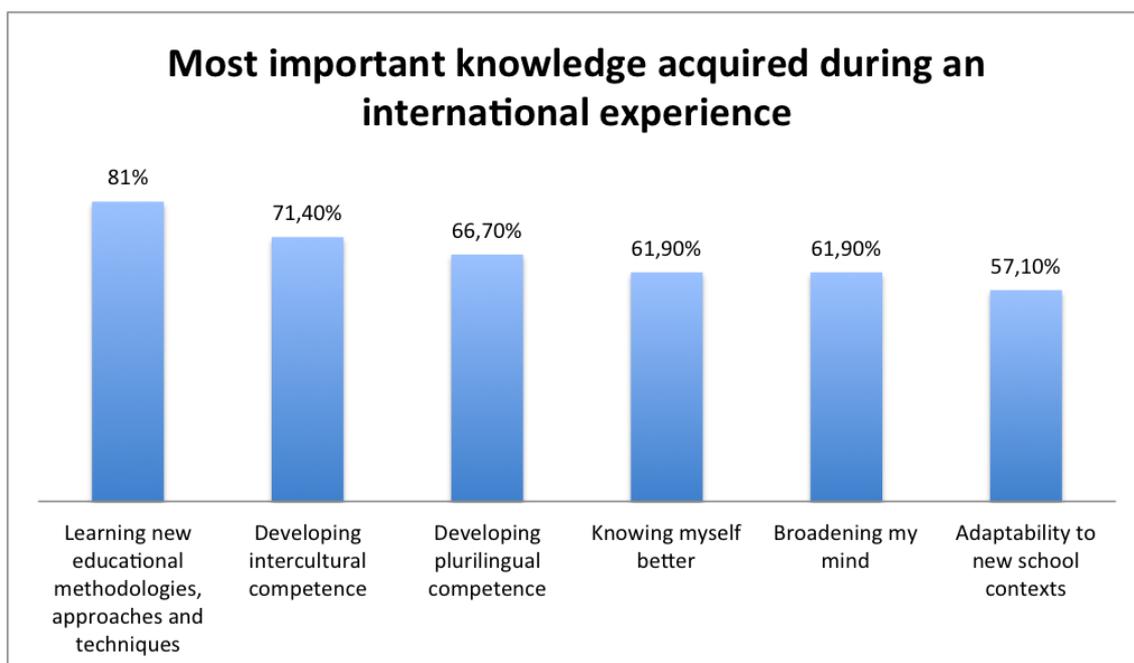


Figure 1: Most important knowledge acquired during an international experience according to the teachers who participated in the questionnaire. Teachers were asked to select the five more relevant options for them.

Teachers feel that during their experience abroad they have acquired new competences and abilities and that they have developed fostered and straightened others.

On one hand, as concerns **acquiring teacher abilities and competences**, out of 21 teachers 95,2% confirm that going abroad to work as a teacher for a year or longer is a good situation to acquire new competences and abilities.

Some of the acquired abilities and competences stated by teachers are the following:

- Personal skills related to sociability and interculturality such as being more-open minded, empathetic, respectful and sociable. A teacher stated that he learned new skills by “...putting my learned knowledge into sociocultural practices on daily basis”.
- Professional abilities and skills such as practicing formal observation, regulating the work time better, helping immigrant families to feel welcome and integrated in the school community, skills related to the new technologies, using new resources and methodologies, setting clear educational objectives, working with limited resources in non wealthy areas, adaptability, flexibility and classroom management.

On the other hand, the **competences and abilities developed or modified** during and after the international experience mentioned by the teachers are the following:

Firstly, **plurilingual competence**. According to the *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education* published by the Council of Europe (2016), plurilingual competence is defined as “the ability to use a plural repertoire of linguistic and cultural resources to meet communication needs or interact with people from other backgrounds and contexts, and enrich that repertoire while doing so” (pg.20).

The findings of this article evidence that teachers who participated in the questionnaire are plurilingual as they can communicate in different languages and use different cultural resources.

In relation to the plurilingual competence, it should be mentioned that the majority of teachers (33,33% of 21 teachers) can communicate in three languages, being these languages Catalan, Spanish and English or Spanish, English and Mandarin; followed by those teachers who can communicate in four languages (23,81%), being Spanish and English the most common ones among other languages like Italian, French, German, Arabic, Basque and Romanian.

Knowing an Additional Language is considered professionally helpful by 95,2% of teachers for many diverse reasons (see figure 2), being the principal reason the facility to find a job position when returning to their home countries. In these cases, the belief of knowing an Additional Language is helpful to find a job seems to be proven right because 90,48% are currently working in the Education field. For instance, a teacher stated that “I have had more job opportunities compared to those who do not master the English language”.

Another consequence of knowing an Additional Language is that teachers feel it is easier to communicate with foreign students, families and teachers. The ability of speaking at least an Additional Language seems to have correspondence with feeling more prepared to teach in multicultural contexts as the majority of teachers asked feels happy to welcome immigrant students in their classrooms.

Apart from that, teachers feel more able to teach an Additional Language to their students than before moving abroad; as stated by a teacher “ I was totally sure that I wanted to teach English to students because my experience abroad was excellent (personally and professionally)”. Actually, 61,9% of them are currently teaching an Additional Language when only the 28,7% of them were teaching an Additional Language before having their international experience.

Also, it should be pointed out that two consequences of learning or mastering an Additional Language when being abroad emerged due to the teachers’ opinions. A respondent stated that knowing an Additional Language helps when learning other languages, which seems to have connection to the development of plurilingualism and another teacher affirms that it helps her to establish new professional relationships.

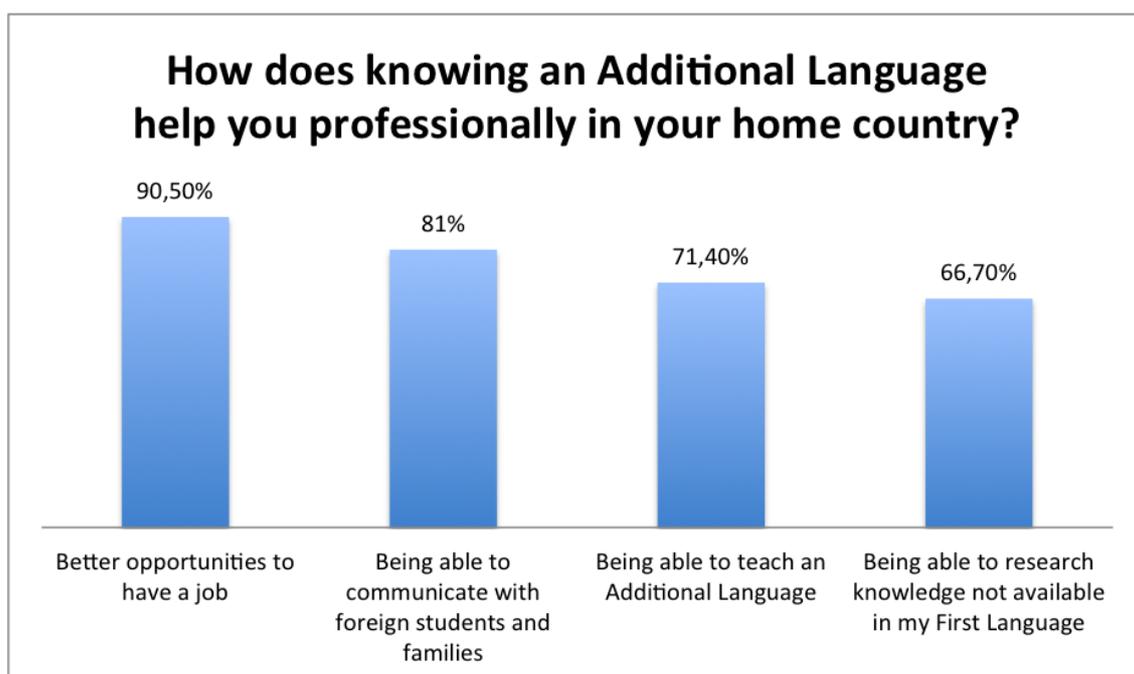


Figure 2: Professional benefits of knowing an Additional Language according to the teachers who participated in the questionnaire.

Secondly, **intercultural competence**. Concerning the intercultural competence (see figures 3 and 4), teachers stated that during their international experiences they started to feel more critical about their own culture, questioned stereotypes, started to comprehend better how cultures interact with other cultures and that they understood global concerns better. The teachers’ responses in the questionnaire regarding to intercultural competence are coherent with the definition of interculturality written by

James (2007), previously mentioned in the theoretical framework. It seems that this intercultural competence development derives in two interrelated consequences: feeling more confident about teaching in multicultural contexts (90,5% of teachers) and enjoyment in teaching foreign cultures to students (85,7% of teachers).

In other words, 81% out of 21 teachers have realised that their intercultural competence and cultural empathy have developed during and after their abroad experience.

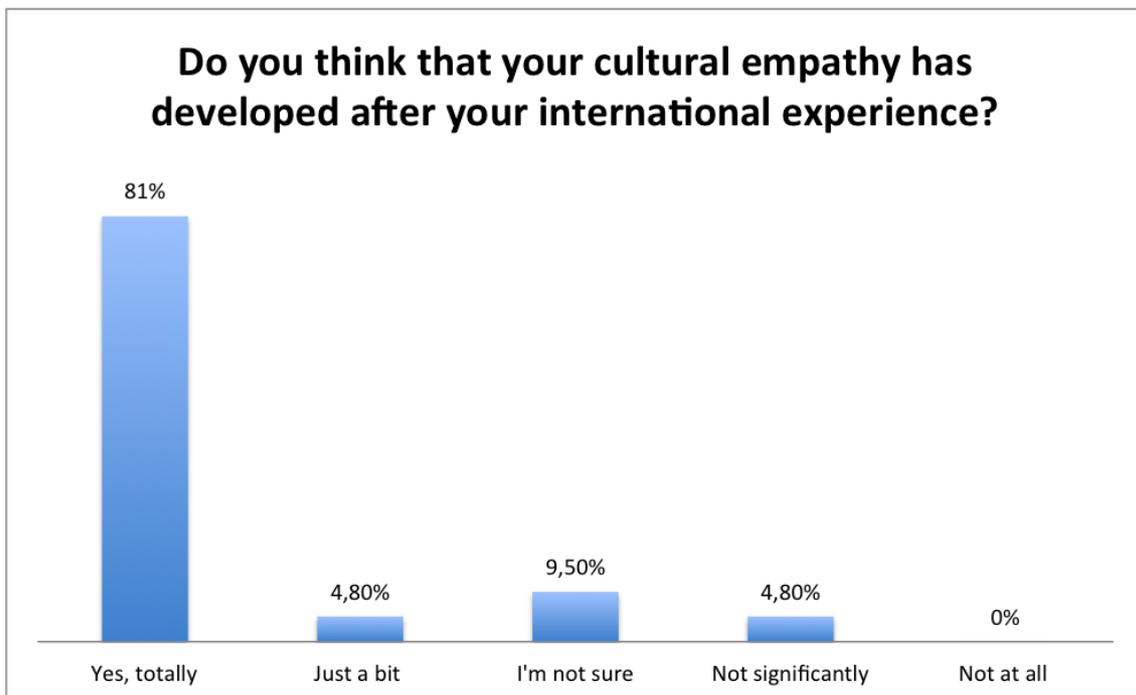


Figure 3: Perceptions of teachers about the development of their cultural empathy

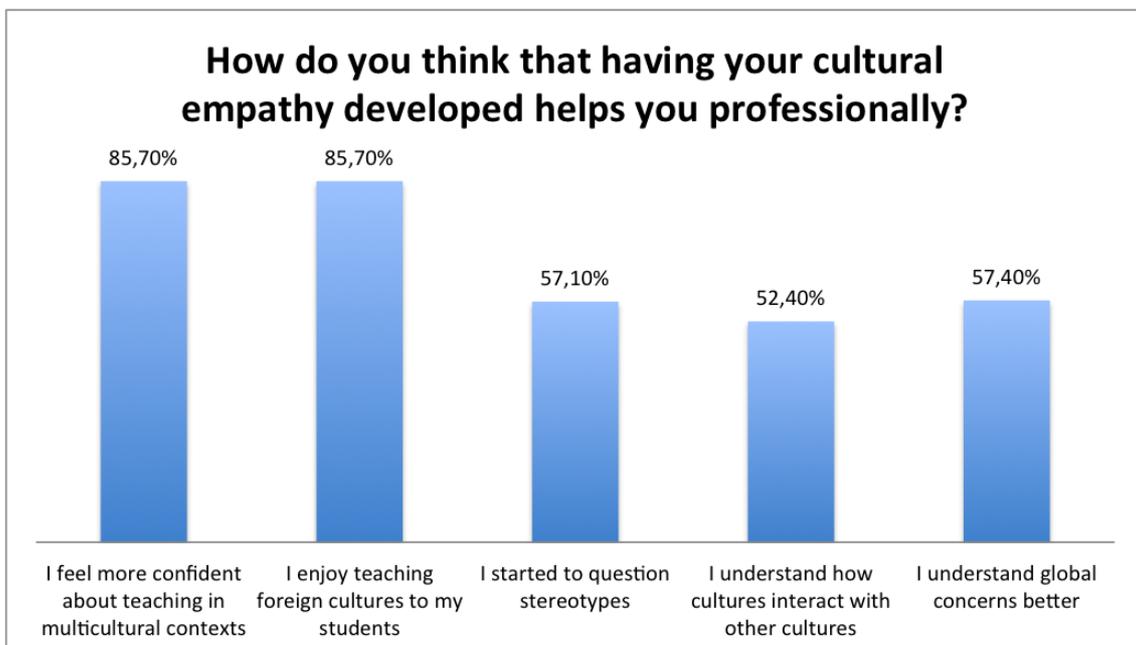


Figure 4: How do you think that having your cultural empathy developed helps you professionally? Teachers were asked to select the five most relevant options for them.

Related to the plurilingual and intercultural competence, it should be pointed out that according to the *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education* published by the Council of Europe (2016), the aims of plurilingual and intercultural education are the following:

1. *It facilitates the acquisition of linguistic and intercultural abilities* (pg. 15)
2. *It promotes personal development, so that individuals can realise their full potential* (pg. 15).

According to the *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education* published by the Council of Europe (2016), it can be assumed that if teachers are able to communicate in the language of schooling, the additional target language and have some knowledge of their students' first languages as well as cultures, they can add this knowledge in the syllabus. Moreover, they can encourage students to respect and accept diversity of languages and cultures.

Thirdly, **reflective practice** was developed by 81% of teachers. Most of these teachers had a multicultural situation in schools and state that they learnt the most from other teachers; as stated by a teacher, what helps her the most was “working in a multicultural environment while I was teaching with more teachers in my classroom, I was taking advantage of learning from teachers, new approaches, English native speakers and I could not stop analysing myself from then on”.

Fourthly, **agency** seems more difficult to develop when being abroad because only 47,6% of teachers consider that they have developed their agency competence. This was an unexpected result in this article because the complexity of very different and new educational settings requires adapting to new school contexts. When these teachers were asked how they modified this ability their answers were more related with reflective practice than agency, mentioning the analysis of their teacher styles and self-reflection but not mentioning anything related to prevision or intentionality, two basic components of agency according to Bandura (2006). The teachers' answers seem to be more related to adapting to the new context than planning acts or strategies needed to be executed in order to achieve a teaching purpose. This may be related to little knowledge of the concept or misunderstanding of it.

In relation to **attitudes**, most teachers (61,9%) confirm that their attitude towards cultural diversity in classrooms has changed during their time abroad, losing the fear of having it in their own classroom and not knowing how to act or deal with it (see figure 5 and 6); as stated by teachers “I first saw cultural differences as an obstacle, now I see it as a rich source where we can all learn from each other”, “I feel way more open-minded and with less fear of failing as a teacher. After my abroad experience I feel way more secure and happy to integrate my students’ cultures in the classroom”.

These findings are coherent with what Sercu (2006, pg. 64) stated:

“with respect to attitudes, ²FL&IC teachers should be favourably disposed towards the integration of intercultural competence teaching in foreign language education and actually willing to work towards achieving that goal”.



Figure 5: After your international experience, do you feel more prepared to teach in multicultural contexts?

² Foreign Language and Intercultural Communication teachers

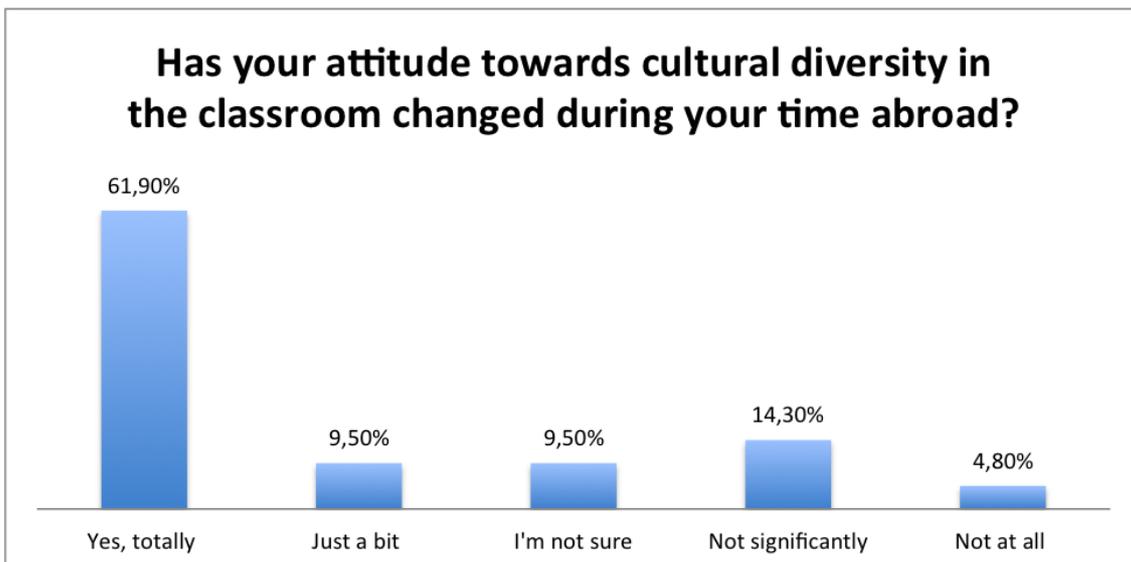


Figure 6: Teachers' attitude towards cultural diversity in classrooms

Teachers have realised that what helped them to modify their attitude towards cultural diversity in classroom was sharing their culture and traditions with their “host-school” and families, establishing relationships with people from around the world, letting their students ask and be curious about the world, among other reasons. This denotes that the teachers who participated in the questionnaire learned about others by trying to understand other’s points of view, a consequence of participating in long-term overseas experiences according to Cushner (2007). Moreover, a teacher confirmed that living with different local families with very different cultures helped her to be more open-minded about cultural diversity and that “ deep down we all want the same: to be happy and grow”. On top of that, a teacher made an important statement that should be mentioned about the results of changing the teacher’s attitude towards cultural diversity in class: “The Chinese students wanted to learn more about this world, to understand it. Also, they realised that there are different languages and cultures in this world. This is very important in a monolingual society”.

Having an experience abroad working as a teacher for a year or longer seems to have a direct effect on teachers’ self-confidence as 95,2% of teachers confirm that their international experience has made them better teachers. Professionals feel better teachers for the following reasons: learning Additional Languages, putting into practice new methodologies and approaches, learning from other teachers, learning about new material resources, facing new educational challenges, being more aware of the students’ needs and knowing themselves better as professionals.

CONCLUSIONS

As declared by Cushner (2007), constructivist learning occurs when experience is linked to knowledge. When teachers decide to move overseas to live and work for an extended period of time, they usually engage in meaningful relationships with locals - both in the school context and their personal lives - that help them to understand their host-culture by comparing its similarities and differences with their home-culture and adjusting to new contexts. Thus, the lived international experience is critical to understand other cultures as well as one's own place in an interconnected world. And here is when the intercultural competence blooms. The sample of evidence presented in this article evidences that intercultural competence seems crucial for teachers to feel prepared and pleased - or thrilled in some cases- to teach in the multicultural Catalan school context.

In addition to developing the intercultural competence, it was also evidenced that returnee teachers with overseas experiences who were interviewed for this article, also developed the multilingual competence. This competence seems also crucial to understand other cultures but, most importantly, seems to be really helpful when teaching an Additional Language and the multilingual competence itself to students. According to the experts interviewed in this article, multilingual competence should be hugely valued in the educational context as it helps teachers to understand the position of the learners, to have less difficulty on understanding how the students reason about the target language, helps learners to make connections between their mother tongues and target language and most importantly, make a pedagogical use of the students' home language.

In addition to developing the intercultural and multilingual competences, teachers were exposed to new educational methodologies, techniques and approaches and developed personal skills such as open-mindedness, empathy and sociability, self-knowledge and personal confidence.

Moreover, most teachers who experienced a significant time abroad developed their awareness of their own teaching styles by reflecting upon their teaching actions in order to improve or integrate skills and by learning from colleagues. In other words, they developed and improved their reflective practice.

As for the third aim of this article, (3) **to suggest improvements that can be made in the Catalan school system**, the following is a list of interrelated suggestions based on the interviewed experts and some research:

First, according to the expert LS, there should be **more education at a teacher level** about interculturality and plurilingualism in classrooms. This expert suggests that there should be courses at a University level so those experts who face or will face a multicultural situation in their classrooms are provided with some assistance and guidance to accurately help their foreign students.

Secondly, and very interconnected with the last suggestion, teachers might find helpful to **include interculturality in the syllabus**. Teachers should reflect upon and analyse the cultural backgrounds of their students and think about what intercultural problems could arise and how these problems could be solved between the students. Also, students' families should be invited to school so they can teach students about their cultures.

Third, as Sercu (2006) defends, teachers should be able to select materials, tasks and content that helps students become interculturally and communicatively competent in the target culture and language. Thus, a significant improvement in the Catalan school system would be to include in the syllabus activities or **projects with schools from around the world**. By doing so, students would be engaged in significative learning and would be able to find their own voice in different target cultures and sociocultural environments. Moreover, if teachers are required to use textbooks in their English lessons, they should choose textbooks that include other cultures apart from the British and American, so students can comprehend that there are multiple cultures with multiple languages.

The Linguistic Model of the Educative System in Catalonia (2018) created by the Departament d'Ensenyament was conceived because languages were - and still are, in some Catalan schools cases - taught, according to Sugrañes (2017), "independently and are not integrated" and previous language(s) of the pupils are not recognised but often seen as an impediment towards successful language learning. In classrooms were

teachers can find multiple languages - and in society in general - promoting the plurilingual communicative competence is essential. Sugrañes and González Davies (2014, pg.4) stated, “a plurilingual approach to language teaching would not only help to deal with the challenges embedded in a plural society, but also help newly arrived pupils to integrate in school by using their family languages as meaningful tools for learning other languages”. So the last suggestion would be for the Departament d’Ensenyament to keep developing its model of education and **keep adapting towards the classrooms realities** through the upcoming years, promoting plurilingualism and interculturality.

Finally, state universities should provide future teachers - not only additional language teachers but all teachers - with **scholarships** of different overseas programs. Something that, sadly, is not currently happening.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Regarding the limitations of the study, I would like to mention the limited sample of teachers who answered the questionnaire, which made it very difficult to make assumptions related to the concepts of this article.

Also, the majority of these teachers did not have more than three years of professional experience when they started their abroad experience.

Related to the last point, it would be very interesting to continue with this research counting with the participation of professionals who had more years of professional experience before moving abroad.

In further research, the following research question would be the focus of study: how are teachers who participate in an international experience different from those who do not?

The aim of this research question would be to compare two different professional realities - to know if teachers without international experience feel able and confident to teach in multicultural contexts and to what extent - with the objective of helping teachers who have never experienced an international experience to integrate interculturality and plurilingualism in their classrooms.

It would also be very interesting to complete the present article by investigating if teachers who are having or have had an overseas experience really develop their agency competence or not and if they do it, to what extent.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Definitions of key concepts

In this article the term “international experience” is understood as an experience working as a teacher in a host-country for at least one school year.

In this article, the concept “intercultural competence” is understood as the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behavior and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions.

In this article, the term “plurilingual competence” is understood as the capacity of integrating and combining a repertoire of varieties of different languages.

The concept “reflective practice” is understood as a set of attitudes towards teaching practices that emerge from a difficulty or problem in the classroom and lead teachers to be aware and reflect upon their teaching actions in order to integrate, improve and/or modify skills to fit specific contexts and improve or invent new teaching strategies.

The terms “reflective practice” and “agency” can be easily confused because are very interrelated:

On the one hand, as “reflective practice” is understood as a set of attitudes that lead the teacher to reflect upon their teaching actions it can be considered as an essential element of agency.

On the other hand, agency implies many more actions, such as set professional goals, plan an action method taking into account the possible results of their actions and to regulate actions and thinking processes.