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## **Second Language Teachers' Perceptions of Their Pedagogical Practices, Collaborations, and Relationships with Other Teachers through Professional Development**

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*Abstract: This paper reports on the relationship between language teacher practices and their collaborations with other teachers through professional development. The paper argues that there is a link between the disposition to use evidence-based practices in language teaching, and ongoing reinforcement of such practices through dialogic exchange in professional practice sessions. Furthermore, the paper understands the learning and development of such disposition as a career-long endeavour, first encountered in quality teacher education programs and then continued by committing to ongoing professional development. Survey data were collected from a group of language teachers from various second languages in primary and secondary schools in [state removed], Australia after they had participated in a workshop on language teaching methodology. The teachers reported extensive use of evidence-based language learning strategies in their classrooms. The paper argues that this disposition is grounded in the ongoing commitment of these teachers to stay in dialogic exchange with colleagues during professional development.*

### **Introduction**

Given the current emphasis on globalisation and the importance attached to transnational movements of peoples, being able to communicate in languages other than English is not only likely to facilitate greater understandings of different cultures but also likely to offer economic (Schroedler, 2018), cultural and educational benefits to nations that encourage multilingual communication (Coffey & Wingate, 2017). In response to this trend, many schools have recognised the importance of teaching students to study languages other than English as a means of being able to communicate, develop culturally appropriate sensitivities, and respond to the everchanging world of work. In addition to the advantages connected to intercultural understanding, second language studies continue to be linked to broad benefits in cognitive functions (Sullivan, Janus, Moreno, Astheimer & Bialystok, 2014).

Acknowledging ongoing efforts to capture the changing dynamics of multilingual learners (cf. Block, 2014; Thompson, 2020) in a superdiverse world (Vertovec, 2007), this paper uses the term 'second languages' in full awareness that students in languages classes have a variety of language backgrounds, including being learners of the language with no prior knowledge, or being learners with prior knowledge as heritage, background or native

speakers, or indeed being multilingual speakers/learners of more than two languages. The term ‘additional languages’ could therefore have been chosen as well; however, due to the focus on teachers of modern languages in mainstream schools in Australia, ‘second languages’ will be used as an umbrella term here to differentiate from EAL/D (English as an Additional Language or Dialect) teaching and to acknowledge the recognition value of the term ‘second language teaching’ beyond the modern language teacher community.

Second language teachers in this rapidly changing environment recognise the importance of having good pedagogical content knowledge so they not only know the language that they teach but also the pedagogical practices that support student learning. Emphasis on knowing how students learn and knowing the content of what is taught are two of the standards in the professional knowledge category identified in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2011). Others include planning and implementing effective teaching and learning, creating and maintaining supportive and safe environments, and providing effective feedback on student learning. At the professional level, teachers are expected to participate in professional development and engage with colleagues and the wider community. The term ‘professional development’ is chosen for this paper as the focus is on how specialised teachers experienced their participation in an out-of-school professional development event that brought them together with other teachers specialised in the same area. For most teachers, this is a rare opportunity, and the research project focusses on the role of ‘coming together’. Future research needs to shed light on more detailed aspects of professional learning that cannot be covered here.

Two issues are of concern to language teachers. First, the decrease in language studies that has been noted in many English-speaking countries (Stein-Smith, 2019). In Australia, for example, the percentage of students studying a language in Year 12 has decreased from 40 per cent in 1960 to around 10 percent in 2016 (Mayfield, 2017). This can be partly explained as a consequence of the rise of English as a global lingua franca (Christensen, 2015). A second issue of concern for language teachers is how to support these teachers in under-researched and challenging contexts. In a meta-analysis of 115 studies on language teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs from 2008-2016, Wyatt (2018) reported that language teaching can be deeply challenging, particularly in regard to confidence in teaching the language itself, the lived experiences of these teachers in different contexts, and the paucity of support that they receive. The research presented in this article links to this body of research, introducing insights into the pedagogical practices of language teachers and the critical role of professional development and collaborations with others for teachers’ sense of efficacy.

### **Pedagogical Content Knowledge and Practices**

Interaction with others is critical for the development of higher-level cognitive functions and teachers can facilitate this process by focusing attention on the relevant information and providing the tools for problem-solving including modelling, scaffolding, and various other prompts that promote ways of reasoning (Mercer, 2008). Concurrently, language teachers need to scaffold their students’ understanding and language use for increasingly academic language expressions in the second language, making higher order thinking possible in the language classroom. Students are introduced to new ways of thinking and patterns of thought when they have opportunities to engage in both online and real-life dialogues with more competent others so eventually, after repeated exposure, they not only acquire new information but also new ways of thinking (Mercer, 2008). In the language classroom, such exposure to more competent speakers of the language being learnt also

includes the social benefits of being able to connect to other cultures, ways of thinking and perspectives on familiar topics.

Language that fosters cognitive growth includes focusing on issues that are relevant to the discussants, asking open questions to elicit unscripted responses, making tentative suggestions to prompt thinking, scaffolding connections between information and ideas, and encouraging reflection to stimulate metacognitive thinking (Gillies, 2011). Language teachers need to develop their students' ability to express themselves in the second language for such cognitive growth.

Research (e.g., Pressley, Hogan, Wharton-McDonald, Mistretta & Ettenberger, 1996; Raphael, Pressley & Mohan, 2008) indicates that teachers who are effective at scaffolding students' learning do the following:

1. Demonstrate deep content knowledge of the subjects they teach, enabling them to scaffold students' thinking in constructive directions
2. Model the skills students need to learn in ways that are meaningful and engaging for them
3. Prompt and cue students to think about the content they are teaching
4. Demonstrate appropriate interpersonal skills that encourage student engagement
5. Connect learning to authentic situations and make these connections explicit.

In a similar vein, Goodwin and colleagues (2014) investigated teacher educators' perceptions of what teacher educators should know and be able to do in an attempt to identify the foundational elements of their practice, including how they evaluate their own preparation and how their experiences informed their preparation as teacher educators. The rationale behind this approach was that "quality teacher education relies on quality teacher educators" (p. 284) and if pre-service teachers are well prepared, they become quality teachers. The results of both an online survey and follow-up interviews indicated that it was important for teacher educators to have: (1) a strong foundational knowledge of educational theories; (2) knowledge about the field of teacher education; (3) intentional mentorship and apprenticeship in teaching and research; and (4) mentoring around professional life in the academy.

Building on research undertaken by Goodwin et al. (2014), Al-Issa (2017) surveyed English Language Teachers (ELT) to investigate their perceptions of the qualities of professional English language teacher educators and the implications and accountabilities these qualities have for preparing ELTs. Sixty-three ELTs representing 23 nationalities completed a questionnaire on the qualities of professional ELT educators. Two major themes emerged from the data. Firstly, quality ELT educators were aware of students' diverse needs and empowered their students by attending to their cognitive and social needs. These educators modelled and scaffolded student learning, particularly by tapping into the multi-lingual resources available in the classroom. Additionally, empowering educators demonstrated good interpersonal skills, practiced social justice, and were passionate about their teaching. In these classrooms, student teachers were challenged to think, share their knowledge, and collaborate with others, and in so doing accept agency for their own learning and professional development.

The second theme that emerged from the Al-Issa (2017) study noted that ELT educators need to have strong disciplinary knowledge. This included having good English language knowledge, proficiency in using the language, and the ability to design and implement instruction so that student teachers were provided with good practical knowledge of how the language can be applied. In addition, ELT educators needed to be able to provide constructive feedback to student teachers so they understood how they could improve their teaching practices. Ongoing professional development was encouraged to help student teachers reflect on their practices and share those practices with others.

In summary, while Pressley et al. (1996) and Raphael et al. (2008) focus on the characteristics of effective teachers in elementary and middle schools and Goodwin et al. (2014) investigates the foundational elements of teacher educators' practice, Al-Issa's (2017) research coalesces the information obtained to investigate the perceptions of effective second language educators. Interestingly, the research of these authors converges around three key themes: (1) Deep discipline knowledge, including the theoretical perspectives that inform that knowledge; (2) Teaching strategies that translate into pedagogical practices that are meaningful to students; and (3) Processes that encourage exploration, collaboration, and reflective practices. These three key themes emerge along the career-trajectory of second language teachers, from early contexts in teacher education programs, to effective classroom practices, and formal or informal reflective cycles connected to collaboration with others.

### **Discipline Knowledge**

Second language teachers are expected to have a well-developed canonical understanding of their discipline which includes the theories that inform learning. One theoretical approach which has risen to prominence over the last three decades is Bandura's Theory of Social Cognitive Learning which proposes that individuals learn by being directly influenced by others who inform, enable, motivate, and guide the learning process (Bandura, 2009). In more recent research, Bandura (2019) proposes that media also helps to link individuals to socially mediated networks that provide personalised guidance, natural incentives and social supports that promote individual and social change. In fact, a plethora of studies on student collaboration attest to the social and cognitive benefits students derive when they work cooperatively together to facilitate each other's learning in face-to-face situations (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) or in technology-supported collaborative online learning environments (Zeneli et al., 2016). In a meta-analysis of computer-supported instruction in schools, Hattie (2009) found that computer-supported instruction made positive contributions to student learning when (a) a diversity of teaching strategies was implemented, (b) practice was well planned, (c) peer collaboration was encouraged, and (d) feedback was optimised.

Language learning is closely tied to motivation, and motivation is connected to successful application of learning strategies. In fact, the extensive body of research on motivation as a factor in effective language learning points to learners with high motivation as using various strategies more frequently than learners with low motivation do (Lui, 2015; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). There is a link between Bandura's Theory of Social Cognitive Learning, the role of motivation in language learning and students working together cooperatively. Cooperative learning supports motivation in the language classroom when supported by a set of strategies and techniques that teachers can teach to their students to foster learner interdependence as a route to cognitive and social development (Oxford, 1997). Knowing and using language learning strategies supports motivation and effective learning for students, which indicates that disciplinary knowledge in language teaching includes an understanding of language learning strategies and strategy instruction (Chamot, 2005).

Two connected methods, in particular, are employed in the broader discipline of second language teaching – task-based language learning (Ellis et al, 2019) and the communicative approach (Canale & Swain, 1980). While both have a focus on authentic, functional uses of languages-in-practice, their theoretical underpinnings are based on concepts borrowed from problem-based learning and socio-cultural theory. Language in these methodological approaches is seen as the means to communicate across cultures, and more specific areas of language teaching such as grammar and the use of the four macro-skills

listening, reading, writing and speaking, are considered through the lens of their pragmatic uses in communication. The field has also made use of extensive research into learning strategies and applied those to the specifics of language learning (Oxford, 2017). Recently, a focus has been on developing a theory of language use in the second language classroom that is based on translinguaging (Wei, 2018). Here, the linguistic repertoires drawn from all languages students speak or have been in contact with, represent a platform from which language teaching is launched.

In short, being able to assimilate and accommodate different theoretical positions and craft responses that facilitate learning are just some of the expectations of second language teachers. These expectations mean that ongoing professional development is critical for second language teachers to be able to engage in high quality teaching and learning that support student learning outcomes.

### **Pedagogical Practices**

Second language teachers are also expected to have a variety of evidence-based strategies that they can draw on to promote student engagement and facilitate learning. Such strategies may include cognitive modelling of reasoning and problem-solving scenarios (Bandura, 2012); practice that is deliberate, distributed, and scheduled to develop students' second language knowledge (Suzuki et al., 2019); and the use of implicit and explicit feedback in promoting understanding and learning (Yilmaz & Granena, 2019). Teaching through example and articulating practical knowledge that is shared with students enables students to discuss the relevance of this knowledge and its application in different situations (Al-Issa, 2017). Other strategies include different multimedia approaches such as simulations, visual representations, worked examples, embodied cognition, and concrete analogies (Mayer, 2020) and a range of dyadic and inquiry-based learning activities appropriate for the needs of students (Debbagh & Jones, 2018).

### **Processes that Promote Learning**

There are numerous processes that have been identified as supporting successful learning, including inquiry learning and collaborative learning. The benefits of inquiry learning, where students investigate a range of problem-based topics, search for possible solutions, ask questions, critique different sources of information, and draw evidence-based conclusions, are well documented across different knowledge domains. The inquiry process is complex; however, as it involves students reconciling their current understandings with the evidence obtained from the inquiry and then communicating their newly acquired understandings in a way that is accepted as valid and logical. Such a process is challenging, requiring teachers to play an active role in helping students understand the inquiry process while they are also engaged in language learning and connecting current knowledge and understandings with prior knowledge and experiences. In the second language learning area this is particularly challenging because teachers not only need to teach the language in the context of appropriate pedagogical practices but they also need to share their cultural and linguistic experiences with students to foster students' cultural and linguistic understandings and language learning (Wong, Athanases & Banes, 2020). This requires considerable personal effort on the part of the second language teacher.

Other processes that are known to promote successful learning, particularly as they apply to second language teaching, include using a range of multimedia that enable students

to build mental representations from words such as printed text and pictures, including illustrations, photos, animations, or videos to facilitate learning and transfer. Mayer (2014) argues that people learn more deeply from words and pictures than from words alone. Tsoi (2012) reports on a hybrid model of learning involving inquiry learning paired with web-based collaborative activities which had a positive effect on students' overall conceptual learning in science. Nakata and Suzuki (2019) found that 'interleaving' where learners practice multiple skills or concepts at once in second language learning, facilitates learning more than 'blocking', where learners practice one skill or learn one concept at a time.

Feedback is another process that has been associated with successful learning. Li (2020) surveyed 200 Chinese university students' perceptions of the use of recasts and prompts in providing feedback to students learning English. The results showed that most students' comments about the two feedback types were positive, indicating that the students overall had a positive attitude to error correction. An examination of the students' responses to the open-ended questions on recasts and prompts indicated that both approaches were valued, as these forms of feedback left a deep impression on them and helped them to remember the correct response. Makransky et al. (2020) investigated the feasibility of using assessment and explanatory feedback in a desktop virtual reality simulation for learning genetics. The results showed that explanatory feedback can be successfully implemented in a simulation with the majority of the students believing that the simulation increased their understanding of the material with the students demonstrating a significant increase in knowledge and conceptual understandings.

There is also broad and longstanding scholarly understanding that reflecting on learning is an effective tool to enhance outcomes across disciplines and at all levels of education (Watson & Kenny, 2014). The role of reflection is also well documented in professional development, especially in the so-called 'caring' professions such as nursing and teaching (Edwards, 2017). While there are a range of reflective frameworks and diverse perspectives around the meaning and practice of reflection, Donald Schön's is perhaps one of the most influential.

Schön's (1983) work, *The Reflective Practitioner*, has been taken up in a range of fields, including education. Ramage (2017) describes Schön as interested in "the epistemology of practice: of how professionals learn and make sense of the world, and how they might do it better" (p. 1160). For Schön, experiential and theoretical knowledge are entwined and equally important (Mintz, 2016). Two key ideas underpin Schön's epistemology: knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action. Knowing-in-action refers to the ways we embody knowledge by performing the "actions of everyday life" (p. 49). Reflection-in-action captures the ways we improvise in the moment by thinking about doing something while doing it. Reflection-in-action is unlike Schön's third kind of reflective practice, reflection-on-action, which is "the quiet kind that might occur at the end of the day through a journal or in conversation with a mentor or close friend" (Ramage, 2017, p. 1168). While reflection-on-action is less critical to Schön's framework, it is nevertheless important; Schön (1984) argues that consistently practicing reflection-on-action supports more effective reflection-in-action. Further, Schön (1995) also used the term 'reflection on reflection-in-action' -: "a simultaneously explicit recall of interactive thinking combined with reflection on that interactive thinking" (Anderson, 2019, p. 3, emphasis in original).

In the context of this research, we suggest that, as second language teachers participate in professional development, opportunities arise for them to reflect on action as well as to reflect on reflection-in-action, which enhances their professional development experiences and offers benefits for teachers and learners alike. These reflective opportunities flow from opportunities for professionals to engage in "learningful conversation" (Senge, 1990, p. 8), which supports learning (Haigh, 2005).

## **Rationale**

Given the importance attached to the global movements of peoples, being able to communicate in languages other than English is not only likely to facilitate greater understandings of different cultures but also likely to reap economic, cultural and educational benefits to nations that encourage multilingual communication. Schools are very cognisant of the transnational and socio-demographic changes that are occurring and recognise the importance of students studying languages other than English in order to prepare them for their role as future citizens in a world that requires citizens to be multilingual. Learning a second language does not occur by osmosis. It requires systematic and planned instruction by second language teachers who have a deep knowledge and understanding of the language and the strategies and processes for teaching that language. The purpose of this study was to survey a group of second language teachers seeking information on their perceptions of (a) the pedagogical practices they employed to teach a language other than English to their students; (b) their perceptions of working with their professional colleagues, and (c) their relationships with other teachers

## **Language Teachers in the Australian Context**

In Australia, since the 1970s the national policy on languages for all has included the provision for English, Aboriginal and Torres Strait and Islander languages, languages other than English, and language services (Lo Bianco, 1988) for cultural and intellectual enrichment, international trade, social equality and Australia's integration into regional affairs and global connections (Bianco & Slaughter, 2009). However, the 1970s promise of multiculturalism and multilingualism has not been realised. One of the many reasons proposed is the possibly insufficient specific training for language teachers (Cruickshank, Black, Chen, Tsung & Wright, 2020) and sluggish investment for language teaching in Australia (Hamid & Kirpatrick, 2016). Many language teachers report that their profession is a real struggle due to the lack of discipline support and continued professional development.

Cruickshank et al. (2020) found that Australian schools, especially those of low socio-economic status, do not always act as a supportive environment for language teachers to make their teaching worthwhile or to thrive in their profession. In fact, it is not uncommon for language teachers to find themselves as the only designated language teacher so that they are required to be supervised by other departments, often alienating them from the support needed for their professional development. Furthermore, other teachers might not think highly of languages as a subject hence, language teachers might suffer from a lack of status and the subsequent lack of material resources for language teaching. Without discipline support, they have to work harder to maintain their position on staff and promote languages as core subjects in the curriculum.

## **Context for the Study**

Fifteen second language teachers, who had participated in a workshop to update their knowledge and skills, responded to an online questionnaire (Appendix A) seeking information about their perceptions of the pedagogical practices they employed to teach a language other than English to their students. The questionnaire also sought information on their perceptions of working with their professional colleagues and their relationships with other teachers. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions, including three open-ended

questions to enable respondents to add any additional information that they perceived was important. The respondents were asked to rank their responses on a continuum from 1 (very unimportant) to 5 (very important). The questionnaire was constructed by drawing on: (i) issues relevant to second language teachers that had been identified in the literature; and (ii) scholarship around the pedagogical practices and behaviours of effective second language teachers.

In terms of the participants, eight had between 16 and 25 years of teaching experience, two had between 11 and 15 years of teaching experience, four had between five and 10 years of teaching experience, one was a first-year teacher, and one omitted to provide this information. We suggest that 14 of the participant teachers, with more than five years of teaching experience, could therefore be regarded as experienced. In relation to the participants' teaching contexts, eight identified as teaching in an immersion or bilingual program at a primary or secondary school; four identified as language teachers in a primary or secondary school; and one identified as using CLIL approaches as a language teacher in a primary or secondary school. Two participants identified as 'Other', one self-describing as teaching in a university context and the other self-describing as a teacher trainer in CLIL. Of the 15 participants, 14 were members of a professional language teachers association and one (who identified as a teacher trainer in CLIL) was not.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Pedagogical Practices**

One pedagogical practice that the majority of the respondents indicated they employed were memory strategies such as flash cards, visualization techniques, and rhymes. In fact, 87% of the respondents indicated that they thought using these memory strategies was important or very important, with 13% indicating that these strategies are somewhat important. Research from cognitive psychology indicates that people learn more deeply when words and pictures (e.g., diagrams, graphs, photos, or dynamic graphics such as video or animation) are presented together than words alone, enabling them to more readily build mental representations of the material they are learning (Mayer, 2014). It is these mental representations when integrated with prior knowledge that together assist students to generate new knowledge and understandings, making sense of what they are learning (Mayer, 2018). Being able to utilise different multimodal representations has been found to promote the development of content knowledge and understandings in second language acquisition (Gilakjani et al., 2011) and deepen conceptual conversations when learning a second language in science classes (Wilmes & Siry, 2019).

A second pedagogical practice included instructing students in cognitive strategies such as skim reading and note taking with 93% of the respondents indicating that cognitive strategy training was important or very important. Similarly, all respondents indicated that instructing students in metacognitive strategies such as planning the steps required to complete tasks, searching for available language support, and making a conscious decision to check their progress were important self-monitoring strategies. Teaching second language learners to utilise specific cognitive and metacognitive strategies can be challenging if students are not consciously aware of the linguistic knowledge they need to master. Under these circumstances, Suzuki, Nakata, and Dekeyser (2019) argue second language teachers need to explicitly teach these strategies and provide opportunities for students to practice using them until they become automatic or implicit.

In a study of 6<sup>th</sup> grade students learning English as a second language, Teng (2020) found when self-regulated strategy development (students learn a number of cognitive and

affective strategies to manage their learning) was paired with collaborative modelling of the text structure, students' comprehension of content and the quality of their writing was significantly better than students who participated in the self-regulated strategy development intervention only, or the collaborative modelling of text structure only intervention. The opportunity to use the self-regulated strategies (i.e., cognitive and metacognitive strategies) in conjunction with the collaborative modelling of the structure of the text with peers helped to foster students' awareness of the importance of reading and taking notes, organising their notes, and synthesising their ideas and information in order to produce better written text structures.

Another pedagogical strategy that the respondents indicated was important or very important included instructing students in social strategies such as asking for assistance and taking advantage of utilising the second language in discussions with others, both in face-to-face situations or online. In fact, 93% of the respondents indicated that actively using the language while engaging with others was important or very important.

Song et al. (2017) report on how a customized personal response system (i.e., computer software that enabled students to individually type questions and answers and send them to the teacher who forwarded them to the class to discuss) was used to promote student-generated questioning by two groups of university students in second language courses. The results of this study indicated that classroom interaction could be fostered through student-generated questioning with the support of a personal response system in second language courses. In addition, there was a significant difference in students' achievement between the pre- and post-test. The authors argued that the results are consistent with the findings of previous studies that student-generated questioning fosters collaborative interactions and increases the frequency of student engagement. The results also suggested that the adoption of student-generated questioning with technology support may result in promoting classroom interactions where the students are able to practice the target language through electronic conversations with a teacher and peers.

Instructing students in compensation strategies such as contextualising meaning, using non-verbal language cues, or interpreting visual representations was another pedagogical practice that 87% of respondents thought was important or very important. Pacheco and Miller (2020) noted that pedagogies that encourage the use of translanguaging are effective. That is, where students' understandings of their own language can be used to help them make sense of the second language they are learning. Strategies such as actively linking new words and concepts to background knowledge, strengthening understandings about features of language, or meta-linguistic awareness, and promoting strategies such as summarising and clarifying concepts in texts are strategies that are effective in helping students learn a second language.

### **Working with Professional Colleagues**

In this study, collaborating with others to share ideas on different strategies for teaching language and content, sharing worksheets and other printed materials, and preparing units and planning lessons were seen as important or very important by more than 87% of the respondents. This was supported in the open-ended responses to 2.6 (*Are there any other aspects, positive or negative, to working with colleagues?*). For example, several (n=3) participants felt that collaboration led to higher quality resources ("editing and re-editing work to improve it"). Others (n=3) commented positively on collaboration ("Collaboration is always positive") as providing "support" and enjoyment from working with "like-minded colleagues [to achieve a] set agenda and outcomes". Interestingly, despite most participants

seeing collaboration as ‘Important’ or ‘Very important’, the open-ended responses also indicate that collaboration is not always easy. Reasons provided included “time constraints” (n=2); different ways of working (n=2); and even a reluctance to share resources (n=2) (“Most people do not like to share resources”). Perhaps this reluctance stems from the relative isolation experienced by language teachers; in the words of one participant, “If you are the sole teacher at a school, collaboration is very rare ... Language teaching at my school has been very isolating”.

Despite the challenges presented by time and isolation, there is no doubt that teachers do value the opportunity to collaborate with their peers to improve their knowledge of particular issues or topics and on the strategies they use. When language teachers collaborate with each other, they have opportunities to promote their professional understandings by sharing ideas, strategies, and tools that can influence students’ learning (Giles & Yazan, 2020). Collaboration in the form of team teaching can be a path for developing and deepening the prospective reflexive practices of pre-service teachers of second languages (Barahona, 2017). Similar observations were made by Schipper, van der Lans, de Vries, Goei, & van Veen (2020) when commenting on the influence of Lesson Study (LS) on teachers’ responses to implementing adaptive teaching practices in their classrooms. The results indicated that LS, where teachers collaborate to identify ways to improve their teaching practices, played a key role in influencing their perceptions of different educational needs and how they were able to address them.

Participating in online communities such as Facebook to obtain new ideas, was seen as important or very important by 75% of respondents with the remaining 25% seeing it as somewhat important. There is no doubt that many teachers value the support they receive from their online colleagues, particularly as student learning is often augmented through different digital networks, requiring teachers to be technologically literate and able to utilise different pedagogical approaches to support both first and second language learners (Strobl et al., 2019). Such online communities not only share ideas but also resources which can be very helpful to teachers who are often time poor and may be under considerable pressure to teach the prescribed curriculum.

### **Relationships with other Teachers**

Connecting with others is one of the basic psychological needs that drives human behaviour. The other two basic needs are the need to be able to exercise autonomy or initiative and ownership through one’s actions, and the need to be able to demonstrate mastery or competence (Ryan & Deci, 2020). These needs were evident to an extent in respondents’ responses to questions that sought information on how connected respondents felt to other language teachers in their schools, to other teachers using their specific language skills at other schools, and to the wider community of language teachers. Seventy-seven percent of respondents felt strongly or very strongly connected to other language teachers in their schools; 46% felt strongly or very strongly connected to other teachers in other schools using their specific language skills, and 46% felt strongly or very strongly connected to the wider community of language teachers. However, it is important to note that it is not uncommon for language teachers to be the only such teacher at their school. As one participant observed, “My current position is the only time I have had a fellow Japanese teacher since I was a first year teacher”. We suggest that while the respondents generally desire to connect with their colleagues, these opportunities can be limited by practical matters such as time constraints and isolation. The seemingly opposing perspectives found in these data could be interpreted as indicating that language teachers develop more independent ways

of working that reflect their time-poverty and isolation. More research is necessary to explore how collaboration time can be built into the professional life of teachers; in particular, language teachers who find themselves the 'sole teacher' of a second language in their school.

The need to be able to exercise autonomy or initiative as professionals was evident in the teachers' responses to questions about the value they placed on professional development with 92% of respondents indicating that professional development opportunities for language teachers outside school were important or very important. When asked what participating in outside school professional development means one respondent said: "It validates what I do. I don't feel so alone. I get new ideas and can 'vent' a little on my circumstances if I need to". Another commented: "I feel more confident in what I am doing and it keeps my practice current". These comments also reflect the need to be able to demonstrate mastery or competence over their professional development which they understood was ongoing throughout their professional lives.

Second language teachers value opportunities to engage with other language teachers outside their school, potentially because they have few language-teaching colleagues at their own schools, and few opportunities to communicate at a high professional level with other language teachers. When asked to indicate if they were a member of a relevant professional association, 100% of respondents indicated they were with 73% indicating that they experience a sense of community when they attend professional development opportunities outside school while 80% indicated that it was good for their mental health. There is no doubt that the respondents valued the opportunity to engage in professional development to exchange resources and ideas, discuss issues and challenges, to inspire others, and be motivated by connecting to others and learning about their practices. Similar findings about professional development were reported by Al-Issa (2017). In Al-Issa's (2017) study, the views held by 63 English language teachers across 23 countries about the qualities of effective ELT teachers were explored. The authors found that professional language teacher educators felt it was critical to reflect on their actions and build up work-related knowledge and practices with other English language teacher educators.

Al-Issa's (2017) findings are synergistic with Haigh's (2005) view that, "conversation can evoke reflection that results in learning" (p. 8). That the language teachers in this research value opportunities to converse with colleagues to improve practice is evident in the fact that 66% of respondents indicated that "Chatting with your colleagues at school to share ideas on language and content learning strategies, and how to teach them" was either 'Very important' or 'Important'. The use of the term 'chatting' in the construction of this question was deliberate and is significant because it conveys the spontaneous, interactive and often-unstructured nature of professional conversations, which are distinct from more prescriptive forms of interaction, such as discussions (Schegloff, 1999). While often unplanned, these interactions can nevertheless have a significant impact on practice and serve an important social function by nurturing relationships and building shared knowledge (Haigh, 2005). For second language teachers, however, who are often the only teacher in their language area at their school, organically arising professional conversation can be rare. As one participant commented, "Only at the [acronym removed] [full name of organisation] and at very rare teacher workshops have I had the opportunity to plan with others."

Another participant commented that "Sharing seems to be not so common outside of your own school"; as such, professional development opportunities are particularly important to second language teachers. Participants' open-ended responses reveal that professional development can lead to "less isolation" and mean that second language teachers "don't feel so alone" through "networking", "support and sense of community", and "connectedness". Further to this sense of connectedness, opportunities to improve practice also arise; as one

participant teacher observed, “You get to compare your ideas and change them if you see something better”. These responses capture the entwinement of professional relationships and knowledge and convey the value that second language teachers place on opportunities to connect with one another, both formally and informally, through professional development.

Spiller (2002 in Haigh, 2005) argues that professional conversations can be particularly beneficial for beginning and early career teachers, helping them to not only “do the work of a teacher but to grapple with the infinitely complex work of *being* a teacher (p.10, emphasis in original). While our participants comprised predominately experienced teachers, they nevertheless indicated that such benefits are equally applicable. However, as several participant teachers observed, time is one of the greatest barriers, both to formal and organic professional collaboration.

## Conclusion

The present study drew on data generated through a survey of second language teachers who participated in professional development offered by [organisation removed]. The study explored these teachers’ perspectives of the value and importance of professional development to their ongoing professional growth and learning. Our small sample size is a limitation that must be noted, but the results indicated that practitioners were using evidence-based practices, which they continue to develop and refine through both formal professional development and the informal learning that occurs alongside it through the professional conversations that accompany formal learning. Further, while professional learning can be challenging, due to time constraints and the isolation often experienced by second language teachers, this research indicates that second language teacher participants generally value the opportunity to engage in formal and informal professional learning. It is also suggested that the opportunity to explicitly reflect on professional practice and the role played by professional development and conversation can enhance teachers’ dispositions towards ongoing professional development. We suggest that future research could explore the potential benefits for student learning outcomes of productive professional learning practices and dispositions. Another valuable avenue for future research could be to investigate more closely the wellbeing benefits of formal and informal professional learning for second language teachers, for whom time poverty and isolation appear to be common challenges.

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