

Study Abroad as Professional Development: Voices of In-Service Spanish Teachers

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to understand how four in-service Spanish teachers interpreted their participation in a summer study abroad program and how the experience contributed to their ongoing professional development and language proficiency. Using a multiple case design (Simons, 2009; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009), the researchers conducted interviews, recorded field observations and collected participant journals. By analyzing these teachers' voices, it was found that the experience revealed a newfound realization of their language proficiency and its impact on their professional practice. A salient finding of the study abroad experience was that these teachers expressed a commitment to further develop their language skills outside of the classroom. Implications for foreign language educators include the need for sustained professional development that focuses on both content and proficiency.

Over the past 30 years, the notion of best practices within the field of foreign language instruction has seen a shift from a more traditional, grammar-based approach focused on what learners know about the language to one that emphasizes proficiency and what learners can do with the language (Brown, 1994; Richards, & Rodgers, 1986; Shrum, & Glisan, 2009). This is evidenced through the continued development of the *ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners* (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, ACTFL, 2012a) as well as the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines—Speaking, Writing, Listening and Reading* (ACTFL, 2012b). Subsequently, there is a need for foreign language teachers to possess minimum oral proficiency levels in their respective languages. In support of this effort, the ACTFL / CAEP (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation) *Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers* suggests a minimum proficiency level of Advanced-Low for Spanish teachers (p. 15). While it is important to have minimum proficiency requirements for new foreign language teachers, practicing teachers should also take steps to maintain and/or improve their oral proficiency in order to be effective in the classroom.

The need for continued professional growth and development for in-service teachers is well-documented (Desimone, 2009; Guskey, 2000; Opfer, & Pedder, 2011). In response to a national focus on school accountability, teacher quality and student achievement, professional development initiatives adopted by many school districts have used programs based on general (non-subject specific) educational research (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001) or, at best, related to the core subjects such as math and science (Ball, Thames & Phelps, 2008; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Yoon, 2001). While it is possible for all teachers to benefit from these *one-size fits all* models, the intricacies of each content specialization require specific training for teachers to develop a deep understanding of both their content and pedagogy. Such training can be especially important for foreign language teachers due to their need to maintain and/or improve their proficiency in their respective languages. Lafayette (1993) stated that language proficiency is the most important component to foreign language teachers' content knowledge and Peyton (1997) added that:

Foreign language teachers must maintain proficiency in the target language and stay up to date on current issues related to the target culture. Regardless of the skills and knowledge that foreign language teachers possess when they commence teaching, maintenance and improvement must be an ongoing process (p. 1).

Certainly, foreign language teachers must be proficient in their respective languages in order to effectively deliver instruction and create a classroom environment conducive to student learning and language acquisition.

School or district-wide professional development programs are not enough for in-service foreign language teachers to maintain and/or improve their language proficiency (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). For many of these teachers, especially those who are unable to use their foreign language outside of class in meaningful, native-like interactions, studying abroad is the most appropriate viable option.

While the literature base for study abroad is quite vast, the majority of the studies have examined the effect of study abroad on undergraduate students, focusing on variables such as homestays, program length and improvements in proficiency (Allen & Herron, 2003; Brecht, Davidson & Ginsberg, 1995; Freed, 1995; Magnan & Back, 2007; Rivers, 1998; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Wilkinson, 1998). The impact of study abroad on other populations including teachers is much more limited. As a result, there is a need to better understand the experiences and benefits of studying abroad as a means of professional development for in-service foreign language teachers, with special attention to how the experience contributes to their language proficiency and subsequent instructional practice. According to Allen (2010), "there is a woeful paucity of research on continuing education that is developed specifically for world/foreign language teachers" (p. 93). Therefore, the purpose of this inquiry was to understand how in-service foreign language teacher participants interpreted the meaning and value of studying abroad.

In order to develop a better understanding of how foreign language teachers interpret the meaning of studying abroad, the following research question guided this inquiry: How did in-service Spanish teachers describe the study abroad experience as a form of professional development?

Research Methods

Research Design

Following Institutional Review Board approval, the researchers chose to use a case study approach in order to capture the lived experience of in-service teacher participants (Creswell, 2007) within a study abroad program. Simons (2009) aligns with well-documented scholars of case study design (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009), but extends further to articulate powerful outcomes:

Case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme, or system in a “real life” context. It is research-based, inclusive of difference methods and is evidence-led. The primary purpose is to generate an in-depth understanding of a specific topic (as in a thesis), programme, policy, institution, or system to generate knowledge and/or inform policy development, professional practice and civil or community action (p. 21).

Case study design allows for flexibility with data generation and analysis in order to capture the lived experience of in-service teacher participants within a study abroad program (Creswell, 2007). The phenomenon of interest with this inquiry is situated within the theoretical frame of professional development with the case or bounded system identified as the study abroad program participants.

Sampling and Participants

Utilizing a criterion-sampling strategy for quality assurance (Patton, 2002), four participants were selected for this inquiry based on: (a) enrollment in an online graduate program in Spanish Education at the University of Nebraska Kearney (b) participation in the Costa Rica Study Abroad Program during the summer of 2014; and (c) attendance at the same language institute in Costa Rica. These participants were the only students who participated in the trip that met all of the criteria and were invited to participate through an email sent by the study’s primary author. While it would have been possible to include other graduate students (e.g., from other institutions) in the study, the researchers did not have access to this information prior to their arrival in Costa Rica.

As reflected in Table 1, all participants were female, self-identified as Caucasian and native English-speakers. Each is referred to by a pseudonym given by the authors.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participants	Age	Teaching Experience	Level Taught	Approximate Size of School	Previous Study Abroad Experience
Audrey	24	2 years	High School	1500 students	4 months
Cindy	27	3 years	High School	1300 students	6 months
Mary	36	13 years	High School	2000 students	6 months
Jasmine	56	19 years	Middle & High School	200 students	No previous study abroad experience

Note: Pseudonyms were used to protect participants’ identities.

Research Setting

This study took place in San José, Costa Rica during the summer of 2014. The participants attended the same language school, which is a well-established institution with over 25 years of experience teaching Spanish to students from all over the world and placing them with local host-families. The language school offers courses designed for students at all levels of Spanish proficiency. In addition, students are able to attend additional workshops (outside of the school day) where they can work on their conversational skills. Audrey, Mary and Jasmine lived with host-families and Cindy stayed at an apartment close to the language school.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to determine how the participants interpreted their experiences of studying abroad in Costa Rica, data sources included (a) individual teacher interviews (Appendix A), (b) teacher participant journals, and (c) observation notes from authors one and three.

Because the participants were from different states, thus preventing the researchers from conducting face-to-face interviews prior to departure, the pre- and post-trip interviews were conducted online using Skype. The use of computer-mediated communication, such as Skype, to conduct interviews is supported in the literature (James & Busher, 2009; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Salmon, 2000). Table 2 shows the timeline for the interviews and other sources of data collection. It is important to note that the pre-trip interviews took place within two weeks of participants' departure for Costa Rica in order to better capture their thoughts related to their professional development needs. Likewise, post-trip interviews were conducted within two weeks of participants finishing their program.

Table 2

<i>Timeline</i>	<i>Data Source</i>
Early May 2014	Participant recruitment
Late May 2014	1st Interview (Skype); and participant journaling begins
June 2014	2 nd Interview (in-country/face-to-face); and research observations begin in-country.
Late June, Early July 2014	3 rd Interview (in-country/face-to-face); participant journaling concludes; and researcher observations conclude.
August 2014	Peer-researcher corroboration of emergent themes; and participant member check procedures initiated.

Authors 1 and 3 examined the initial transcript from the first interview and each made suggestions for follow-up questions for the in-country interviews. All individual interviews were conducted and recorded by Author 1 and/or Author 3 and transcribed by Author 3. All of the interviews conducted for this study lasted approximately 30 minutes. Of the numerous ways to analyze interview data, coding and categorization approaches are commonly used (Saldaña, 2013). Author 1 conducted the first coding of the in-country interviews and then he and Author 3 were

involved in collaborative coding and discussion. Using a model of semi-structured interviews supported by Seidman (2012), the initial interview questions were developed based upon a review of the relevant literature as well as the expertise of the authors. Follow-up interview questions were related to the initial interview questions but modified based upon the previous responses of the participants.

Secondary data sets included teacher participant journals and researcher observation field notes (two separate logs, one for each researcher) including communication with the participants through phone, email, and informal interactions. As data-collectors, Authors 1 and 3 functioned as both passive participants and observers (Spradley, 1980).

In consonance with Lincoln and Guba (1986), the researchers ensured the trustworthiness and quality of the data with subsequent analysis by employing three measures of rigor and accuracy: credibility, dependability, and transferability (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, Denzin (1978) proposed triangulation between multiple sources of data and multiple investigators to confirm emerging findings as a strategy to address a study's credibility. Thus, the researchers worked together to determine themes and the findings were shared with participants as a member check as a validation strategy and to demonstrate dependability (Patton, 2002). None of the participants requested modifications to their interview transcripts.

Findings

The research question that guided this study was how in-service Spanish teachers described the study abroad experience as a form of professional development. In the following section, we present the findings from the participants' interviews that revealed a unique realization about the professional development demands placed upon foreign language educators, especially as it relates to language proficiency and subsequent instructional effectiveness. Additionally, we document the findings from our primary data source, the pre-trip, in-country and post-trip interviews, in a chronological pattern, presenting each of the four participants in turn.

Pre-Study Abroad Interviews

As part of the pre-study abroad interviews, all of the participants were asked the following question: *What do you do to maintain your Spanish proficiency skills and how could you do more?* (See Appendix A for the Interview Protocol). In the following, we present a brief context about each participant and the pre-trip responses of Audrey, Cindy, Mary and Jasmine, all of whom recognized the unique professional development need of engaging in meaningful interaction with their content in order to improve their foreign language proficiency.

Audrey. Audrey had just completed her second year as a high school Spanish teacher in a mid-sized Midwestern community and was preparing to teach *Advanced Placement* (AP) Spanish for the first time during the upcoming academic year. Given the proficiency requirements needed to teach an AP course, she was motivated to improve her oral proficiency and pedagogy while studying abroad. When we asked her what she did to maintain her Spanish oral proficiency, she said that while her enrollment in graduate-level Spanish courses was helpful, professional and personal demands did not allow her to use Spanish in meaningful ways outside of the classroom.

Furthermore, she mentioned that even though she worked in a department with three other Spanish teachers, they rarely used the language to communicate with each other.

Cindy. Cindy was a high school Spanish teacher who had just completed her third year of teaching in the Northwest of the United States in a school with approximately 1500 students. Due to the licensure demands in her state, which require candidates to pass a foreign language pedagogy exam as well as achieve a minimum Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) score of Advanced-Low, Cindy was primarily motivated to study abroad in order to improve and/or maintain her OPI rating. Similar to Audrey, she also identified her graduate courses as a source of language enhancement, yet admitted that she could do more to improve her Spanish oral proficiency. However, unlike Audrey, Cindy mentioned a commitment to reading in Spanish as well as speaking with her colleague:

John is the name of the teacher that I teach with. He and I are the only Spanish teachers and we try to speak Spanish as much as we can with each other. I try to read probably every other book that I read in Spanish. That's the goal but that doesn't always happen, and I try to interact with people in the community who speak Spanish as much as I can.

Mary. A veteran Spanish teacher of 13 years who teaches in a large, urban high school on the West Coast of the United States shared that she was *very confident* in her language abilities, which was evidenced by the fact that she had passed state certification exams in two different states, which require an overall oral proficiency level of at least Advanced-Low. While Mary said that taking graduate courses in Spanish was helpful, she also felt as though she could improve her oral performance. Unlike Audrey and Cindy, Mary mentioned that she practices her Spanish with colleagues and also tries to read and listen to Spanish outside of school as well as talk to native-Spanish speakers. In addition, she noted that she and her colleagues routinely speak Spanish to each other in order to maintain their skills. Nonetheless, she felt as though her language proficiency could improve and that it had actually declined over the years as she had been teaching.

Jasmine. Unlike the other participants who were in larger school settings and cities, Jasmine teaches middle through high school Spanish in a small, rural Midwestern community with fewer than 1000 people. Her school only offers Spanish levels I, II and II. A veteran teacher of 19 years, she described her Spanish proficiency as “rusty but very proficient for what I have to teach at the school level.” Jasmine is the only Spanish teacher in her school so she does not have access to Spanish-speaking colleagues. Furthermore, the community in which she lives has very few native-Spanish speakers. However, she still tries to read and watch movies in Spanish and access Spanish-language sites online.

While all four of the participants demonstrated an awareness of the importance of engaging in activities designed to maintain and/or improve their Spanish language skills, there was still a difference among the participants both in terms of the activities they engaged in, the frequency with which they did these, and their perceptions of what was enough or adequate, based upon their individual needs. Furthermore, through their pre-trip interviews, the participants all recognized that they needed to improve their Spanish proficiency, which was one of their primary reasons for going abroad.

In-Country Interviews

Given the research question, *How did in-service Spanish teachers describe the study abroad experience as a form of professional development?*, we conducted at least one in-country, semi-structured interview with each of the four participants. These interviews were approximately 30 minutes and were conducted in-country with the participants by Author 1 and/or Author 3. In these interviews, we asked them all to comment on how they would describe their proficiency after having been abroad for a few weeks, what steps they were taking to improve and how it might impact their instruction in the upcoming school year.

Audrey. During her in-country interview, after having spent more than two weeks in Costa Rica, Audrey commented that the experience had given her greater insight into her proficiency and the steps she would need to improve, especially as she prepared to teach AP Spanish. When asked about her preparation for this course and, given the proficiency demands, how studying abroad may have affected her feelings, she admitted that she was confident in her abilities to be creative, design lessons and manage the classroom. However, she also indicated that she was scared and nervous about the proficiency demands needed to teach AP and felt as though she would have to review the lessons beforehand to ensure that she was comfortable with the Spanish proficiency required to teach the lessons.

Cindy. Similar to Audrey, Cindy also acknowledged a need to improve her Spanish proficiency prior to her arrival in Costa Rica. After only 10 days in the country, she felt as though her speaking skills were improving and understood the connection this would have to her teaching: She stated that “Being more fluent in speaking Spanish is going to improve my teaching styles.” Furthermore, she was able to connect with another high school Spanish teacher who was also studying abroad and found that they were able to support each other “without being offended or feeling judged.”

Mary. Prior to the trip, Mary was confident in her Spanish abilities but felt she could improve. After spending more than two weeks studying abroad, she commented that she understood the value of the experience and the impact it would have on her teaching. Furthermore, she made a commitment to continue to improve her Spanish after returning home and also revealed an understanding of the connection between her proficiency and pedagogical effectiveness:

I feel like this experience has shown me how much improvement I need to make to be a better teacher. Honestly, I already can tell that I’m going to spend a lot of time this year figuring out ways to speak, and finding opportunities to have conversations with people, and possibly with native-speaking friends that I have, but also I need to go back and I need to study more. I think I’m going to spend some time, a lot more time reading.

Jasmine. While the other participants readily shared how the study abroad experience was shaping their self-assessment of their proficiency and its connection to their teaching, Jasmine seemed a bit more reluctant to share during her first in-country interview. As researchers, we noticed that, despite her pre-trip assertions that she would be comfortable with the study abroad experience, she was frustrated as she tried to adapt to the classes as well as to the linguistic demands with which

she was confronted on a daily basis. Because she was somewhat guarded, her comments revealed that she didn't feel as though she needed to change her instructional practices since, in her words, she "had a system that worked."

Compared to their pre-trip comments, the data showed that the candidates' study abroad experience developed a more refined awareness of the connection between language proficiency and instructional practice for Audrey, Cindy and Mary. However, a comparison of Jasmine's pre-study interview responses and her study abroad interview responses (and in-country behavior) indicated that the experience led her to become more unsure of her language abilities and reluctant to make changes in her classroom.

As a whole, all of the participants realized varied levels of need related to their proficiency and related professional development prior to studying abroad. However, after they had been in the country and had opportunities to use the language, Audrey, Cindy and Mary quickly acknowledged the experience was beneficial as it enabled them to recognize more accurately their limitations in oral performance and either make the necessary changes or explore opportunities to improve. While Jasmine was also able to self-assess her proficiency and related professional development needs, her responses were more guarded and, based upon her comments, she seemed to regress to her comfort zone and rationalize that her abilities were adequate for the demands of her job rather than to commit to working harder to improve her levels of proficiency.

Post-Study Abroad Interviews

In order to further determine how the participants described the study abroad experience as a form of professional development, we interviewed them within two weeks of their returning from Costa Rica. Again, using a semi-structured interview format, we further explored the research question by determining how the study abroad experience affected their professional development needs—especially related to their perceived language proficiency—and the steps they might take as a result of their realizations.

Audrey. Audrey was preparing to teach AP Spanish in only her third year of teaching and the study abroad experience appeared to have a profound impact as it caused her to reflect on her in-class behaviors and how they might be causing her to not maximize the use of the target language. Audrey's candor and self-assessment was profound as she said "I realized that I'm a bad teacher." For example, she mentioned that in order to maximize her use of the target language in class, she needed to resist the urge to "take a free minute to check that email from my administrator or from a parent" because she finds it difficult to get back into Spanish immediately after reading or writing in English. In addition, she also realized that, despite her busy life outside of school which often times keeps her from practicing her Spanish, she could still do more by committing the first ten minutes of her planning period to reading a book or listening to the radio in Spanish. We were encouraged by this commitment as it is something that other foreign language teachers could easily adopt in order to maintain and/or improve their own language proficiency.

Cindy. Like Audrey, Cindy also went abroad with similar goals related to improving her proficiency and professional practice, which she felt she accomplished.

However, the experience also caused Cindy to realize the need to improve her pronunciation, which she had not realized prior to studying abroad. Cindy commented “I feel like my proficiency has increased. I think that I’m more confident. I also think that my pronunciation has improved dramatically, because I started hearing errors that I was making.”

In addition, Cindy felt as though the unique experience of studying abroad with other Spanish teachers contributed to her professional development and growth and enabled her to recognize the need to continue to work on her speaking proficiency, especially as it relates to being a more effective teacher, stating, “If I’m in the target language more they [the students] are going to have to pay more attention to me when I’m speaking.”

Mary. Mary also described the study abroad experience as being beneficial to her language development and, once again, committed to using the language more in order to maintain and/or enhance her skills. Like Audrey, she also committed to reading more authentic texts in Spanish. In addition, the experience of being a language student caused her to reflect upon her own students and the challenges of learning another language. “I think sometimes I still forget that it doesn’t matter how relaxing or comfortable the classroom is it’s still hard to use that second language. It just is, especially when working with kids.”

Jasmine. Toward the end of the trip, Jasmine’s comments revealed that the study abroad experience caused her to re-assess her language abilities and, as a result, commit to taking steps to improve once she returned home. However, unlike the other three participants, this was a powerful departure from her pre-trip and initial in-country comments, which seemed to be more superficial and did not reflect an accurate portrayal of her language proficiency and related instructional practices.

My language ability is probably a little lower than I thought. I’m going to make myself watch all my movies and television in Spanish more often so that I can listen to it and understand it. I’m going to be getting online and instead of just watching the news in English I’m going to switch it over to Spanish a couple times a week so I’m hearing it in Spanish.

Although the participants expressed different levels of self-awareness of their language proficiency and its impact on their teaching, based upon their interview responses, there was still a noticeable change in how the study abroad experience contributed to their acknowledgement of necessary changes. Furthermore, as in-country observers, we noticed that it was not until the participants experienced a powerful, often times frustrating jolt that represented a professional lack of congruence between their perceived and actual proficiency that they finally admitted a more accurate assessment of their abilities in the foreign language. For example, when we asked the participants if they had any recent experiences using Spanish (while abroad) where there was a breakdown of understanding or a realization of their inability to adequately function they responded affirmatively indicating that at times they felt inadequate, overwhelmed or simply out-of-place and unable to be as fluent as they would have liked. Audrey offered the most powerful response when she said “I lie to people and just tell them that I teach the beginning [Spanish] levels because I’m embarrassed. I’m afraid they’ll think ‘Who the heck is this woman teaching Spanish? She’s terrible.’”

Discussion

While previous research related to in-service foreign language teachers studying abroad has confirmed that the experience can impact teachers' actual and/or perceived proficiency (Barfield, 1994) along with their cultural knowledge and pedagogy (Allen, 2010), this research did not reveal how teachers experienced, and most importantly, responded to studying abroad.

As documented in the findings section, the professional development needs of foreign language teachers are very complex as it incorporates both content knowledge, foreign language pedagogy and language proficiency. Lozano, Padilla and Sung (2004) noted that "professional development for foreign language teachers should help them maintain proficiency in their target languages, develop content knowledge, and learn what constitutes successful foreign language pedagogy" (p. 303). Regrettably, the traditional model of in-service professional development for all teachers—the workshop—may fail to address the complex needs of foreign language teachers.

Additionally, while it is possible for foreign language teachers to take advantage of at-home opportunities to enhance their language skills, it may be difficult. Fraga-Cañadas (2010) surveyed over 100 high school Spanish teachers to determine how often they practiced the language outside of the school setting and found that almost half (44%) of the respondents indicated that, since finishing their last Spanish courses, their Spanish proficiency had either remained the same or declined. Moreover, 48% of the teachers indicated that their teacher preparation program had only prepared them *to some extent* in listening and speaking. In response to open-ended survey questions, teachers reported that their teaching assignment, or level of Spanish taught, can also affect their proficiency. One student wrote: "I feel that my fluency has not improved since I started teaching because of the basic level of Spanish that students learn and I teach" (Fraga-Cañadas, 2010, p. 401). Another student echoed this sentiment: "I've been teaching level one and two and have really forgotten stuff like the subjunctive that is not part of my curriculum" (p. 401). Finally, 66% of the surveyed teachers indicated they had not participated in any type of professional development designed specifically for Spanish teachers within the past three years (p. 403). As a result of her findings, Fraga-Cañadas called for more "authentic opportunities designed exclusively for Spanish teachers" (p. 412). Similarly, Cooper (2004) surveyed over 300 foreign language teachers in Georgia to assess their perceptions of the effectiveness of their professional preparation, and found that in-service foreign language teachers identified the need to spend more time in the target countries (i.e. study abroad) and engage in activities related to their language proficiency.

Implications for Foreign Language Professional Development

Clearly, there is a need to encourage study abroad among foreign language teachers as a primary source of professional development. We feel as though the findings from this study offer a unique perspective of the importance of a study abroad experience and how it leads teachers to recognize the need to enhance their content knowledge, pedagogy and language proficiency that they otherwise would not have realized.

Furthermore, through documenting the experiences of our participants, we were able to confirm the findings of previous research, but more importantly, we

were able to further explore how this experience in Costa Rica and subsequent realizations lead to self-reflection and a commitment to self-improvement. In other words, we have documented the voices of foreign language teachers which acknowledged that the study abroad experience is an authentic way for these teachers to truly engage in the development and/or refinement of their Pedagogical Content Knowledge, which Shulman (1987) defined as “that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding” (p. 8). However, recognizing the need for all teachers to have a sound command of their content, Shulman (1986) further noted: “What pedagogical prices are paid when the teacher’s subject matter competence is itself compromised by deficiencies of prior education or ability?” (p. 8). Therefore, foreign language teachers must continue to engage in professional development activities, such as studying abroad and language use outside of the classroom, in order to deliver instruction that fosters the development of their students’ language acquisition.

The implications of the findings from this study can not only benefit in-service foreign language teachers but also pre-service foreign language teachers who are still developing their language proficiency. Of primary importance is the realization that beyond improving proficiency and cultural awareness, the study abroad experience can result in a more accurate self-assessment and identification of areas in need of improvement. The most salient finding was the extent to which the participants developed a more accurate assessment of their language skills—especially related to oral proficiency—as a result of studying abroad. All of the participants commented that if they had not traveled abroad, they would not have realized their language deficiencies. Without this insight, the participants would not have committed to pedagogical changes or improving their out-of-class language use. As Jasmine said in her post-trip interview, “If I had just sat here at home I would have figured that everything was OK and just kept going and going.”

Therefore, it is important for both future and current foreign language teachers to understand that the demands of their content require them to continue to use the foreign language outside of the classroom.

Limitations and Future Research and Practice

Perhaps future research could examine developing community-based or virtual programs that connect both future and current foreign language teachers with native speakers as a means of language development, such as mentoring or peer-coaching. These programs could be administered through both public schools and universities.

The findings of this study could also be used to investigate the impact of study abroad on other important pedagogical variables such as teacher self-efficacy, which Bandura (1997) defines as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3). Previous studies have reported the benefits associated with more efficacious foreign language teachers and areas such as job satisfaction and retention (Swanson, 2008, 2010, 2012), student achievement (Swanson, 2014) and language proficiency (Chacón, 2005; Yilmaz, 2011). However, there is a need to examine how studying abroad is associated with in-service Spanish teachers’ perceptions of self-efficacy—especially as it relates to

language proficiency and instructional competence. Furthermore, to more thoroughly understand the connection between studying abroad and foreign language teachers' self-efficacy, future research could employ a mixed-methods design, which would consist of both semi-structured interviews and survey instruments designed to assess general (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) and foreign language-specific teacher self-efficacy (Swanson, 2010).

Although this study offered unique insight into the experiences of in-service foreign language teachers studying abroad, our findings are not without limitations. While case studies can provide a more in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, they are limited to the boundaries of the respective cases. In this study, one of the primary limitations was that our participants were similar because they were all graduate students who identified a need to further enhance their proficiency and instructional practice through studying abroad. Another consideration with respect to the generalizations of this study is that the subjects' deficiencies and/or gains in language proficiency were self-reported and not based on a standardized assessment.

However, despite the aforementioned limitations, the implications of this study are still relevant and timely to the field of foreign language education. For example, the results could be used to better inform the post-secondary curriculum for future foreign language teachers by requiring a study abroad experience. As previously mentioned, the *ACTFL/CAEP Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers* (2013) suggest a minimum proficiency level of Advanced-Low for Spanish teachers (p. 15), which can be difficult to attain without studying abroad (Malone, Rifkin, Christian, & Johnson, 2005). Furthermore, the commitment found among this study's participants to continue to use the foreign language on a regular basis, beyond the study abroad experience, could also be used to develop a professional development framework designed for in-country language maintenance and development for both current and future foreign language teachers.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. How do you describe your race or ethnicity?
4. How many years have you been teaching Spanish?
5. What is your highest earned degree?
6. Have you ever had to take a language proficiency test, such as the OPI, or a language-based exam for your teaching certification? If so, what test/tests did you take and what were the results?
7. Describe any recent experiences you've had using Spanish where there was a breakdown of understanding or a realization of your inability to adequately function.
8. Do you have previous study abroad experience(s)? If so, please explain.
9. What is your current teaching assignment? What levels of Spanish do you teach?
10. What size of school do you teach in?
11. Self-assess your Spanish abilities in reading, writing, listening and speaking.
12. How comfortable are you / would you be teaching upper level Spanish? What about native or heritage speakers?
13. When you're planning lessons and activities, do you ever take into account your own level of proficiency?
14. What do you do to maintain your Spanish proficiency skills and how could you do more?