

## The Effectiveness of Courses Abroad as a Professional Development Model for Foreign Language Teachers

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### Abstract

This article details a study conducted to determine the effectiveness of a professional development model for inservice Spanish teachers. Subjects were participants in intensive summer immersion programs abroad that included a rigorous methodology course advocating sound pedagogical models for lessons and stressed 90%+ target language use in the foreign language classroom. Subjects responded to an online survey requesting demographic data and provided Likert scale ratings on the perceived utility and effectiveness of program goals from their personal perspective. Results confirmed an overwhelmingly positive professional experience for participants and yielded concrete data supporting the goals of the program.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

What first inspires most foreign language (FL) teachers to follow their career path is their love of the language and culture. During their years of preparation, many engage in some form of study abroad and/or immersion experiences and

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interaction with native speakers (NSs) and their respective culture (IIE, 2014; Isabelli, 2004). Nearly every university certification program for preservice FL teachers offers either its own array of study abroad options for students or, at the very least a direct path to other options offered by affiliated institutions or organizations (Pearson, Fonseca-Greber, & Foell, 2006). In addition, the collaboration between the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) resulted in the expectation for FL teacher education candidates to obtain an oral proficiency rating of Advanced-low in the language(s) they will teach as one measure of their certification potential (Glisan, Swender, & Surface, 2013).<sup>2</sup> This NCATE and ACTFL mandate has thus been a strong impetus for these preservice teachers to seek out and participate in study abroad experiences in order to reach this threshold proficiency level (Swender, 2003). Upon entering the profession, however, these same FL teachers are challenged with finding their way back to their original passions. As they move from being preservice teachers to inservice status, they are faced with personal and professional obstacles to maintaining their skills and knowledge (Glisan, 2005; Watzke, 2007). Professional development experiences that are tailored to the multi-faceted demands of being a FL teacher are not as readily available as opportunities for teachers in other subject matters (Berniz, 2007; Campbell, 2009; Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson,

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& Orphanos, 2009; Potowski & Carreira, 2004; Schmidt-Rinehart, 2001). The Advanced level of target language (TL) proficiency, the refined classroom strategies, the use of authentic materials, the integration of technology, and the in-depth knowledge of cultural products, practices, and perspectives necessary to teach in this communicative era present a pedagogical sophistication that is unique to FL teachers. Professional development for this teacher cadre must be different. It must involve contact with the language and culture, and it must include an opportunity to hone lesson plans for their particular curricula, purposes, and students and to interact with other FL teachers (Velez-Rendon, 2002; Watzke, 2007).

The *Connecting Cultures* program was designed to meet these specific needs. In this program, teachers are given a chance to be study abroad students again while focusing on the development of materials for their own classrooms. The present study was conceived in order to determine the effectiveness of this type of professional development model. The research results presented here directly derive from survey responses contributed by participants in all the iterations of the *Connecting Cultures* program over a span of two decades. Does this type of professional development model indeed succeed in providing an optimal learning environment for FL teachers—one in which they can improve and/or further develop their linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical content knowledge, as well as forge lasting collaborative relationships with FL colleagues?

## The Effectiveness of Courses Abroad as a Professional Development Model

### Professional Development – The Need

Foreign language teachers find themselves in a very singular position: their content area is also their delivery mechanism. In essence, for FL teachers, “the medium is the message” (Bernhardt & Hammadou, 1987, p. 301). Because their professional circumstance is unique, FL educators desire and require professional development that is specific to their particular career needs. All too often, however, these teachers are subjected to generic forms of professional development that neither relate to their specialized context nor provide much educational benefit to them (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). This is lamentable in the present day when the research base on professional development clearly indicates which components are most likely to form the basis for achieving effective and satisfactory growth in one’s profession (Kesner, 2005; Klingner, 2004). Indeed, in light of the differing requisites of this body of FL professionals, researchers have rejected a “one size fits all” approach to professional development that would attempt to satisfy its requirements in the most generic sense (Berniz, 2007; Klingner, 2004; Schulz, 2007; Schmidt-Rinehart, 1997). Instead, they call for carefully planned and orchestrated professional development opportunities that will improve the pedagogical and linguistic capabilities of FL teachers and will concomitantly target deficiencies extant among these practitioners (Amengual-Pizarro, 2007; Campbell, 2009; Hedgcock, 2002; Lacorte & Krastel, 2002; Potowski, 2003; Potowski & Carreira, 2004).

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An examination of the FL professional development research base reveals several major areas of emphasis and/or concern for FL teachers, both inservice and preservice. These areas include language proficiency, expertise in FL instructional methodology, TL cultural knowledge, and maintenance of professional relationships (Allen & Negueruela-Azarola, 2010; Amengual-Pizarro, 2007; Ellison, 2006; Glisan, 2005; González Pino & Pino, 2009; McDonough, 2006; Oxford, 2008; Velez-Rendon, 2002). At all stages of their career, FL teachers acknowledge the importance of achieving and maintaining a strong linguistic proficiency in the TL they teach (Amengual-Pizarro, 2007; Bell, 2005; Oxford, 2008; Swanson, 2012). Nevertheless, this goal appears to be elusive for many FL teachers for a number of reasons. During preservice training, not all FL teacher candidates take advantage of opportunities to study abroad or, if they do, they may engage in minimal or short-term experiences rather than semester or year-long immersion periods (Oxford, 2008). Thus these preservice teachers miss out on significant interaction with NSs of the TL (Antón, 2011). Proficiency in the TL is sometimes not stressed in teacher training programs. As a consequence, the students do not engage in the interactive practice nor acquire the ability to generate the TL “patter” necessary to communicate successfully with their future students and conduct an immersion atmosphere in their classroom (Amengual-Pizarro, 2007; Bell, 2005; LeLoup, Ponterio, & Warford, 2013). Not having a strong TL base when one is expected to conduct a classroom with 90% TL use creates a

feeling of inadequacy in teachers and reduces their sense of efficacy. This, in turn, can lead to greatly reduced TL use in the classroom, dissatisfaction with one's role as a FL teacher, and even eventual abandonment of the profession (Amengual-Pizarro, 2007; Swanson, 2010; 2012).

The study abroad setting has the potential to provide the ideal language learning environment for FL teachers. The combination of a carefully designed program to meet the needs of the teachers and the motivation of professionals seeking to further their skills makes the study abroad setting a powerful one. No longer young undergraduate students with limited language skills and unclear goals, the FL teachers are highly motivated to make the most of their time in-country, taking advantage of every opportunity to enhance their language proficiency, interact with the culture, gather authentic materials for their classroom, and learn from their colleagues. They are surrounded by the language and culture 24/7 and have the language skills from the very beginning of their experience to glean cultural knowledge not accessible without L2 proficiency. The homestay provides immediate access to native speaker interlocutors, and specific course assignments lead to focused and increased interaction (Allen & Dupuy, 2012; Allen, 2010; Cadd, 2012; Castañeda & Zirger, 2011; Di Silvio, Donovan, & Malone, 2014; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2010).

Expertise in FL instructional methodology encompasses a sound knowledge of second language acquisition (SLA), a solid basis of FL pedagogy, and skill in classroom management and how FL instruction can assist with this important skill. If FL teachers have little to no grasp of how languages are acquired, they can hardly carry out effective instruction in the classroom (Amengual-Pizarro, 2007; Hedgcock, 2002; Lacorte & Krastel, 2002; McDonough, 2006). This pedagogical content knowledge includes both SLA and language proficiency, and both can certainly change over time. Keeping abreast of current research in the SLA field can increase pedagogical knowledge and improve instructional practice. Improving one's language proficiency—as opposed to suffering from language attrition—can only be seen as a most positive step for any FL instructor. Researchers call for the incorporation of SLA instruction in teacher education programs, familiarization—on the part of all FL practitioners—with language teaching discourse (via regular readings of professional journal articles and like literature), and a recognition of how such content knowledge can influence one's instructional practices (Amengual-Pizarro, 2007; Antón, 2011; Tellez, 2005; Watzke, 2007). The evolving demands of the FL profession require a direct link between scholarship and teaching.

Engaging in action research projects can help practitioners further develop their own personal theories of language teaching, soundly grounded in the extant research base (Allen & Negueruela-Azarola, 2010; Brown, 2009; Contreras-Sanzana & Villalobos-Clavería, 2010; Lacorte & Krastel, 2002; McDonough, 2006). During the initial years of inservice teaching, educators have a strong inclination to teach as they were taught and to fall back on familiar patterns from their

## The Effectiveness of Courses Abroad as a Professional Development Model

own language instruction, despite knowledge gained in their teacher education programs (Brown, 2009; Contreras-Sanzana & Villalobos-Clavería, 2010; Lortie, 1975; Watzke, 2007). They tend to follow traditional models that may be outdated and ineffective. Because these initial years are quite formative and set the stage for a predisposition toward professional growth or not, these teachers need to engage in career development that will strengthen their professional maturity in many areas. Such participation could determine their effectiveness, their career satisfaction, and even their continued presence in the field (Potowski, 2003; Watzke, 2007). At the opposite end of the spectrum are the inservice teachers who have spent years in the profession without participating in meaningful professional development and who may be subject to the same criticisms of lagging behind in pedagogical and language content knowledge (Glisan, 2005). Both cohorts of educators—and all those in between—can benefit greatly from a well-planned and germane model of FL professional development.

Difficulty in acquiring, maintaining, and increasing cultural knowledge also presents significant issues for FL teachers. While many FL teachers express satisfaction with their level of TL proficiency (rightly or wrongly), they also admit to a lack of confidence in their cultural knowledge (Swanson, 2012). Omaggio Hadley (2001) lists several reasons for not including culture in one's daily curriculum: lack of time, knowledge, and desire to delve into topics that may touch on affect, an area which some practitioners hesitate to address. Preservice as well as inservice FL teachers, including university professors, appear to be fairly competent at teaching about products and practices of a TL culture. Where they fall short is in the conveyance of the all-important part that is termed perspectives (González Pino & Pino, 2009; LeLoup, Ponterio, and Heller, 2010). Some researchers argue that this problem stems from a dearth of courses on or attention to cultural understanding in FL methods courses in teacher training programs and, as a consequence, call for the inclusion of quality cultural instructional practices in the pedagogical preparation of preservice as well as inservice FL teachers (Ellison, 2006; González Pino & Pino, 2009; Schulz, 2007; Swanson, 2012). As reflected in the Cultures goal area of the National Standards, which are now known as the World-readiness Standards (NSFLEP, 2006, 2015), these perspectives are the underpinnings of cultural artifacts and behaviors and are arguably the most salient, albeit the most challenging, portion of cultural instruction and understanding. Indeed, three of the five goal areas of the National Standards (2006, 2015) deal directly with culture: Cultures (2.1, 2.2), Connections (3.2), and Comparisons (4.2). While it can be demanding and even difficult to teach culture in the second language classroom, because culture is inseparable from language, it must be incorporated as part of TL instruction (Byrd, Hlas, Watzke & Montes Valencia, 2011; Schulz, 2007). A boon to the incorporation of culture is the wealth of authentic materials one can readily find via the Internet and through use of myriad technological resources (Bell, 2005; LeLoup & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2003). Combining this treasure trove of materials available to teachers

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## The NECTFL Review 76

with sound pedagogical practices, the 3 Ps (products, practices, and perspectives) of the national standards can form a sturdy component for language instruction (NSFLEP, 2006, 2015).

Professional connections form a cornerstone of one's career development (Long & LeLoup, 2014). When teachers are actively involved in their own

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professional growth and when they collaborate with colleagues across the field, they advance in their ability to articulate their FL instructional beliefs and practices (Glisan, 2005). Beginning teachers need mentors and colleagues willing and even eager to share their knowledge. Singleton teachers, often isolated in their school districts, benefit from networking connections forged through conference attendance, participation in online forums (e.g., the Foreign Language Teaching Forum or FLTEACH), and involvement in professional organizations such as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the various AATs (American Association of Teachers of X language), and the like (Contreras-Sanzana & Villalobos-Clavería, 2010; Glisan, 2005; LeLoup & Ponterio, 2009; Swanson, 2010). Without these connections and efforts at professional participation, teachers will be hard pressed to stay abreast of professional issues and new initiatives in the field. A teacher truly invested in his or her career cannot remain on the periphery of the profession and expect to be successful (Daie, 1998; Glisan, 2005).

Given these compelling issues in FL professional development, the authors saw a need to develop an effective model of professional development that would address each of these areas to the extent possible for FL educators. Given that overarching arguments against engaging in professional development include the lack of time, money, and opportunities specifically geared toward growth in language and cultural knowledge as well as current pedagogical best practices (Schulz, 2007), the *Connecting Cultures* program was conceived to meet the demands stated above. The present study was designed to measure the effectiveness of the program after several iterations, as perceived by program participants.

### Program Description

The *Connecting Cultures* courses abroad span 20 years and cities in three countries: Cuernavaca, Mexico (offered four times), Mérida, Venezuela (offered one time), and San José, Costa Rica (offered five times). The locations were chosen based on contacts through the instructors' respective and original university study abroad offices and were held at intensive language schools in Mexico and Venezuela and at a private university in Costa Rica. A total of 110 teachers participated in the courses. All participants were U.S. teachers of Spanish and received graduate credit for the course. The format of the program was a two-week in-country course with an online extension added beginning in 2001 when the technology became available.

## The Effectiveness of Courses Abroad as a Professional Development Model

The program was designed to address four primary goals, ones that cover key areas of professional development specific to the needs of foreign language teachers: improve language skills, refine instructional practices, enhance cultural knowledge, and connect with colleagues (see *The Need*: literature review above). The immersion setting provided the ideal environment to improve language skills. The participants signed a language pledge upon arrival, promising to maintain all interaction in Spanish throughout the in-country portion of the course.

The homestay afforded opportunities for both language and cultural development. Throughout the two weeks, participants were encouraged to interact with their family as an extension of the academic work. They not only practiced their language skills, but also used them as informants for cultural “homework.” Participants were often asked to consult with their families in order to report back to the class. In later iterations of the program, participants used country-specific culture books such as *Culture Shock! Costa Rica: A Guide to Customs and Etiquette* (Wallerstein, 2011) and were assigned to solicit answers from their family for culture quizzes. The national standards’ paradigm of the 3 Ps was incorporated in discussions and lessons throughout the program. Cultural knowledge was further enhanced by excursions specifically designed and incorporated to address the goal of professional cultural development. The host schools worked closely with the program directors to plan pedagogically-based excursions (e.g., a visit to local schools, a lecture and tour of the national legislative assembly, excursions to national monuments), and weekend opportunities to explore the country.

The daily course work was two-tiered: two hours of language class with a teacher native to the TL country where the course was conducted and a two-hour pedagogy class taught (in Spanish) by the U.S. instructors. The language class varied according to the country and host institution. Each site, however, specialized in intensive language instruction and its teachers were trained in needs-based, individualized instruction. Students were assessed individually and then grouped with others of similar language ability, allowing the participants to work on specific concepts to improve their own proficiency. The host institution teachers provided the materials and curriculum for the Spanish language class.

The methods component focused on the use of authentic materials and technology to meet the National Standards (NSFLEP, 2006, 2015). Participants developed lessons based on models of instruction supported by sound pedagogical practices and SLA research (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 2002; Shrum & Glisan, 2010). This component served as a mini-methods course in which students were presented with prototypes for developing lessons in comprehension, interpersonal communication, and language structures. Each lesson needed to incorporate both technology and culture. The two-week program included workshop days in which the participants had opportunities to consult with the instructors, collaborate with other students, and consider exemplary lessons from previous courses. The lessons that were in-progress were presented on the last days of class—again, to have the benefit of feedback from fellow students and the instructors. Completed lessons were due once the students returned to the U.S.

## The NECTFL *Review* 76

Starting in 2001, the course continued online after the participants returned home. They engaged in asynchronous discussions of professional readings targeting the goal areas of the course. The professional readings consisted of either a content-related text (e.g., Moran, 2001) and/or articles from professional journals selected by the instructors. Each student was responsible for being a discussion leader for selected chapters or articles, and others responded to each leader's post a requisite number of times. Students also read an additional article germane to the course's focus. Furthermore, students shared the materials they were required to develop during the course (e.g., lesson plans, journal article critiques). This online continuation was accompanied by an increase in the number of credit hours possible for the course (from three to six semester hours).

### Procedures and Instrumentation

The study was designed to ascertain the perceived effectiveness of the *Connecting Cultures* professional development model in the areas of

1. improving language skills,
2. refining instructional practices,
3. enhancing cultural knowledge, and
4. connecting with colleagues.

Before conducting the investigation, the two researchers sought approval from their respective universities to undertake a joint research project. Institutional Review Board (IRB) training was completed by both researchers, IRB approval was granted by both universities, and the respective institutions both signed a Cooperative Research and Development Agreement (CRADA).

Upon approval of the project, a survey<sup>3</sup> was designed to solicit demographic information and the participants' evaluation of the effectiveness of the program goals, providing both quantitative and qualitative data. The researchers consulted the director of one institution's Center for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) for assistance in survey construction. The survey was developed through the Survey Monkey platform, and participation was solicited via e-mail. The first part of the 20-item survey required the respondents to identify the program in which they participated and to complete a profile regarding their own travel experience, academic background, and teaching experience. The remaining questions were formulated as Likert-type items within scales that focused on each goal area and addressed related subcategories. The respondents evaluated the utility and effectiveness of the program goals through these Likert item ratings. In addition, several questions offered the opportunity to expand on participants' initial ratings. At the end of the survey, respondents were given the opportunity to write recommendations and suggestions for the program. The open period for survey response covered a four-month period; all possible subjects were sent multiple e-mail reminders soliciting their participation and assuring them of the anonymity of their responses.



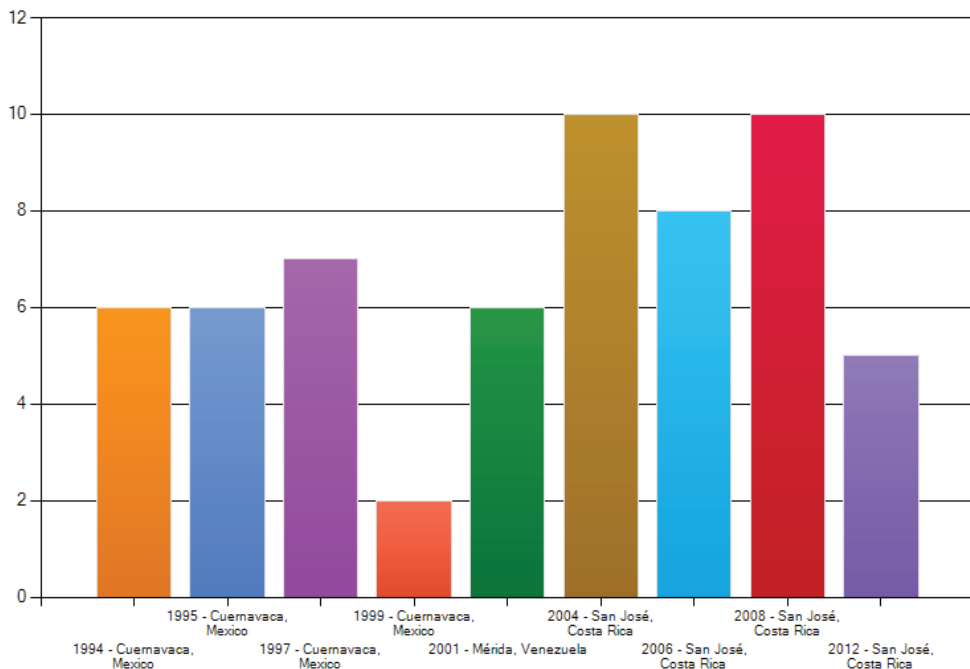
## The Effectiveness of Courses Abroad as a Professional Development Model

### Demographic Information

All 110 participants in the *Connecting Cultures* programs were eligible for inclusion in the study. The total number of potential respondents was actually 98 as several had repeated the program. Because the programs spanned 20 years, securing active e-mails or addresses for all participants proved challenging. Researchers made use of several vehicles to garner active e-mails, including original demographic information gathered at the time of the course and social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn. The final number of “successful” e-mails sent (i.e., no bounces received indicating an invalid e-mail address) was 68. The final total of respondents was 49, yielding a response rate of 72%. Figure 1 shows the country and year of each of the 49 responders.

**Figure 1. Program Identification**

**PROGRAM IDENTIFICATION - Please indicate the Connecting Cultures program in which you participated. (check all that apply):**



As seven teachers participated multiple times, the tallies shown in Figure 1 do not always sum to anticipated totals. Four teachers participated in three different programs and three teachers repeated the program twice. The Mexico programs from 1994-1999 yielded 21 responses, the Venezuela program (2001) generated six responses, and the Costa Rica programs (2004-2012) garnered 33 responses.

The information gleaned from the demographic information on the survey provides a professional profile of these language teachers. The majority of the teachers

**The NECTFL Review 76**

(67%) reported that they were at the beginning of their teaching careers when they took the course (one to five years of experience). Eighteen percent had been teaching six to ten years, two percent eleven to fifteen years, nine percent fifteen to twenty years, and four percent 25-30 years. When probed about their international travel experience acquired before the *Connecting Cultures* program, the majority reported that they had spent a semester or more abroad. Others indicated short-term experiences and a few had never been out of the country. Table 1 depicts the length and type of international travel before and after the program.

**Table 1. International Travel Experience Before and After Participating in the *Connecting Cultures* Program**

Length	0	2 wks Prof dev	2 wks with students (1-multiple)	3-4 wks (1)	Multiple short-term (3-4 wks/ea)	Semester or more	NS (travel or lived abroad with family)	2-wk vacation (1-multiple)
<b>Before</b>	4%	4%	0	7%	16%	65%	4%	0
<b>After</b>	24.5%	12%	16.5%	2%	16.5%	2%	0	26.5%

The data revealed a contrast regarding travel after the *Connecting Cultures* experience. The most common responses regarding length of time out of the country described multiple one- to two-week experiences and no further travel. Two new categories emerged: those of vacation travel and teacher-led student trips. The respondents identified the primary reason for their travel as pleasure/vacation as well as professional/personal development and academic credit (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Primary reasons for travel abroad since *Connecting Cultures* program**

Pleasure/vacation	75%
Professional Development	61.1%
Academic credit or advancement	33.3%
Personal development	44.4%

The survey respondents represent a sampling from each of the *Connecting Cultures* programs offered over the years and in different locations. They included teachers at all stages of their careers, with beginning teachers representing the highest percentage of participants. Amount of time in-country varied greatly as did their reasons for traveling. The response rate and representative participation from the various iterations of the course generated a stable data set through which researchers were able to assess the effectiveness of the different components of the program model.

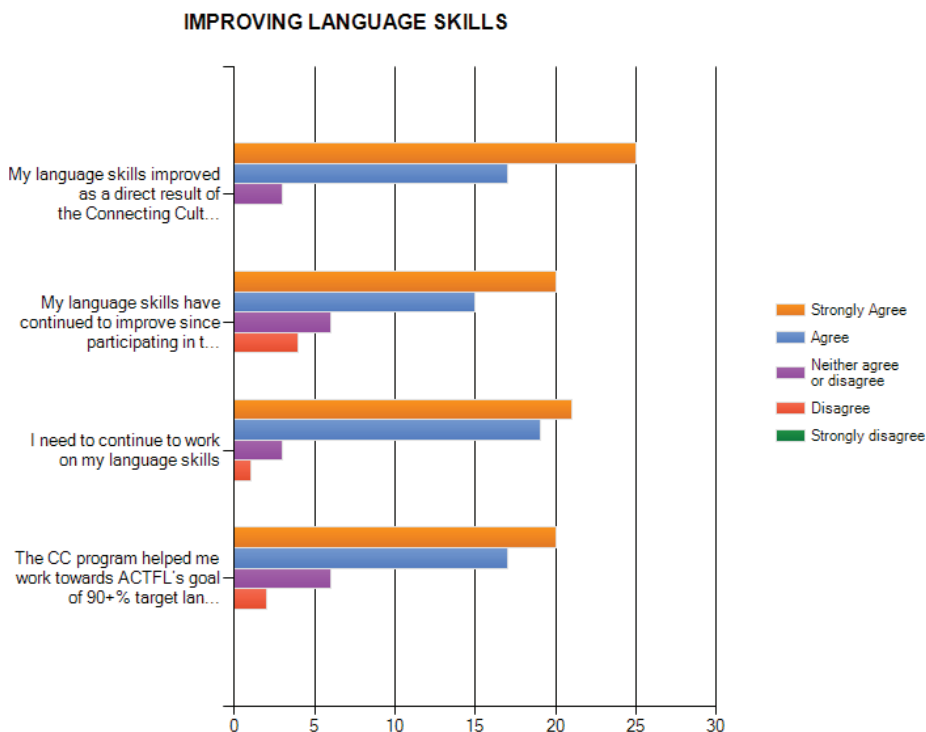
**Results and Discussion**

In order to tap participants’ opinions on the effectiveness of the *Connecting Cultures* program for professional development in the aforementioned four

## The Effectiveness of Courses Abroad as a Professional Development Model

goal areas, Likert-type scales were created with varying numbers of items for each primary goal of the program. The first goal, improving language skills, contained four individual Likert items concerning language skill improvement during and after the program as well as increased TL use in classroom discourse since participating in the program. The opinion of participants vis-à-vis the effectiveness of the program for this goal area was overwhelmingly affirmative. Response percentages in the combined categories of Strongly Agree and Agree for each Likert item in this scale ranged from a high of 92.9% to a low of 80.9%, still quite positive. Figure 2 shows the responses for each item involving language skill improvement.

Figure 2. Improving Language Skills



Clearly, participants in the program felt their language skills not only improved during the program but continued to do so after, in some cases well after, completion of the course. Respondent comments underscore this:

Being in the country where the language is spoken is the best way to improve one's language skills. The course being taught in the language, and the contract to speak only in Spanish while in the country were extremely beneficial.

The program has encouraged me to continue travel in order to put my language skills to true, realistic use. It has also encouraged me to continue to find other ways to get practice as I should use more TL in my classroom.

**The NECTFL Review 76**

The second goal, refining instructional practices, dealt with several subtopics. Subjects were first asked to evaluate the use of lessons they created during the course. They were then asked to comment on the role that culture presentations, the use of authentic materials, and attention to the national standards played as a direct result of the instruction received during the program. Finally, they were also asked to indicate if there was an increase in the use of technology after taking the course. Even though this was not a specific concentration of the initial offerings of the *Connecting Cultures* program, participants reported an increase in technology use (responses of Strongly Agree and Agree categories totaling 83.7%). This certainly may be due to a general increased availability of technology to teachers over the time period of the study. The highest percentages were reflected in items concerning the incorporation of more culture and authentic materials in regular classroom instruction (responses of Strongly Agree and Agree totaling 90.7% in both cases). This was a felicitous finding as it is a major objective of the program. The remaining lower scoring categories involved use of lessons created during the course (responses of 76.7% for both lesson use and effectiveness). While this is still a positive response, this percentage may be due to participants creating lessons “in a vacuum” during the in-country portion of the course. In other words, the subjects created lessons with authentic materials and directed toward the culture of the country in which the course was held, not necessarily aligning these lessons with their own curriculum back in the U.S. Figure 3 shows the distribution of responses on this dimension of the study.

**Figure 3. Refining Instructional Practices**



## The Effectiveness of Courses Abroad as a Professional Development Model

The upturn in the incorporation of culture and the increased use of authentic materials in FL lessons are excellent benefits to students and a direct result of in-country immersion programs where participants are constantly surrounded by the TL culture and have ready access to myriad authentic materials of all types. Expanded survey responses corroborated these benefits:

That course was probably the best from which I had developed a good base, as well as the knowledge to teach foreign language in a way that was more beneficial to my students. I continue to use a lot of the methods that I learned in that class!

The courses provided for me a paradigm shift in thinking and creation of activities. It isn't that I continually use the original lesson, but elements in lessons are consistent.

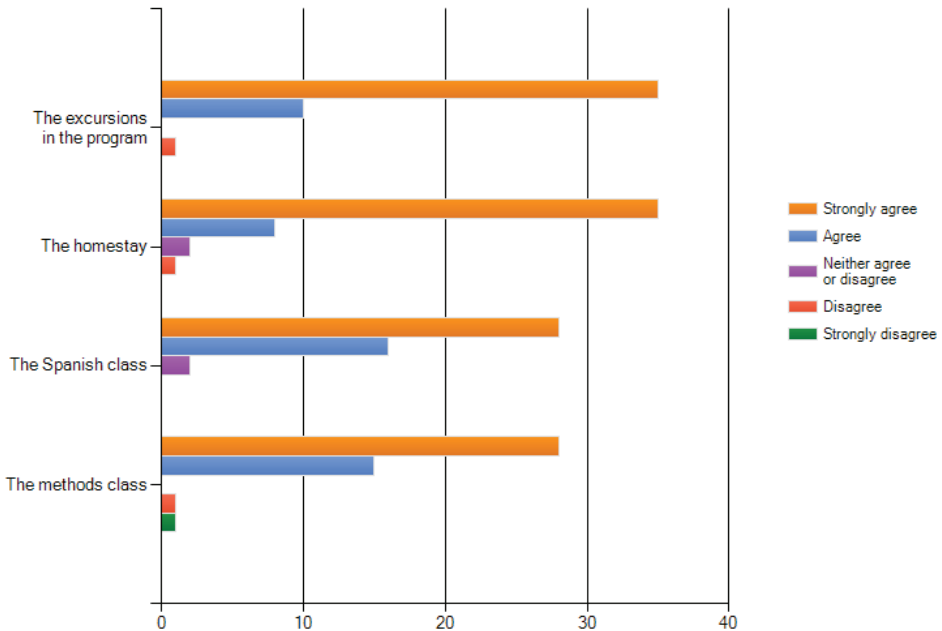
As enhanced cultural knowledge is a concomitant result of time spent in-country, it was also important to pinpoint the most successful vehicles for achieving this goal. Subjects were asked to proffer their opinions on each of the following main components of the *Connecting Cultures* program in effecting this goal: the culture-based excursions, the homestay, the Spanish class with a NS teacher, and the FL methodology course. Here, results offered the overall strongest affirmation and support of the program as an effective professional development model. Responses on all four items in this scale ranged from a high of 97.7% (responses of Strongly Agree and Agree) for both the excursion and Spanish class components to 95% (responses of Strongly Agree and Agree) for the homestay to 93% (responses of Strongly Agree and Agree) for the FL methodology class. The excursions were deemed the most effective in meeting this goal area, and indeed great effort and planning combined to ensure that all excursions were tied directly to the Spanish classes as well as the FL methodology course. In this way, subjects were exposed multiple times to related cultural artifacts, behaviors, and perspectives and thus could make connections between and among them. The homestay was also rated high, although during the initial offering of the course in Costa Rica, subjects were erroneously placed in homes with several other English-speaking students, resulting in difficulties with the language pledge. This situation was remedied for all subsequent iterations of the course in that country. While most subjects found the Spanish classes quite effective, some participants were NSs of Spanish and as such did not value these lessons as much. Figure 4 on the next page illustrates the subjects' perception of the effectiveness of the different components intended to enhance cultural knowledge of the subjects.

Although quite a bit of time was spent in the FL methods class addressing the notion of culture and the 3 Ps, the main focus was purposefully on instructional practices. As such, the subjects perhaps did not directly associate this goal area with the pedagogy course. In general, the *Connecting Cultures* program was seen as quite successful vis-à-vis the enhancement of cultural knowledge:

The excursions were great, as well as the homestay. I used information from one of the excursions to help introduce a reading from a legends book that I had bought while I was there. The students love it because it

Figure 4. Enhancing Cultural Knowledge

**ENHANCING CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE: The following components of the Connecting Cultures program significantly expanded my knowledge of products, practices, and perspectives in the target culture.**



personalizes things for them when you can say you have been there, and give them inside information on the culture. Books and the internet [sic] are great, but the actual experience is even better!!

Staying with a family and communicating with them is KEY.

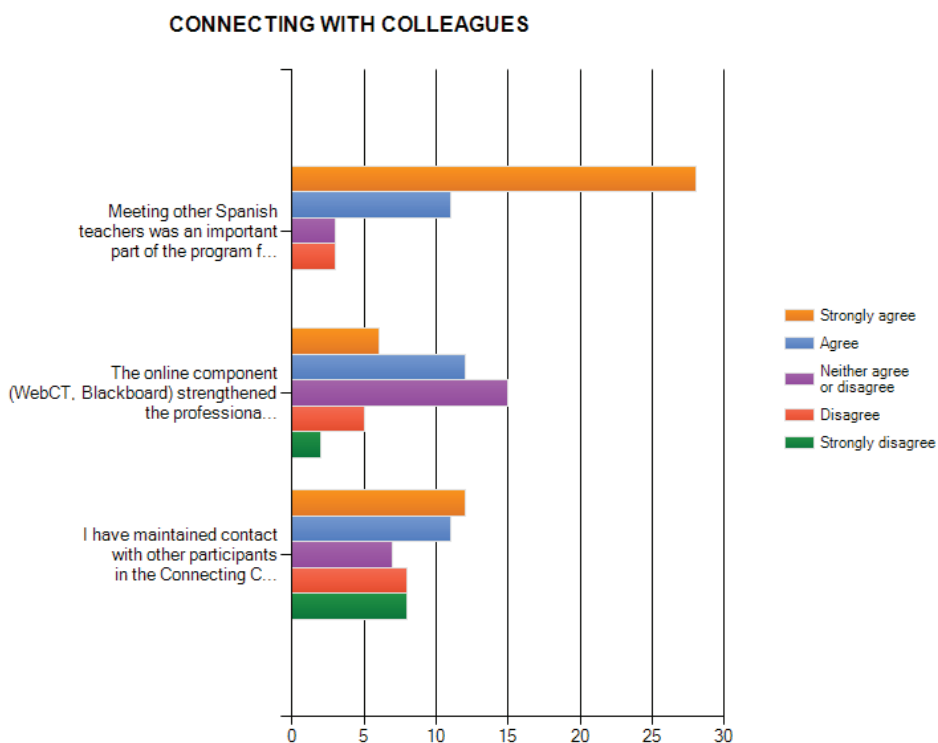
I walked away from the program feeling refreshed as a teacher (even though I had been teaching for only a few years). I also felt confident in my knowledge of Costa Rica as well as my ability to research more about the country to benefit my lessons.

The final goal area of connecting with colleagues presented the researchers with the most difficulty as one of three Likert-type items was applicable only to participants from 2001 on. This was clearly indicated on the survey, and those not involved in the later iterations of the course were directed to skip this item. The inclusion of a web-based extension and component to the course as of 2001 was deemed a vital portion of the revised course. In addition, the expansion of social media capability and the explosion of connectivity in the daily lives of many people in the U.S. justified the inclusion of this particular item to measure its effectiveness. Overall, the response rates for this scale were much lower. The component that the subjects considered most important was the initial connection made with other

## The Effectiveness of Courses Abroad as a Professional Development Model

FL teachers during the course (responses of Strongly Agree and Agree totaling 88.1%). The use of online technology to strengthen these connections was rated by 43.2% (responses of Strongly Agree and Agree) of the subjects as effective in strengthening their professional network. Interestingly, 40.5% responded neutrally and 16.2% disagreed (responses of Disagree and Strongly Disagree). It is conceivable that those participating in the early iterations of the course with the online component were not yet totally integrated into the daily connectivity we see today; hence, they may not have stayed in contact with those particular FL teachers from their *Connecting Cultures* class. Another possible explanation for not maintaining contact might simply be due to the amount of time elapsed since their participation in the program. Figure 5 illustrates the responses to the query regarding connecting with colleagues.

Figure 5. Connecting with Colleagues



Meeting other Spanish teachers was clearly an important component of the program, regardless of the continuation of relationships among participants. Indeed, a few comments from respondents plainly demonstrate this:

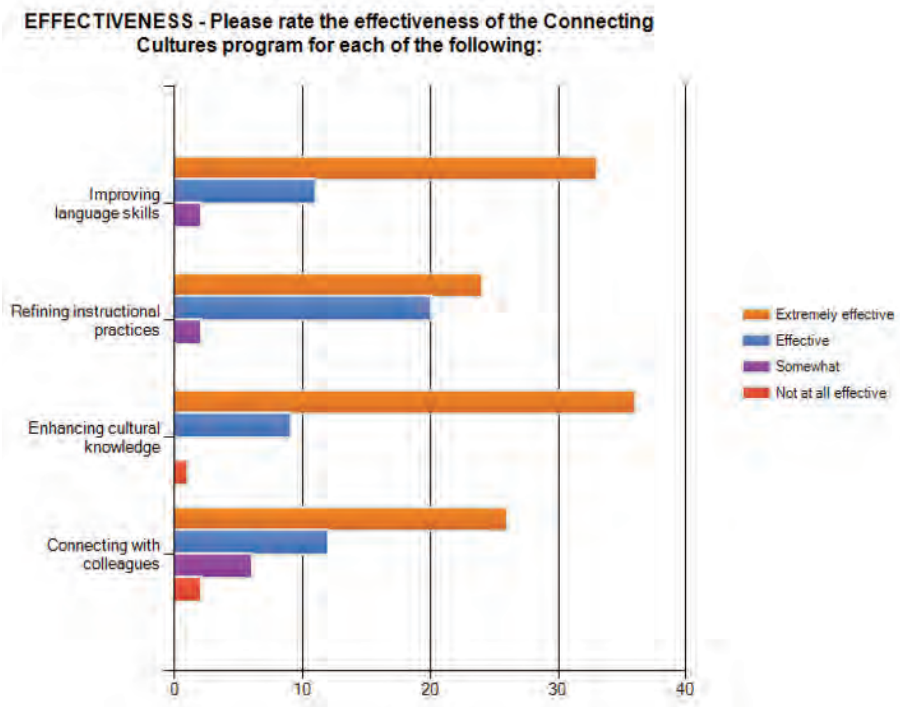
While teaching, the friendships and connections made with other teachers was probably the greatest component of our ongoing professional development over the years.

## The NECTFL Review 76

I made lifetime connections with other teachers that we have maintained. What an enrichment they have been to me - to share life, ask for and receive advice, suggestions, ideas.

A composite representation of overall ratings by the subjects of the effectiveness of the program and its four goals shows quite positive responses. The goals of improving language skills (responses of Strongly Agree and Agree = 97.6%) and enhancing cultural knowledge (responses of Strongly Agree and Agree = 97.6%) were nearly tied in their ratings of effectiveness, with the goal of refining instructional practices coming in a very close third (responses of Strongly Agree and Agree = 95.3%). The goal of connecting with colleagues was a somewhat distant fourth (responses of Strongly Agree and Agree = 83.7%) although still rated quite highly. A compilation of the results from the four-part research question is represented in Figure 6.

**Figure 6. Overall Effectiveness Rating of the Program**



Given the opportunity to offer recommendations for the program, respondents indicated a high rate of satisfaction with the program as it already stood:

The program is perfect for classroom teachers. The amount of time spent in the country is reasonable for teachers with families/responsibilities at home.

The program was well structured and effective. I highly recommend it.



## The Effectiveness of Courses Abroad as a Professional Development Model

The survey results clearly show the *Connecting Cultures* program as an effective professional development model. Nevertheless, the data also indicate some areas where some issues can be addressed and some improvements can certainly be made in future iterations of the course. The issue of TL use in the classroom was always present, underscored by the language pledge required of all participants. With ACTFL's position statement recommending 90% TL use by both teachers and students (2010), this topic became more salient in the FL methodology component of the course. The emphasis on TL use in the classroom needs to continue if teachers are to comply with this directive from the national organization. Placing program participants in homestay situations where they are the only English-speaking guest will help create optimal conditions for TL use during this portion of the course. It would be helpful to participants to see more clearly the connections made in the FL methodology course involving sound pedagogical practices, use of authentic materials in lesson plans, and increased cultural knowledge.

In general, the survey design and execution successfully plumbed participant judgment regarding the four goal areas of the *Connecting Cultures* program. However, because researchers wished input from as many participants as possible, this created an inherent limitation due to the time period covered (twenty years) and the ability to contact subjects. Also, as responsive instructors, the researchers made adjustments to the course as it developed over the years. A few of these changes presented problems in the data collection, reporting, and interpretation (see above). Nevertheless, the researchers are confident that the total results largely confirm the effectiveness of this type of program as a professional development model for FL teachers.

## Conclusion

The survey results reported in this article of participants in the *Connecting Cultures* program over a 20-year period were resoundingly positive. According to the participants, the program was successful in providing a short-term, focused professional development opportunity for Spanish teachers. *Connecting Cultures* was carefully designed to meet the unique needs of FL teachers in the areas of sustaining and improving language and cultural knowledge as well enhancing instructional practices. The teachers became study abroad students again and dedicated two weeks in-country improving their own skills and networking with colleagues. The host institution instructors worked with the teachers to increase their language proficiency and FL methodologists guided them through lesson development using authentic materials. The language pledge, the homestay, and focused cultural assignments ensured sustained interaction with NSs. When technology became available, the teachers were able to extend their program online when they returned to the U.S., further augmenting their experience.

Although all areas were deemed successful in meeting the teachers' professional development needs, enhancing cultural knowledge and improving language skills emerged as the most powerful components of the program. Improvement in these areas is perhaps more difficult to achieve without an immersion experience.

## The NECTFL Review 76

Interestingly, the demographic data revealed that it is common for teachers to have longer in-country experiences during their college programs, but it is difficult to find the time and money to travel once they have gotten past those beginning years of their careers. This is borne out by the research (Schulz, 2007). The participants reported that their travel abroad since graduation was only for short periods of time and/or for pleasure or vacation. If teachers are to keep up their language skills and cultural knowledge, professional and financial incentives and support must be created in order for them to be able to immerse themselves in the target culture and language in a meaningful way.

Given the dearth of appropriate and applicable professional development opportunities available for FL teachers, it is imperative that the profession offer its practitioners ample possibilities to engage in activities and experiences that will enhance their TL skills, their cultural knowledge, their SLA acumen, and their collegial connections. These components have been identified as key factors in FL teacher job satisfaction, performance, and retention. The *Connecting Cultures* program provides a highly successful and workable model for others to follow.

## Notes

1. LeLoup and Schmidt-Rinehart have coauthored several previous articles dealing with study abroad and/or reporting on professional development for foreign language teachers. Both authors contributed equally to this article.
2. As of July 2013 a de facto consolidation of NCATE and the Teacher Accreditation Council (TEAC) resulted in the formation of the Council for Accreditation of Educator Programs (CAEP) as the new accrediting body for educator preparation.
3. The complete questionnaire is available by contacting the authors. The majority of the questions/items can also be found in the tables and figures of this article.

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