OVERSEAS LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCE: STUDENT BELIEFS ABOUT THEIR TEACHERS’ QUALIFICATIONS

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OVERSEAS LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCE: STUDENT BELIEFS
ABOUT THEIR TEACHERS’ QUALIFICATIONS

by

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates ESL student beliefs about ESL teachers’ overseas experience (OE), language learning experience (LLE), and overseas language learning experience (OLLE), the combination of the two, as well as student attitudes toward native-English-speaking teachers. Data is gathered via an online survey from students of university or college-affiliated Intensive English Programs in the United States.

The results show that respondents consider OE and LLE to be important experiences for ESL teachers, and strongly prefer native-English-speaking teachers, although non-native-English-speaking teachers have both OE and LLE. Results suggest that OLLE may be considered a separate factor, but sample size was too small to confirm this.
The author suggests that a larger sample and improved questions could more clearly delineate these beliefs, and that non-native-English-speaking teachers should inform ESL programs and students and about the advantages they can offer as a part of the teaching team.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

This project began with an overheard conversation between 2 ESL students enrolled in a university Intensive English Program in the U.S. The students were comparing two teachers, and made reference to the fact that one teacher had lived overseas and learned another language. Both students agreed that this made the teacher more empathetic, as they believed he understood their experience better than some of the other teachers. From this belief, they concluded that they would rather be in his class than any other teacher’s class.

While little can be drawn from one anecdote in isolation, this conversation illustrates a belief common among ESL teachers, including the author: that the experience of learning a second language while living in a foreign environment makes an ESL teacher more sensitive to the challenges their students face. It seems reasonable that a teacher who has had a similar experience would seem to be more able to identify with the students, as well as be in a better position to notice some of the problems that may inhibit student success. The students mentioned above certainly seemed to believe this is the case, and likely brought to their classes preconceived notions about teacher qualities that affected their attitude and comfort level.
As student beliefs can have a major effect on their attitudes and expectations, it would be useful to know whether a belief in the positive effects of Overseas Language Learning Experience is widespread among ESL students.

1.2 Terminology

Some terminology in this work is the creation of the author, while other terminology is well known in the Second Language Acquisition field.

ESL: (English as a Second Language) Teaching or learning English in a native-English environment.

EFL: (English as a Foreign Language) Teaching or learning English in a non-English speaking environment.

IEP: (Intensive English Program) An intense English learning program, often associated with a university, normally aimed at quickly improving the skills of international students to the point that they can succeed in university classes. For this research, an IEP was defined as a program with membership in the American Association of Intensive English Programs. To attain membership, programs must meet certain criteria, including hours of instruction per week, faculty qualifications, curriculum standards, student resources and admission requirements.

SLA: (Second Language Acquisition) the process of learning a language other than one’s native language.

LLE (author’s term): Language Learning Experience. The experience of having learned a second language, whether in an EFL or ESL context. Includes classroom learning as well as learning in the L2 environment.
OE (author’s term): Overseas Experience. The experience of having lived overseas; in this case, outside of the US. Distinguished from quick trips such as vacations.

OLLE (author’s term): Overseas Language Learning Experience. The experience of having lived overseas and learned another language for day to day life. This project studies student beliefs about OLLE in ESL teachers.

NEST: Native-English-Speaking Teacher. An ESL/EFL teacher whose first language is English.

NNEST: Non-Native-English-Speaking Teacher. An ESL/EFL teacher whose first language is a language other than English.

1.3 Research Questions

Research questions for this project include:

• Do university-level ESL students consider Overseas Language Learning Experience to be an important quality for ESL teachers?

• Subsidiary questions include determining the importance of OE and LLE as separate variables, as well as beliefs and preferences about NNEST (Non Native-English-Speaking Teachers)

1.4 Scope

It would be a massive undertaking to determine whether OLLE actually changes teacher behavior in the classroom in a quantifiable way. To perform such a survey would require detailed observations of teachers, a method of classifying behaviors, and performance appraisals of and interviews with students. As such a survey is beyond the resources available to the author, this research is restricted to student beliefs about such
experience. Such beliefs can be used as a marker of the importance of OLLE for teachers. If students do not care about or notice the effects of such experience, this would suggest that OLLE may not be a research priority.

While ESL students comprise an extremely diverse group, ranging in age from children to the elderly, in skill level from basic adult literacy to university-level, and in venue from church group to classroom to living room, this study focuses on university IEP students in the United States.

This choice was made for several reasons, most relating to research reliability. As IEPs have minimum entrance standards, it was felt that all respondents would have the basic reading skills needed to understand the survey. The goal of most IEP students is to gain the English skills necessary to undertake university study in English. To do this, they are living overseas, which is both challenging and expensive, which suggests that they are well-motivated. It is also likely that, as they are concentrating on English every day, they may have given more than a little thought to the mechanics of learning a second language, and to the importance of teachers in the process. In addition, it was felt that an online survey would be effective at reaching IEP students, who normally have email access through their schools if not in their homes.

In Chapter II, the literature reviewed for this project will be discussed. Research methodology for the study will be discussed in Chapter III, the results of the research in Chapter IV, and implications and suggestions for further research in Chapter V.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Literature Review

Two areas of the SLA research literature have been particularly relevant for this project. These first of these areas is the influence of affective factors in second language learning, particularly the role of student beliefs and anxiety. As this study focuses on the possible effects of certain student beliefs about their teachers, it is useful to look at just how beliefs can make a difference in student success. The second area of research, the language learning experiences of ESL teachers, was also reviewed with a view toward the reactions of teachers, administrators, and students to this experience.

2.1.1 The Influence of Affective Factors on Second Language Learning

A wealth of data about the influence of affective factors on learning in general (Dewey 1933, Rogers 1969) and second language learning in particular (Moskowitz 1969, Gardner 1985, Horwitz 1987) strongly suggest that a student’s emotions, attitudes and beliefs play a major if not key role in learning success. In addition, anecdotal experience, both the author’s and that related to the author by other teachers and by students, provides confirmation that anxiety, motivation and other affective factors can be key factors in successful learning.

Despite the key role played by affect, defining the concept in a satisfying way has proven difficult. Researchers and practitioners have defined affect in many ways,
depending on the type of explanation or analysis they were attempting. According to Oxford (1990:140), “The term affective refers to emotions, motivations, and values.”

Scovel defines affective factors as “those that deal with the emotional reactions and motivations of the learner” (Scovel in Horwitz 1991). Arnold and Brown defined affect as “aspects of emotion, feeling, mood or attitude which condition behaviour” (1999:1).

Finally, Duley, Robert and Krashen (in Arnold and Brown 1991:44) say that:

one’s ‘affect’ toward a particular thing or action or situation or experience is how that thing or that action or that experience fits in with one’s needs or purposes, and its resulting effect on one’s emotions.

However affect is defined, it has proven a useful catch-all that can represent a wide range of phenomena.

One of the most influential formulations of affect’s effect on language learning is the Affective Filter (Burt and Dulay 1977). The affective filter is seen to be a ‘wall’ of negative factors that block language learning. In 1986 Krashen showed that a ‘low’ affective filter corresponded to low anxiety, increased motivation and self-confidence in language learners (Krashen 1982:32). The strength of the Affective Filter concept is its simplicity and its confirmation of what many language teachers have intuited all along: that affect is a central variable in learning, and must be attended to if students are to learn.

Finch (2000) provides a useful model, dividing the affective domain into attitudes, motivation, beliefs, anxiety, learning styles (personality) and the learning environment. Each of these factors affects learning to a different extent, and in combination with each other. Because these factors can change from minute to minute
and day to day, it is difficult, if not impossible, to completely describe their relationship (Brown in Oxford:140).

Arnold and Brown, in their 1990 review of research on affect in language learning, find affect composed of individual factors and relational factors. Individual factors listed include anxiety, inhibition, extroversion-introversion, self-esteem, motivation, and learner styles. Relational factors include empathy, classroom transactions and cross-cultural processes, a set which takes in an incredibly wide variety of factors. Empathy, in particular, is noted for its importance in student/teacher interactions, and further research is suggested.

Upon reviewing and comparing the various approaches to characterizing affect, one might conclude that affect can be seen as a lens through which people view the world. The way a student sees language learning is determined by affective factors such as motivation to learn, beliefs about language learning, their anxiety about the learning situation, etc. This ‘lens’ strongly influences how students approach the language learning environment, what strategies they use, their self-esteem and confidence, their personal involvement in learning, and, ultimately, their success.

The specific affective factors most relevant to this study were learner beliefs, student anxiety (which this author believes is strongly affected by beliefs), and teacher effects.

2.1.2 Learner Beliefs and Second Language Learning

Students enter the language learning environment with many preexisting ideas about how languages are learned. Horwitz’s 1987 study, using her BALLI (Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory) instrument, clearly established learner beliefs as a
central component of language student affect. Horwitz found that student beliefs often revealed a “restricted view” of language learning. For instance, more than 50% of participants felt that the most important element in learning English was learning vocabulary or grammar rules. According to Horwitz, this belief: “will almost certainly lead students to invest the majority of their time memorizing vocabulary lists and grammar rules at the expense of other language learning practices” (Horwitz 1987:289).

At the same time, Horwitz found beliefs about the time needed to become fluent to be unrealistically short.

In other cases, students may resist or devalue teaching approaches and techniques that do not square with what they believe about language learning. Horwitz notes that some students want more communicative lessons while others wish for more rigorous grammar drills. These desires likely stem at least in part from what these students believe about language learning and therefore which approaches work best. It also seems reasonable to assume that if students have unrealistic beliefs about language learning, they may become initially discouraged and disappointed or alternately overconfident, which can lead to students giving up too easily in the case of the former and frustration in the case of the latter. Beliefs can also contribute to student anxiety, as discussed later.

Although Horwitz did not directly investigate the results of student beliefs, she assumed that they would affect behavior. However, Wenden’s 1987 study, which looked at the effects of these beliefs, showed that students’ strategy choices were indeed influenced by their beliefs about learning language. They pursued strategies that were consistent with the beliefs about language learning that they held.
The belief categories Horwitz studied were Foreign Language Aptitude, Motivation, Difficulty of Language Learning, Nature of Language Learning, and Learning and Communication Strategies. Environmental factors such as teaching methodology or teacher-related variables were not studied. Her 1999 study of BALLI research showed that cultural differences did not seem to be a clear determining factor in student beliefs, although the learning environment seemed to have an effect (Horwitz 1999).

In addition, Brown’s study of Japanese learners in a U.S. ESL program found a strong correlation between learner beliefs and learning strategy use (1998:245-252).

An important point to note is that neither the author nor the researchers cited in this work claim that learner beliefs are permanent, or that their relationship to learner behavior is at all straightforward or predictable. In every learner there is a constantly shifting matrix of knowledge, motivations, feelings, influences and viewpoints. Research on learner beliefs is not mathematics; rather it is an attempt to identify certain factors or types of factors that may (or may not) affect the way people pursue language learning.

More recently, Kalaja and Barcelos (2003), have criticized the current research methods on SLA beliefs, and promote the use of contextual analysis as far more relevant and useful. They claim that as beliefs are created in context and are ever-changing, surveying subjects about beliefs (the ‘normative’ approach) is less useful than has been assumed. They state that more qualitative, context-sensitive research is or will be required to yield accurate results.
Although context and learner history (see pp. 53) is obviously of great import in considering the genesis of a particular belief or set of beliefs about SLA, the ‘normative approach’ of using surveys to identify and gauge these beliefs is still valuable. This approach can identify an area or subject of beliefs, in order to decide which factors to take into account in a more detailed contextual study. While beliefs are indeed ever-changing within each individual, surveys can identify the relative frequency and strength of beliefs within a particular population.

2.1.3 Anxiety and Second Language Learning

Aside from effects on student learning strategy use, how else can beliefs influence a student’s language learning potential? Young’s 1991 review of language anxiety research points out that “Learner beliefs about language learning are a major contributor to language anxiety” (Young 1991:428).

Horwitz observes:

We note that a number of students believe nothing should be said in the foreign language until it can be said correctly and that it is not okay to guess an unknown foreign language word (Horwitz 1984). Beliefs such as these must produce anxiety since students are expected to communicate in a second language before fluency is attained. (Horwitz 1991:29)

Anxiety is an emotional state characterized by fear, apprehension, and a desire to avoid or overcome the object of anxiety. Many situations can produce anxiety in students, but foreign language anxiety has been shown to be a particular and separate form (Horwitz 1986, Gardner and MacIntyre in Horwitz 1986). Horwitz states:

…we conceive foreign language anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process. (Horwitz 1991:31)
It does seem to be true that a certain amount of anxiety can be helpful even in language learning. Kleinmann (1977) found that in some learners a “facilitating anxiety” helped prod them into using structures that others in their language group avoided. The problem is that most students feel far more anxiety than is helpful. Some learners experience so much anxiety that they give up language study completely, with some students even changing majors to avoid the language requirement (Horwitz 1986:35).

Research shows that even when students do not cease language study, high levels of anxiety have a negative impact on their learning. High levels of anxiety negatively affected student performance in a study by Gardner and MacIntyre (as cited in Horwitz 1991) and Kleinmann’s previously mentioned study found that in most students, anxiety was a factor affecting which language structures they attempted.

What actually triggers foreign language anxiety? Horwitz identified three possible components of foreign language anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (1991:30). Of these, the most relevant to this study would seem to be communication apprehension. The disorientation of being without the usual tools of discourse can create a feeling of helplessness in otherwise confident adults. As Horwitz (1991: 31) states,

Because individual communication attempts will be evaluated according to uncertain or even unknown linguistic and sociocultural standards, second language communication entails risk taking and is necessarily problematic….Probably no other field of study implicates self-concept and self-expression to the degree that language study does.
2.1.4 Teacher Qualities and Second Language Learning

It has been shown that affective factors internal to the learner have a profound impact on language learning. Many factors (including beliefs, attitudes, personality, and motivation) contribute, either positively or negatively, to the emotional state of language learners. But external factors also have an effect, increasing or decreasing the effect of the internal factors. Many consider one of the most important factors to be a teacher’s personal qualities. It seems obvious that the teacher would have an immense impact, and should work toward making students comfortable. But what qualities would help teachers do this?

Rogers, Moskowitz and others have long claimed that warmth, caring, and a positive personality are good attributes for teachers, but defining these qualities has proven difficult, and quantitative studies have often given vague results.

Matlock, in her 2000 study of the importance of ESL student/teacher rapport, identified eight factors that seemed to comprise the most important characteristics of effective teachers: enthusiasm, warmth, humor, credibility, high expectations, support, task orientation and knowledge.

The idea that teachers’ personal qualities affect student performance is confirmed by Price, whose research revealed that “instructors had played a significant role in the amount of anxiety each student had experienced in particular classes” (1991:101). Price also reports the following:

Another student relaxed on the first day of an intermediate French class in which the instructor walked around the room and asked everyone to describe his and her language learning background. The student realized then that the other students were not any more advanced than she. (1991:108)
Lee’s study of teacher effects on students’ oral performance found that with Asian students in particular, a teacher’s personal qualities, particularly empathy and attention to student needs, are a central factor in getting students to speak in class. Lee suggests that teachers should have some experience of “being a foreigner” in order to sharpen sensitivity to students’ needs (Lee 1998).

2.1.5 Teachers’ Overseas Language Learning Experiences (OLLE)

The combination of OE and LLE would seem to give teachers a unique view into the world of their students, and therefore might be seen as a factor which can increase the empathy of a teacher, thereby decreasing the anxiety of students to some extent. Little research was found on the subject of OLLE specifically, but there are many relevant studies of the two components of OLLE: teachers’ second language learning experience and teachers’ overseas living experience. Examining these two areas can suggest the effect they might have together. It is reasonable to assume that their separate effects would be magnified if they were present together. Those works which seem to point to OLLE were considered, as was the possible relationship between NNESTs and NESTs who have OLLE.

2.1.5.1 Overseas Experience (OE)

The idea that overseas experience can be helpful for teachers is not new, and is held by many teachers and administrators. In fact, some have suggested that it should be a normal part of ESL teacher education. As Griffin states,

all ESL teacher candidates should have intercultural experience…. They should be required to move outside of their own cultural zone, to work with a population culturally different from their own, or in a culturally different setting. (1999:138)
There is evidence that increased empathy for students by teachers is an important factor in reducing student anxiety and establishing effective rapport. ESL students must deal with immense pressures when studying English in an Intensive English Program in the US. They face not only the pressures of learning a new language, but also of socializing with people from the American culture and the disparate cultures of their classmates. They must handle the daunting tasks of everyday problems and transactions in a foreign culture and in a language of which they do not as yet have full command. It seems reasonable to expect that a similar experience, that of living in another culture, would give teachers a sense of what students are going through.

While some teachers will have had some training in multicultural sensitivity, many will not, and fewer still will have had the experience of living in a culture foreign to their own. Rutledge states that:

despite the attention placed on multicultural teacher preparation and to field experiences, foreign study has been ignored by most teacher educators as well as researchers as a viable option for developing more adept teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse students. (2002:25)

There is evidence that overseas experience is influential, at least in the eyes of teachers. Suarez (2003) makes the claim that “global experiences” can increase teachers’ empathy by exposing them to the sense of being the “linguistic other” that their students feel. Participants in a study-abroad program for teachers in Mexico reported: “I feel empathy for them (students) because, in a small way, I have walked in their shoes. I know how exhausting trying to learn or understand in another language can be” (2003:181), and, “I now have some firsthand experience on the feelings that our
students experience when in a new place. I can be empathetic as well as sympathetic” (2003:181).

This theme of empathy is also supported by Rutledge, who discusses a short term ‘plunge’ experiment in which teachers lived and taught in Mexico for two weeks. They reported that even in a short period of time they had developed far more empathy for their students. One participant noted this benefit:

…having a better understanding and empathy for what it takes to learn a second language. There were times, when I was in Mexico, I got tired of negotiating the language and trying to figure out what was being said. ESL learners have to do that all the time. I imagine they get tired too. (2002: 142-143)

Some of these short programs included language learning, but they were of a very short duration. They may therefore be best viewed from the perspective of “culture shock” experiences, as opposed to the kind of long-term language learning I associate with OLLE.

2.1.5.2 Teacher Language Learning Experience (LLE)

While overseas experience seems to have an effect on the way ESL teachers think and teach, what about language learning, the second component of OLLE? It would seem logical that teachers who have experienced the challenge of learning another language would be in a better position to teach languages. In fact, this assumption is the basis of some ESL teacher training activities.

Many researchers and practitioners have suggested that LLE can help teachers be more empathetic as well as improve their own teaching techniques through the experience of being a student, whether as a part of teacher training or incidentally. Berry’s review of the role of language improvement in teacher training suggests that
training should include LLE, as this will give teachers insights into how students feel in class (1991: 100-102).

McDonough (2002) reflects on her own experience being a language learner as well as a teacher, and points out that teachers may see the vast difference between teachers’ and students’ experiences of the classroom. She notes that in most cases, students and teachers focus on entirely different things in the classroom, and that these types of language learning experiences are therefore particularly valuable for teachers.

Flowerdew (1999) describes a language learning experience as part of a TESOL course where NNESTs in Hong Kong learned a second language (other than English) in order to get to get insight into their students’s experiences. Participants reported that it put “knowledge into action” and that it was an excellent experience for teachers as it lets them reflect on what they are learning to do in the classroom and combine their experience with their studies.

A report of a program in which British language teachers took a Mandarin class in London reports that participants felt unexpected anxiety about learning and gained a new awareness of classroom environment and language learning activities. At the end, participants said they were reconsidering the roles of various teaching strategies, and generally felt more connected to their students’ experiences (Lowe 1987).

Ellis and Willcoxson (1994:326) found that after a workshop at which teachers were placed in the role of students of Japanese, the experience had “prompted them to reconsider some of their views about their role as teachers in the classroom.”
Ellis points out in a 2001 paper, that despite the increasing use of language learning experiences, they are limited by their duration and depth, although they can help teachers’ development:

They tend to provide limited insights into learning a little language at a beginner level. As potential learning experiences, the LLEs pale in comparison with the variety and richness of real-life language learning which bilingual teachers possess, but upon which they are currently not encouraged to reflect and draw professionally. (2001: 64)

Ellis suggests that an LLE’s lack of “threat to the learner’s identity” is their weakness, and that what is needed is the experience of actually living overseas.

2.1.5.3 OLLE

As language learning and overseas experience have been shown to have a strong effect on teachers, the combination of these two factors would logically seem to offer a valuable glimpse into the world of their students. They will have had the specific experience of working through the process of learning another language, as well as the more general experience of dealing with a new way of life in an unfamiliar environment. Most importantly, however, they will have faced the stress and difficulty of doing them simultaneously, with their language learning affected and informed by their experiences outside the classroom and vice-versa. Several studies suggest that this is the case, although as Rutledge points out, there is not enough emphasis on OLLE in teacher training (2002: 25). Anecdotally, the author has been told on more than one occasion by ESL students that they feel more comfortable with a teacher who has had some OLLE.

Even a short-term OLLE may have significant value if participants are placed in identity-threatening situations. Rutledge, cited above, discusses a short term ‘plunge’
experiment in which U.S. K-12 teachers lived and taught in Mexico for two weeks to get a sense of what their Mexican students felt. Teachers reported that even in this short period of time they had developed far more empathy for their students, having been faced with the struggles of not just learning a language, but trying to rely on it for everyday life. The participants emphasized how much this had changed their view of student experiences and their attitude toward teaching methods and activities (Rutledge 2002: 141-142).

Birch describes a program in which teachers spent time as language learners in Thailand as a reflective experience during an ESL training program. Teachers dealt with the same issues ESL students do, such as culture shock, fluency and accuracy issues, and learning styles. Participants felt that the experience was quite rewarding for developing teachers and came away with skepticism toward simplistic answers to pedagogical questions. They saw from their own experience that students often want and need very different help than teachers may believe (Birch 1992).

The importance and usefulness of seeing a language from the perspective of an outsider is noted by Hyde (2000) in a personal diary of language learning. She shows the usefulness of seeing a language from the outside, in experiencing the cultural disorientation. Hyde also warns against unrealistic “artificial” experiences as part of teacher training, citing Golebiowska and Waters (in their criticism of short language learning experiences for teachers). Realistic long-term experiences are far more useful.

Lee’s study on teacher effects noted that one of the most highly rated teachers studied, and one of the most popular with students, had lived in Korea and learned
Korean as a second language. One of his students stated, “I feel more comfortable with Tom than with any other teacher because he has lived in Korea” (Lee 1998:100).

While this student may have felt even more comfortable because the teacher understood his culture in particular, it is obvious that the fact that this teacher has “been in his shoes” in general is a factor.

Some researchers have also seen indirect evidence of the importance students place on a teacher’s intercultural experience. A study of ESL student perceptions of the culture-learning process finds that students often feel that teachers didn’t know enough about their cultures and the difficulties they were having; the implication is that ESL teacher should have some sort of serious intercultural experience, not just language learning experience (Griffin 1999:137-138).

2.1.5.4 Non-Native English Speaking Teachers

While most research on ESL/EFL teachers has been directed toward native-English speaking teachers (NESTs), the fact is that non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) make up an increasing fraction of the ESL/EFL teachers in the field in the U.S., and a majority of those outside the United States.

It has been a common belief that NESTs are better teachers of English because of their greater knowledge of both the language and the culture of English-speaking cultures. Brown, in her 1998 study of the hiring practices of ESL program administrators, found that while administrators stated that well-qualified NNESTs were effective teachers and might have particular advantages (better conscious grammar knowledge, empathy), in practice, they tended to prefer hiring NESTs. In Mahboob’s 2003 research into the status of NNESTs in US Intensive English Programs, he finds
that although administrators seem to prefer NESTs, students seem to recognize the strengths of both NESTs and NNESTs.

There is research to suggest that NNESTs possess some of the very traits that NESTs might be expected to gain from OLLE.

By definition, NNESTs have one critical experience that NESTs do not: experience learning English as a second language. They can provide students with a model of a successful learner, as well as be in a better position to recognize and deal with common language problems students might face. NNESTs also have experienced the same difficulties as students in dealing with culture shock and the social and official misunderstandings that inevitably occur.

In an investigation of the English-only debate in the K-12 classroom, Auerbach states that it is not at all clear that NESTs are superior teachers to NNESTs. He states that the reasons are two-fold; their superior knowledge of the struggles of their immigrant students and their status as successful language learning: “who is better qualified to draw out, understand, and utilize learners’ experiences than those who themselves have had similar experiences?” (Auerbach 1993: 26).

Medgyes has examined the dichotomy between NEST and NNESTs and has found many differences, both in style and teaching approach. In his 2001 study he found that while NESTs had better English skills, were generally more flexible in approach, and were superior in being able to put items in context, NNESTs had several advantages of their own. NNESTS were more insightful and empathetic, and provided better learning models. His conclusion is that NESTs and NNESTs complement each other, and both should be considered equally valuable (Medgyes 2001: 435). These findings
backed up Medgyes’ earlier study conducted in 1999 which found essentially the same things but was hampered by a very small sample size.

Medgyes’ 1992 study had shown that US ESL administrators preferred NESTs, but not unreservedly. They found NNESTs to be better models of learning and use of learning strategies. They were also seen as more empathetic, having been “in the students’ place.”

In a study of 7 NNESTs through email and personal interviews, Liu finds that the issues of power and student relations are so complex that easy answers are not apparent. Liu concludes that many factors must be considered in each case, and that it is not possible to say that either NESTs or NNESTs are better simply on the basis of native-language status (Liu 1999).

2.2 Summary

We have seen that affect is of central importance in SLA, and can be the difference between success and failure. Learner beliefs can act as a filter which colors the way learners see and therefore approach the learning situation. If these beliefs are unrealistic or discouraging, they may create disabling anxiety, which can harm the learning process.

As a central part of the learning environment, the teacher and the teacher’s personal qualities, and also student beliefs about those qualities, can have a major impact on how a learner approaches learning. In particular, overseas experience, which seems to increase a teacher’s empathy and sensitivity, seems to be a positive factor in the eyes of both students and teachers. Teachers’ language learning experience is viewed by teachers as a positive quality, but little research exists on student views.
A combination of OE and LLE would seem to combine the strengths of each and have even more positive effects on both teacher qualities and learner attitudes about those qualities. There is some research on the phenomenon of NNESTs, who by definition have OLLE which seems to bear out the ideas presented above, but this research does not speak to student beliefs. To date there has been little research on OLLE, and none on student beliefs about OLLE in particular. This study attempts to fill this research gap.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Instrument

The research question driving this project is “Do university-level ESL students consider Overseas Language Learning Experience to be an important quality for ESL teachers?” In order to gain insight into ESL students’ beliefs about teacher experience and qualifications, an instrument that measures and assesses beliefs was required. While there are instruments that measure students’ use of particular strategies (SILL) and countless others that measure their proficiency, only 2 directly assess beliefs: the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), originally developed by Elaine Horwitz (Horwitz 1985), and the Foreign Language Attitude Survey (FLAS), developed by Degarcia, Reynolds, and Savignon (1976). The FLAS was designed for use in surveying EFL teachers, and its items seem clearly relevant only to an EFL classroom context. It has not been widely used in surveying ESL students. The BALLI, on the other hand, was designed to survey the beliefs of both teachers and students, and has been used in numerous studies and language learning settings (Horwitz 1999:558). It also contains items more easily interpreted in an ESL rather than an EFL environment. For these reasons, the instrument used in this study is a modified version of the BALLI.

The BALLI instrument consists of statements of various beliefs (originally 34 items) which are rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale from Strongly Agree to
Strongly Disagree (see Appendix A). The BALLI tracks beliefs in 5 main areas: the difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, learning and communication strategies, motivation, and the nature of language learning. The BALLI was originally designed to help identify both teacher and student beliefs in order to identify areas in which these beliefs conflicted, and to tailor pedagogical techniques to a particular student or group of students. It does not attempt to explain the reasons for these beliefs or to assess the correctness of such beliefs. The BALLI does not produce a single composite score, or even a composite score of each of the 5 areas of belief. Questions are normally analyzed by a simple comparison of the frequency of response in each of the response categories.

In order to assess students attitudes toward teachers’ language learning and intercultural experience (topics which are not covered in the BALLI), 6 new items were added, bringing the total number of items to 40. The new items assess 3 dimensions of a single area of belief about teachers; teachers’ overseas experience, teachers’ language learning experience, and teachers’ status as native or nonnative speakers of English. Rather than ask directly whether students prefer teachers to have OLLE, the concept was broken into 2 components, which can be correlated with each other as well as studied independently. A pair of questions concerning teachers’ status as native or nonnative speakers of English was included in order to compare student preference on this item, and to assess any possible relationship with OLLE.

Each item was presented in two ways; as an objective fact, (what I will call declarative item) such as “X is better than Y”, and also as a personal preference “I prefer X to Y” (the preference item). In this way it was hoped to capture student
opinions concerning whether they saw an item as a personal preference or as a more objective general fact.

The author was not so concerned with the exact nature or origin of the belief, but more with the existence or nonexistence of strong student beliefs about this area. The 6 questions added to the BALLI were the following:

Teacher Language Learning
- ESL teachers who have learned another language are better teachers of English.
- I would prefer to have an ESL teacher who has learned another language.

Teacher Native-speaker Status
- ESL teachers who are native speakers of English are better teachers of English.
- I would prefer to have an ESL teacher who is a native speaker of English.

Teacher Overseas Experience
- ESL teachers who have lived overseas are better teachers of English.
- I would prefer to have an ESL teacher who has lived overseas.

The added items were distributed throughout the BALLI instrument as administered in order to collect partial information in those cases where students did not complete the survey.

3.2 Subjects

Since this author’s main interests lie in adult/university education, it was decided to study adult students bound for higher education.

After considering the extremely wide variety and intensity of ESL programs in the US, it was decided to limit the study to students of Intensive English Programs
(IEPs) which were affiliated with a college or university. Even this definition was problematic, as not all programs are academically and/or administratively comparable. Programs vary by hours of instruction per week, qualifications of instructors, and entry requirements. To focus on an even more uniform population, it was decided to limit the study to programs that held membership in the American Association of Intensive English Programs (AAIEP), a professional organization consisting of approximately 300 IEPs in the United States. The AAIEP requires that its members meet its association standards, which cover curriculum design, instructor qualifications, student counseling, periodic program evaluation, and instruction hours per week.

Given the traditionally low participation rate for voluntary surveys, this author chose 88 IEPs from those listed on the AAIEP website’s membership list. It was felt that with this many schools contacted, response would be high enough to assure enough data for the study. To gather surveys from around the US, it was decided to choose at least one IEP from each state. In all, 88 IEPs were chosen (Appendix B).

3.3 Administration

The BALLI has traditionally been administered via paper forms in a classroom setting. This limits the survey to the few geographic areas where resources are available to administer it. The responsibilities of IEPs toward their teaching agendas make it difficult for IEPs to allow time for such a study to be conducted by an outside investigator. Even where it is practical to do, administering the survey in a classroom also runs the risk of the Halo or Hawthorne effects (Brown 1998: 32-33), as well as the risk that subjects may consciously or unconsciously worry that their instructors may see
the results. In view of these limitations and the project’s lack of any funding with which to offer incentives, it was decided to administer the survey via the Internet.

The survey (Appendix C) was published on the SurveyMonkey™ website. SurveyMonkey™ is an online provider of research and survey services. It allows researchers to design and publish surveys on secure servers, allow access by those who have been sent an email address, limit the access of respondents by the use of computer “cookies,” and when the survey is finished, download the data. The internet address of this site was incorporated into an email containing a consent form which was sent to the administrators of the IEPs chosen for the project.

3.3.1 Advantages

Several potential advantages were considered in the decision to conduct the survey online. The survey can be less threatening, as it can be made anonymous, with no identifying information elicited, as in the case of this survey. Assurances can be made in writing on the first page of the survey that IEP faculty and staff will have no access to results that identify the school or particular students. Also, a consent form can be integrated into the survey, such that a student must agree to the consent statement in order to proceed with the survey.

It was felt that these qualities might result in less nervousness, and consequently a higher response rate. In addition to avoiding the negative effects and logistical obstacles of administering a paper survey, it was felt that students would be more likely to take and finish a survey they could complete at any time, and teachers might be more willing to distribute the necessary information if it did not take up any valuable class time.
3.3.2 Disadvantages

The possible disadvantages of an internet-based survey of this type are largely the danger of non-target subjects taking the test or subjects taking it more than once. The first concern cannot be totally alleviated, as some teachers and administrators may wish to examine the survey before making it available to their students. This concern was addressed by providing IEP directors with a copy of the survey on the SurveyMonkey website that they could examine for themselves. The second concern was felt not to be a likely problem, as the survey is not intrinsically “fun” to take, and no incentive exists for them to take it again. SurveyMonkey also plants a “cookie” file on the user’s computer which disallows users from taking it twice.

Institutional Review Board limitations on direct contact with IEP students or IEP teachers without written consent forms required that all recruiting be done through IEP administrators. As the survey would be administered online, email was chosen as the medium of contact. The email, which contained a consent form for administrators to send back via an email reply, described the project in general terms, describing the instrument and stating that this was a survey of student beliefs. It asked administrators to distribute the email to teachers and request that they in turn distribute it to their students, with the understanding that the survey was completely voluntary and unrelated to their studies. Repeat requests were sent out 2 weeks after the initial request, and again at 1 month.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

4.1 Response and Analysis

Response to the survey as administered was limited. Delays in receiving Research Compliance approval pushed back the release date to the end of the Fall semester for most IEPs. As a result, only a limited number of responses were received by the end of the year.

Early in 2005, the participation request emails were resent to the selected IEP administrators. This resulted in a few positive responses from administrators, but only about 20 subjects actually completed the survey. A third email resulted in 10 additional responses, bringing the total to 30, the minimum considered necessary to make the study meaningful. Time and resource limitations forced the end of the data-gathering phase at this point, as it was felt that 30 responses would be enough to indicate whether or not strong beliefs existed about the factors in question.

4.1.1 Demographics

Subjects were asked to provide basic demographic data, and 28 of the 30 respondents supplied such data. Respondents were nearly evenly divided by gender; 16 (53%) female and 13 (47%) male. The age of the respondents ranged from 19 to 35 years, with a mean age of 24.5.
Respondents represented 15 countries. The relevant questions asked for the name of the the country they were born in and the country where they had lived most of their lives. The second of these questions was considered the country of origin. In only one case were the answers to this question different (ex., born in Afghanistan, lived in Pakistan.) Korea was the most heavily represented country, with 7 respondents, or 23% of those who gave demographic information. Taiwan and Japan had 3 responses, or 10% each.
Respondents were asked to select their academic major area from the following 3 options: Humanities, Sciences, or Business. For this question, 27 responded. Of these, 11 (41%) reported Humanities, 10 (37%) reported Sciences, and 6 (22%) reported Business.

Although responses were sought from IEPs in all 50 states, only 9 states were represented. The largest number of responses came from Texas and Oregon, with 11 and 7 respectively. One respondent declined to indicate their state.
Several of the pre-survey questions concerned attitudes toward English learning and prior English learning experience, which it was felt might influence current beliefs. A full 93% of students said they enjoyed learning English. 58% felt that their level of proficiency was “average” for their class, but 67% felt that their level of proficiency was “poor” compared to native speakers. 37% of students had studied with a native speaker before beginning their IEP studies, while 63% had not.
4.2 Results

4.2.1 Results Compared to Previous BALLI Studies

The first assessment performed was a comparison of the results of this study to those of previous BALLI studies, as most of the items are common to the 2 instruments. This assessment was intended to verify that the results of the current internet-based study were comparable to those of previous studies administered on paper. Broad agreement between this and previous studies was expected, as the BALLI tracks common beliefs about language learning. Results were taken from Horwitz’s 1999 report in which she analyzed several different BALLI studies. Results from the ESL students were averaged on several representative questions to get an overall result. Horwitz aggregated responses into “Agree,” “Neutral,” and “Disagree,” therefore comparison of exact percentage breakdowns for each response category were not possible.

Data was downloaded in a spreadsheet format, and formatted for SPSS, after which descriptive statistics were generated. A sample group of questions was selected and compared with the results reported in the Horwitz study. The results were as expected: the current survey and the previous surveys were broadly comparable on most items. In all cases, the directionality of the responses (agreement or disagreement) of the items was the same (see Table 4.1). In the present survey, agreement with most items tended to be stronger than in the previous surveys. It is unclear whether this is due to a difference in the test administration or simply differences between groups or perhaps an artifact of the small sample size.
Table 4.1 Comparison of Items between this and earlier studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Horwitz 1999</th>
<th>This study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is easier for children than adults to learn a language.</td>
<td>86% agreement</td>
<td>100% agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning a foreign language is different from other academic subjects.</td>
<td>70% agreement</td>
<td>87% agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.</td>
<td>85% agreement</td>
<td>77% agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.</td>
<td>78% agreement</td>
<td>93% agreement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.2 Inter-item Reliability

Reliability analysis served as a starting point in showing whether the items “hang together” as a separate category or categories, although BALLI categories are not designed to do this. A Cronbach’s Alpha test for reliability was run on the 6 added items using SPSS. Results are shown in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Overall Reliability Scores (Cronbach’s Alpha)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer to have an ESL teacher who is a native speaker of English.</td>
<td>α = 0.5673</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL teachers who are native speakers of English are better teachers of English.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer to have an ESL teacher who has lived overseas.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL teachers who have lived overseas are better teachers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer to have an ESL teacher who has learned another language.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL teachers who have learned another language are better teachers of English.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a Cronbach’s Alpha score of .80 or higher is generally considered significant (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994:264-265), no strong claim can be made as to the reliability of the questions as a group. SPSS was also used to search for any differences
in reliability by running the test with various items removed, but the results were even lower alpha scores.

To test the reliability of the items that are meant to measure the same belief, Cronbach’s Alpha tests were run on each related pair of questions using SPSS (See Table 4.3). While reliability scores for 2 of the pairs were not significant, the score for the pair of questions regarding overseas experience was significant, at .8065. This suggests that these two items may indeed be measuring the same belief about the effect of overseas experience on teachers. The same test was run across all 6 items and between the language learning and overseas experience items, with no significant results.

Table 4.3 Item Pair Reliability Scores (Cronbach’s Alpha)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item 1</th>
<th>Item 2</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer to have an ESL teacher who is a native speaker of English.</td>
<td>ESL teachers who are native speakers of English are better teachers of English.</td>
<td>α = 0.5976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer to have an ESL teacher who has lived overseas.</td>
<td>ESL teachers who have lived overseas are better teachers</td>
<td>α = 0.8065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer to have an ESL teacher who has learned another language.</td>
<td>ESL teachers who have learned another language are better teachers of English.</td>
<td>α = 0.5699</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2.3 Correlations

In order to establish that the new items were not overlapping with the original BALLI items, but were indeed asking about a separate area, and to look for correlations among the new items, SPSS was used to generate an intercorrelation table of all 40 items using Spearman’s Rho. There were very few significant correlations between the new items and existing BALLI items, suggesting that the new items are measuring different categories of beliefs than the existing BALLI. One interesting correlation was between the new item “I would prefer to have an ESL teacher who is a native speaker of English” and 2 existing BALLI items. Testing revealed a positive correlation with “It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation” (correlation coefficient of .423 with a significance of .02 at a 5% confidence level.) Testing also revealed a negative correlation between the native speaker item and “You shouldn’t say anything in English until you can say it correctly” (correlation coefficient of .406 with a significance of .026 at a 5% confidence level).
Although there were few correlations between new and existing BALLI items, the new items did show some significant correlations with each other. These are shown in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4 New Item Correlations (Spearman’s ρ)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prefer T with LL (N=29)</th>
<th>T with LL better (N=30)</th>
<th>Prefer NEST (N=30)</th>
<th>NEST better (N=30)</th>
<th>Prefer T with OE (N=30)</th>
<th>T with OE better (N=30)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correlation coefficient</td>
<td>ρ = .412* P = .026</td>
<td>ρ = .170 P = .378</td>
<td>ρ = .030 P = .879</td>
<td>ρ = .272 P = .154</td>
<td>ρ = .428* P = .021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer T with LL (N=29)</td>
<td>Correlation coefficient</td>
<td>ρ = .198 P = .295</td>
<td>ρ = .184 P = .330</td>
<td>ρ = -.097 P = .610</td>
<td>ρ = -.090 P = .636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEST better (N=30)</td>
<td>Correlation coefficient</td>
<td>ρ = .390 P = .033</td>
<td>ρ = .126 P = .506</td>
<td>ρ = .272 P = .145</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer T with OE (N=30)</td>
<td>Correlation coefficient</td>
<td>ρ = -.212 P = .260</td>
<td>ρ = -.171 P = .366</td>
<td>ρ = .674* P = .000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)

The paired items, highlighted above, correlated significantly with each other, suggesting that they are indeed measuring the same underlying belief. As with other BALLI items, the 6 questions do not all measure the same thing, so should not be expected to generally intercorrelate as a whole, but only in pairs.
Perhaps the correlation of most interest, one that suggests that the OLLE concept may indeed be valid, is that the item involving preference for teachers’ language learning experience correlated not only with the other language learning item, but also with the item “ESL teachers who have lived overseas are better teachers.” This correlation is significant at the .05 confidence level, and suggests that language learning and overseas experience may indeed be related. While there is no cross-correlation with the other overseas experience item, it should be remembered that the sample size is small, and a larger number of cases might make clear whether there is a significant correlation.

Correlations were also run using the demographic variables in order to reveal any effects they might have had on the survey. National origin, sex, age, state of residence and other demographic variables were not seen as being statistically significant variables in the correlation table. With the small sample size, this is not unexpected. Again, a study involving a large number of participants may uncover more influences attributable to demographic differences.

To confirm that the distribution of responses to the new questions was not the result of chance, chi square testing was also run using SPSS to compare attained frequencies to expected frequencies. As expected, this testing showed the responses to be non-randomly distributed, with a .05 significance level.
4.2.4 Response Interpretation

As previously stated, the BALLI has typically been interpreted by simply observing the frequencies of the responses to the items. Each of the six new items suggested here is part of pairs of items eliciting responses on a particular belief. One item in each pair gives the subject an abstract statement about whether something is objectively true. The other item asks about the subject’s personal preference regarding the item. This is done to avoid gaining only an answer that students might assume the researcher wants to hear, or may assume is in some other way “correct.”

Students in an IEP may feel that, as they are students and not teachers with extensive training in second language acquisition, their opinions may not be correct, or their preferences may not be based on logic. They maybe therefore feel less sure about making objective statements about teacher qualities. This author’s expectation is that they will give less certain answers to the questions asking for a declaration of fact.

The preference item is designed to elicit their true feelings, which it is felt will be a clearer reflection of their beliefs than the declarative item. Students may feel less pressure in answering this item as they ae not being asked to make a judgment that they do not feel qualified to make.

In fact, a review of the data received showed that on all three pairs, respondents agreed with the “preference” item more strongly than with the “declarative” item.
4.2.4.1 Native English-Speaking teachers

The “declarative” item concerning native English-Speaking teachers showed strong student response, with 66.7% agreeing with the proposition (13.3% strongly agreeing, 53.3% agreeing) and 33.3% with no opinion (see table 4.5). The “preference” item, as in the previous pair, showed even stronger agreement, with 93.3% agreeing (40% strongly agreeing, 53.3% agreeing) and only 6.7 registering no opinion. There were no negative responses (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.5 NEST Declarative Item Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ESL teachers who are native speakers of English are better teachers of English.</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.6 NEST Preference Item Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I would prefer to have an ESL teacher who is a native speaker of English.</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>93.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2.4.2 Teacher Language Learning Experience

The declarative item concerning teacher language experience produced less noticeable reaction, with 60% registering no strong belief, and 36.7% agreeing (although none strongly) that language learning experience makes an ESL teacher a better teacher (see Table 4.7).

The item positing a personal preference for a teacher with language learning experience, however, showed a majority of agreement, with 72.4% agreeing, (10.3% strongly agreeing, 62.1% agreeing), and only 27.6% with no opinion. There were no negative responses (see Table 4.8).

Table 4.7 LLE Declarative Item Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ESL teachers who have learned another language are better teachers of English.</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>96.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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Table 4.8 LLE Preference Item Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I would prefer to have an ESL teacher who has learned another language.</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>10.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>72.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27.6</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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41
4.2.4.3 Teachers’ Overseas Experience

The declarative item involving overseas experience, showed 73% agreement, with 20% agreeing strongly, and no disagreement. 26.7% had no opinion (see Table 4.9). As in the other cases, the “preference” item showed a stronger agreement, with 80% total agreement (23.3% strongly agreeing, 53.3% agreeing). Only 20% of respondents registered no opinion (see Table 4.10).

Table 4.9 OE Declarative Item Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ESL teachers who have lived overseas are better teachers.</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
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<tr>
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<td>20.0</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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Table 4.10 OE Preference Item Results

<table>
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<th>I would prefer to have an ESL teacher who has lived overseas.</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tr>
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<td>23.3</td>
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4.2.5 Summary

Clearly, these three areas are the subject of strong beliefs among the respondents to this study, and agreement is stronger when the item is presented as a personal preference rather than as a declaration of an objective fact. In the view of this researcher, subjects may have been less likely to make a strong statement of fact in an area they feel unqualified to comment on. They were, however, willing to give their personal feelings. As these feelings are likely based on underlying beliefs, conscious or unconscious, that the item in question affects the quality of an ESL teacher, it seems that answers to the preference question may more accurately reflect respondents’ beliefs. The preference score has therefore been given more weight in the following discussions.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Teacher Factors

This research was conducted to reveal whether or not ESL students believe that certain teacher experiences are an important qualification for ESL teachers. More specifically, the survey investigated the concept of Overseas Language Learning Experience and its two component factors, Language Learning Experience and Overseas Experience. The research also considered teachers’ NEST or NNEST status. In this discussion, the individual factors will be considered first, followed by the topic of OLLE as a separate construct.

5.1.1 Overseas experience

As was expected, a teacher’s overseas experience was considered a positive qualification by 80% of the respondents in this study. This confirms not only what earlier research suggests, but also anecdotal experiences shared with the author by ESL students, as well as student comments overheard between classes at an IEP: having a teacher who has “walked the walk” matters.

This belief is unlikely to be purely theoretical, but is likely to be at least partially shaped by their experience with ESL teachers in their IEP classes, however brief.
It is widely accepted that time spent in another culture can increase one’s empathy toward others, particularly with regard to the pressures and trials faced by international students. Teachers who have spent time overseas may also be more sensitive to intercultural differences in discourse styles and strategies, especially if they spent time in their students’ native geographical area.

For example, the author, having spent substantial time in Asia, has noticed a tendency to speak more quietly with Asian students, and with less body movement. Even if their experience was not in the same area, teachers who have lived abroad, due to their experiences in adapting to a foreign environment, may be less likely to assign negative meaning to cultural and linguistic miscues, and more likely to react in a more positive manner to students.

OE may offer teachers additional linguistic and sociolinguistic tools for communication that are readily apparent to ESL students. The advantages of OE for teachers may be less in pedagogy than in understanding, but seem to be substantial.

It is possible that overseas experiences can be negative, and have the potential to cause teachers to be less empathetic and understanding. In the author’s experience, however, even those who may not have enjoyed living overseas do not allow those feelings to color their interactions with ESL students in the United States, and they may in fact have more sensitivity toward the stresses their students may face due to their experiences.
5.1.2 Language Learning Experience

Language learning experience was important to respondents, but the results were less consistent than for OE. While 72% personally preferred teachers with LLE, only 36.7% were willing to declare objectively that this experience made for better teachers. The low results on the declarative item may be due to students’ self-perceived lack of knowledge about why such experience would be useful, although intuitively they believe it to be a positive factor.

The author believes that the preference result may be a combination of an expectation of some empathy with language learners (as with overseas experience) and an expectation that a language teacher would have better insight into the language learning process as a result of reflection on their own L2 learning.

While on the surface it may seem reasonable that people who have learned another language would be able to transfer that experience into better pedagogy, this may not be true, at least in most cases. An ESL teacher in the United States may have studied an L2, but is less likely to have lived overseas where using it was necessary for daily life. In addition, many teachers studied an L2 long before becoming ESL teachers, and unless intending to become ESL teachers, may have paid little attention to the process (which itself is unlikely to be a current methodology). In either case, the teacher’s experience would likely have been very different from that of their students.

5.1.3 Overseas Language Learning Experience

This study was done to establish whether students believe that OLLE, the combination of LLE and OE, is an important qualification in an ESL teacher. Based on
the results of this study, the answer is still unclear, but there is some evidence suggesting that it may indeed be a separate factor in students’ underlying beliefs.

The statistics show that there is a correlation between overseas experience and language learning (between one question regarding overseas experience, and the pair regarding language learning), but there was no correlation between LLE and the OE “preference” item, which the author considers to be the clearest expression of the respondents’ beliefs. Both LLE and OE were seen as important factors by students, but respondents did not seem to strongly connect the two.

If OLLE is not a separate factor in the minds of students, why not? It would seem logical that a teacher who has been in the learner’s situation would be preferred to a teacher who is familiar with only half of the experience. Both language learning and overseas experience were believed by respondents to be important, but overseas experience was more consistently approved of by respondents.

The author believes that the qualities that overseas experience is thought to bring to a teacher may be more obvious to students, as shown in the OE discussion, while potential teacher qualities gained from language learning may be less so. While students may see immediate differences, as the discussion of OE showed. On the other hand, a student might not be sure what advantage a teacher’s previous language learning experience brings.

5.1.4 NEST/NNEST Status

One of the most unexpected findings of this study was the apparent disconnect between respondents’ belief that both LL and OE are valuable qualifications for ESL
teachers and their strong preference for NESTs. Respondents showed an overwhelming personal preference for NESTs, although NNESTs in the United States, almost by definition have had both the experience of living in another culture (the very culture that students are adjusting to) and the experience of learning a second language (the very language IEP students are learning). This result confirms anecdotal information the author has received from both students and NNESTs that students strongly prefer NESTs.

Although the NNEST provides both a unique insight into the culture and a successful learner model, respondents seemed not to take this into account. This suggests that fluency and cultural knowledge are more important to the respondents than the other qualities discussed.

There is a suggestion that fluency may be the issue, as one of the few correlations between the new items and existing BALLI items was between the “preference for NEST” item and the BALLI item “It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation,” suggesting that students may feel that they must have a NEST to achieve good pronunciation.

While this survey did not examine the idea of cultural fluency, this, along with linguistic fluency, may be a major factor. In these areas, most NESTs undoubtedly have the advantage over most NNESTs.

It seems that IEP students are unaware of the advantages that a successful language learner can bring to the classroom, even when that learner has successfully faced the very challenges facing students.
Another factor which may be at work is that for some students, the visual cues provided by a NNEST’s appearance may be in conflict with their expectations of what an English speaker looks like. Some students may associate a “genuine” English teacher with a white Briton, Canadian, or American, and may be reluctant to accept that an Asian, Middle Eastern, or African can be an effective English teacher.

Related attitudes can also affect some NESTs. In some Asian countries, for example, American-born NESTs who are of the same ethnicity as students may be devalued as teachers. One of the author’s acquaintances, a Japanese-American in Japan, reported great difficulty in finding employment because of her ethnicity. Many Japanese had difficulty seeing her as a NEST because her appearance challenged their stereotype of a native English speaker.

5.2 Implications

What practical benefit can administrators, teachers and teacher educators gain from this project? The author believes that the teacher factors investigated in this research should be considered as a factor in IEP/ESL students’ attitudes and expectations regarding their learning environment. Awareness of what students value can help programs tailor their communication with prospective students and their orientation programs for arriving students.

5.2.1 Hiring

While students do seem to have definite beliefs about the preferred experiences of their teachers, this does not mean that programs should necessarily tailor their hiring practices to match students’ existing beliefs.
For IEPs and other ESL programs employing NNESTs, this research suggests that students should be explicitly informed of the positive qualities NNESTs can bring to the classroom. As in the author’s experience, IEP students are highly unlikely to voice these concerns openly, program administrators should be proactive in informing students that both NESTs and NNESTs can play a vital role in creating an effective learning environment, and address the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Certainly program administrators should not be reluctant to hire qualified NNESTs, and should consider their experience and role as learner models important to the success of a program, and should inform their students of these advantages.

Anecdotally, this author has been told that IEP administrators are more likely to hire NESTs with OE than without. This study does seem to support the idea that such teachers may be more effective in some ways, but it does not take into account professional training, or investigate whether OE has any effect on student success rates.

What does seem to be clear is that students feel more comfortable when their teachers have OE, and feel that LLE would be a plus.

5.2.2 Teachers

ESL teachers might find it useful to share any overseas experience or language learning experience they may have with students. Explicitly letting students know that the teacher does have some idea of the challenges they face can help lower anxiety.

Teachers without overseas or other intercultural experience should consider the advantages of such experience where it is feasible, and training programs or classes in sociolinguistics or discourse analysis where it is not. Prospective or current teachers
who are considering an overseas stay may find that this study validates some of the reasons they are considering such experience.

5.2.3 NNESTs

As students (and likely administrators) seem not to recognize the positive qualities of NNESTs, NNESTs themselves should not be shy in promoting the advantages they can bring to the ESL classroom. While they may face more difficulties in competition with NESTs, they may be able to even the field by educating administrators.

In the classroom, NNESTs should emphasize that their experiences bring some major advantages that outweigh the perceived disadvantages. They should emphasize their training and their status as successful learners. They may be able to help students overcome their fears by pointing out that non-native pronunciation does not necessarily impede communication.

5.3 Future Research

The results of this research suggest that items about teacher factors could usefully be added to future iterations of the BALLI or similar instruments used to gauge student beliefs. This area has not been closely studied, despite its apparent importance.

One area in which experience gained in this study could improve future research is in the administration of the instrument. While online surveys may have some advantages, especially in the areas of privacy and flexibility, improvements could likely increase the response rate dramatically.
One possibility for raising the response rate is by contacting teachers and students more directly, where possible, instead of relying on program administrators, who may be reluctant or simply too busy to actively seek student participation.

If more direct contact is not possible, the method of recruitment could still be improved in such a way that more responses are gained. Where possible, initial contact should be done in a more traditional manner, such as letters or personal contacts. Email is too easy to ignore, as most people get a large amount of unwanted email each day.

With enough responses, correlations would likely be found that could more precisely map the relationship between beliefs about teachers and other variables.

Due to the complexity of affective factors, open-ended or interview items should be added to future surveys in order to capture more detail about respondents’ beliefs, attitudes, proficiency levels, and self-assessment. Such information may help determine the origins and makeup of these factors.

Information about the nature and extent of respondents’ past learning experiences, including length of study, learning environment and information about previous teachers should be gathered to investigate how these experiences may have affected their beliefs. In addition, longitudinal studies should be performed to reveal how beliefs change over time or with more learning experience.

More detailed demographic data such as age, gender, country of origin, native languages and existing second languages could reveal patterns of beliefs among different national, geographic, or language groups. With enough responses, it should be
possible to determine whether such factors are more important than individual differences in affecting student beliefs.

Gaining more information about teachers involved could contrast student perceptions against more objective measures teacher qualities. Direct observation of teachers with and without OLLE could help uncover any apparent differences in teaching styles, and help determine whether any such differences are due to experience, training, or both. The extent and nature of teachers’ experiences and language learning history should also be carefully recorded.

It is the author’s hope that future research may be able to answer some of the questions raised by this study, and increase our understanding of what beliefs students bring to the classroom.
APPENDIX A

SURVEY QUESTIONS
Survey Items

Items answered on a five-point scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree Nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree) except where noted:

1 It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.
2 Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.
3 Some languages are easier to learn than others.
4 English is:
   a. a very difficult language
   b. a difficult language
   c. a language of medium difficulty
   d. an easy language
   e. a very easy language
5 I believe that I will learn to speak English very well.
6 People from my country are good at learning foreign languages.
7 I would prefer to have an ESL teacher who has learned another language.
8 It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.
9 It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English.
10 You shouldn't speak anything in English until you can say it correctly.
11 It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.
12 People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages.
13 I would prefer to have an ESL teacher who is a native speaker of English.
14 It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.
15 I enjoy practicing English with the Americans I meet.
16 It's OK to guess if you don't know a word in English.
17 If someone spent one hour a day learning a language how long would it take them to speak the language very well?
   a. less than a year
   b. 1-2 years
   c. 3-5 years
   d. 5-10 years
   e. You can't learn a language in 1 hour a day

18 I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.

19 ESL teachers who have learned another language are better teachers of English.

20 The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words.

21 It is important to repeat and practice a lot.

22 Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.

23 People in my country feel that it is important to speak English.

24 ESL teachers who are native speakers of English are better teachers of English.

25 I feel timid or shy speaking English with other people.

26 If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.

27 The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.

28 ESL teachers who have lived overseas are better teachers.

29 I would like to learn English so that I can get to know Americans better.

30 It is easier to speak than to understand a foreign language.

31 It is important to practice with cassettes or tapes.

32 Learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects.

33 The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my native language.

34 If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.
35 People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.

36 I want to learn to speak English well.

37 I would prefer to have an ESL teacher who has lived overseas.

38 I would like to have American friends.

39 Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.

40 It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.
APPENDIX B

INTENSIVE ENGLISH PROGRAMS CONTACTED
## Intensive English Programs Contacted

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<td>EF Education Cambridge University</td>
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<td>EF Education Institute of Virginia Tech</td>
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<tr>
<td>English Language Center at Old Dominion University</td>
<td>INTERLINK Language Center-University of North Carolina at Greenville</td>
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<td>English Language Center, UMBC 1000 Hilltop Circle,</td>
<td>American English Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baltimore, MD 21250 (410) 455-2831</td>
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REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The author earned a B.A. in Communications/Public Relations and English from the University of Southwestern Louisiana in 1986, and an M.A. from the University of Texas at Arlington in 2005. His interests include sociolinguistics, learner and teacher variables in SLA, and pedagogical phonology.