

Doing TESOL postgraduate studies overseas: Teacher training, studying abroad, (and/) or a master's degree?

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Abstract

TESOL postgraduate studies in Anglophone countries are finding international students increasingly in the majority, especially in one-year master's programs such as those in the UK. These programs are especially desirable for such students as they expect to not only get an advanced degree, but also to gain some English teacher training, and to hone their own English language skills by treating the year overseas as a study abroad experience. In this preliminary study, we examine the data collected in semi-structured interviews with 20 TESOL postgraduate students from China in their first month in the same program at a UK university. We discovered disparate interpretations of the program. The most common expectation was developing language skills in what they saw as the start of their study abroad year, expressing frustration with the lack of diversity in the student cohort, and wishing to make friends with "foreigners" (i.e., non-Chinese). This study has implications for TESOL postgraduate studies curriculum developers to consider ways of addressing students' different interpretations.

Introduction

The concept of transnationalism can be used to refer to the multiple types of relationships and exchange that happen across borders (Anderson, 2019). Students who pursue their TESOL postgraduate studies overseas, crossing national borders, are engaged in such transnational exchange. This chapter examines how TESOL teacher education and transnationalism may intersect by exploring overseas postgraduate TESOL students' expectations of their MA program.

Postgraduate studies in TESOL, particularly in Anglophone countries (e.g., UK, Australia, New Zealand, in particular, as the one-year TESOL master's is often more desirable than the two-year master's in the United States and Canada), are often comprised of international students who may have different interpretations of the degree. The MA (or MEd, or MSc) program in TESOL may be viewed by students and academic staff alike as a teacher training program. Some students may understand the degree to be an advanced theory-based

program designed to facilitate “mastery” of the field of TESOL and a prerequisite for further (doctoral) studies in the field. Additionally, with some students seeking to improve their English language proficiency through further studies, it may be perceived as a study abroad year. While it is certainly arguable that these three interpretations could be understood together to provide a single way of describing postgraduate studies in TESOL, we argue that they indicate different types of students, with different sets of intentions, that are deserving of attention by TESOL teacher education curriculum developers.

As Phakiti and Li (2011) noted, increasing opportunities have become available for international ESL students around the world to pursue their master’s or PhD studies in TESOL in Anglophone countries. With this trend, it is important to understand more about the expectations of these students. This chapter offers a contribution to the current discussion around international postgraduate TESOL students by focusing on understanding the interpretations of these students and related expectations in their MA program in a UK university. An impetus for the specific focus in this chapter on *expectations* is hearing, year after year, the same questions from students when they begin their postgraduate studies in TESOL, such as “When do we get our classroom placements?”, “How can I make local friends so I can learn local culture and improve my English?” and “Now that I am a master’s student, can I apply for a PhD?” There are three distinctly different initiatives in these questions, suggesting three very different ideas about why these students have enrolled in a TESOL master’s program overseas, which will be further explored in the findings section.

The data reported in this chapter is the first phase of a longitudinal project that examines the expectations and experiences of 20 international students as they go through a one-year MA TESOL course in the UK. In this chapter, we take an in-depth look at their interpretations of the program to reveal insights—concerning TESOL teacher education in an increasingly transnational world—into why international students may have different objectives, and how those objectives may relate to their expectations of their TESOL studies.

Previous research on transnationalism and international TESOL postgraduate students

In TESOL postgraduate studies, the influence of neoliberalist ideas and globalization have led to increased focus on transnationalism, most commonly connected to internationalization. This idea of transnationalism has been described, citing Altbach (2004) and Altbach and Knight (2007), as “a process involving student body, faculty, and curricula change; enrolment trends; knowledge conglomeration; push-pull factors impacting globally mobile students and the

sending and receiving countries; and the economic, social, and educational consequences” (Anderson, 2019, p. 228). As theoretical constructs, transnationalism and internationalization allow researchers to focus on the individual experiences of students in investigating their socialization into the academic discourses and communities of postgraduate TESOL studies.

These constructs proved very useful for theorizing our study, and in our review of relevant literature, we found much of the research on internationalized postgraduate TESOL studies focused on curriculum concerns and/or language issues. For example, in their investigation of the association between globalization and postgraduate TESOL in the UK, Hasrati and Tavakoli (2015) found that MA TESOL programs were responding, however slowly, to the need for change to address the increasingly international profile of student cohorts. These changes were noted in the literature as being required for issues related to these students’ approaches to learning, as well as concerns about their language proficiency. Given that the majority of both TESOL practitioners and TESOL postgraduate students are L2 users of English (Liu, 1999), much of the research of these students’ experiences targets the difficulties that they may have with the use of academic language in their postgraduate studies (e.g., Nguyen and Pramoolsook, 2016; Phakiti and Li, 2011). Drawing on analysis of diary entries from ESL/EFL students in an MA TESOL program in the United States, Lee and Lew (2001) explored students’ perceptions of the demands of their postgraduate studies. Their results demonstrate that students may experience a sense of inferiority and anxiety due to their perceived deficiency in their English language proficiency, compared to their more proficient peers.

The research also points toward these students’ interest in international postgraduate TESOL studies specifically in Anglophone (so-called “native speaking”) countries. More than 20 years ago, Liu (1998) argued that ethnocentrism was a problem in TESOL studies in these countries, as the students’ own contexts in which they will teach were typically not considered in the curriculum. Overseas TESOL postgraduate students were expected to take on the English teaching practices and ideas, including “native speaker norms,” of the country where they studied, not where they would teach. Current research suggests this is still the case in some cases (see Fagan, 2019; Nuske, 2018).

These students may be “killing two birds with one stone” (Berry, 1990)—gaining a further degree and at the same time developing their English language skills. Cullen (1994) reported on the incorporation of language development in TESOL teacher training programs, in response to an obvious need of the students enrolling on these programs. Some larger TESOL master’s programs have added language development components, such as the University of

Sydney's unit "English in Academic Settings" offered only to English L2 students on the MED TESOL program, first offered in 2004.

In another Australian university, [Inoue and Stracke \(2013\)](#) investigated how postgraduate TESOL students may perceive the meaning and value of the degree, focusing on ideas related to English linguistic imperialism and students' beliefs that native English-speaking teachers are advantaged. Findings from the study show that these students valued the degree because a postgraduate degree in TESOL from an English-speaking country was considered to be more likely to put them in a better position than other non-native English-speaking teachers in their country.

While brief, this review of relevant literature points toward the need for investigation into current developments concerning the thoughts of international, and specifically English L2, TESOL postgraduate students, when it comes to *why* they choose to do the degree overseas, and in what ways this influences their expectations of the program.

To further our understanding of the experience of TESOL international students, the following research questions were asked:

- 1 How are postgraduate TESOL studies interpreted by international students at the start of such a program in the UK?
- 2 What do these students identify at the start of the program as aspects of postgraduate TESOL studies relevant to their objectives?

Methods

Research procedure

To explore the expectations of international postgraduate TESOL students, we arranged to interview 20 students near the start of their MA TESOL studies, to be conducted only by Dandan, who was a recent postgraduate TESOL student. This was to encourage more open responses from participants (see [Rose et al., 2020](#)). The research procedure involves face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted at three points: at the beginning of the course, in the fifth month of the course, and after they finish the course. In the interviews, participants were invited to reflect on their expectations as they go through the course, aiming to uncover their motivations, their expectations of the course, and the challenges they may face in undertaking their postgraduate studies.

Focusing specifically on initial thoughts identified at the start of the MA TESOL program, this chapter draws on the data from the interviews that were conducted in the first month of their postgraduate study, which focused on their backgrounds and perceptions of the MA program.

Each participant was interviewed for approximately 30–40 minutes. Transcripts were shared with participants in accordance with ethics approval to confirm accuracy, for the option to clarify statements, and in case they wish to make any amendments.

Participants

Regarding the sample, the 20 students identified as participants were all volunteers. We recognize this as a limitation of the study, as these potentially more motivated students are unlikely to be representative of the larger cohort (see [Rose et al., 2020](#)). This particular program regularly has approximately 100 students in the MA course, majority Chinese nationals. After an invitation to participate was sent out to the whole cohort, these 20 students volunteered to participate in the project by contacting the researchers.

All participants are in their early twenties; 18 participants are females, and two males. Among the 20 informants, 17 obtained their bachelor’s degree from Chinese universities. Two students hold degrees from Sino-British universities based in China. Additionally, another student studied in a “2+2 program,” a cooperation scheme between two universities, where she had studied in a Chinese university for two years before continuing her undergraduate study in a university in the United States for another two years. While all 20 participants held beliefs about the TESOL program that fit into the key themes, due to limited space, the data reported in this chapter are presented as extracts from interviews with just seven of the students that exemplify the themes. [Table 15.1](#) shows the background information of these seven participants. All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants, in accordance with ethical approval.

Table 15.1 Participants’ background information

Name	Gender	Undergraduate Programs Studied
Zitong	Female	International Business
Mingli	Female	Finance
Wencan	Female	English Education
Ning	Female	Business English
Yihan	Female	Portuguese
Lanting	Female	Business English
Haoran	Male	Applied Linguistics

Language of the interviews

The interviews were conducted in the language the participant preferred—all of the participants decided to use English to start the interview. In setting up the data collection procedure, we anticipated that code-switching might occur, as we understand it can allow for increased efficiency in expressing ideas (McKinley & Sakamoto, 2008). Based on our transcripts, nine used Chinese at some point in the interview, code-switching for several words or switching to Chinese for an extensive amount of time. This occurred in particular instances: to confirm understanding, to ask for a translation, to allow for more convenient communication, to enact thinking processes in Chinese, or to express certain ideas more effectively said in Chinese.

Data analysis

Once all 20 interviews were completed, transcribed, and checked by the participants for accuracy, we employed thematic analysis, understood from a “qualitative content analysis” approach as identifying “thematic segmentation,” focusing on the content of what participants said (Selvi, 2020). Through this analysis, we did independent preliminary coding of the transcripts, which were then compared and adjusted to develop a coding frame based on the key themes. Three key themes were identified as particularly prominent across the dataset regarding students’ interpretation of the program and their related expectations in the course. The seven participants were identified according to their responses as fitting into one of three themes, outlined in the next section.

Findings

In spite of the differences in the participants’ language learning expectations, their undergraduate studies and career goals, three prominent themes emerged in the interview data regarding their interpretations of the MA TESOL program. The first theme identified is the interpretation of the MA TESOL study as a teacher training program. The second theme is the perception of viewing the program as an advanced degree. Finally, the most prevalent theme was found in students’ considerations of their MA studies in TESOL as a study abroad year. Our responses to the two research questions are presented with examples of the three themes, which is followed by individual participants’ expectations related to those objectives in their MA studies.

A teacher training program

The following two extracts exemplify the points regarding how students view their MA TESOL studies as a teacher training program, which they link closely with their future career as teachers of English. Such students perceive the MA TESOL program as a way to enhance their career prospects by gaining practical teaching skills that can be applied to their future teaching practice. As a result of such objectives, both participants here felt that the course, which appeared to focus mainly on theoretical content, did not fit with what they expected. We can see from the data that Zitong, in Extract 1.1, was attempting to find ways to link the theoretical perspectives in the course to her initial objective. Mingli, in Extract 1.2, who viewed “theories” and “practice” to be disconnected, also found that the MA program was not meeting her expectations.

Extract 1.1: “I think it’s all about the teaching skills”

I think it’s all about the teaching skills because it’s really like applying to practice major ... So I applied this course because I want to improve my, not improve, maybe gain some knowledge about teaching skills ... like how we conduct a course, how, what we usually do in the classroom, before the class, what we need to do. Like a procedure of the whole teaching.

(Zitong)

I found that it’s not really about teaching skills, but there are some theories and how do you apply them into the practice. It actually is a bit different from what I thought before. But right now, I think it’s fine because when I read a lot of pre-readings, I found that it actually will help our teaching, maybe skills, and also, like a mindset, like what we need to do in the future.

(Zitong)

Pre-service teachers such as Zitong considered the TESOL program to be a teacher training program that can equip them with practical teaching skills that can facilitate their professional development. As a result, at the start of her postgraduate studies, where she encountered much more concentration on theories than she had anticipated, she tried to actively link what she has learned in the program with her future teaching practice.

Extract 1.2: “it’s practice, compared with theory”

I’m not so, an academic person, so I choose this course ... I choose the MA TESOL. And it’s practice, compared with theory ... Just, let you to know how to, and not some vague concepts, yeah, the course to tell me what to do in class, and how to prepare for your work, and how to communicate with students, or what kind of approaches or techniques you can use in your teaching process ... Cause I think, the future is career oriented. So you should know more about practice, rather than theory. The theory, you read more, but you don’t know how to do with it.

(Mingli)

I have said, I am not a so ... academic person. Maybe too many theories, especially in [the name of a module], this module, and [the name of another module], there are so many frameworks or ideas made by some authors ... I think the program can add more courses. [The modules that we currently have] [j]ust tell you some approaches or some theories, uh, prior authors have developed or have written. But in the reality, we still don’t know how to be a teacher ... [I would like the program to] [j]ust tell us how to prepare, uh, and how to find all materials, or some approaches to get connect with your students more closely.

(Mingli)

Although Mingli and Zitong shared a common concern with acquiring practical skills for their future career, students such as Mingli may view “practice” and “theory” as two disconnected components (and even *mutually exclusive* for her and some other student participants) in their MA studies. Participants alike have expressed their lack of interest in the modules that engage with key theories in the field of TESOL, as they find it to be irrelevant to their objectives of career development. This may also partly explain why some TESOL students have been particularly interested in getting a teaching placement in their MA course, seeing teaching practice as the primary objective of a TESOL program, more along the lines of a CELTA (The Cambridge Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages).

Advanced degree

Another key theme that emerged from the data is viewing the program mainly as an advanced degree. Three types of expectations, or sub-themes, related to this theme are: viewing their MA

TESOL course as (1) a theory-based program that enables a “mastery” of the field of TESOL (“acquiring enough knowledge” and “acquiring advanced theories” were two of the frequently mentioned concepts in this sub-theme), (2) a prerequisite for further doctoral study in TESOL, and (3) a degree that enhance employability. The following three extracts will exemplify these three strands of objectives.

Extract 2.1: “I want to learn more about those theories”

So the reason why I choose TESOL ... is because previously I have some teaching experience, but they may have some contradiction to those theories that I have learned in class. So I want to learn more about those theories and try to find a way to cope with those contradictions ... But now I found that those theories [in the MA course] are actually things I have learned in my Bachelor ... uh, during my bachelor’s degree ... So, I don’t know if I can find the suggestions to those contradictions ... So previously, we may say that every student is an independent individual, so we respect them, and love them, and try to find a way to make the study more suitable for them. And you also need to, like, encourage them, and don’t scold at them. But, when I was teaching a student that have some learning problems, like uh, he cannot settle down to listen. And you may find that you don’t have other ways, because except for scold and to ask him to settle down ... So one way I try to solve this is to have more stable understanding of those theories.

(Wencan)

In her account, Wencan demonstrated an expectation of gaining a stable “mastery” of the field of TESOL from her MA study. She had expected the MA TESOL course to offer theoretical content that would be different from what was learned in her undergraduate course. Aiming to clear up the confusion from her previous teaching experience, she assumed that the MA course would differ from her undergraduate program in enabling her to achieve a stable understanding of theories.

Extract 2.2: “I hope I can get exposed to some very advanced theories or research”

I hope I can get exposed to some very advanced theories or research. And maybe I will get interested one of them, and I want to dig deeper ... I have always wanted to be, like,

a PhD, or something like that. But think I have to find my true interest, my academic interest, in this way, I will be willing to spend four years to do it. But right now, I think I haven't found my interest.

(Ning)

Ning demonstrated her interpretation of the program as a prerequisite for doctoral study in TESOL. Some other participants also expressed their aspirations for pursuing PhD studies after finishing their MA. Some students like Ning viewed further studies as a process to explore their research interests, whereas some other participants appeared to be more interested in gaining a doctorate to apply for TESOL-related positions in higher education.

Extract 2.3: "I just want to get a master's degree"

Expectations. Um, to be honest ... I just want to get a master's degree ... I didn't major in English ... I wasn't that much good in my IELTS ... If I want to work in, like, in the area which is related to English teaching and things like that, it would be pretty difficult for me to get a job. I would not be that much competent ... [W]orking for English learning App, usually they show a page ... And you have to have a really solid background to support the idea that you can teach them well. Even that it's not essential to the fact that if you can teach them well, but just for marketing purposes ... to support that idea that we can really help you ... Like, having a degree is a point. And also, I think, yeah, you have to be really passionate in this area so that you can teach well, not just because you have a degree ... But you need that to make the Chinese believe in you.

(Yihan)

I just want to get a degree. Yeah, I did have concerns. I'm still having concerns, actually, about my ... [a]ssignments and the final report, because ... I never wrote anything in academic English ... So I'm concerned about my ability to write something academically in a foreign language. So yeah, because I'm not even familiar with the requirements to write academically ... It's not just the English proficiency level ... I have problems with all the points. I have to find, how to find an idea that you want to say, and how to support your idea.

(Yihan)

With the goal being only to obtain the *degree* in TESOL that is considered as a necessary enhancement of her employability, Yihan expressed concerns regarding the level of academic work required to get the degree. Not having prior experience in understanding conventions of academic writing in English, she was particularly concerned with the assignment requirements at the beginning of her study. As intuitive as this expectation seems, this is an important objective for several participants that can have an impact on their views on what to prioritize in their studies. Yihan viewed “getting a degree” as her only objective at the time of the interview, which may lead to deprioritizing the assessment requirements. Some other participants talked extensively about their expectations of the value of the master’s degree in TESOL in the UK in enhancing their prospects for TESOL-related positions. This may explain why some students seemed to be more proactive and concerned about considering their final assessment at the beginning of course. This objective seemed to be especially prominent in interviews with students coming from an academic background that was not directly related English language teaching. Such participants expressed their expectations to use the TESOL degree to gain access to positions in the field of English language teaching.

These three strands of objectives suggest that students may see the program primarily as an advanced degree that can provide them with crucial or even necessary opportunities related to their aspirations in the field of TESOL. While the first two examples exemplified aims to pursue and/or identify their intellectual curiosity. These aims can be seen as incentives to pursue intellectual enhancement by exploring a (potential) area interest they have chosen. However, in the third example, the participant came with a clear idea about her career goal, viewing the MA study as a degree that enhances her career prospects. With a priority of gaining the degree, she showed a very different focus in study priorities.

A study abroad year

“Study abroad” was the most frequently discussed concept in the first phase of interviews. Aspects of being an English L2 student having gone overseas to study in the UK were emphasized repeatedly. Concepts mentioned repeatedly in the interviews related to this theme include, for example, “improving English,” communicating with “foreigners”/“foreign students”/“international students,” and “understanding local culture.” Reasons for raising these aspects were often related to the anticipated struggle to achieve such aspects on a program where the student cohort is entirely Chinese. There was little recognition by participants of the inappropriateness of sometimes using the word “foreigner” to refer to anyone not Chinese,

suggesting the possibility of a sustained sense of *foreignness* during the year-long study that will end with a return to China. The following two cases demonstrate how students may view their MA TESOL studies as a study abroad year, with expectations related to linguistic and cultural aspects related to their TESOL studies in the program. It was found that students may perceive their MA year to be an opportunity to experience a sense of *difference* overseas.

Extract 3.1: “You are here to practice English”

Actually, I was a little disappointed because I saw all of my classmates were Chinese. Yeah, I thought it was [about] English teaching, so maybe this course may involve some, not local people, but foreigners, like Indians or Americans, like that. But I saw all Chinese, so I was a little disappointed ... Because [if] there are some foreigners, you have to talk in English, right? ... [W]hen we discuss question in our study group, we just use Chinese. I think it's, um, flaws, right? Because you are here to learn English. You are here to practice English, so you need to use English as often as possible. But it's very difficult for all people to say English in your study group, because you are all Chinese, so you can talk more smoothly and you can actually understand what they are talking about in Mandarin.

(Lanting)

Um, foreigners, for example, I think it's like “alarm” that you need to, or you have to speak English so they can understand you. And I think they have different thinking pattern. Yeah, so when you communicate together, or when there is a foreigner in your study group, you can actually, you can actually share your different thinking patterns and your opinions about this question, about this program, about this essay, so I think it's a great learning process.

(Lanting)

Viewing the MA course as an English language-related program, Lanting considered her postgraduate study in TESOL to include opportunities to communicate with students from different countries. She positioned herself as *a learner of English abroad*, so she needed to grasp opportunities to improve her language proficiency. For this objective, she perceived opportunities to engage with students from other countries as an effective way to practice her spoken English. An interesting point relating to this account is the construction of a “foreigner”

image, which has certain traits that the participant presumed to be part of the valuable assets that the program could have offered.

Extract 3.2: “You go abroad, you have the opportunity to communicate. That’s a part of the investment”

[I]n this program, we have, all of them, Chinese students ... we don’t have international students ... I’m somehow disappointed ... [B]efore people go abroad ... they expect, uh, first of all, different education system, different education environment, different living environment, different people they can communicate ... But they will find out that’s not the case. They have different education system. They have different education environment. But they will have the same people to communicate with ... I think that’s the point where people think “not worth the money,” because they come here, they expect to know all those people outside ... I, to some extent, also think that ... [Y]ou have the opportunity to communicate. That’s a part of the investment ... Your investment to a journey abroad [which includes] [m]oney ... all the efforts you put in [that were] spread out several years ... So we have, uh, rehearsed in our mind many times that we will be working in a leading university in the UK, experience different things, and develop academically and professionally, having different experience, like, broaden our horizon.

(Haoran)

“International students” is a general term that we use back in China to refer to the students that isn’t Chinese. But here, because there are too many Chinese students, we cannot identify ourselves as international students, although we are international students ... We are here in the UK, we need to identify ourselves, first of all, as Chinese. And secondly, as a student, as an international student. But because there are too many Chinese students, we are in the same community, whether it’s speech community ... the same cultural background ... same social community, yeah. Same academic community.

(Haoran)

Similar to the disappointment shown by Lanting in the previous extract regarding not having “foreigners” peers in the program, Haoran was also disappointed about not having

“international students” in his MA course, which he considered to be an essential component of his expectations of studying abroad. The difficulty in positioning himself as an “international student” may stem from viewing his cohort as a linguistically, culturally, and socially homogeneous community. By viewing his peer students as a homogeneous group, it was difficult for students like Haoran to conceptualize how opportunities would be available for them to achieve intercultural communication for their postgraduate studies. Developing intercultural competence can be an inherent goal for going abroad for international postgraduate students, who may have to adapt themselves to unfamiliar contexts to facilitate their learning (McKinley et al., 2019).

Previous studies have shown that international TESOL students in a program with both native and non-native speakers of English may view their previous experience in learning English to be a valuable contribution to the postgraduate program (Lee & Lew, 2001). However, in this program, students who consider their MA TESOL studies as a study abroad year, by seeing the entire group as a homogenous one, may find it more difficult to identify themselves as a member of a group that has diverse insights into the field of TESOL.

Additionally, Haoran’s account reveals that students may consider their TESOL studies as a study abroad year with significant devotion of money, time, and effort—they expect multiple gains from their MA studies. This view resonates with Edwards and Ran’s (2009, p. 191) point, that studying abroad can entail “enormous financial sacrifices by the family.”

Discussion

(Failure to meet) transnational expectations

As Anderson (2019) points out, universities generally place great significance on internationalization in terms of recruiting international students, aiming for a more culturally and academically diverse environment and greater economic benefits. This suggests that value has been placed on the international student cohort and the transnational experience. Many of these globally mobile postgraduate TESOL students in our study had assumed they would “cross borders” to study. The participants in this study described expectations of their MA TESOL program that arch beyond the academic aspects. Specifically, the “study abroad” theme reveals that these international students had the expectations related to transnational experiences, such as learning local culture and interacting with students from diverse backgrounds, which they expected to be embedded in their learning experience in the program.

This consensus on the importance of transnational experiences suggests the possibility of a certain level of reciprocity in transnationalism. However, our study shows a potential discrepancy between what the universities aim(/claim) to offer and what students may expect regarding transnational experiences. A strong sense of disappointment was identified across the dataset, as many students felt they would not be able to have the transnational experiences they had expected with the student cohort that they identified as homogeneous. This was especially evident in one participant's difficulties in identifying himself as an "international student" in the TESOL program.

Though the number or rate of international students in a university may generally be used as a proxy for how "international" the university is, as our study shows, having international students may not itself constitute a diverse learning environment. We need to acknowledge that programmes like TESOL, with its distinctive interests of the teaching of English to EFL/ESL learners, are likely to attract students coming from certain countries. Based on the interview data, students in such a cohort may find that the transnational experience they were promised was hard to achieve in the programme.

We argue that a certain level of reciprocity in the transnational experience between the MA TESOL program and the international students need to be promoted with overt intervention. The data in this study challenges the presuppositions that entail the current understanding of what a TESOL program can be. By exploring the various expectations of these students from a transnational perspective and demonstrating the possible discrepancy between what the university offers and what students may expect, we argue that the quality of reciprocity should be emphasized more in the TESOL programs.

For MA TESOL programs to better achieve transnational objectives, we highlight the needs to address the reality in TESOL programmes in relation to the reciprocity of transnational experience. Built-in activities in TESOL teacher education that acknowledge, address, and facilitate such reality would be crucial. The implications of this study suggest that to better align the program with students' expectations, factors such as "studying abroad experience" need to be taken into account by postgraduate TESOL education curriculum developers.

Our findings indicate that international students may share the same transnational agenda with universities. To promote reciprocity, universities may start by acknowledging the diverse needs of the student cohort and that a transnational experience may not be readily available in postgraduate programs such as TESOL. This is an argument to be constructed and negotiated within individual universities that can acknowledge that having a large proportion of international students does not *make* the program international. The lack of overt approaches

in the program may miss the opportunities to support students to have the transnational experience overseas they expected (that they *paid for*), which would align with the internationalization agenda of universities.

Rectifying three different interpretations

While our participants' interpretations of the TESOL program varied, they fit generally into three key themes with three different objectives: study abroad, teacher training, and an advanced degree. These interpretations do not necessarily conflict, but they do not currently function as three approaches forming a holistic program.

Concerning research showing interpretations of international MA TESOL programs as teacher training programs, findings are compelling. With the data from program websites in 2014, Stapleton and Shao (2018) surveyed over 200 MA TESOL programs in 16 countries. By analyzing the frequencies of the fields of knowledge that these programs offered, their findings demonstrate that language teaching methods were the most frequent focus of these courses. Along with the findings from our own small study, this suggests a strong interpretation for postgraduate TESOL studies as teacher-training programs. However, some institutions, such as the University of Greenwich, resist this interpretation, as they explicitly point out that their MA TESOL course is not about teacher training: "This MA is an academic course of study and not a teacher training course" (University of Greenwich, 2020).

As much as we can argue that the MA TESOL course is not a teacher training program and/or study abroad, we must acknowledge that students come into the program with their individual experiences and expectations, which are likely to influence their experience of the course. The relevance of such interpretations may even go beyond their postgraduate studies. A recent study conducted by Hennebry-Leung et al. (2019) shows that TESOL graduates from MA TESOL programs may face multiple challenges in their transition between being students in a master's program and practitioners in the classroom. Their investigation focused on understanding how participants may draw on what they have learned in their MA programs to inform their classroom practice, emphasizing participants' views on the relationship between "theory" and "practice." This is an indication that students' interpretations of the course and their experiences in the course are likely to form an arch that extends beyond their studies in the program. Therefore, it is important for course designers to strike a balance in meeting these diverse needs. Our participants' MA TESOL program appeared to have offered scant activities that might address the students' expectations of the program as a study abroad experience, such as interacting with local residents.

As TESOL programs generally target students who are interested in teaching English in ESL/EFL contexts, it is likely that the courses will continue attracting a large number of international students from certain countries. As shown in our data, many participants take the study abroad experience as part of their expectations of doing TESOL studies overseas. In contrast to studies that explore the experience of international students in TESOL programs that have both students from ESL/EFL backgrounds and local, so-called “native” English speakers, where international students tend to demonstrate a sense of linguistic inferiority in terms of their use of English in the program (see [Lee & Lew, 2001](#)), students in our project viewed students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds as facilitators of improving language proficiency. However, they did not appear to see interacting with other Chinese students as a beneficial aspect of meeting their expectation of study abroad experience. Notably, the interpretation of viewing the studies as a study abroad year may not just be restricted to this MA program. Research that examines the experience of Chinese students in UK universities has also highlighted such interpretations. For example, [Edwards and Ran’s \(2009, p. 191\)](#) research shows that some Chinese students in UK universities wanted to seek friendship from students with different nationalities to improve English proficiency and to gain “a different lifestyle.”

Not being able to conceptualize the cohort as culturally diverse, some students became quickly disillusioned as the cohort was less diverse than what they had expected, in terms of nationalities and/or ethnicity. However, as researchers have pointed out, viewing international students who are Chinese speakers as a homogeneous group is problematic as there are significant differences across regions in China ([Edwards & Ran, 2009](#)). Also, China has a diverse range of “social, ethnic and linguistic groups” ([Dervin, 2015, p. 3](#)). It is therefore important for teacher educators to help students who may see themselves in a homogenous group to acknowledge what they can individually bring with them into their TESOL studies, and to build this facilitation into the postgraduate TESOL curriculum as a way of supporting their transnational experience.

These objectives can be taken individually and holistically, as it was observed that the interplay of such interpretations can influence individual experiences in the program. As discussed, international students come with different priorities and deal with the studies differently. As teacher educators and curriculum developers, embracing all three aspects in considering what to include in the course can be helpful. Insights about these objectives can also be helpful to create information that can better inform and support students’ preparations for entering their postgraduate TESOL studies.

Postgraduate TESOL curriculum can be adjusted to facilitate active ongoing discussion about the expectations of students and can help facilitate their reflections on their interpretations of the course. With different students exchanging their different interpretations, those who previously saw little use of theory in their future practice may start to see the value of theoretical content and may become more actively engaged in their classroom behaviors. This can also help students to recognize the valuable diverse attributes they can bring to the classroom. Additionally, TESOL teacher educators can encourage students who may see themselves being in a homogeneous group to acknowledge the individual value of their prior experiences and ideas. Curriculum developers may also take students' cultural expectations of the course into consideration by having built-in activities that link with the course content to facilitate students' intercultural communication.

Limitations of the study

While we are drawing on some bigger generalizations here, we recognize that a major limitation of this study is the lack of generalizability from the limited data. That is, due to the approach taken and the sampling strategy, the findings of this research cannot be generalized outside of the study context. In problematizing the stereotypes associated with Asian students in the field of TESOL, [Kumaravadivelu \(2003\)](#), p. 710) observed that there has been “a remarkable readiness to forge a causal connection between the classroom behavior of Asian students and their cultural beliefs even though research findings are ambiguous and even contradictory.” This reminds us of the danger of our findings being interpreted as stereotypes and homogenization associated with TESOL international students from China. It is important to recognize that these international students' experience of the program are results that related to a complex interplay of different variables, among which their expectations may simply be one of the factors. What this research contributes are students' voices in what they expect and how they interpret their TESOL studies, which are constructs that we need to recognize as possible interpretations of TESOL studies from international students.

Conclusion and direction for future research

This small, qualitative study has been enlightening regarding postgraduate TESOL students' expectations about their program, and their concerns about it depending on the way they initially interpret the program. The research in this area has been rich, but it has not specifically focused on the current development in TESOL international students' expectations. As [Hasrati and Tavakoli's \(2015\)](#) research shows, MA TESOL programs have witnessed changes in

student profile and curriculum in a globalized higher education context. By connecting globalization with MA TESOL programs in the UK, their study is an indication of the value of international students' perspectives in further modifications of MA TESOL programs. What we see in this study focusing on students doing overseas TESOL studies is that, with ideas echoing previous studies, it points to new insights into changes that might take place in the MA TESOL programs.

Having gained insights into student participants' interpretations of TESOL postgraduate studies, we can now conceptualize ways to work toward integrating them in the program; importantly, we do not suggest that future research should argue one objective over the other. Based on the analysis, all three strands of expectations are valid interpretations, demonstrating relevance in how the students may perceive the course at the commencement of their study, which can be significant in their transition stage. Thus, in recognizing a diverse range of interpretations of TESOL, the next step in the research agenda can investigate the feasibilities to address these objectives holistically in developing program curriculum and activities. Drawing on the findings presented in this chapter, three possible research directions for future studies can be considered.

In terms of extending and utilizing the knowledge on understanding students' interpretations of the program, future research can start to examine how to integrate these different interpretations. Also, further research may investigate other possible interpretations of the TESOL postgraduate studies in different contexts.

Regarding the positionings of students, existing research has looked at how supervisors may perceive students from ESL/EFL backgrounds in MA TESOL programs (see [Llurda, 2005](#)). Future research efforts can be directed to understanding students' own perspectives on how they position themselves. Also, in such explorations, labels such as "non-native students" and "international students" may require more interrogation. As shown in our study, students may find it hard to identify with the identity marker "international student." Further research may aim to scrutinize the labels ascribed to TESOL students and discuss the implications it may have on the identities of TESOL students. This is a consideration of a further limitation of the study, as it may simply be that we are assuming students would or might identify in these ways.

Additionally, by integrating the three objectives, future research may examine how international MA TESOL programs are addressing the future career needs of the cohort of students. Research on employability of graduate international TESOL students can provide

further insights into the contexts and types of TESOL-related positions students will be likely to engage with after graduation.

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