

# *Transitioning From Master's Studies to the Classroom: From Theory to Practice*

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The importance of social interaction in a community of practice for promoting effective teacher learning is well established (Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Research outlines the challenges language teachers experience in transitioning between teacher education programmes and the classroom, particularly regarding the theory–practice nexus, and emphasizes the professional community’s key role in providing mentoring and support. In this regard, language teachers’ experiences in transitioning from theoretically oriented language education master’s programmes to the language classroom are underresearched. This study reports data gathered from 21 mainland Chinese participants transitioning from master’s programmes in three locations (Hong Kong, Scotland, and China) to language classrooms in China. In line with other research on teacher education programmes, this study’s findings suggest interesting common experiences among these new teachers regardless of the context where their studies took place, including a sense of isolation, a “sink-or-swim” phenomenon leading to the abandonment of theoretically grounded pedagogical beliefs in exchange for adherence to “safe” practice, confusion regarding the relationship between learning on university programmes and the practice of teaching, and weak self-efficacy as transitioning teachers face internal and external pressures.

Implications and consequences are discussed in the context of the theory–practice nexus.

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The internationalisation of higher education is a worldwide phenomenon, with an estimated 1.6 million students studying outside their home countries (Altbach, 2015). Career enhancement prospects and knowledge enrichment are two of the key factors influencing students' decision to enrol on international master's programmes relating to the teaching of English (MATESOL; Copland et al., 2017). Detailing the impact that globalisation has had on higher education in general and MATESOL programmes in particular, Hasrati and Tavakoli (2015) point to the need to adapt curriculum content in response to the rising recruitment of international students. Yet, in many MATESOL programmes, largely populated by international students, instruction focuses on theories and practices developed in sociocultural contexts that are quite different from those in which students were schooled and will later teach. Despite extensive exploration of associated economic, political, and social factors (e.g., Jiang, 2008; Svensson & Wihlborg, 2010), little is known about the pedagogical challenges brought about by internationalisation (Hasrati & Tavakoli, 2015). The present study aims to address this gap, at least partially, by examining the experiences of English language (EL) teachers transitioning from international MATESOL programmes to a teaching career in China. Understanding the extent to which MATESOL study may or may not adequately prepare teachers for their teaching context is crucial for those working on such programmes, designing curricula, determining content, and shaping pedagogies. Furthermore, examining the interpersonal and contextual affordances and constraints experienced by teachers transitioning into the classroom should extend understanding of the factors that mediate teacher learning, when transition is not only from student to professional, but also from one cultural context to another.

For the purposes of this article, MATESOL represents master's programmes in EL teaching. Specifically, in our study the term *MATESOL* represents postgraduate, taught programmes, lasting 1 to 2 years, claiming to engage students with the key theories in the field of EL education and undertaken primarily by current or future EL teachers, with varying backgrounds and degrees of experience.

China is by far the highest student-sending country (HEA, 2017), with master's study abroad being a path frequently taken by those preparing to be EL teachers, raising important theoretical and practical questions relating to students' transition from an advanced degree

to the language classroom on returning home. Although little is known about the Chinese context, studies in the wider context (e.g., Farrell, 2014, 2016; Kaufmann & Ring, 2011) document the challenges novice teachers face particularly in the first 5 years, with expectations of applying their learning to practice being quickly overwhelmed by organisational and institutional responsibilities. The sense of failure teachers experience in facing these demands leads many to leave the profession (DelliCarpini, 2009) and others to adopt survival rather than best practices (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), generating a highly problematic situation for these new teachers and their students, as well as for the health of education systems (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Wright (2010) outlines a shift in teacher education programmes towards greater emphasis on school-based, experiential practice, challenging the applied linguistics model that splits practice from theory. His review of research on second language teacher education practice points to increasing recognition within teacher education of pedagogies that emphasise discovery, dialogue, modelling, reflection, and experience over transmission of theories and knowledge for rich teacher learning. Notwithstanding exceptional exemplars of such pedagogies in practice, “in many contexts, change in SLTE [second language teacher education] pedagogy has been either very slow or negligible” (p. 281). The present study examines the experiences of students as they transition into the classroom from MATESOL programmes continuing to adopt an applied linguistics model of theory and practice.

Unlike master’s programmes, initial teacher training or teacher education programmes typically offer opportunities for learning *about* and *through* teaching practice. A core component of such programmes is the opportunity for mentored teaching practice that iteratively integrates theory and practice, encouraging students to apply their learning to practice, reflecting on the need to adapt theory in response to classroom contexts. Notwithstanding such opportunities, in transitioning into the classroom novice teachers struggle to negotiate the integration of theory and practice with their role as practitioners and the dissonance between idealised expectations and classroom realities (e.g., Kaufmann & Ring, 2011).

Qualifying as a teacher in China requires passing examinations on general educational knowledge and educational psychology, and is not contingent on completing a teacher education programme or a teaching practicum. Thus, for many Chinese students studying MATE-SOL, this course constitutes *de facto* a primary form of teacher preparation. Because such programmes rarely explicitly set out to train teachers, practicum opportunities within which to discover, experience, model, and reflect on practice have not typically been a priority.

Yet many MATESOL programmes do seek to enable students to use theory to critically evaluate their own and others' teaching practices, thus implicitly seeking to equip them for effective practice. Students in such programmes often express a wish for more practical input on how to perform their future roles in the language classroom and for opportunities to put their learning into practice (Copland et al., 2017). Discussions about integrating a stronger practice component need also to consider the extent of parity with the classroom situations students encounter as they begin teaching. Effective teacher learning is understood to result from the interplay between theory, practice, and the context of teacher learning (Johnson & Golombek, 2011), posing a challenge to MATESOL programmes attracting international students who engage with theories developed in social settings very different to their own and do so outside the context of classroom practice.

## Conceptual Framework

Teachers enter the classroom with implicit yet deeply ingrained beliefs and ideas regarding processes of language teaching and learning (Freeman, 2002), resulting from years of practical experience as language learners and leading to the formation of everyday concepts of language teaching and learning based on arguably superficial understandings of the nature of language learning and teaching (Johnson & Golombek, 2011). Effective teacher learning requires interplaying everyday concepts with scientific concepts, generated by up-to-date research and theories and tested through teachers' own systematic observation and theorisation (Johnson & Golombek, 2011). Supporting language teachers in this process is a particular challenge for MATESOL programmes, where heavy emphasis is placed on direct transmission of existing scientific concepts and where notions of teachers as theorists have been slow to take root.

In his seminal critique of the theory–practice discourse, Clarke (1994) argues that teachers have too long been disenfranchised, positioned as passive recipients of theory rather than agents in its development. Robust theory cannot exist unless it is firmly rooted in and scrutinized by classroom practice. Supporting and challenging one another, theory and practice interact iteratively with everyday concepts and scientific concepts, mediated by macro, meso, and micro contexts enabling robust adaptation for a contextually responsive pedagogical framework and shaping teacher identity and teacher learning (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). De Costa and Norton (2017) suggest that it is the integration of practices at these levels that determines the legitimacy

or otherwise of teacher identities in relation to their professional practice as they adapt their learning to the unique cultural, social, and personal features of their context. Opportunities to learn by doing, reflect on successful as much as on unsuccessful experiences of practice, and adopt a recursive process between practice and theory, scaffolded by mentoring for critical enquiry, enable teachers' engagement in the process of testing and contextually adapting theory, building expertise and ownership of their professional practice and empowering them in the theory–practice discourse.

## **Supporting Developing Practice**

Teacher education research highlights the importance of embedding practice opportunities closely aligned with taught content for promoting effective teacher learning (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Hindman, Wasik, & Snell, 2016). Furthermore, modelling teaching from planning to delivery is a powerful way to promote understanding of how specific pedagogical content knowledge might inform instructional decisions (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), allowing novice teachers to visualize the adaptation of theory for practices that are uniquely suited to students' needs. Such opportunities are rare in MATESOL programmes, limiting opportunities for students to develop a coherent and holistic pedagogy rooted in scientific knowledge of language teaching, adapted to the classroom reality, and providing a foundation for establishing a strong professional identity. Brannan and Bleistein (2012) propose that novice teachers' successful adjustment to teaching depends on support structures, such as the ongoing involvement of teacher educators and in-school mentors during the first teaching years (Farrell, 2012). However, such support is limited and haphazard for novice teachers transitioning from international MATESOL programmes to the classroom, and possibilities for in-service collaboration and sharing of good practice vary greatly between institutions and contexts (Mann & Tang, 2012). Notwithstanding the requirement for schools in China to provide guidance and support for new teachers, little is known about the exact nature and extent of these practices (J. C.-K. Lee & Feng, 2007).

## **Relating Theory to Practice in the Field of Language Teaching**

The dissonance between preservice learning and novice teachers' experiences of the workplace is well documented (e.g., Allen &

Wright, 2013; Roness, 2011). Courses that address educational theory receive frequent criticism from student teachers, beginning teachers, and principals, who struggle to see their relevance to practice (Skilbeck & Connell, 2004). Meanwhile, studies cite a worrying lack of impact of teacher education on teacher behaviour and learning (Bergqvist, 2000; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005), cautioning against the preparation of teachers who know much about theory but little about practice (Levine, 2006). Although some argue that teacher educators should negotiate theoretical rigour with the content teachers need in order to be prepared for classroom practice (Burkhardt & Schoenfeld, 2003), teacher development in all its guises might helpfully move away from the dichotomizing theory–practice discourse, trying instead to engage developing language teachers in critical examination of the notion of theory, promoting understanding of their unique vantage point for generating theory in practice.

## **The Theory–Practice Divide and Teacher Self-Efficacy**

Along with context and individual intention (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005), situated professional learning and engagement in practice are significant factors shaping teacher professional identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As these processes unfold interactively, teachers align their actions with a community of practice, integrating the identity of the teaching community with their own personal professional identity (Tsui, 2007). Studies document the difficulties of negotiating a professional identity as novice teachers transition from teacher education programmes to the classroom (Farrell, 2001; Numrich, 1996). These studies have typically focused on teachers who engaged in practicum during teacher training, offering context and opportunity for identity formation to begin within a professional community prior to taking up their first teaching post. MATESOL students, who rarely experience practicum opportunities, are required to familiarise themselves with school life and develop a robust pedagogy, while at the same time negotiating their own personal professional identity. Furthermore, the distance between the teacher preparation they receive and classroom contexts they encounter may be reflected in the distance between their own professional identity and that of the teaching community they will work in. The challenges facing novice teachers, compounded by a fragile professional identity, can have negative consequences for the professional self-efficacy of these transitioning teachers.

Bandura's (2012) self-efficacy theory proposes that individuals act when they feel capable of attaining the goal and all individuals have a

fundamental need for competency experiences. Thus, efficacy beliefs emerging from interactions in schools and from experiences of pedagogical success influence both participants' well-being and what they are able to accomplish (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004), not least because these beliefs are rooted in the reality of the professional context and its affordances. The degree to which teachers are able to enact the roles they envisage for themselves results from complex and recursive interplay between their actual and perceived competence, the social interactions and professional affordances of the school, and classroom context. This combination of factors is crucial in orienting their identities as practitioners (Varghese et al., 2005) and raises questions about the professional self-efficacy of teachers whose envisaged realities are shaped in MATESOL programmes removed from their future community of practice.

## **Challenges and Opportunities for the English as a Foreign Language Teacher in China**

The Chinese perspective on education can be said to be rooted in the long and rich Confucian traditions, while at the same time also rapidly evolving in step with social, political, and economic changes in China. Traditionally, teachers in China have been seen as gatekeepers of knowledge, who are best placed to teach knowledge and skills to children in school settings (Huntsinger, Huntsinger, Ching, & Lee, 2000). Meanwhile, Confucian influence has fostered the view that parents are responsible for producing successful children, able to achieve academically (Guo, 2013). Notwithstanding the strong influence of Confucianism, the notion of parenting and the roles of teachers and parents in the life of children in China are being redefined and reshaped (Guo & Kilderry, 2018), resulting in changing demands and expectations of schools and teachers (Wang, 2014). Meanwhile, responding to government policy initiatives, schools have begun to promote closer teacher–parent cooperation. Emerging evidence suggests that these measures have resulted in some degree of tension, with teachers preferring parents to be involved at home and not at school and neither parents nor teachers being prepared to cooperate inside schools (Ng, 2003). Teachers thus need to navigate traditional expectations of expertise together with increasing parental involvement, resulting in tensions as teachers seek to maintain and assert their expert status in this shifting climate (Guo & Kilderry, 2018).

Recognising the increasing need for their populations to communicate effectively in English, governments in East Asia, including China's, have shifted towards emphasising variations of communicative



language teaching (CLT), more closely aligning with pedagogical frameworks implemented in the West (Ho, 2004). In implementing such pedagogies, teachers are required to negotiate a number of practical but also philosophical challenges. CLT typically engenders classroom roles and learning strategies aligned with learner-centred methodologies, but less so with the teacher-centred approach that has more frequently characterised Chinese classrooms. Questions have been raised about the appropriateness of CLT for contexts with “cultures of learning” that are different from the Western settings where the approach and its variants were developed (Chow & Mok-Cheung, 2004; Hu, 2005; Littlewood, 2007). Although Carless (2004) posits that adaptation rather than adoption is a natural part of the teachers’ practice, moulding innovations to their own teaching philosophies and classroom contexts, it is nevertheless a process that requires a degree of experience and expertise, as well as reflective spaces. Furthermore, the seeming incompatibility of CLT methodologies with the summative, form-oriented, knowledge-based public assessment demands of the Chinese education system presents a further challenge for teachers (Littlewood, 2007). Along with perceptions that such pedagogies lead to classroom management difficulties, particularly in large classes (Li, 2003), and fail to promote the rich use of target language claimed by their proponents (Carless, 2004; S.-M. Lee, 2005), the focus on form that continues to characterize public assessment in China and its consequent backwash effect on school curriculum and classroom teaching is at odds with the paradigms that dominate language education research today and that frame teaching on many MATESOL programmes. Although beyond the scope of this article, critical scholarship has problematised the notion of idealised native speakerism and has challenged the ideologies that shape government and stakeholder beliefs about identity, education, and interaction (e.g., Hu, Li, & Lei, 2014; Kumaravadivelu, 2016). It is in the chasm between theory and policy that novice teachers returning from MATESOL study abroad must negotiate their professional identities and grapple between, on the one hand, implementing and enacting pedagogy that aligns with the education and preparation they have received and, on the other hand, ensuring their students are considered competent learners by the metrics used in their context.

Despite the challenges outlined, knowledge about novice language teachers’ experiences during their first years of teaching is limited (Farrell, 2016; Mattheoudakis, 2007). Little is known about learning on MATESOL programmes (Mattheoudakis, 2007), and even less about the transition across cultural contexts from such programmes to the classroom. Farrell (2012) proposes that novice teachers should be encouraged to tell their own stories with regard to the various issues



and challenges they face in their particular setting during their first years, so that their experiences might feed back into the curriculum of MATESOL programmes, bridging the gap between research and practice. Such data could form the basis of organised material for teachers to reflect on the nature of the professional context of teaching and learning for which they are preparing (Wright, 2010). In keeping with this notion, the present study seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding the experiences of novice teachers entering the classroom after MATESOL study.

## THE STUDY

The study reports data gathered during the participants' first year in the classroom, following their completion of a MATESOL course, specifically addressing the following research questions:

- To what extent do transitioning teachers perceive their learning as relevant to their classroom practice?
- To what extent do transitioning teachers feel equipped for transitioning to their classrooms?
- What challenges and opportunities are experienced by transitioning teachers as they begin to apply their learning to their practice?

A longitudinal, qualitative approach captured the richness of participants' experiences. Monthly interviews were conducted with each participant over a 12-month period, as they transitioned into their teaching post after having completed a MATESOL programme. The researchers responded to participants' reflections, engaging in a dialogic process to provide a common frame of reference and support for these teachers in their practice.

## Participants

In order to recruit participants, the project was advertised via email in the institutions and programmes in which the researchers were at least known to the participants, which was essential in minimizing participant attrition, particularly given the demands the transition would make on participants' time and energy.

Participants were required to be studying in a MATESOL programme, as understood for the purposes of the study, intending to commit to the duration of the study and intending to find a teaching job on returning home. The study began with 51 participants fulfilling

the criteria, 21 of whom remained in the study from beginning to end. All 21 obtained teaching jobs on completing their studies, and the final 12 who participated in the highest number of interviews, thus allowing the greatest continuity in the data, were included in the final analysis. All who agreed to participate in the study were Chinese students, reflecting the nature of the broader student population on MATESOL programmes. Of the final 12, all returned to mainland China to teach, with one exception who obtained employment in a Hong Kong school. Some participants had prior experience of informal private tutoring, and two of the final 12 participants had 1 year of full-time school teaching experience and one participant had 3 years.

As shown in Table 1, the 12 participants had studied in three different master's programmes, in Hong Kong, Scotland, and mainland China, all in the field of EL teaching. Courses on the respective programmes addressed areas such as second language acquisition,

**TABLE 1**  
**Participants' Background Information**

Pseudonym	Place of study	Prior teaching experience	Major	Teaching context at time of data collection
Fay	Hong Kong	1 year English teaching	MA TESOL	Language institute, Shenzhen, China
Geri	Hong Kong	Private tutoring	MA TESOL	Primary school, Hong Kong
Hera	Hong Kong	None	MA TESOL	Secondary school, Guangzhou, China
Maja	Hong Kong	Private tutoring	MA TESOL	Secondary school, Hangzhou, China
Yula	Hong Kong	1 year English teaching	MA TESOL	University language centre, Huyang, China (teaching English to non-English-major students)
Lulu	Hong Kong	3 years English teaching	MEd ELE	Secondary school, Beijing, China
Lucky	Harbin	Private tutoring	MEd ELT	International secondary school, Harbin, China
Zita	Harbin	Private tutoring	MEd ELT	Primary school, Tianjin, China
Elsa	Shanghai	Private tutoring	MEd ELT	Primary school, Shanghai, China
Yana	Shanghai	Private tutoring	MEd ELT	Primary school, Hangzhou, China
Hope	Edinburgh	Part-time teaching assistant	MA TESOL	Language institute, Shanghai, China
Liz	Edinburgh	Private tutoring	MA TESOL	Language institute, Beijing, China

phonetics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and research methods. In addition, students across the programmes studied courses relating to, for instance, EL teaching methodology, curriculum development, and the teaching of grammar. Though all programmes claimed to address the relationship between theory and practice, none offered systematic and structured practicum opportunities as integral to their curriculum.

## **The Dialogic Interview**

An in-depth interview approach was adopted to explore the core research themes while allowing opportunities for participants to elaborate further. Key areas explored in the interview were participants' understanding of the relationship between their learning on the MATESOL programme and their respective classroom practices, the challenges and opportunities they encountered in implementing their learning in practice, and the development of their professional self-efficacy. The in-depth interview approach allowed exploration of what was meaningful to or valued by the participants, within the scope of the research aims (Newby, 2010). The pre-established relationship between interviewer and interviewees was essential, first to facilitate a conversational approach in the interviews that promoted openness and sharing and second to establish trust and a safe zone for the participants to share their experiences.

The dialogic nature of the interviews functioned as a subsequent form of in-depth teacher development in which participants were prompted to reflect on what they had learned and practiced. Teachers' conceptual development is both a gradual and complex process, requiring multiple and sustained opportunities for dialogic mediating, scaffolded learning, and reflective assisted performance. Thus, aligning with the core aim of the study to contribute to effective teacher development, we considered it our ethical responsibility to subsequently support the participants in their professional development and to protect their professional self-efficacy. This method may have helped students relate theory to practice, but students seemed quite able to distinguish between the common factual framework input they received from the researchers and what they had learned and could extract from their own MATESOL.

## **Procedures**

Data were gathered through electronic means and by telephone, allowing flexibility to ensure continuity of data collection, given the

pressures and demands made on participants both during their studies and as they embarked on their teaching posts.

Approximately one interview per month was conducted with each participant, for the duration of the study. Interviews were conducted in participants' first language, Mandarin Chinese, and were transcribed and translated by a certified Chinese–English translator. Transcriptions were read by participants for member-checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers engaged in a dialogic process with participants, responding to their reflections each month, helping to sustain participation and promote a sense of community. Responses were conveyed via email.

## **Analysis**

Analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) stages for generating meaning from qualitative data, entailing counting frequencies of occurrences, noting patterns and themes, using informed intuition to examine plausibility, and clustering data into categories, types, and classifications. Iterative analysis and reanalysis led to identification of codes and categories. In line with Saldaña's (2013) approach, analytic reflection on the codes and categories in the context of the existing literature enabled thematisation, reflecting previous literature, but also allowed for emergence of new themes. Exploring patterns and individualities allowed commonalities to be identified, while also giving space for the emergence of contextual and personal differences. The data excerpts included in this article were selected for their representative capacity to more fully illustrate themes that emerged through the data.

## **Establishing Trustworthiness and Credibility in Data Analysis**

The ongoing process of dialogic interviews allowed identifiable patterns to emerge within and between participants, such that their perceptions and experiences could be thematised characterising their transition experience, particularly focussing on the theory–practice nexus. All members of the research team responded to the dialogic interviews, allowing them to become intimately familiar with the data, engaging in an ongoing prolonged process of reflective analysis over the 12-month study duration. This allowed for better understanding of participants' experiences unfolding over time, while also giving time to identify the extent to which observations could be considered representative (similar to all participants) of the developing trajectory.

These procedures and processes contributed to enhancing the credibility of data interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **FINDINGS**

Contrary to our initial expectations, data from students on MATE-SOL programmes in three different contexts pointed to convergence rather than divergence in student experiences. Four key themes emerged: the need to meet professional external demands, the relationship between theories learned and classroom realities, support for developing practice, and challenges to professional self-efficacy. These themes provide the structure for the presentation and discussion of findings.

### **Meeting Professional External Demands**

In line with previous studies (e.g., Kaufmann & Ring, 2011; Mandel, 2006), participants referred to pressures they faced in adapting to the demands and schedules of school and classroom that appeared to have a real and significant effect on their ability to develop pedagogy grounded in their broader theoretical understanding of language teaching and learning.

As is true for teachers the world over, time constraints were common to participants, leading some to compromise between their ideal pedagogy and what they felt was realistic or feasible:

To be honest, I had little time to reflect or think about teaching theories or methodologies while I was preparing my English lessons during the past month.

(Maja, Hong Kong)

When I want to design a special class to apply what my learning to my practice, I have no time because the class involves for example communicative approach and that is always time-consuming.

(Lulu, Hong Kong)

This echoes previous findings and points to novice teachers' struggle to meet the multiple demands of the first teaching years (Kaufmann & Ring, 2011). In Lulu's case, time constraints influenced her to abandon the implementation of CLT approaches learned about in her studies, resonating with concerns that such pedagogies may be misaligned with China's education culture (Littlewood, 2007). Lacking the

tools to engage in the “natural” process of adaptation referred to by Carless (2004), Lulu neither adapted nor adopted, but instead abandoned.

Participants experienced tension between trying to satisfy parents’ demands and holding to their own developing pedagogies and teaching philosophies, compounded in Liz’s case by a lack of professional self-efficacy:

For me, I am still learning to teach. Parents sometimes come to listen to my open classes.<sup>1</sup> Different parents have different requirements, so the pressure is quite big.

(Liz, Scotland)

Others indicated that the pressure to keep parents happy was such that they found themselves abandoning their own teaching philosophies even when they considered these well grounded:

Our course ... emphasizes ... a communicative language teaching method to reinforce their language sense. ... I totally agree with the philosophy. However, their parents are concerned by less homework, especially less mechanical vocabulary reciting homework. ... Finally we have to compromise with them and give out extra vocabulary translation homework.

(Hope, Scotland)

Hope’s case highlights the challenge teachers and schools face in the context of increasing parental involvement in their children’s education and the demands they subsequently make, leading practitioners to make pedagogical decisions they consider unsound as a means of appeasement. In this sense, the findings provide empirical evidence to support suggestions in the literature that a shifting perception of the roles of parents and teachers in China can lead to challenges in promoting cooperation (Guo & Kilderry, 2018). Fay’s experience closely resonated with this:

Her child was required to remember 500 words every day. I suggested to reduce that number, but she immediately denied by saying, “... If you asked him to memorise 500 words a day, he would only remember a maximum of 50 words. ... If you only require him to memorise 50 words a day, he’ll only have 5.” ... We not only need to teach well, but also to face the challenges raised by all kinds of demanding parents.

(Fay, Hong Kong)

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<sup>1</sup> Liz was working in an institute where parents are regularly invited to observe teachers during lessons. Such lessons are referred to as *open lessons* or *open door classes*.

Further external pressure arose from the assessment orientation that is often seen to characterise China's education system today (Littlewood, 2007):

[My school] cares about both IB<sup>2</sup> ideas and the result of High School Entrance Examination. There are ... conflicts between the two ambitions. ... We want to give students authentic language experience to develop their language skills and knowledge, so there are a lot of courses taught by foreign teachers. ... However, for the improvement of exam results, Chinese English teachers still need to force students to memorize as many vocabulary and phrases in the National Curriculum as possible.

(Hera, Hong Kong)

Added to the implied assumption that traditional teacher-centred pedagogies provide more effective preparation for examinations, the situation points to expectations that local teachers transitioning from their MATESOL programme will adopt pedagogies more inherent to the Chinese education system, leaving little room to put into practice their learning. The lack of support for teachers shaping their own professional practice is further supported by Lulu's experience:

The school I've been working in has its own teaching system. ... Teachers design unified handout and PPT [PowerPoint] for the whole grade. It's not always acceptable if I use my own teaching material and abandon the teaching material imposed by school.

(Lulu, Hong Kong)

Being constrained to use the ready-made materials worked against Lulu's pedagogical beliefs about adapting teaching to the needs of learners, disempowering her in the pedagogical decision-making process and again suggesting that far from a "natural" process, pedagogical adaptation is something teachers need to be equipped and empowered for, particularly in the face of constraints and demands.

## Relating Theory to Practice

Reflecting concerns raised about teacher education programmes (Allen & Wright, 2013; Roness, 2011; Skilbeck & Connell, 2004), participants highlighted a range of obstacles to the implementation of their learning on the MATESOL programme to their practice in the

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<sup>2</sup> IB stands for *International Baccalaureate*, an internationally recognised education programme running through all stages of school education. The participant was referring to the IB Diploma Programme for ages 15–19, focussed on academic learning across a range of subjects.



classroom. Participants highlighted the fact that some of the concepts and theories they were exposed to during their studies signalled a move away from the methods typically implemented in China and risked alienating students who were unfamiliar with them:

Chinese students are more accustomed to the class where teachers talk and explain nonstop ... and to the teacher who teaches them a bunch of new words, and always giving them lots of input.

(Fay, Hong Kong)

Indeed, in some cases they were unwelcome by students and perceived as an inefficient use of time by both teacher and students:

I organised students to do group discussions ... but I found that ... the students all like to go through the textbook ... rather than take the time to communicate with their group members in English. Also the whole process takes a long time and the effect is not particularly good. The students themselves feel that this will be a waste of time.

(Yula, Hong Kong)

In the face of students' negative reactions to a "new" approach, Yula abandoned her intended pedagogy and opted instead for "safe" practice (Feiman-Menser, 2001). The incident exemplifies a struggle between Yula's envisaged professional practice and the reality, potentially contributing to a sense of disempowerment and weakening her professional identity (Bandura, 2012). In the context of collaborative and supportive professional structures, such experiences might be considered learning opportunities, stimulating reflection on good practice. Instead, despite the importance of collaborative work for language learning, Yula concluded that group discussions are a "waste of time." Elsa described a similar experience:

I do not see direct effect of teaching strategies upon students' language learning achievement, but I can see students' improvement after persisting in reciting articles. ... Now I require all the students to recite articles.

(Elsa, Shanghai)

Participants not only felt unable to put into practice the pedagogies they had learned about on the MATESOL programme, but also lacked the tools and the skills to develop pedagogical responses to the classroom features they were faced with:

We discussed many things about the English teacher during our graduate studies, but there are many more things that we need to consider and learn during teaching practice, ... We wrote and read many arguments, but when we're teaching, the situation varies a lot. (Geri, Hong Kong)

Indeed, there was a shared view that MATESOL programmes do not go far enough in connecting theory to practice, particularly in relation to the students' own future teaching contexts:

The graduate study is really very theoretical. Graduate study gives us a framework, but how to use it? It is not detailed explained and specifically did not consider the context.

(Maja, Hong Kong)

I think my postgraduate learning did not shape my practice a lot. ... It does not have much impact on my teaching.

(Zita, Harbin)

I personally think the relevance ... is little, because my teaching environment is quite different from the expected teaching environment.

(Elsa, Shanghai)

We learn lots of theories ... yet we have little chance to practice in post-graduate study. ... Students in Europe tend to speak more when learning a language, but they did not pay much attention to grammar and spelling, which is quite different to the situation in mainland China.

(Hope, Scotland)

Concerns raised by participants point to the value of integrating opportunities for practice in the process of teacher learning (Carr, 1992; Lampert, 2010). Such opportunities during the MATESOL programme could offer students a safe context in which to experiment with innovative teaching strategies, engaging students in guided, concrete, and context-specific reflection on the relationship between theory and practice, equipping them for adopting an evidence-based pedagogy and constituting an important step in forging a robust professional identity (Wenger, 2003). The findings point also to a lack of wider support mechanisms for these developing teachers. Access to mentoring, which seemed lacking for the participants, would arguably provide a key mechanism in the context of classroom teaching, to transform such experiences into learning opportunities reflecting on ways to shape and adapt theory in response to classroom contexts (Clarke, 1994).

## **Supporting Developing Practice**

Echoing Ball, Sleep, Boerst, and Bass's (2009) call for teacher education to better equip teachers for doing practice rather than talking

about practice, participants pointed to the significant role of apprenticeship in their professional development, drawing comparisons between their learning on the MATESOL programmes and their learning through observation of experienced colleagues. From the beginning of the project, Maja bemoaned the lack of practical examples on her programme:

I want to hear more real-world scenarios and cases regarding the application of theories from teaching content. ... Our professors touching upon the implications for pedagogy on language education are quite general.

(Maja, Hong Kong)

Once in the classroom, she pointed to the usefulness of observing the practice of others:

I would observe other teachers' lessons. By observation I can learn how to guide students to answer questions, how to manage a class. Experienced teachers can really make the natural convergence and their teaching is quite smooth.

(Maja, Hong Kong)

This was true also for Zita:

What I learned from the English teaching class during the postgraduate course is not directly related to my work. ... Instead what I learn from the experienced teachers, self-reflection, and practice in the experiment is very helpful.

(Zita, Harbin)

This sentiment was further highlighted by Elsa both on completing her MATESOL learning...:

I think the present teaching cannot be related to teaching of my postgraduate course, while the most influential thing is through the communication with experienced teachers and observing their lessons.

(Elsa, Shanghai)

... and once in the classroom:

I think my teaching is more shaped through watching the video lesson network, my practice and observing other teachers' lessons. About the theoretical knowledge, I rarely think about it before preparing a lesson or [during] a lesson.

(Elsa, Shanghai)

Systematic integration and critical examination of such examples on MATESOL programmes would arguably constitute an important

means of enabling students to understand that those very examples they consider effective teaching are possible only as a result of a close interplay between theory and practice. Although participants highlighted the usefulness of observing experienced colleagues, the wider context seemed to leave participants largely isolated:

As I was the only person who studied in this programme, I can only rely on myself when I prepare for a class using the knowledge I learn in the program. My fellow teachers at school can't support me because they have no idea what theory I want to use. If my university teachers can offer certain help, it will be better.

(Lulu, Hong Kong)

Previous literature highlights the isolation that novice teachers experience when entering the teaching profession (e.g., Mandel, 2006). However, Lulu, who had been a teacher before her MATESOL course, also felt isolated as a result of her wish to implement pedagogies not in keeping with those of her colleagues. Drawing on Tsui's (2007) concept of alignment for acceptance into the professional community, Lulu's decision to pursue further professional development through the MATESOL programme may have inadvertently contributed to misalignment with her practice community, leaving her feeling isolated and unsupported.

## **Challenges to Professional Self-Efficacy**

Issues emerging from the findings closely relate to professional self-efficacy. Participants seemed to lack confidence in their pedagogy, knowing what they would like to achieve but having little idea of how to achieve it. Implicit in this was a need for feedback mechanisms, supporting the notion of social interaction in a community of practice as fundamental to teacher learning:

I am not sure whether my teaching method is effective or not.

(Tai, Beijing)

Sometimes I feel that I do not know how to guide students to answer questions. ... I feel that I still lack the ability to give clear and concise instructions. ... I am thinking whether it is because my presentation of this language point is not clear enough. ... I think my instructional language is not concise.

(Maja, Hong Kong)

Sometimes I find that what I remember from my learning are all fragments. Since my knowledge is not systematic enough, and my experience is very limited, my teaching practice seems to be [unconvincing].

(Hera, Hong Kong)

I do not think I have a very effective method in teaching writing. ... I am still confused how to use effective methods to teach writing.

(Lucky, Harbin)

Participants blamed themselves for their perceived inadequacy in teaching. Maja blamed her presentation and language choice; Hera pointed to her limited experience and inadequate knowledge; Lucky highlighted her ineffective teaching methods. Whether or not these evaluations are accurate, participants' professional self-efficacy appeared low and there was little evidence that they might be able to solve the problems or to avail themselves of support for processing the challenges they faced. Given the importance of competency experiences in promoting self-efficacy (Sweet, Fortier, Strachan, & Blanchard, 2012), participants' sense of incompetence in developing an effective pedagogy is concerning.

## CONCLUSION

The present study examined the experiences of teachers transitioning from MATESOL programmes to classroom practice in their own words, specifically focusing on understanding how and to what extent these teachers could explicitly draw on their MATESOL learning to shape their practice, and the challenges and opportunities they encountered in the process.

Findings point to a range of challenges in the transition, specifically regarding the implementation of teaching practices that integrate the knowledge acquired during the MATESOL programme. External challenges manifest themselves, for instance, through pressures imposed by stakeholders, in this case parents and the established practices of their community of teacher practitioners, lack of a cohesive community of practice they could smoothly integrate into, lack of institutional support and flexibility for developing new pedagogies, and a mismatch between the pedagogical approaches learners are accustomed to and the principles and practices participants learned about during their study. Internal challenges comprise low professional self-efficacy and a tendency to abandon perceived good or innovative practices in favour of "safe" pedagogies, in turn exacerbating the low levels of self-efficacy.

The interplay between the former and the latter merits further investigation.

A fruitful future avenue of investigation would be exploring novice teachers' understandings of theory and how these understandings evolve over the course of their teaching trajectory. Participants seemed to view theory as a predetermined body of knowledge, acquired during their studies, distancing their practice from theory and situating themselves outside the community of theorists and experts (Clarke, 1994). Rather than viewing themselves as members of a knowledge community with a meaningful contribution to make in shaping theory, participants appeared to view the theories, concepts, and pedagogies encountered in the MATESOL programme as a standard to be reached and found themselves wanting. The extent to which participants' notions of theory and practice are a result of discourse in their university studies would merit further investigation. Similarly, understanding the processes and factors that might support novice teachers to view themselves as theory makers in their own classrooms would offer insights into the development of teacher identity from novice to expert.

Participants struggled to see the relevance of their studies to their teaching practice, in particular *how* to apply their learning to shape a cohesive and effective pedagogy, responsive to the nature of their context and their learners. To this end, they wished their MATESOL programmes had more extensively integrated illustrative teaching exemplars. Participants pointed to the usefulness of an apprenticeship approach offering opportunities to observe more experienced teachers and allowing them to better understand the ways in which principles and theories might effectively be integrated into classroom practice through real teaching examples. Models and exemplars of teaching are important ways of supporting teachers to transition from tacit understandings of language teaching to evidence-based frameworks grounded in theory, from *everyday concepts* to *scientific concepts* (Johnson & Golombek, 2011). Data pointed to participants' beliefs that their pedagogy was ineffective and that their professional capacity was limited. Deconstructing and challenging deeply ingrained everyday concepts and beliefs about what constitutes effective language teaching (Freeman, 2002) may also be an important precondition to promoting higher professional self-efficacy among teachers, allowing teachers to develop an empirically grounded teaching framework. Yet the usefulness of such processes relies also on their responsiveness to the micro, meso, and macro contexts (Douglas Fir Group, 2016); participants seemed caught in a conflict between their ideal practice and envisaged identities and their classroom, institutional, and social contexts.

This article focused on the interplay between teachers' learning in MATESOL programmes and their classroom experiences: Students' learning does not stop when their MATESOL studies are complete, making it important to consider also their wider developmental context as teachers, including important players such as in-school mentors, professional networks, and the like. Although for countless students who return to teach in mainland China, these support structures are often very limited or nonexistent, thus making the role of the MA tutor in the professional preparation of their students an important piece of the puzzle.

## Implications

There is an urgent need to better understand the nature of the experiences of teachers transitioning from MATESOL programmes to the classroom. The significant contribution of this study can be understood in three ways. First, it extends and enriches understanding of international language teachers and their professional environment, particularly EL teachers and their experiences during their first teaching year by listening to their own reflections on their practice; second, it provides insights into the underresearched experiences of language teachers transitioning between countries from study to classroom practice; third, it aims to contribute to existing research on the theory–practice relationship in language teaching by understanding the affordances and constraints that arise from teaching preparation that is primarily theory based and delivered in a context removed from the classroom and classroom processes.

The first significant implication of this study is the need for further follow-up longitudinal research tracking the factors and processes that mediate teachers' adaptation. For many teachers, understanding the relevance of their MATESOL programme is a long-term process requiring experience and reflection on critical incidents. A second key implication is the need to equip students with robust frameworks for developing a personal teaching philosophy resistant to discouragements and pressures and nurturing of their professional self-efficacy. Essential to effective ongoing teacher development is an awareness of the ways in which theory is shaped and reshaped in the process of classroom practice and reflection (Wright, 2010). Thus, opportunities to critically examine their role as theorists would be a useful component of MATESOL programmes. Finally, closer school–university partnerships might usefully filter into MATESOL programmes, to include collaborations with schools in the countries where students will begin their teaching careers. Such partnerships might open doors for



integrating teaching practicums into MATESOL programmes, involving local teachers in shaping communities of practice, and potentially offering opportunities for those teaching in MATESOL programmes to experience the classrooms their students will be working in, contributing towards a more authentically internationalised higher education pedagogy.

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