

“A small piece of my heart remained”: In-service foreign language teachers’ perspectives on short-term mobility in continuous professional development

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Abstract

Based on the need for qualified French, German and Spanish teachers in Norway, a continuous professional development (CPD) programme for in-service teachers was developed by six universities in Norway, France, Germany and Spain. The hybrid course design includes weekly online sessions, one physical seminar in Norway and short-term mobility involving one week abroad per semester. This article discusses how the professional development of 25 teachers, in terms of intercultural competence (IC), language learning and subject didactic knowledge (SDK), is influenced by short-term mobility. Interviews with the participants were subject to content analysis and discussed through the lens of intercultural theory and literature on CPD education. The findings indicate that hybrid course design is vital for the participants’ professional development. Short-term mobility is particularly salient to the teachers’ motivation and their development of IC, language learning and SDK. Meeting the same instructors online and on site increases the participants’ sense of security and fosters a community of practice. The study has implications for the organisation of CPD programmes and addresses the gap in knowledge regarding the role of short-term mobility in CPD programmes for in-service foreign language teachers in Norway and internationally.

Keywords: Continuous professional development, intercultural competence, language learning, short-term mobility, foreign languages, in-service teachers

1. Introduction

A shared objective of the European Union and Norway’s language policies is for its citizens to be able to communicate in two foreign languages (FLs) (European Parliament, 2025; Forskrift om NKR og EQF, 2017). Educating qualified teachers is key to achieving this goal. This study examines the influence of short-term mobility abroad on the professional development of in-service French, German and Spanish teachers who participated in a continuous professional development (CPD) programme in Norway.

Despite Norway's explicit aim to educate more qualified FL teachers, the dwindling recruitment numbers raise cause for concern (Haugen et al., 2024; Meld.St. 25, 2016–2017). Since 2009, the Ministry of Education and Research has funded CPD programmes for teachers. Nevertheless, a diminishing percentage of this funding goes towards qualifying FL teachers (Ministry of Education and Research, 2009, 2023). Furthermore, only online CPD programmes without obligatory stays abroad are supported (Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, 2019). This policy effectively contravenes the national guidelines for FL teacher education that strongly advise a stay abroad as a part of such education (Universities Norway, 2016) and the general research consensus that studying abroad is favourable to FL acquisition (Llanes, 2011). Although teachers' professional development has been extensively studied (see e.g. Evans, 2019), research on CPD programmes and short-term mobility is limited (Coburn & Borg, 2024 Helmchen & Melo-Pfeifer, 2018). Responding to Whatley et al.'s (2021) call for more research on short-term mobility, our study discusses the professional development of FL in-service teachers who participated in a CPD programme with integrated short-term mobility.

Focus group interviews with 25 teachers about their development constitute the primary data for this article, with a particular focus on the role of the study weeks abroad. Accordingly, we formulated the following research question: How may study weeks abroad, integrated into CPD courses, influence the professional development of in-service FL teachers in terms of intercultural competence (IC), language learning and subject didactic knowledge (SDK)?

2. Background

To address the need for more qualified teachers of French, German and Spanish, a CPD programme with 30 European Credit Transfer System points over two semesters was developed in 2020 and 2021, with six universities in Norway, France, Germany and Spain collaborating.¹ The CPD programme's hybrid design included different learning contexts, as outlined in Table 1, in addition to self-study.

Table 1 Course design

| Learning context | Autumn term | Spring term | Duration | Location |
|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------|--------------------------|
| Physical | 1 study week | 1 study week | 5 days | France/ Germany/Spain |
| Physical | 1 seminar | 1 seminar | 2 days | Norway |
| Digital | 12 online meetings | 12 online meetings | 2 hours | Zoom |

The CPD programme consists of courses in French, German and Spanish, and from 2021 to 2024, a total of 25 in-service teachers were enrolled in the programme. The inclusion of short-term mobility was grounded in a socio-cultural view on language learning, highlighting the importance of interacting with others to learn a language “in the dialogic interactions that arise between socially constituted individuals engaged in activities which are co-constructed with other individuals” (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995, p. 116) and the importance of context for language learning (Llanes, 2011). The two short-term mobility periods therefore occurred in groups where the participants could reflect on shared experiences while receiving institutional support, a crucial factor in IC development (Humphreys & Baker, 2021).

Interaction with others in the target language may also develop the learner's communicative language competencies and strategies. Communicative language competence includes linguistic competence, as well as sociolinguistic and pragmatic competencies, following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2020). Furthermore, in alignment with the recommendations from the National Guidelines for FL Teacher

Education (Universities Norway, 2016), the white paper on International Student Mobility (Meld. St. 7 (2020–2021)) state that:

Both longer and shorter forms of international mobility contribute to improving Norwegian higher education. For some students, and perhaps especially within professional educational programmes, the alternative to travel for short-term mobility is not to travel at all. The benefit the student can gain from short-term mobility is large compared to not having a stay abroad at all. (p. 54, authors' translation)

The aims of the study weeks include authentic opportunities for language learning as well as experience of cultural practices. The first study week was placed early in the first term to kick-start the learning processes and further motivate the students. During the study week in the second term, the students returned to the same place and the same instructors. The study weeks consist of a combination of teaching on campus, for example, lectures on cultural topics or language-focused activities, as well as excursions and activities off campus to facilitate language learning and intercultural meetings, such as literature walks, cooking classes, hikes and museum visits (see e.g. Gretsche & Kniffka, 2025).

The course design aimed at developing professional FL teachers with an emphasis on the participants' IC, language skills and SDK. The courses build on an action-oriented approach and insights from the CEFRL and the European Language Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) (Council of Europe, 2020; Newby et al., 2011). To succeed in a CPD course, motivation is fundamental. To define the participants' motivation for the CPD programme, we distinguished between behaviours driven by interest and enjoyment – intrinsic motivation – and behaviours driven by an external reward – extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The following sections define the central terminology and present the theory and previous research on professional development, IC, mobility and CPD programmes in language learning.

3. Professional development

Evans (2014) describes teachers' professional development as the acknowledgement of "a 'better' way of 'doing' things" (p. 187), both mentally and physically. Becoming a professional FL teacher requires solid competencies in the target language, broad IC in relation to the areas where the language is spoken as well as knowledge about how languages are learned. It could be argued that all of this is part of FL teachers' SDK, but we distinguish between the three for analytical purposes.

When describing the participants' recognition of what enables them to perform better professionally, we build on Bayrhuber and Frederking's (2024) model, which includes three types of SDK. SDK type 1 (SDK 1) is experience-based and relates to Shulman's (1986) "wisdom of practice" (p. 9). It evolves through practice as teachers reflect on their experiences from teaching alone, with colleagues, in relation to learning content and the wider debate on teaching and learning. SDK type 2 (SDK 2) is research-based and corresponds to the academic discipline of subject didactics. It includes knowledge of "teaching and learning processes", how teachers and students think and feel, and the facilitation of learning, all in relation to the subject (Bayrhuber & Frederking, 2024). The overarching level of subject didactics, SDK type 3 (SDK 3), is knowledge about subject didactics at a meta-level across subjects. Our understanding of SDK emphasises SDK 1 and SDK 2, highlighting the experiences and knowledge that enables the participants to accommodate pupils' learning, but it also includes transdisciplinary understanding pertaining to SDK 3.

4. Intercultural competence

Inspired by Deardorff (2019), Dypedahl (2019) and the Council of Europe (2018), we define IC “as the attitudes, skills and knowledge required for constructive communication and behaviour ‘when interacting across difference’” (Deardorff, 2019, p. 102; Heggernes, 2021, p. 25). Models of IC typically include (1) knowledge, (2) skills and (3) attitudes (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009), as in Byram’s (1997, 2021) model of intercultural communicative competence. This model was developed for FL teaching and is accordingly used below to describe some of the components of what we, in alignment with the Norwegian curriculum, refer to as IC. IC involves both cognitive and affective components, and in the process of developing IC, these frequently overlap (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009).

IC is one of the core elements of the Curriculum for Foreign Languages in Norway and focalises knowledge of languages and cultures and perspective-taking (The Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, 2019). Consequently, IC is also an important component of the education of FL teachers. Through learning an FL, students will explore and gain knowledge of “other languages, cultures, ways of living and thinking”, discover “new perspectives on the world and themselves”, which furthers “curiosity of [and] understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity” (The Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, 2019, p. 2). These formulations align with intercultural theory (Baker, 2011; Byram, 1997, 2021; Council of Europe, 2018; Deardorff, 2006).

Language-learning courses have traditionally focused on factual knowledge of the culture of a target-language country (Haukås & Vold, 2012), which can lead to essentialist conceptions of national cultures and stereotyping. Dervin (2016) warns of this risk and posits that communication occurs between individuals, not cultures. Consequently, critical and multiple perspectives on both one’s own and others’ cultures are required to develop *intercultural knowledge* (Byram, 2021; Hoff, 2020). A curious and open attitude can lead language learners to seek knowledge by employing the “skills of *discovery and/or interaction*” (Byram, 2021, p. 65, italics added). The latter entails the “ability to acquire new knowledge of cultural practices” through communication and interaction with interlocutors with a different cultural background “under the constraints of real-time” (Byram, 2021, p. 65). An example could be a language learner trying to communicate with native speakers, such as our students during their study weeks abroad. Interaction across difference can be both cognitively and emotionally demanding, for example, when trying to make sense of both a FL and of different ways of communicating simultaneously. Consequently, many components are involved in constructive communication across difference, but in this article, we highlight the skill of *discovery and interaction*, in addition to *intercultural knowledge*.

We draw on Baker (2015) to consider how IC can be fostered through language-learning courses. He suggests activities such as the following:

... investigating the relationships between culture, language and communication through: exploring local cultures; exploring language learning materials; exploring the media and arts both online and through more ‘traditional’ mediums; making use of cultural informants; and engaging in intercultural communication both face to face and electronically. (Baker, 2015, p. 131)

These activities highlight the importance of experience in developing IC (Hammer et al., 2003). While intercultural contact is no guarantee that IC will develop, research reveals “a negative relation between contact and prejudice” (Bennett, 2009, p. 132). Among the conditions that can contribute to IC development through IC contact is “facilitated contact” through mentoring and reflection (Bennett, 2009, pp. 132–133). In our context, the shared goals of the participants and their instructors included the curricular aims of increased IC (Oslo Metropolitan University, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). The learning objectives of German, for example, include using their knowledge of culture and society from the target-language countries to “identify and evaluate intercultural

challenges, and [...] be capable of teaching necessary strategies to overcome and reflect [on] such challenges” to guide FL pupils’ IC development (Oslo Metropolitan University 2023a). To cater for communication, interaction with and experience of different cultures for fostering the IC of the FL learner (Baker, 2015; Bennett, 2009; Byram, 2021; Hammer et al., 2003), the CPD programme was designed to accommodate physical and real-time encounters with representatives of the target-language countries. The encounters may function as a form of “facilitated contact” (Bennett, 2009, p. 132), allowing for joint reflection on the experiences and countering stereotyping.

5. Professional development through short-term mobility

Short-term mobility to partner universities in target-language countries was an important part of the course design. Research on mobility shows that:

... study abroad has the potential to enhance language learning in every dimension, whether it is defined in terms of general constructs such as proficiency or fluency, in terms of skills, or in terms of components of communicative competence, such as strategic or discourse abilities. (Kinging, 2013, p. 341)

Despite the amount of research on mobility and study abroad, there are few studies on the role of short-term mobility in teachers’ professional development (Helmchen & Melo-Pfeifer, 2018). One exception is Helmchen and Melo-Pfeifer’s (2018) study on the professional development of German pre-service teachers through two-week exchanges to Spain. While the students were primarily motivated by opportunities for language learning before the exchange, they shifted their focus to intercultural and professional development when reflecting on their experiences in the subsequent focus group interviews. The students highlighted the opportunities for comparing the two educational systems as beneficial to professional development. The discussion of their intercultural and professional experiences was characterised by “emotional talk” (Helmchen & Melo-Pfeifer, 2018, p. 109), where the students agreed on the superiority of their national educational system compared to that of the host nation.

Llanes’s (2011) review of FL learning contexts shows that oral skills and vocabulary improve more through stays abroad than through studying at home. Students who reported that they interacted more in the FL had greater gains (Yager, 1998). Mobility duration is generally linked to improved linguistic and intercultural competence (Whatley et al., 2021). In her study of advanced learners of Spanish L2 who spent an academic year abroad in Barcelona, Isabelli (2004) concluded that one year abroad “seems to be the most beneficial for the acquisition of more complex aspects of a language” (p. 124). However, this presumption has been challenged, and some studies have also indicated substantial gains in learning outcomes through short-term mobility (Landon et al., 2017). Even short stays of three to four weeks can increase listening comprehension, oral fluency and vocabulary acquisition, in particular for weaker learners (Llanes & Munoz, 2009). Other studies indicate that the language level before mobility is important for such benefits to occur (Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014). Research documents, however, that usage of the FL in- and outside of the classroom is linked to both intercultural and linguistic development (Whatley et al., 2021).

6. Research on continuous professional development for foreign language teachers in Norway

CPD education in Norway in FLs and English is mainly offered as online courses, although some of the English courses include face-to-face seminars. Coburn and Borg (2024) studied the impact of a

CPD course in Norway involving a combination of face-to-face seminars and individual work through a multiple case study of four primary English-language teachers. One of the objectives of these courses is the creation of communities of practice both in and across schools, but as the teachers did not meet in person very often and did most of the work outside the seminars individually, the organisation of the course did not support the building of such communities (Coburn & Borg, 2024). Classroom observations showed that at the end of the course, the teachers spoke more English in the classroom, and they spoke more fluently, but to some extent, produced more errors (Coburn & Borg, 2024). Importantly, the students had only been exposed to English during the course seminars and did not report any type of immersion as part of the course.

The CPD course for German teachers in Norway described in Haukås, Pietzuch, and Schei (2023) was entirely online. The main aim of their study was to see if the principles of self-determination theory (SDT) – autonomy, competence and relatedness – that were built into the course could be effective in promoting motivation for learning. Despite its online format, the students reported that they spoke more German in class throughout the course and that they experienced “a growing feeling of competence throughout the course” (Haukås et al., 2023, p. 672). The insights from the study “suggest that designing an online language teacher education programme based on SDT can be beneficial in terms of ensuring students’ motivation levels, positive learning outcomes, and low attrition rates” (Haukås et al., 2023, p. 675).

Even though the *National Guidelines for the Primary and Lower Secondary Teacher Education Programme for Years 5–10* (Universities Norway, 2016) recommend a stay abroad for future language teachers where the target language is spoken, this is not mentioned in these studies of CPD courses in Norway. As far as we know, Haukås et al.’s (2023) study is the only one relating to a CPD course in an FL other than English in Norway, and being entirely online, it is important to learn about the benefits of including short-term mobility in course design. The present study sheds light on the in-service teachers’ perceived benefits from the study weeks abroad during their CPD course.

7. Method

To follow the participants’ development during the study weeks abroad specifically and more generally during the courses, a qualitative research design was developed. The primary data consist of focus group interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) with all participants who had enrolled in the programme at the time of the study and were conducted with three cohorts in the period from 2021 to 2023. Focus group interviews were deemed appropriate to elicit multiple perspectives on the participants’ learning while providing opportunities for building on one another’s responses and probing the topic (Creswell, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Aligning with a socioconstructivist epistemology (Vygotsky, 1978), we consider the group setting as beneficial for professional development, as it provides opportunities for joint reflection and learning among peers.

Furthermore, focus group interviews allow for investigating teachers’ perceptions at the group level rather than at the individual level. Structured interview guides were used for all cohorts. The first and third cohorts were interviewed once and the second cohort twice at the end of the study weeks abroad when their experiences and reflections were still fresh.

The interview guides contained four thematic categories: motivation (2 questions), expectations and IC (8 questions), language learning (4 questions) and professional development (2 questions). After the initial questions about the students’ motivation to qualify as a French/German/Spanish teacher through a CPD programme, the other questions targeted their experiences during the study weeks abroad. Questions about differing expectations and potential differences between the first and second study weeks were added to the interview guide for the second interview to capture the

students' development. The project was registered with the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. All participants consented to audio-recorded interviews which were stored in a safe and encrypted tool for data storage. Once transcribed, all recordings were deleted. The transcriptions were revised and coded in NVivo. Each focus group interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. In total, 25 teachers were interviewed, as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2 Interview participants

| Cohort | Spanish | German | French | Total |
|--------|---------|--------|--------|-------|
| First | 2 | 3 | 0 | 5 |
| Second | 5 | 6 | 2 | 13 |
| Third | 0 | 7 | 0 | 7 |
| Total | 7 | 16 | 2 | 25 |

In the reporting of interview data, the participants were assigned random numbers from S1 to S25, with the letter S equalling "student". Secondary data encompass course evaluations carried out both during the mid-term and at the end of term, as well as evaluations of the study weeks.

7.1 Participants and researchers

The participants consisted of a very diverse group, ranging from first-language users in the FL to learners at an A1/A2 level, while the majority ranged from A2–B1.² Some were already teaching the language, while others had no experience with FL teaching. The cohorts included teachers with less than five years of experience and teachers with more than 20 years of experience. As the size of the cohorts is small and the three authors were involved in various roles in the design, teaching and organisation of the programme, information is not provided on an individual level to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

7.2 Data analysis

The interview data were subject to content analysis and coded through an abductive approach (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017; Cohen et al., 2017). The latter entails that some codes are deduced from theory, whereas other codes emerge through the analysis. The following codes were deductive: *motivation* (Ryan & Deci, 2017), *discovery and interaction* and *intercultural knowledge* (Byram, 1997, 2021), *communicative language competence* (Council of Europe, 2018) and *SDK, including learning processes* (Bayrhuber & Frederking, 2024). When engaging with the data, other codes emerged, such as *immersion*, related to language learning, *emotional response*, related to all categories, and *confidence, teaching approaches* and *community of practice* related to SDK. While these, to differing degrees, can be linked to theory, such as communities of practice, this theory was not part of the theoretical background.

To enhance validity, two coders coded parts of the material. The overarching codes frequently overlapped, indicating the relationships between them. The double coding revealed a difference in the coders' interpretation of the subcategories for IC: discovery/interaction and knowledge. This is not surprising, as discovery often leads to knowledge. After joint discussions among the three coders regarding the categories, overlap and differences in coding, the data were coded according to the most salient category. This resulted in the following code structure to express the FL teachers' professional development:



Figure 1 Professional development: Code structure

8. Results

The findings suggest that success factors for the in-service teachers' professional development included the following: **(1) Motivation:** Extrinsic factors include gaining a qualification in FL teaching and the attractiveness of the study weeks abroad, and intrinsic factors include the desire to improve competence in the target language and develop SDK. **(2) Intercultural competence:** The emotional impact and knowledge developed through the study weeks abroad contributed to reflections on one's own and others' cultures and an increased awareness of linking intercultural experiences to teaching. **(3) Language learning:** The use of language in authentic situations in the target-language country furthered both language skills and increased linguistic confidence. **(4) SDK:** The practical and aesthetic activities, such as cooking classes and engagement with art both on and off campus during the study weeks abroad, coupled with a focus on SDK, prompted professional development. Relationships with peers and teachers played an important role in the development of all three categories. In the following section, we report the results in more detail.

8.1 Motivation

The participants' motivation could be divided into extrinsic and intrinsic factors. Regarding extrinsic factors, the possibility of visiting a target-language country featured prominently in the responses: "One of the criteria, if I were to study German, was that I wanted to go to Germany" (S10). Becoming a qualified FL teacher with the 30 credits required was the second most important reason. This could also lead to more job opportunities or a more interesting job situation: "I wanted to teach more subjects, and so German was an excellent choice" (S11). Several participants were encouraged by their principals, as their schools needed a qualified FL teacher, particularly when colleagues retired.

A central intrinsic factor was the desire to develop competence in both the target language and SDK. The teachers believed that this would increase their confidence as FL teachers. Increased confidence was noted already six weeks into the course: "It is lovely to have the confidence that I notice now" (S12). The focus on SDK also attracted the participants: "This is something that I can actually use in the classroom, not just a lot of theory" (S8). Along with the motivation behind selecting the courses, a finding in the second round of interviews was that motivation for professional development, including language learning, evolved throughout the course, in particular because of the study weeks and the sense of achievement gained. The instructors and co-students

greatly affected motivation: “I’ve been extremely motivated by my co-students, and, not least, by the teachers we relate to on a daily basis. You have, like, been the linchpin” (S10).

8.2 Intercultural competence

The questions in the interview guide relating to IC revolved around the in-service students’ expectations of going abroad and experiencing cultural meetings. Were their expectations met or revised, were there any surprises and did the stay give them new perspectives on the world and/or themselves?

8.2.1 Discovery and interaction

The interview after the first study week included several comments about easily observable similarities and differences. The teachers remarked on similarities in looks, such as Normands being tall and blonde with a Nordic look (S24), and differences, for example, that everyone on public transport in Freiburg wore masks during the Covid 19 pandemic (S10). Infrastructure was also highlighted, for example, that society was still cash dependent (S11) and a well-functioning public transport system existed:

[Like in Oslo] there’s lots of people in the street, an enormously high number of bikes, cars and trams, but [in Freiburg] it works so well because people look out for one another and they are polite, as you see somewhat less of in Oslo. There it’s a bit more, elbowing your way ahead [in Oslo]. (S23)

The discovery of differences in daily routines could be a source of frustration, for example, late mealtimes, but also something to which the participants adapted.

Human interaction differed from the teachers’ expectations, as exemplified in this quote from a native speaker in the target language who had lived for several years in Norway:

I wasn’t prepared for them being so generous ... I don’t know how much of their spare time they must have spent on us and how much they involve us in their personal lives ... It was a super positive surprise! (S14)

Instructors were perceived as friendly, welcoming and hard-working, and as models for the target-language country’s culture.

Whereas politeness was repeatedly mentioned, some participants expressed surprise at the rudeness of some shop employees. A school visit also revealed differences in how German teachers and pupils interacted, indicating a more hierarchical relationship than our participants were accustomed to. They also discovered differences across regions and continents in terms of both linguistic varieties and forms of interaction. As one student stated, “I have my first language, but that is from Latin America, and I have to become more aware of what type of words I’m using, as that is not the word used here [in Spain]” (S2). The Spanish, French and Germans were described as more sociable than Norwegians. The teachers considered it useful to learn about such differences because it allowed them to discover differences and see more perspectives. The increased confidence derived from improved linguistic competence also gave participants new perspectives on themselves. This made them realise what they were capable of and improved their teacher competence.

New discoveries occurred during the second study week, which made the teachers reflect on how to adapt to cultural expectations. When a junior instructor acted, in the teachers' opinion, deferentially in front of the professors, they reflected on the hierarchy and their own interactions with the faculty, for example, how to express gratitude to both junior and senior instructors. The invitation to a senior instructor's home was perceived as an extraordinary and pleasant surprise. As stated by a teacher who had lived in German-speaking countries for several years, "This is not typical of Germany" (S17).

8.2.2 Intercultural knowledge

The development of knowledge about one's own and others' cultures and social interaction is closely intertwined with discovery. When discovering that daily routines differed from Norway, the participants gained knowledge of other cultures, for example, that dinner is generally served later in Spain and France, and the reasons for this, as well as knowledge about themselves and how to adapt. When "you have some background knowledge, it is easier to understand others", and "being more around other cultures" can make you more open, as S25 stated.

Through spending time in the target-language country during the study weeks, the participants gained first-hand knowledge of historical events, places and cultural traditions. This makes a difference in teaching, the participants noted, as they can tell their pupils about their own experiences rather than finding online materials. It motivates the pupils, another teacher added, for example, when she told her pupils about the French tradition with the *Galette de roi* (French pastry served on Epiphany), "they all went quiet, they thought it was super exciting ... it makes French come alive and the country interesting to the pupils, which can motivate them" (S24).

8.2.3 Emotional response

This category relates to both IC and language learning. IC develops in interaction between both cognitive and affective stimuli, and an emotional response is frequently sensed when encountering cultural difference. The participants expressed how they were eager to make the most of the study weeks, which functions as both linguistic and cultural immersion: "I seized every opportunity to have a conversation" (S24). Both events they witnessed, such as strikes and demonstrations and activities that were part of the programme, had an emotional impact that led to intercultural learning. Even a mountain hike, which "the professors did not think was strictly necessary, as it was not pedagogical enough", can lead to intercultural learning: "We think it's really cool to experience the way Germans go hiking" (S20).

Unusual mealtimes and working long hours could be tiring. However, the participants adapted and stated that they benefitted from the extensive programmes. The strongest reactions to cultural differences were stirred by the school visits in Germany. The participants perceived a stronger hierarchy and a more direct tone from teachers to pupils than they were used to: "Like, they just declared 'you've made a mistake', 'you haven't submitted the test ... if you don't, you'll be penalised.' It was announced publicly in the classroom; those were the kind of things we reacted to" (S12). A teacher in another cohort stated that he almost wanted to intervene and say, "'Hey, you can't do that, you have to think about the kids!' It wasn't exactly a shock, but maybe they were a bit more old-fashioned" (S13). Nevertheless, the overall impression seemed to be that of a generous host culture, making "a small piece of [their] heart remain" (S12).

Linguistic immersion also had an emotional impact. Realising that they were able to communicate in an FL resulted in a strong sense of achievement. One participant seemed positively ecstatic about "[b]eing surrounded by the language all the time, listening to the news, culture, written text and sound" (S24). This immersion was "worth its weight in gold" and must be exploited to the maximum, "so let's go!" (S24). Mastering a new language rendered the participant feeling stronger

and more confident, declaring that “[l]anguage is a sort of power” (S25). The emotional impact of “the language bath” leads to the next section.

8.3 Language learning

As stated in the theory section, it is difficult to measure language learning from only one week of mobility. Nevertheless, interview data revealed that participants experienced both linguistic development and increased confidence when speaking the target language. It is important to consider that language learning during the study weeks builds on the coursework during the semester and that both the course design and the study weeks contribute to the experience of development.

The concern related to the lack of authentic opportunities to practice their target language before the CPD course was visible in the metaphors used by the participants when talking about their language skills prior to the course: “If you don’t travel to a Spanish-speaking country for many years, your language becomes rusty” (S7).

8.3.1 Immersion

The most important aspect of the study weeks abroad was the chance to use the language all the time in everyday communication, experiencing a real state of immersion: “You have to use the language when you go to a shop or a place. The constant use of the language motivates you and makes you aware of how you use the language” (S4).

Besides the multiple authentic opportunities for speaking the target language, the in-service teachers highlighted the sheer intensity of an experience described through the metaphor of bathing in the language: “It is more a language bath than it can be at home when we work full time at the same time. Also, we experienced many opportunities for communication throughout the day, in addition to the teaching we have here” (S18). Compared to the situation at home, the study weeks were much more intensive, as described by one student: “You never get to work 8–10 hours a day with German. And we interacted with German all the time” (S19).

Another important experience during immersion was the constant exposure to the target language, such as while dining or watching television. Prior knowledge of the language allowed the participants to engage in these situations. Experiencing that they were understood when talking to people increased their confidence: “Just getting a little bit of confidence makes me feel that ‘I am really able to communicate in Spanish’” (S5). Some would continue speaking the target language even when being addressed in English: “Then I continued in French until they stopped speaking English because I am not interested in speaking English when I am in France. I want to use every minute to practice the language” (S24). Other benefits from the immersion were opportunities to revise their language instantaneously and tasks like visiting the market and writing about it or discussing their experiences.

As previously mentioned, prior knowledge and preparation can increase the learning potential of mobility. Knowing that the study weeks were part of the course motivated the participants to intensify their studies to prepare for the linguistic immersion of mobility: “When thinking about us travelling, I got very motivated to work” (S4). Both the French and Spanish courses started with the first study week, and the students reported that they learned very much during the week. They also mentioned that starting with the week abroad gave them more confidence in continuing the course.

8.3.2 Communicative language competence

When in-service teachers use language in authentic situations, they do not only develop their linguistic competence. As language use also includes the development of sociolinguistic appropriateness and pragmatic consideration, the participants also developed their sociolinguistic and pragmatic competencies as they became aware of how to use the language.

To describe their development, the participants mentioned all the components of communicative language competence according to the CEFRL, such as pronunciation and phonetics, grammar, oral fluency and listening comprehension. The more formal parts of the language learning were related to the teaching on the courses, both during the study weeks and throughout the year.

Regarding sociolinguistic appropriateness learned during mobility, the participants mentioned register and varieties of the target language in addition to courtesy phrases. When communicating in authentic settings, they needed to learn to use the appropriate forms of salutation, such as *Sie* in German and *usted* in Spanish, forms that have fallen out of use in Norwegian. Furthermore, the participants gained an understanding of different varieties of the language, both in terms of vocabulary and fixed expressions, but also of how some varieties were more prestigious than others.

Finally, the in-service teachers mentioned the development of pragmatic competence, both related to enhanced spoken fluency and conversational skills, and related to writing. The sense of developing more fluency also resulted in a sense of empowerment: “Now I feel more confident when I speak German” (S15). This strong contact with the target language during the study weeks influenced the Norwegian language, as one of the students said, “I use words in German when I speak Norwegian” (S16).

Their communicative language competence also developed throughout the course, which positively affected the outcome of the second study week. Both the improved language level and returning to a familiar place saved energy.

I can say how I experienced it then, because the first time I was here I used lots and lots of energy in trying to understand, trying to get along and was stressed the whole time, right? Now I am much calmer and experience that, ‘Yes, I understand everything.’ (S17)

The students also underlined that both speaking and comprehension improved greatly during their second study week: “We were not as tired this time, and that is because we didn’t use as much energy to understand what was said as last time” (S16).

The participants also gained knowledge about their own language development. They discovered what skills were trained specifically when abroad, mainly listening, speaking and vocabulary development, whereas writing was more focalised through individual work at home. Being a learner, struggling to understand and trying to adapt, was also seen as a useful experience: “This can make it easier for me to adapt teaching to my own pupils who struggle” (S15).

8.4 Subject didactic knowledge

As with the teachers’ development of communicative language competence, the development of SDK was also ongoing throughout the entire course. Nevertheless, there are several aspects of the study weeks that contributed specifically.

The impact of improved confidence and language skills on their SDK was reported by several participants and is illustrated with the experience of one of the participants, who, in the second interview, stated that the language had become her favourite subject. It had made her work more

interesting and “it is easy to teach [and] assess the pupils, to see their level of competence. It is a joy to teach” it, and they always looked forward to going to work on the days when they were teaching the FL (S24).

Short-term mobility solidified the student experience, and being in the role of the student brought about knowledge that was useful to develop teachers’ SDK. As one teacher explained, “The feeling when we have German instructors, who are speaking, and I know German fairly well, but I was feeling that I understand what they are saying, but it doesn’t register because there’s so much at once” (S19). Being a student helped the teachers see the pupils’ perspectives, and they stated that this could make it easier to adapt their teaching to the needs of their pupils. Another teacher commented that while in Germany, she had thought a lot about her pupils at home, how rapidly she, as a teacher, spoke in class and what her pupils were able, or dared, to say out loud. Being in Germany made them reflect on how limited language competence can make learners refrain from talking, thinking that, “There’s no point, because it’s so complicated” (S21).

The study week also fuelled the teachers’ teaching approaches very directly. As mentioned in the section on IC knowledge, first-hand experiences can be brought into teaching and serve to motivate the pupils: “You bring something to the lessons that the students can’t obtain themselves, unless you bring them on a study trip,” one participant stated (S17). The participants experienced school visits, museums and other places of cultural and historical significance. The instructors modelled how one could teach language in the museum or in the kitchen and provided several tips for language-learning activities and materials.

Building communities of practice can further teachers’ professional development. We observed these communities developing through the teachers’ own initiative in the aftermath of the physical meetings in small groups. For example, the three German teachers in the first cohort decided to visit a German-speaking country together every year. In the second cohort, an inexperienced teacher who was fluent in German teamed up with an experienced teacher who was at an A1/A2 level, so that he could help her with the language and she could assist him with subject didactics.

Finally, the study weeks provided the time and opportunity to come together, listen to and reflect on one another’s experiences: “This is quite important for the educational outcome, in addition to making experiences and practicing what you have experienced” (S15). The participants confirmed that, overall, the course had changed their views on SDK and teaching practices. Learning through exploration and discovery, in the words of another participant, will lead to these teachers “implementing almost a paradigm shift within language teaching in Norway, as up until now, it has been about the rote learning of grammar. Now, we have learned how to do it!” (S23).

9. Discussion

The study weeks facilitated the participants’ professional development in terms of IC, language learning and SDK. Regarding IC, the findings highlight two categories from Byram’s (1997, 2021) model: discovery and interaction, and knowledge. The teachers reported the discovery of both similarities and differences. The study weeks allowed multiple opportunities for reflection on and discussions of cultural meetings, which is closely linked to the development of intercultural knowledge and SDK 1 (Bayrhuber & Frederking, 2024). Naturally, participants with little previous experience with the target language and cultures made more discoveries than participants with extensive experience. However, the latter also had moments of surprise and could point out incidents that contrasted with their cultural understanding.

A potential pitfall of focusing on cultural differences between Norway and the host country is that it can lead to cultural rather than intercultural competence to develop and even stereotyping (Jenkins et al., 2011). The focal role of the instructors could lead to them being perceived as representatives of their national culture rather than as individuals. The following quote is ambiguous in this respect:

Now, I know the professors fairly well through weekly online sessions and meetings in Oslo. So, learning to know individuals from the target culture has a limitless value, as they become examples of everything I see in Spanish society. They interpret it, they explain it, they put it into perspective, but simultaneously they are live representatives of that culture. (S1)

Even if the instructors were presented as “individuals”, they were also clearly seen as representatives of a national culture. The school visits in Germany may also be perceived as exemplary of the school culture in Germany. Similar to the pre-service teacher students in Helmchen and Melo-Pfeiffer’s (2018) study, our participants found it useful for their professional development to compare school systems. Another similarity was the “emotional talk” when discussing the school visits and the perceived superiority of one’s own national educational system. Interestingly, the German pre-service students were positive about the way in which Spanish teachers interacted with pupils, but were critical of there being more teacher-centred teaching approaches in Spain than in Germany. The Norwegian in-service teachers, on the other hand, were critical of how some teachers in Germany interacted with their pupils to the extent that they wanted to intervene on the pupils’ behalf. While they did not explicitly state that the less hierarchical relationships between pupils and teachers in Norway were better, they described what they saw in this German school as “old-fashioned”. This calls for Dervin’s (2016) reminder that we communicate with individuals, not with cultures. Furthermore, a longer mobility duration with multiple school visits may allow for more nuanced perceptions. Yet, there are several instances of teachers going beyond the cultural in their reflections, avoiding generalisations. Granted that many of the questions in the interview guides focused on difference, there were surprisingly few instances of stereotyping of the other cultures in the data material.

The study weeks abroad were equivocally the most educative and positive learning experience for the participants and a great source of motivation. This is the clearest finding from both the interviews and the evaluations. Analysing the participants’ motivation reveals the importance of the hybrid course design both for selecting this particular CPD programme and for increasing motivation throughout the courses. As discussed in Gretsche and Kniffka (2025), the design of the study weeks was based on language-learning theory and insights from teaching. This design includes both SDK 1 and 2, which is also visible in the reflections from the participants: “This is something different than being here on holiday” (S9), where the study week provided “in-depth cultural learning” through a range of “cultural meetings”, from “a lecture by an author to visiting people’s homes” (S10), making the students feel “integrated” (several students). Through designing the study weeks with multiple opportunities for intercultural meetings (Baker, 2015; Bennett, 2009; Byram, 2021), the participants experienced intercultural learning.

Even if two one-week stays during the course is a short period of time, the participants experienced a sense of immersion when being surrounded by the target language 24/7. This was both exhilarating and taxing. Nevertheless, it was seen to improve their communicative language competence, particularly their listening and speaking skills, in alignment with the findings from Llanes’ (2011) review on mobility, while also practicing their pragmatic and sociolinguistic skills. Highlighting the study weeks abroad showed the importance of authentic opportunities for practicing the target language, in alignment with the English teachers in Coburn and Borg’s (2024) study, who, despite a clear progression in language skills throughout the in-service course, were concerned that their English would “regress [...] due to a lack of authentic opportunities to practice their English” (p. 628). The second study week offered increased opportunities for practicing the FL after several months of instruction to further develop their communicative language competence.

The improved speaking and listening skills the participants experienced after the second study week aligns with Baker-Smemoe et al.'s (2014) claim that the language level before mobility affects the benefits gained from a study week.

While our focus was on the study weeks, the overall course design was highlighted as essential for the participants' professional development. Importantly, all the participants agreed that physical meetings improved their learning outcomes, highlighting the importance of learning contexts for language acquisition (Llanes, 2011). Their overall reflections on the course design indicate that they, through the process, acquired SDK 3, engaging in meta-theoretical considerations (Bayrhuber & Frederking, 2024). Many participants expressed that they would have liked to meet in person more frequently, even if they recognised that online sessions were easier to fit into their daily routines and were also inclusive of teachers from across the country. Some expressed a dislike of online sessions. It was challenging to participate "in Zoom, not seeing and not having access to the speakers' body language" (S15). However, the online sessions worked because "we are only six participants. If we were 20 ... it would never have worked" (S12 and S13), as "no one would have been seen" (S15). The view that online teaching with larger groups would not work has implications for scaling up the courses but can be challenged by Haukås et al.'s (2023) study, where 25 in-service teachers successfully completed an online programme in German. Only one participant across the three cohorts was expressly positive about online teaching. Nevertheless, he affirmed that a combination of online teaching with onsite sessions was "vastly superior to mere online teaching" (S4). Both the onsite seminars in Norway and the study weeks abroad were highlighted as highly educative. Several participants also stated that because they had met in person, the learning outcomes of the online teaching improved. It "improves the dynamics" (S5) and renders the participants "more secure", making it easier to "speak up in Zoom" (S25) when you know the instructor and the other participants. The physical learning context seemed to target the affective dimension of learning positively, enhanced by the students meeting the same instructors on site and online.

The development of intercultural and linguistic competence occurring through short-term mobility is essential to the professional development of in-service teachers. The study weeks constitute an immersive learning experience, communicating in an FL 24/7, something that is likely to have a stronger emotional impact than hours of online sessions. The participants were seen to move through the role of, for some, insecure students who did not fully master the language, to gradually gaining confidence as intercultural speakers with strengthened SDK (Bayrhuber & Frederking, 2024). It is likely that gaining a self-image as a more confident professional FL teacher will positively influence their instructional practices, as "teacher confidence is a vital professional attribute" (Nolan & Molla, 2017, as cited in Coburn & Borg, 2024, p. 629). Coburn and Borg (2024) focalise the need for building communities of practice for teachers' development. The overall course design, with regular online sessions, physical meetings in Norway and short-term mobility, contributed to the professional development of the participants. Based on the interview data and our own observations, however, short-term mobility contributed the most strongly to the affective and experiential dimensions that foster the professional development of FL teachers. We, therefore, advocate for short-term mobility being integrated into all FL training courses. Blended learning is, in our experience, a flexible approach to CPD that may generate deeper learning outcomes than online teaching alone.

10. Limitations

This study does not aim to draw conclusions about the individual development of each participant. As the number of participants was too low to generalise to entire populations, we outline some tendencies on a group level. While the interview questions targeted the teachers' experiences during the study weeks, the other parts of the programme may also have influenced their perceptions of learning throughout the study weeks. We concur with Evans (2019) in that professional learning is a multi-dimensional process, and consequently, concluding that the professional development described above was solely a result of the study weeks would be an over-simplification. A weakness of our study is that we relied on evaluations and interviews and did not observe teaching by the in-service teachers. Consequently, the discussion of changes in teachers' instructional practices relied on self-reported data, and future studies should include observation of teaching. We still argue that professional development occurred, as it may take time before professional learning translates into teachers' practice (Evans, 2019). It is also likely that confident FL teachers who have completed courses built on an action-oriented approach will implement this approach in their own classrooms, as seen in Coburn and Borg (2024). In so doing, their pupils will have more opportunities to practice the language through more student-active approaches (Coburn & Borg, 2024).

11. Concluding remarks

The design of the course was vital to the in-service teachers' reported professional development. The hybrid design facilitated the development of relationships. While the online meetings made it possible to combine work and studies, meeting in person changed the dynamics of the online teaching. Meeting the same instructors online and on site increased the participants' sense of security and a community of practice developed. The study weeks abroad are highlighted as particularly salient to in-service teachers' motivation as well as to their professional development, including improved language skills and IC. The participants' unequivocal support for the importance of short-term mobility and physical meetings makes us question the educational authorities' move towards online-only CPD courses in Norway. While longer exchanges can further improve professional development, well-designed short-term mobility with opportunities for reflection is a far superior option to staying at home for the professional development of FL teachers.

The study addresses the gap in knowledge regarding the role of short-term mobility in the professional development of FL teachers in Norway and internationally (Coburn & Borg, 2024; Helmchen & Melo-Pfeifer, 2018; Ming, 2019). The findings have implications for the future organisation of CPD programmes for FL teachers. They highlighted the positive impact of a hybrid course design, emphasising the role of physical learning contexts and short-term mobility for FL teachers' professional development.

Endnotes

- 1) The universities received Norwegian Partnership Programme for International Teacher Education funding from the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills to develop the CPD programme.
- 2) The admission requirements advise an A2 level for German and French, and a B1 level for Spanish.

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