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**Title:** Intercultural identities of non-native teachers of English: an exploration in China and the Netherlands

**Issue Date:** 2017-12-06

## Chapter 6

# General conclusions and discussion

## **6.1 Brief overview**

In this dissertation, we report on our exploratory study into the intercultural identities of Chinese and Dutch secondary school teachers who teach English as a foreign language (EFL). The aim of our study was to explore the characteristics of such intercultural identities in different countries, and the relationship between teachers' cultural values and their intercultural identities. In order to be able to produce a rich description of teachers' intercultural identities and their cultural values, we used both qualitative and quantitative methods. Our main questions were: (a) How do non-native EFL teachers in secondary education in different countries perceive their intercultural identities? and (b) How are cultural values of these non-native EFL teachers related to their intercultural identities?

The main findings and conclusions of the three studies described in section 1.5 of Chapter 1, are summarized below: the review of recent studies on EFL teachers' intercultural identities (Chapter 2), the interview of a small group of Chinese and Dutch EFL teachers (Chapter 3), and the survey of a large group of Chinese and Dutch EFL teachers (Chapters 4 and 5). The second part of this chapter is an overall discussion of the findings, with special attention to the fluidity of teachers' intercultural identities, the context-dependent nature and implicitness of these intercultural identities, and the connection between cultural values and intercultural identities. In the final section, we discuss the strengths and limitations of the study and give suggestions for further research in this field.

## **6.2 General conclusions of the studies**

### *6.2.1 Review of recent studies (Chapter 2)*

The aim of the literature review was to provide an overview of the recent research on the intercultural identities of non-native teachers of English. We attempted to answer the following research questions: (a) How are the intercultural identities of non-native teachers of English characterized and defined in recent studies? and (b) What do these studies report about the formation of these intercultural identities?

To answer the research questions, we systematically reviewed 21 studies on the intercultural identities of non-native teachers of English worldwide. These were selected from all 59 particularly relevant studies that we found from a literature search in relevant databases. They had all been published in the last 15 years in international peer-reviewed academic journals. We categorized the studies into two groups according to their themes, namely: (a) characteristics of teachers' intercultural identities, and (b) the formation of teachers' intercultural identities. We reviewed and compared the aims, concepts and definitions, related concepts, methodology, and main findings of the studies.

The results of our literature review revealed the following characteristics of teachers' intercultural identities:

- being flexible and constantly developing,
- responding to different intercultural contexts,
- being influenced by teachers' language skills and intercultural competence, and
- influencing teachers' attitudes towards language, culture and teaching.

Three groups of interrelated factors that formed or shaped teachers' intercultural identities were found: (a) factors related to personal knowledge and experience, (b) factors related to teaching context, and (c) factors related to general sociocultural context. The results of the literature review permit the conclusion that both characteristics and formation of teachers' intercultural identities involve personal and contextual sides, as previously observed by Beijaard et al. (2004) with respect to an analysis of studies with a more general focus, i.e., studies on teachers' professional identity. The papers analysed in our review illustrate a shift of focus during the last few decades from only linguistic competence to an interaction between sociocultural factors and teachers' perceptions of themselves in the teaching context. Several papers referred to specific sociocultural theories (such as Vygotsky's) in the study of language teachers (Ellis, 2013; van Compernelle & Williams, 2013). The review of recent studies drew our attention to various theoretical approaches and empirical research findings that seemed useful for designing our research on teachers' intercultural identities. To explore the characteristics of teachers' intercultural identities in various sociocultural contexts further, we found it necessary to conduct both an in-depth case study and a large-scale survey.

### *6.2.2 Interview with Chinese and Dutch EFL teachers (Chapter 3)*

The aim of the interview study was to explore and compare how Chinese and Dutch EFL teachers perceive themselves in relation to ES cultures. We attempted to answer the following questions: (a) How do Chinese and Dutch EFL teachers perceive their intercultural identities? and (b) What similarities and differences exist between their perceptions of intercultural identities?

To answer these questions, we conducted an exploratory study by interviewing 5 Chinese and 5 Dutch secondary school EFL teachers. The interview questions were focused on four aspects: (a) teachers' feeling of connection with ES cultures; (b) influence of ES cultures on their personal or professional identity; (c) intercultural sensitivity, i.e., their perceptions of their own ability to cope with intercultural experiences; and (d) their attitudes towards ES cultures in teaching. In our analysis of the interview data, we quoted key words and phrases related to these themes, and phrases with similar meanings were combined into categories. A descriptive label was then chosen for each category.

The results of our exploratory interview study show that both the Chinese and Dutch teachers kept a strong affiliation to their own cultures, while perceiving themselves as also connected to ES cultures by profession and/or by personal interest. These teachers tended to be flexible rather than rigid in coping with cultural differences pertaining to their intercultural sensitivity; they noticed the influence of ES cultures on certain aspects of their lives; all of them tried to remain impartial in culture teaching, because they considered it important to regard cultures as equal and to avoid imposing their ideas on students. However, some of the teachers focused particularly on the teaching of language skills. Others considered it difficult to teach about cultures in an impartial way because they contended that students could pick up teachers' attitudes anyway. These findings are consistent with the results of the small number of previous studies that are available about EFL teachers, which found that teachers had a tendency to maintain their affiliation to their home cultures (Phan, 2007; Phan & Phan, 2006), experienced influence of ES cultures on their personal identity (Menard-Warwick, 2011), and experienced difficulty in avoiding personal attitudes and opinions in culture teaching (Byram et al., 2002).

Apart from the similarities mentioned above, differences were also found between the two national groups in the perceptions of their intercultural identities. For example, Chinese teachers felt connected to ES cultures mainly because of knowledge and profession, while Dutch teachers felt so mainly because of their interest in ES cultures. Chinese teachers felt comparatively less confident than Dutch teachers when communicating with native speakers of English and saw more differences than similarities between Chinese and ES cultures. Dutch teachers felt comparatively more comfortable when talking to native speakers of English, and saw more similarities than differences between Dutch and ES cultures. Chinese teachers felt that their knowledge about ES cultures was limited but wanted to highlight the positive sides of ES cultures. Dutch teachers felt it was difficult to remain impartial because students can often pick up the teachers' attitude anyway, even if the teacher does not express it explicitly.

The results revealed challenges and difficulties for EFL teachers in culture teaching, not only for teachers whose home culture is far from ES cultures but also for those whose culture is close to ES cultures. For Chinese teachers, the sources of their difficulties lay mostly in their limited access to the authentic materials from ES cultures and lack of immediate need for intercultural communication with people from ES cultures. For Dutch teachers, there were also challenges related to different cultural norms (e.g., between Dutch and American cultures), and the risk of overlooking cultural differences. These challenges and difficulties reminded teachers of the need to reflect on their attitudes to cultures.

### *6.2.3 Survey among Chinese and Dutch EFL teachers: Characteristics of intercultural identity (Chapter 4)*

Based on the teachers' opinions collected in the interview study, the second phase of our research aimed to explore the general characteristics of non-native EFL teachers' intercultural identities in China and the Netherlands. We attempted to answer the following questions: (a) How do Chinese and Dutch EFL teachers perceive their intercultural identities in relation to ES cultures? (b) What variables in the personal backgrounds of the teachers, apart from nationality, are related to their intercultural identities?

To answer these questions, we designed a questionnaire survey based on the literature explorations and on the teachers' perceptions collected in the interview study.

We compared the results of the two national groups to see if there were any differences between Chinese and Dutch teachers. We also searched for underlying factors of their intercultural identities and relevant variables. Participants in the questionnaire survey were 114 Chinese and 154 Dutch EFL teachers working at a number of secondary schools in the two countries.

The results show that Chinese teachers and Dutch teachers viewed their intercultural identities differently and for both groups the sociocultural contexts of their teaching were found to be the most influential variable in making such a difference. Our results reveal four factors underlying the teachers' intercultural identities: 'Openness to ES cultures', 'Connection to ES cultures', 'Disconnection from ES cultures', and 'Impartiality with respect to ES cultures'. Related to the different distances from ES cultures, Chinese and Dutch teachers had different intercultural identities in terms of these underlying factors. Chinese teachers perceived more difficulties than did Dutch teachers in communicating with English speakers and in understanding or accepting ES cultures and these difficulties appeared to be related to their opinions about how to teach ES cultures. In addition, compared with Dutch teachers, Chinese teachers put less emphasis on being impartial towards ES cultures. Different intercultural identities may lead to different choices in culture teaching, from aims and focuses of the teaching, to different culture teaching activities, as also found in earlier research of, for example, Menard-Warwick (2008) and Sercu et al. (2005).

The findings of our survey confirmed the context-dependent nature of teachers' intercultural identities, and provided more insights into how to describe and compare non-native EFL teachers' intercultural identities in different nations.

#### *6.2.4 Survey among EFL teachers: Cultural values and intercultural identity (Chapter 5)*

The aim of this part of the study was to explore whether it was possible to gain insights into the nature of the relationship between the cultural values of EFL teachers and their intercultural identities. We attempted to answer the following questions: (a) What similarities and differences exist between cultural values of Chinese and Dutch EFL teachers? (b) How do the teachers' cultural values relate to the intercultural identities of the Chinese and Dutch EFL teachers?

We formulated some expectations about the relationship between cultural values and teachers' intercultural identities, which were based on: earlier research on cultural values and attitudes towards intercultural communication (Sagiv & Schwartz, 1995; Schwartz, 1996; Tartakovsky & Schwartz, 2001); studies of teachers' intercultural identities (Menard-Warwick, 2008; Newton et al., 2010; Sercu et al., 2005); descriptions of the values by Schwartz et al. (2001); our own concept of intercultural identity; and the situation of non-native EFL teachers who work in their own countries. The expectations were that the cultural values of tradition, benevolence, universalism, stimulation, power, and security might be connected to teachers' intercultural identities, while conformity, self-direction, hedonism, and achievement were unlikely to be relevant.

To examine our expectations, we adopted the English version of the 40-item Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) of Schwartz et al. (2001) and we also included in our questionnaire the questions about teachers' intercultural identities that we had developed on the basis of our previous in-depth interviews (see Chapter 3). We sought to analyse the ways in which teachers' intercultural identities are predicted by their cultural values (according to Schwartz's cultural value theory).

In addition to the different opinions of Chinese and Dutch teachers about their intercultural identities (as summarized in Section 6.2.3), the results show that the teachers maintained almost the same set of preferences for cultural values that have been found in earlier studies with regard to the respective populations in general. Our hypotheses regarding the relationship between cultural values and intercultural identities were partly confirmed by our research findings. All the values we had selected, especially, tradition, power and benevolence, were connected to some of the factors, namely, Openness to ES cultures, Disconnection from ES cultures, and Impartiality with respect to ES cultures, in the directions we had expected. Significant differences were also apparent in the way in which the Chinese and Dutch teachers' cultural values related to their intercultural identities. The three values just mentioned were found to be related to more factors underlying the intercultural identity perceptions among the Dutch teachers than among Chinese teachers; for the group of Chinese teachers the relationship was not statistically significant. Our findings may alert non-native EFL teachers to the possibility that their accustomed cultural values may impede their understanding of ES cultures and/or allow stereotypes to invade and bias their teaching.

### 6.3 Discussion

World cultures and languages were previously often defined from perspectives centred in Western civilization; these perspectives are challenged nowadays and we are urged to reconsider them (Holliday, 2009). From relevant literature available about cultural studies, we see the trend of regarding cultures as dynamic and multi-dimensional rather than static and bounded only to nations. Specifically, in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language worldwide, the debates on the ownership of the English language and the roles of native and non-native English-speaking teachers have led to insightful reflections and perceptions. For example, it is widely accepted that competence for future intercultural communication, rather than native-like linguistic competence, should be the aim of foreign language education (Byram et al., 2002; Council of Europe, 2001). This also implies that teachers should pay more attention to cultivating intercultural competence among students, no matter whether the teachers themselves are native or non-native speakers (Newton et al., 2010), and that teachers need to be aware of their own relationship with the cultures taught in class, so as to be cautious about their attitudes and positions when they are teaching (Byram, 2008; Byram et al., 2002).

In this dissertation, we focused on how EFL teachers see themselves and perceive their roles in relation to the cultures they teach, i.e., their intercultural identities. The findings of our study reveal characteristics of teachers' intercultural identities, the differences between the intercultural identities of Chinese and Dutch EFL teachers, and the relationships between the teachers' cultural values and their intercultural identities. We will now discuss some of the key issues emerging from our research, i.e., the fluidity of teachers' intercultural identities, the context-dependent nature and implicitness of teachers' intercultural identities, and the connection between cultural values and intercultural identities.

#### 6.3.1 *The fluidity of teachers' intercultural identities*

We defined teachers' intercultural identities in this study as their 'awareness of themselves in relation to the cultures they teach'. The intercultural identity of EFL teachers manifested itself in our study as a fluid entity, rather than a fixed or prescribed one. We argue that recognizing the fluidity, and both the personal and contextual aspects of teachers' intercultural identities, is crucial nowadays.

As the demand for teaching foreign languages with an intercultural dimension increases, teachers need to familiarize themselves with different cultural norms in the world, together with their students. This also means that the teachers, consciously or unconsciously, need to ‘negotiate’ between these new cultural norms and their original ones, and the results of such negotiation can become part of their lives, helping them to see the world ‘through multiple cultural lenses’ (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Menard-Warwick, 2008, p. 622). Their intercultural identities emerge as a process of blurring of boundaries between their own cultures and other cultures, and in an individualized process of reflection and (re)forming of their own identities through intercultural experiences (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Kim, 2007). As Alptekin and Alptekin (1984) foresaw in the 1980s,

*It will be an identity which is able to transcend the parochial confines of the native and target cultures by understanding and appreciating cultural diversity and pluralism thanks to the new language, while not losing sight of native norms and values in the process. In short, it is a bilingual and intercultural identity (p.19).*

Though Alptekin and Alptekin mentioned intercultural identity in their article as the target for students who learn English as a foreign or second language, their description could apply equally to the intercultural identity of EFL teachers. Among the papers reviewed in Chapter 2, we found that teachers’ intercultural identities were constantly developing along with their educational, working or transnational experiences (e.g., Menard-Warwick, 2008, 2011; Nugroho Widiyanto, 2005; Ortaçtepe, 2015). During the process of identity formation, teachers can be influenced by various aspects of ES cultures (e.g., popular culture such as literature, music and films), reflect on their own values and ideas, and incorporate these elements of ES cultures into their own identity (Howe & Xu, 2013; Menard-Warwick, 2011; Moran, 2001). In the interviews that formed part of our study, we also found that the participating teachers recalled the influence from ES cultures, such as their interest in English language and literature, pop music, et cetera, on the formation of their own identities as EFL teachers.

In an increasingly globalized world, teachers’ intercultural identities develop constantly all over the world because they now have more convenient access to information about other cultures than had previous generations. We argue that it needs to be acknowledged that the sociocultural contexts of EFL teachers’ own countries may both promote and hinder the constant development of their intercultural identities. We

know from history that, as economic open door policies and international business development can greatly promote the need for intercultural communication, at the same time political media censorship and xenophobia can reinforce cultural stereotypes and limit people's tolerance, understanding or acceptance of other cultures.

This means that recognizing the fluid entity and both personal and contextual aspects of teachers' intercultural identities is more important than ever. Regarding the personal aspect, the fact that teachers have their own attitudes towards cultures which are rooted in their own sociocultural backgrounds and intercultural experiences should be taken into account. This also means that it is difficult for teachers to remain absolutely impartial in culture teaching without revealing any of their attitudes towards the respective cultures (Byram et al., 2002). Regarding the contextual aspect, different sociocultural contexts and the distances between cultures partly determine the means of communication between cultures, which, in turn, influence how teachers regard their relationship with the cultures they teach.

### *6.3.2 Context-dependent nature and implicitness of teachers' intercultural identities*

We argue that further understanding is needed of the nature of teachers' intercultural identity and the extent to which we can talk about intercultural identities in terms of 'awareness of self'. We know from our findings that teachers' intercultural identity needs to be understood as part of a context-dependent process that they go through, often without being conscious of it, in which they sometimes take deliberate identity positions. EFL teachers are continually exposed to new cultural ideas and practices in their teaching and, along with this, they constantly renegotiate their identities as non-native EFL teachers, a process which often remains implicit (Newton et al., 2010). In addition, we found that the EFL teachers in our research combined definitions of their intercultural identities with definitions of their roles in language teaching. The teachers in our interviews (see Chapter 3), e.g., Sha and Lotte, defined their intercultural identities (i.e., their connections to ES cultures) by explaining their relationship with the students or their teaching methods as related to their feelings of connection to ES cultures. This reflects other research: in the review of previous studies in Chapter 2, we also found that a variety of terms and perspectives about language-and-culture teaching and cultural studies were used to describe teachers' intercultural identity. However,

definitions in existing research were often vague or non-existent. On the one hand, this makes it difficult to do research and describe teachers' intercultural identities in a way that is meaningful to a broad audience; on the other hand, the results of our study appear to confirm previous findings that teachers' identities are holistic and responsive to several elements in the context (Bukor, 2015; Huang & Varghese, 2015). Meanwhile, our literature review and empirical findings illustrate that it is possible to describe teachers' intercultural identities in a meaningful way. Our research not only indicates the need to study and describe teachers' intercultural identities from multiple perspectives, it also shows that it is possible to do this on a larger scale and by using a questionnaire. Further research could build on our findings and explore more details of the processes by which teachers become aware of their own intercultural identities and adopt deliberate identity positions, for example, when faced with culture-related dilemmas, important decisions, et cetera. Observations and comparisons of intercultural identities among different groups of teachers, such as those in the studies of Guerrero Nieto and Meadows (2015), Llurda and Huguet (2003), and Menard-Warwick (2008), or classroom-based research of teachers in culture teaching, such as that of Su (2008, 2011), are much needed. In the meantime, systematic frameworks and practical instructions about teachers and culture teaching, such as those of Byram et al. (2002), Moran (2001) and Newton et al. (2010), are critical to the further exploration and development of teachers' intercultural identities.

### *6.3.3 Understanding the connections: Cultural values and intercultural identities*

Based on our research, we argue that more nuanced ideas about differences between non-native EFL teachers from various cultures are necessary, because there are important differences between various groups of teachers in this respect. For example, we found that the relation between teachers' cultural values and factors that characterize their intercultural identity perceptions was more obvious among Dutch teachers than it was among Chinese teachers. In addition, benevolence and tradition did have predictive value for the combined group and for the Dutch group, but not for the Chinese group. Although the Dutch teachers attached significantly more importance to benevolence than did the Chinese teachers, and the Chinese teachers attached significantly more importance to tradition than did the Dutch teachers, the standard deviations for each of the factors of intercultural identity were much higher among the Chinese teachers than

among the Dutch and, as a consequence, did not seem to have a clear relation with differences in attached importance to cultural values within the Chinese group. A possible explanation may be that the Chinese teachers interpreted their relationship with ES cultures as a professional one, while they may have interpreted their opinions on cultural values as a more personal attachment. Our interviews and survey showed that Chinese teachers felt less connected to ES cultures than Dutch teachers, because the distance between Chinese and ES cultures is much greater than that between Dutch and ES cultures. Moreover, the relationship between cultural values and (inter)cultural identities reflects the expectations of the dominant group in a society (Roccas et al., 2010), which means in our study that the relationship between teachers' cultural values and their intercultural identities would reflect the mainstream ideas of Chinese or Dutch culture. Thus the degree of or ways of appreciating foreign cultures or people in Chinese and Dutch morals or beliefs, mainly forged at school or at home, can be quite different. As the interviews showed, Dutch teachers are accustomed to multilingual education (in pre-university secondary schools, students need to learn at least 3 foreign languages) and international travel. Assimilation into other cultures becomes part of their education at school and in the home. Due to the long distances to other countries and the social and economic conditions, it is not common for Chinese people in the mainland region (where we conducted our research) to learn another foreign language besides English, nor to travel abroad regularly. For schools and families, assimilation into other cultures does not seem an urgent need for children and is often ignored.

Our findings indicate the possibility that teachers' trusted cultural values impede their perceptions of ES cultures and/or allow stereotypes to bias their teaching. For example, we found that Chinese EFL teachers were more supportive of highlighting only the positive side of a culture. A possible reason for this could be that these teachers are eager to be good role models for their students (Scollon, 1999; Wette & Barkhuizen, 2009; Zhang & Liu, 2014). However, by only presenting the positive sides of a culture, students are given less incentive to critically reflect on ES cultures in relation to their own culture, and vice versa. While in our interviews we found that Chinese teachers regarded themselves as more egalitarian than authoritarian in their relationship with their students, our study on cultural values shows that the participating Chinese teachers had the tendency to put more emphasis on power and tradition than did Dutch teachers. These findings may indicate that Chinese teachers have more 'traditional' ideas about teaching and that they combined these ideas with those about teaching ES cultures.

Another example can be found among Dutch teachers. In contrast with the earlier finding that teachers' ideas about 'taking the perspective of others' was more related to European than to Eastern culture (Gholami, Kuusisto, & Tirri, 2014), some of the Dutch teachers in our interview held the opinion that certain phenomena in American culture are incompatible with Dutch ideology and that it would be difficult to get them accepted. For example, they found more homeless people on the streets during their travels to the US and were not satisfied with the welfare system there. More reflection on teachers' attitudes towards cultures, not only Chinese teachers but also of teachers from other nations, could help them to find ways to avoid imposing their own attitudes towards ES cultures on their students (Byram et al., 2002). Nevertheless, the differentiated findings in our study and the various possible explanations underline the context-dependent nature of teachers' intercultural identity perceptions, and illustrate that nuanced views on EFL teachers and their professional and personal concerns are needed.

#### **6.4 Practical implications: The intercultural dimensions of teacher education**

Sercu et al. (2005) provided a list of characteristics for an idealized 'foreign language and intercultural competence teacher'. Such an idealized teacher might be a helpful model in teaching intercultural competence, but can hardly explain how teachers in practice consider their intercultural identities, mainly because the sociocultural backgrounds of the teachers are not taken into account. It is difficult for teachers to remain absolutely impartial in cultural teaching without revealing any of their attitudes towards ES cultures (Byram et al., 2002). As one of the Dutch teachers (Vic) said in the interview study (chapter 3), teachers can be consciously willing to be neutral and impartial when discussing cultures in class, while their attitudes towards cultures can still be picked up by their students. This means teachers constantly need to reflect upon the possible influence of their stereotypes and prejudices on their teaching and be cautious of the ways they 'respond to and challenge their learners' prejudices' (Byram et al., 2002, p. 30).

Although geographical distance may still be an obstacle for many teachers to learning about other cultures, we argue that young students today have more opportunities to enjoy travelling abroad or to explore new things in the world online. As

students may be more sensitive towards other cultures than their teachers, this provides new chances for teacher to get to know more about other cultures. A case in point might be the news on Dec. 25, 2016, when some Chinese university students complained about the bias against women in the reading material of their English exam. The reading text encouraged women to please men in many humble ways. The students found that the material was taken from an English website providing tips for women to pursue men, and they questioned the appropriateness of using that material for an examination (Shao, 2016). Gender equality is one of the ideas imported from foreign cultures. It was obvious that the Chinese students were more sensitive to it than their teachers, and their knowledge was more advanced than the expectations of their teachers. Future research could investigate ways in which teachers could update their knowledge about ES cultures by learning more about youth cultures in their own country. The study by Menard-Warwick (2011) about the connections between popular culture and teacher identity, for example, could be a good place to start exploring the connections between the cultures of young students and the formation of teachers' intercultural identities.

The findings of our study remind teachers in every culture of the need for regular reflection and intercultural teaching skills. Teachers need to be alert to the possible occasions when intercultural misunderstandings may arise, e.g., when preparing teaching materials or organizing discussions about issues that conflict with the norms in their own or their students' cultures. They also need to be alert to 'the levels of communication at which intercultural misunderstandings may arise, and they should be able and willing to negotiate meaning where they sense cross-cultural misunderstanding' (Sercu et al., 2005, pp. 5-6). Teachers, teacher trainers and researchers could use our survey questionnaire for comparisons before and after intercultural experiences, teacher training programmes, et cetera, together with more comprehensive tools as used in the studies of Sercu et al. (2005) and Fasoglio and Canton (2009), to explore possible changes in intercultural identity perceptions.

According to Byram et al. (2002), teachers do not have to be very knowledgeable about other countries and cultures, but they need the skills to promote an atmosphere in class which allows students to take risks in their own thinking and feeling about cultures. Recent studies on culture teaching have included EFL classes in Taiwan, where a teacher asked students to do ethnographic interviews or cultural portfolio projects so as to explore foreign cultures by themselves (Su, 2008, 2011). Such practices may not only

cultivate students' awareness of other cultures, but can also provide reflective and critical perspectives on ES cultures for both teachers and students. It could be a mission for teacher trainers to develop programmes for EFL teachers about how to cultivate intercultural competence among students, e.g., how to integrate language and culture in teaching, how to engage students in genuine social interaction, how to encourage and develop an exploratory and reflective approach to cultures and how to promote explicit comparisons and connections between language and cultures (cf. Newton et al., 2010).

### **6.5 Strengths and limitations of the study and suggestions for future research**

Our study has shown one way to describe the characteristics of teachers' intercultural identities by means of a mixed study design. Through the interviews, we examined teacher identity in depth in specific sociocultural contexts and, by means of the questionnaire survey, we drew individual results together to explore general tendencies in the groups and to make it possible to consider them as a totality for further comparison and study. By combining the results of both phases of study, we gained more detailed insight into intercultural identities for both Chinese and Dutch EFL teachers. Our findings could serve as a starting point for researchers to further explore teachers' intercultural identities in different countries.

Like the studies by Guerrero Nieto and Meadows (2015), Menard-Warwick (2008), and Ortaçtepe (2015), our study highlights the importance of critical perspectives (meaning perspectives involving awareness of different ideologies and analysis of both merits and faults of cultural dispositions), culture teaching skills, and self-reflection by teachers. The questionnaire about teachers' intercultural identities was designed on the basis of opinions from both Chinese and Dutch EFL teachers, which, together with the ranges of intercultural identity perceptions as a reference, could also be used as a tool to help non-native EFL teachers to reflect on their own intercultural identities. Individual teachers could determine their own positions on the various scales and compare them to a group of teachers, in their school for example.

It should be noted that teachers' intercultural identities can be related to many aspects of culture teaching, including, for example, their opinions towards language and

cultures, their selection of teaching materials, their relationship with students, and their teaching skills or activities (Diniz de Figueiredo, 2011; Guerrero Nieto & Meadows, 2015; Menard-Warwick, 2008). Though our exploratory study focused only on non-native EFL teachers in their own countries, it should be acknowledged that such intercultural identity perceptions may exist among all foreign language teachers who deal with two or more cultures in class. Teachers who teach students from another nation or region also need to be aware of the cultural differences or diversities in their classes (e.g., Gu, 2013; Huang, 2014; Wang & Du, 2014). As long as there is teaching involving two or more cultures, research needs to be done to explore further how groups of teachers consider their intercultural identities, what the factors are behind such identities, and how they can be helped in culture teaching by reflecting on their intercultural identities.

Although our findings have helped to pin down characteristics of the Chinese and Dutch EFL teachers, we must be careful not to create stereotypes of teachers in different nations, as Moussu and Llurda (2008), Sercu et al. (2005), and Holliday (2010) have already warned against. As our earlier interview results show, notwithstanding the differences between the two national groups, there were also important differences and variations in ideas among the individuals within the two groups.

In addition, though more direct access to other cultures provides more opportunities for teachers to be exposed to other cultures, this does not necessarily mean that they are ready to understand everything about them or willing to take the perspective of others. With their different cultural backgrounds and levels of intercultural sensitivity, teachers might respond to certain phenomena in ES cultures in unexpected ways. As in the example quoted in Chapter 3, we found in the interview study that Dutch teachers who had been to United States admitted their difficulty in understanding some aspects of the culture there, which indicated that we need to look into the experiences and attitudes towards ES cultures of individual teachers, and find out more about the reasons behind them.

Our exploratory study focused on teachers' perceptions of their intercultural identities at one moment in time rather than over a longer period. Through gaining insight into the perceptions of their intercultural identities, it was possible for us to better understand how the teachers were aware of themselves in relation to ES cultures at that specific moment. Additional data may be gathered in the future to obtain a better

understanding of teachers' perceptions of intercultural identities, such as by using cross-cultural psychological tests or classroom observations (van de Vijver, 2015). In addition, it would be interesting to investigate, by means of in-depth explorations over a period of time (e.g., Trent, 2012, 2016; Tsui, 2007), how EFL teachers' intercultural identities develop in the context of their participation in a teacher training or postgraduate programme (e.g., Ilieva, 2010; Ortaçtepe, 2015).

Finally, it should be noted that the participating Chinese and Dutch teachers had similar scores on several of the intercultural identity items in the survey, which indicates that they also shared many opinions towards culture teaching, as has also been found in other comparative studies (Sercu, 2002, 2006; Sercu et al., 2005). It would therefore be an interesting topic for future research to specifically explore the common features of EFL teachers across countries (and possibly across other contexts), in order to identify not only the roots of their similarities but also how these similarities could be used to benefit students and EFL teachers worldwide.

From another perspective, though previous studies have given some insight into the possible influence of cultural values on people's behaviour in intercultural communication, in our research, we found such influence to be different from or less salient than it was in the findings of those earlier studies. The shared dimension of the professional backgrounds of EFL teachers and the context of their culture teaching can mix up or dilute such influence. The role of shared versus non-shared professional backgrounds should therefore be further explored so as to better understand the connections between teachers' cultural values and their intercultural identities (Phan, 2008). In addition, it is necessary to be aware of the diversity observed across teachers in terms of their national or cultural backgrounds, intercultural experiences, gender, teaching context, et cetera (Diniz de Figueiredo, 2011; Llorca & Huguet, 2003; Menard-Warwick, 2008; Ortaçtepe, 2015). In the future, attention should therefore also be paid to the roles of, for instance, popular culture (Menard-Warwick, 2011), and such personal characteristics as the teacher's response to aspects of ES cultures present in the textbook (Forman, 2014), level of language proficiency, prior intercultural experiences, and interpersonal skills (Menard-Warwick, 2008; Reves & Medgyes, 1994; Tsui, 2007). We hope that this first step in the study of the intercultural identities of EFL teachers will raise awareness of the marked variations in these identities and the many factors that shape them, and of the need for additional research on both these aspects.

