Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands

Maintaining self while adapting: Chinese foreign language teachers' identity development in an intercultural context
Liu, X.

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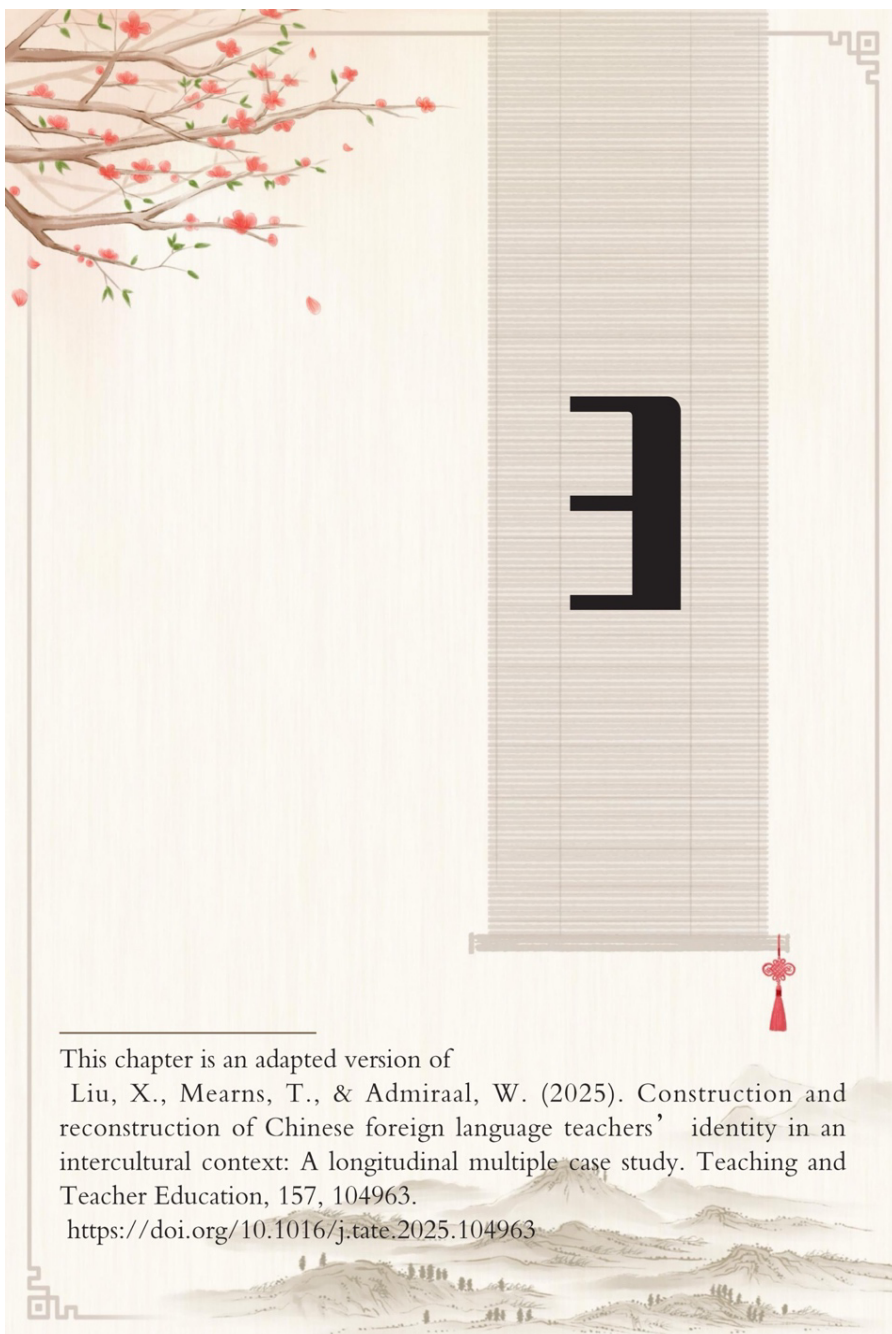**Abstract**

This longitudinal study explores how teachers construct their teacher identity in intercultural contexts. In this study with three Chinese language teachers, reflective journals, oral narratives, and interviews were primary sources of data. Additionally, teachers' storylines were utilized to provide additional information regarding participants' identity development. The findings reveal that the construction of teacher identity involves an ongoing process that transforms through social practice. Through dealing with challenges and conflicts arising from the teaching and socialization process, teachers reassemble their teacher identity and develop professionally. The experience of teaching overseas enables CFL teachers to develop a more agentic identity.

3.1 Introduction

Developing a teacher identity is a crucial component of learning to become a teacher (Friesen & Besley, 2013), as it contributes to a teacher's educational philosophy (Mockler, 2011), decision-making (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017), well-being (Skinner, Leavey, & Rothi, 2021), and effectiveness (Bukor, 2015). In today's rapidly globalizing world, education is increasingly taking on an intercultural dimension (Bense, 2016). This is especially the case in language education, where 'native speaker' language teachers are employed in a context that is far removed from their own home culture (Liu et al., 2024). These teachers find themselves navigating not only the traditional roles of imparting knowledge but also serving as cultural mediators, fostering inclusivity, and adapting to the evolving demands of an intercultural environment (Gong, Lai, & Gao, 2022). A cross-cultural context was selected because it offers a unique opportunity to understand how teacher identity is constructed and reconstructed in response to diverse cultural expectations and educational paradigms. The cross-cultural context highlights the complexities of teaching Chinese—a language deeply rooted in Confucian cultural traditions—to students in Western settings. These settings often require CFL teachers to bridge significant cultural and educational divides (Moloney & Xu, 2015; Ye & Edwards, 2018). By examining this phenomenon, the study offers insights into the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive strategies that CFL teachers employ to adapt and thrive in their roles (Liu et al., 2023). Most previous studies of how language teachers working overseas construct

and reconstruct their teacher identity over time, as they engage with the complexities of working in an intercultural context, have focused on the identity development of English foreign language teachers. This limits the application of research findings to teachers of other languages, such as Chinese, where different cultural factors are likely to be at play.

Over the last two decades, native-speaker Chinese foreign language (CFL) teachers have increasingly been employed in cross-cultural settings outside of China (Wang & Du, 2016). When CFL teachers work in an intercultural context and face students from different cultural backgrounds, they have to adapt emotionally, behaviorally, and cognitively, as well as renegotiate and reconstruct their teacher identities (Liu et al., 2023). Research conducted in Australia, the US, and the UK has demonstrated that converting Confucian teaching concepts to Western teaching beliefs presents a great challenge for many native-speaking CFL teachers (Moloney & Xu, 2015; Ye & Edwards, 2018; Liu et al., 2024). To overcome challenges and improve the quality of CFL education in intercultural settings, CFL teachers need to develop a refined teacher identity as it helps them navigate cultural differences, adapt teaching practices (and build intercultural competence (Liu et al., 2024). In addition, a strong teacher identity enables CFL teachers to reconcile their own cultural and pedagogical values with those of the host country, fostering inclusive and effective learning environments (Gong & Gao, 2024). In this way, teacher identity serves as a foundation for success and fulfillment for CFL teachers in cross-cultural teaching. Therefore, how these sojourning CFL teachers construct their teacher identity in a

culturally shifting educational setting is a topic that deserves further academic scrutiny.

Taking the above into consideration, the current study aims to take native-speaker CFL teachers in the Netherlands as examples to explore international teachers' identity construction in the process of their adaptation to the local educational culture. The study is of both theoretical and practical significance. By providing insight into intercultural adaptation within the specific educational context, we aim to contribute to the growing body of knowledge regarding the complexity of identity development of international teachers in cross-cultural settings. Furthermore, the findings of this study may be of assistance to both policymakers and educational institutes in bringing about more adaptive policies and pedagogical practices, and designing more inclusive and effective teaching environments that correspond to the needs and characteristics of these international teachers.

3.2 Literature review

3.2.1 Stages of teacher identity construction

Teacher identity is defined as teachers' perceptions and beliefs about themselves as teachers (Mockler, 2011; Yanzan, 2018), and involves others' expectations and positioning (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beijaard et al., 2004). It is not stable or fixed and is "neither a given nor a product" (Villegas et al., 2020). Instead, it is a dynamic process that develops over time (Harun, 2019) and that is (re)produced through language (Karimi & Mofidi, 2019). According to Rodgers and Scott (2008), contemporary conceptions of teacher identity share the

assumption that identity involves the construction and reconstruction of meaning through stories over time. On the basis of these assertions, one can conclude that teacher identity construction is an ongoing and dynamic process that entails making sense and (re) interpreting one's own values and experiences (Barkhuizen, 2016; Liu et al., 2023). In this study, teacher identity is defined as a process of narrative construction, co-construction and negotiation with the self and with the contexts and people with which the self-interacts (Moradkhani & Eba- dijalal, 2024).

The development of teacher identity is examined in several studies. Despite using different terms to describe the phases in the teacher identity development process, all of these studies indicated that teacher identity development is an ongoing process that is shaped by social practice (Villagas et al., 2020). The identity construction begins with "seeking out teacher identity" (Brunetti & Marston, 2018), or, in other words, a "pseudo-identity" (Gholami et al., 2021) to a "refined and enhanced identity" (Brunetti & Marston, 2018), or "moral identity" (Gholami et al., 2021). Over time, teacher identity undergoes further reconstruction as teachers interact with diverse social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Friesen & Besley, 2013). These stages are particularly significant in intercultural settings, where teachers must constantly negotiate their identities in response to unfamiliar cultural and pedagogical environments. However, much of the literature has focused on general identity development, with limited attention to the specific trajectories of language teachers, particularly those teaching Chinese in cross-cultural contexts. The increasing mobility of teachers around the world (Rosenfeld et al., 2022) offers a unique opportunity

for examining the ways in which CFL teachers develop their identities in intercultural contexts.

3.2.2 Factors influencing teacher identity construction

The construction and reconstruction of teacher identity is a complex and dynamic process that has garnered significant attention within the field of education (Barkhuizen, 2017; Beijaard, 2019). Teacher identity construction has no start or end point; therefore, the process of becoming and being a teacher is constantly shifting and is mediated and transformed through social practice and the active process of developing teaching competences (Liu et al., 2023). This process is influenced by various factors, including personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, pedagogical beliefs, social interactions, and the contextual demands of the teaching environment (Yazan & Lindahl, 2020; Liu et al., 2024).

In the context of foreign language teaching, this process takes on a unique dimension due to the intercultural nature of the discipline (Gong, Lai, & Gao, 2022). Scholars asserted that teaching in a new context – whether it is a new type or level of course, a new school or district, or a new country – and with new student groups always requires adjustments and offers opportunities for identity construction and reconstruction (Jeongyeon & Young, 2020).

Social interaction is a crucial element in the formation of teacher identity since it is through others that we become ourselves (Dimitrieska, 2024). Day et al. (2013) claim that teacher identity is not only constructed from personal experiences, technical and emotional

aspects of teaching "but also as the result of an interaction between the personal experiences of teachers and the social, cultural, and institutional environment in which they function on a daily basis" (p. 603). As De Costa and Norton (2017) affirm the identity of a teacher is continuously being informed, formed, and reformed as individuals evolve over time and interact with others.

Teacher identity construction is a process of constantly "becoming". Even a small event in a particular setting would exert some influence on its dynamic of change. Trent (2020) holds that teacher identity is formed at the intersection of teachers' past experiences of learning, individual aspirations, and social expectations, with the aforementioned factors being in either a harmonious or contradictory relationship with each other. In addition to the role teachers' past experiences play in their identity development as teachers, the practice of teaching has proven to contribute to teacher identity development (Reeves, 2018; Taylor, 2017). Nguyen (2016) assumes that teacher identity is constructed from the interaction of multiple shifting and conflicting personal, professional, historical, and cultural factors. Hence, identity is not an inborn feature of teachers, but an ongoing process of interpreting experiences connecting personal and contextual features, which yields a multifaceted understanding of self (Ruohotie, 2013; Tao & Gao, 2018).

3.2.3 Focus of the present study

In the context of teaching in an intercultural context, the construction and reconstruction of teacher identity represent a critical area of inquiry.

As international teachers navigate the intricate interplay of language and culture, their evolving identities shape not only their teaching practices but also the intercultural competence of their students. This longitudinal study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge by shedding light on the multifaceted dimensions of international teachers' identity construction within an intercultural context. Through a careful examination of teachers' experiences, beliefs, and practices over time, we seek to provide valuable insights into the dynamic nature of teacher identity in foreign language education. Therefore, the current study aims to explore the dynamics of identity development of CFL teachers in an intercultural context, leading to the following research questions.

1. How do CFL teachers develop their professional identity in an intercultural context?

2. What factors influence CFL teachers' identity development in an intercultural context?

3.3 Methodology

3.3.1 Context and participants

This research study took place in the Netherlands, where Chinese is taught in secondary schools, language schools, and Confucius Institutes. Participants in the current study are from Confucius Institutes (CI). Courses in the CI are offered to broad target groups, including adults, university students, adolescents, and children. The youngest students are seven years old. Teachers in the Confucius Institutes undergo intense professional training in China, prior to travelling abroad, to teach Chinese in international settings. Confucius Institutes provide

CFL teaching in three cities in the Netherlands. In most cases, CI teachers work in the Netherlands for at least two years.

A purposeful sampling technique was adopted to recruit CFL teachers from Confucius institutes in the Netherlands. This method allows us to focus on our specific area of interest, gather in-depth data on this topic, and select a sample that accurately represents the identity construction of native-speaker CFL teachers. Access to CFL teachers was obtained via the first authors' professional network. Our goal was to investigate teachers who had just moved and begun their teaching career in another country. When we began to collect data, there were five teachers who fit our research purpose. We obtained the consent of three teachers to participate in our study. The data gathered from these participants was comprehensive, and thematic saturation was achieved during the analysis process, which indicates that the data was sufficient to answer the research questions effectively.

Three female CFL teachers (Zhang, Lian, and Tang) participated in the study over a period of two years. At the beginning of data collection, all three teachers were starting their teaching period in the Netherlands. A brief description of the participants can be seen in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 *A brief description of the participants (with pseudonyms)*

Zhang

In addition to being an associate professor at a Chinese university, Zhang has ten years of teaching experience. Although her major was not linguistics or second language teaching, she has a great love of languages that set her on the path to becoming a CFL teacher. It is enjoyable for her to stand in front of a class and share her language and culture with people from different countries. As a newcomer to the Netherlands, she found it difficult to adjust to the new lifestyle and educational system, but she also viewed it as an opportunity to become familiar with the new culture, interact with interesting people, and broaden her horizons. Meanwhile, the international teaching experience enhanced her abilities as a CFL teacher and allowed her to develop a deeper understanding of intercultural communication and become a more professional individual.

　　Zhang decided to extend her contract in the Netherlands for one more year at the end of our data collection. She stated that having taken root in the last two years, now is the time to grow upward and contribute to CFL teaching in the Netherlands.

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Table 3.1   *A brief description of the participants (with pseudonyms)*

(continued)

Lian

We found Lian to be a very passionate and confident CFL teacher, as she told us "I enjoy teaching Chinese as a second language, and always feel excited when interacting with students in the class." Because of her passion for cross-cultural communication and language instruction, she pursued a master's degree in CFL teaching after majoring in commercial English at a university in the UK. Her interest in CFL teaching was sparked during her practicum in Britain. She has always been curious and passionate about teaching CFL, and she looked forward to beginning a new chapter in the Netherlands. In addition to being interested in teaching students, Lian is keen to develop her teaching style. During her time in the Netherlands, she transformed from a beginning teacher to an independent educator.

Following the data collection period, Lian decided to remain in the Netherlands for one more year, given that she enjoyed the working atmosphere and had already adapted to the working pace there. She was uncertain about her future, as she believed that teaching CFL overseas is an unstable occupation. She needed to find a more stable employment situation.

Table 3.1 *A brief description of the participants (with pseudonyms)*

(continued)

Tang
Tang described herself as a novice teacher who has a lot of things to learn and improve on. Her initial motivations for pursuing a career in CFL teaching were that it seemed like an interesting field, and that she was proud of the language and culture she grew up in. It was by chance that she began her teaching career in the Netherlands. Having taught CFL in Korea, she observed that Dutch students were more active than Korean students. Tang appeared quite confident in her ability to teach CFL to children, although she believed this was not an easy task. Inspired by her previous English teacher, she aspired to become a mature and wise teacher, who is also entertaining. Despite her passion, she was uncertain about the future of her career since CFL teachers do not have a formal career path.
Despite her desire to stay in the Netherlands for a longer period of time, the institute did not extend her contract. She was disappointed since she enjoyed the working environment in the Netherlands. However, she was aware of the instability of this profession and the fact that a CFL teacher is constantly on the move. She reported that it will not affect her passion and love for teaching.

The current study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of ICLON, Leiden University in March 2021. All participants in this study provided informed consent prior to their involvement. This process included providing detailed information about the study's pur- pose, procedures, potential risks, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without any repercussions. All information has been stored and processed confidentially.

3.3.2 Data collection

Data were collected over two years (from February 2022 to January 2024), and consisted of written and oral narratives, interviews, and participants' monthly reflective journals (24 journal entries per participant). These data helped us to gather meaningful experiences and challenges that CFL teachers encountered upon entering and during their stay in an intercultural context. In addition, a storyline instrument was used to capture participants' perceptions of their identity development.

Data collection was divided into three phases (see Fig. 1).

Phase 1
- 1.1. Individual interview
- 1.2. Instructions for writing reflective journals

Phase 2
- 2.1. Reflective journals per month
- 2.2 Oral narratives

Phase 3
- 3.1. Storyline
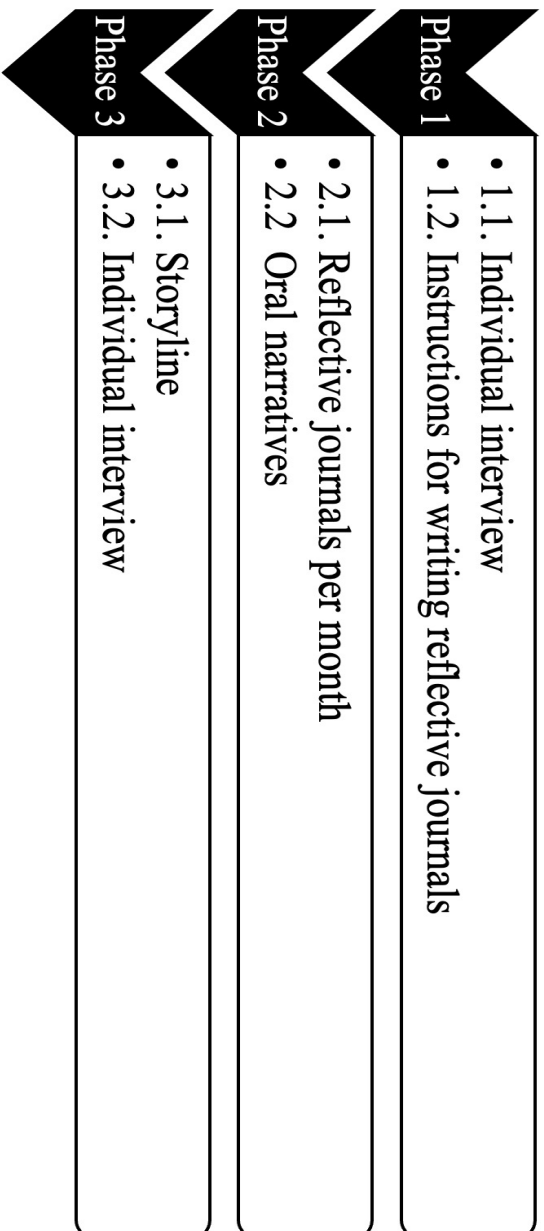- 3.2. Individual interview

Fig. 3.1. *Data collection process*

This first phase was conducted in February 2022, one month after the participants began teaching in the Netherlands. An individual semi-structured interview (see Appendix A) was conducted by the first author, to obtain information about the participants' background, previous teaching experiences, expectations for the new teaching practice in the Netherlands, and feelings regarding the first two months of teaching. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 min. All interviews were conducted face to face, were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and were subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

In Phase 2, after the first individual interview, the participants wrote reflective journals every month until the end of their second year of teaching in the Netherlands (from February 2022 to January 2024). A structured format (see Appendix B) and instructions for writing reflective journals were provided to the participants during the first interview. The journals varied in length, ranging from 3 to 10 pages on average. The journal entries focused on participants' reflections on their teaching experiences, challenges they faced, their reflection on professional development, adaption to the new education context, as well as their outlook for the coming months. Additionally, we invited participants to share their oral narratives in further individual meetings with the first author, every month. Oral narratives served as a supplement to the journals. Oral narratives provided participants with the opportunity to share details not included in journals, such as the key moments that shaped their teacher identity. Oral narratives allow for a more dynamic and interactive way of storytelling, capturing emotions

and nuances that written words may not fully convey. They enable participants to express their thoughts spontaneously, often leading to deeper insights and reflections. By combining oral narratives with written journals, a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and identities can be achieved.

The third phase was at the end of the participants' two-year teaching period, in January 2024. Participants' written and oral narratives were collected for the last time. In addition, participants were asked to draw the storylines of their two-year teaching experience. Storylines served as stimuli for the final individual interview. Firstly, they were shown the line represented in Fig. 3.2. The X-axis represents time, and the Y-axis represents the teacher's self-efficacy regarding their role as a teacher. Based on their own perspectives, they developed a line showing the process of their identity development. Then they labelled their key experiences and events on that line.

Y-axis - Participant's self-efficacy regarding their role as a teacher
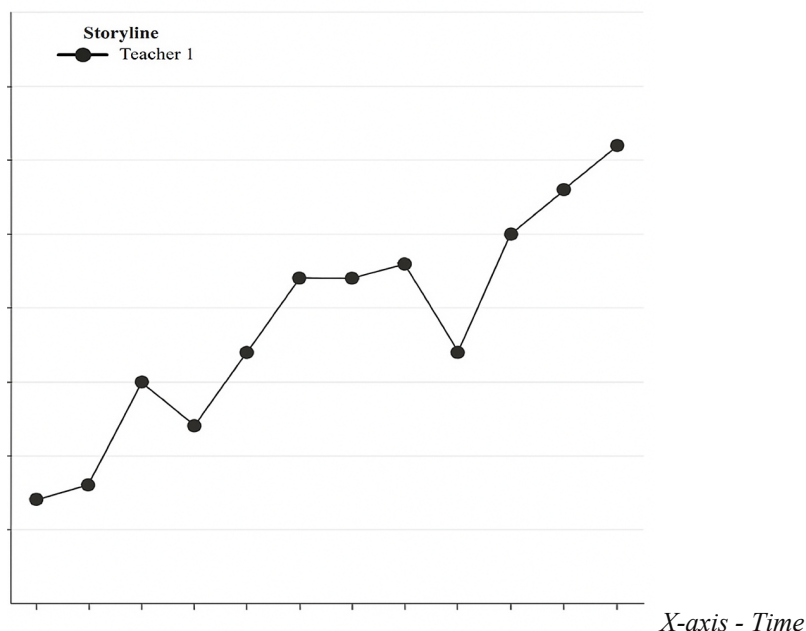
Fig. 3.2. *Example of identity development storyline, as produced by Zhang*

These key experiences were the starting point for semi-structured interviews in which the participants were asked to elaborate on these experiences: what happened, how they coped with such experiences, and how the experiences affected their identity development. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a detailed understanding of the key experiences in the storylines of participants.

3.3.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed in the data analysis process because we intended to understand how participants' mindful experience in intercultural settings had influenced their teacher identity. This type of data analysis aims to identify common themes and conceptual manifestations among the stories collected (Clarke & Braun, 2016). Thematic analysis is used not only to identify key themes within the data, but also to understand how those themes relate to one another (Clarke & Braun, 2016).

The data was analyzed using the following steps. Initially, the first author conducted multiple readings of the transcripts and narratives of participants without taking notes or highlighting anything, as the goal was to immerse herself in the participants' experiences. As a second step, line-by-line coding was performed in ATALAS.ti software, generating initial codes related to participants' experiences of teacher identity construction. For example, the excerpt, "there were many things in my daily life made me feel overwhelmed." was coded as "the influence from daily life". The excerpt, "students challenge my authority in class, something that hardly happened when I taught in China." was coded as "the influence from the students". In the third step, codes were iteratively reviewed and grouped into broader themes through the discussion among authors, such as "broader context factor", "other people", etc. To ensure reliability, coding consistency was reviewed through intercoder agreement sessions. In the fourth step, to determine the final themes, the authors triangulated their opinions and

engaged in a detailed discussion. Temporal patterns within the categories were identified, leading to the emergence of three distinct stages of teacher identity development: "survival stage", "exploratory stage", "proficient stage", and three influential factors, "context', "secondary characters", "incidents". The coding process is illustrated in Fig. 3.3.

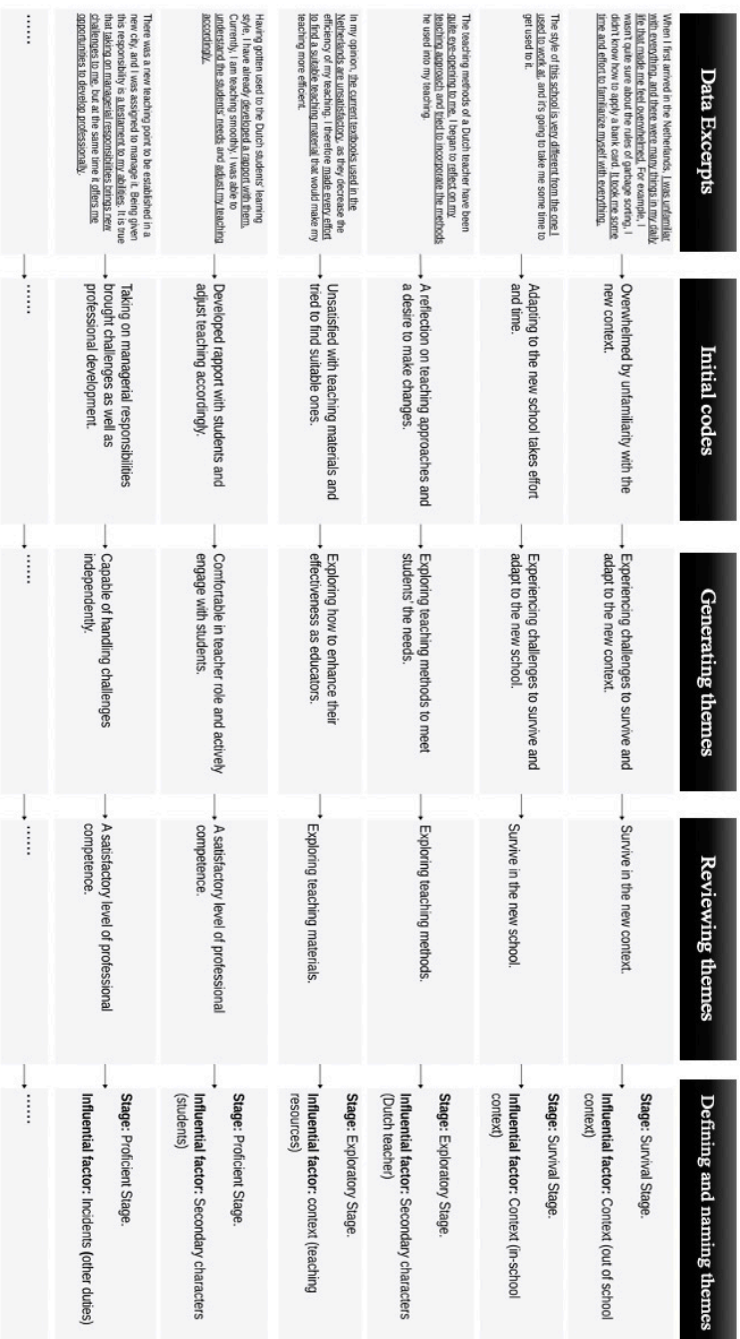| Data Excerpts	Initial codes	Generating themes	Reviewing themes	Defining and naming themes
When I first arrived in the Netherlands, I was unfamiliar with everything, and there were many things in my daily life that made me feel overwhelmed. For example, I wasn't quite sure about the rules of garbage sorting. I didn't know how to apply to a bank card. It took me some time and effort to familiarize myself with everything.	Overwhelmed by unfamiliarity with the new context.	Experiencing challenges to survive and adapt to the new context.	Survive in the new context.	**Stage:** Survival Stage. **Influential factor:** Context (out of school context)
The style of this school is very different from the one I used to work at, and it's going to take me some time to get used to it.	Adapting to the new school takes effort and time.	Experiencing challenges to survive and adapt to the new school.	Survive in the new school.	**Stage:** Survival Stage. **Influential factor:** Context (in-school context)
The teaching methods of a Dutch teacher have been quite eye-opening to me. I began to reflect on my teaching approach and tried to incorporate the methods he used into my teaching.	A reflection on teaching approaches and a desire to make changes.	Exploring teaching methods to meet students' the needs.	Exploring teaching methods.	**Stage:** Exploratory Stage. **Influential factor:** Secondary characters (Dutch teacher)
In my opinion, the current textbooks used in the Netherlands are unsatisfactory, as they decrease the efficiency of my teaching, I therefore made every effort to find a suitable teaching material that would make my teaching more efficient.	Unsatisfied with teaching materials and tried to find suitable ones.	Exploring how to enhance their effectiveness as educators.	Exploring teaching materials.	**Stage:** Exploratory Stage. **Influential factor:** context (teaching resources)
Having gotten used to the Dutch students' learning style, I have already developed a rapport with them. Currently, I am teaching smoothly. I was able to understand the students' needs and adjust my teaching accordingly.	Developed rapport with students and adjust teaching accordingly.	Comfortable in teacher role and actively engage with students.	A satisfactory level of professional competence.	**Stage:** Proficient Stage. **Influential factor:** Secondary characters (students)
There was a new teaching point to be established in a new city, and I was assigned to manage it. Being given this responsibility is a testament to my abilities. It is true that taking on managerial responsibilities brings me new challenges to me, but at the same time it offers me opportunities to develop professionally.	Taking on managerial responsibilities brought challenges as well as professional development.	Capable of handling challenges independently.	A satisfactory level of professional competence.	**Stage:** Proficient Stage. **Influential factor:** Incidents (other duties)
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Fig. 3.3. Coding process

3.4 Results

Through the qualitative analysis of the oral narratives and reflective journals, participants constructed their identity in three stages, referred to here as the 'survival' stage, the 'exploratory' stage, and the 'proficient' stage. During the survival stage, teachers are experiencing challenges in adapting to a new teaching environment and trying to gain acceptance from students, peers, and leaders. By dealing with everyday issues, they attempt to attain a certain level of comfort and security. During this stage, teacher identity is still fluid and fragile, as teachers are just beginning to understand their role within the new environment. At the exploratory stage, teachers are open to new ideas and eager to improve their skills. Moreover, teachers reach a relatively high level of competence in their work and continue to develop professionally. During this stage, teacher identity starts to stabilize as teachers gain confidence. At the proficient stage, the processes are curvilinear. Having reached a satisfactory level of professional competence, teachers may either seek to enrich their teaching and enjoy a high level of job satisfaction, or experience stagnation and seek professional alternatives. Teacher identity at this stage is largely established and solidified.

Throughout all three stages, three clusters of factors have been found to have a significant impact on participants' identity construction in the intercultural context, as illustrated in Fig. 4. Context refers to the environment and circumstances in which teaching takes place. Secondary characters are those who establish a direct dialogue with the

participants, therefore acting as a link between the subject (participants) and the object (the overseas teaching). Incidents refer to important events that occurred before or during the participants' teaching experience in the Netherlands. Fig. 4 illustrates how these three factors affect partic- ipants' identity development during their teaching in the intercultural setting.
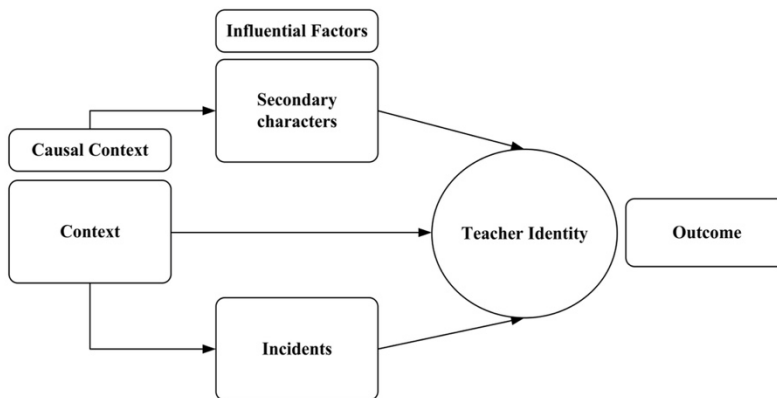

Fig. 3.4. *The outline of participants' identity construction*

Below, the findings are organized according to the three stages. For each stage, an overview is provided, illustrating the characteristics of teacher identity construction at the stage. After that, the participants' identity construction will be presented in the form of a narrative, based on their reflections. Then, there is a summary for each stage to show how the three influential factors (context, secondary characters, incidents) influence participants' identity construction.

3.4.1 Survival stage

The reflective journals showed that the "survival stage" began as soon as the three participants arrived in the Netherlands and prepared to start their teaching journey. Data suggested that teachers in this stage were primarily reactive, dealing with problems as they arose and struggled to find their footing. The key focus was adaptation. They were trying to adapt to new teaching environments, unfamiliar school policies, language barriers, and the varying attitudes of students and colleagues. Teachers often experience feelings of vulnerability, uncertainty, and stress. Their main goal was survival – trying to find their place and role. Table 3.2 demonstrates the experiences of participants at the survival stage.

Table 3.2 *Examples of participants' experiences in the survival stage*

		Zhang	Lian	Tang
Context	Out-of-school	Struggled to adapt to daily life.	Previous overseas experience helped with the transition.	Struggled to adapt to daily life.
	In-school	Easy to adjust to work pace.	Struggled with role transition from student to teacher.	Struggled with stricter management compared to previous school.
	Teaching resources	/	Lack of open resources and platforms to exchange resources.	/
	Teacher training	/	Lack of targeted training for CFL teaching.	Lack of targeted training for CFL teaching.
Secondary characters	Students	Challenged by students' questioning of authority and critical perspectives.	Teacher's low Dutch proficiency hindered students' understanding.	Difficulty maintaining engagement with Dutch students.
	Colleagues	Friendly and cooperative colleagues, exchanged of teaching ideas.	Despite limited interaction, open to communication.	Communicating and exchanging ideas with colleagues was helpful.
	Principal	/	Provided responsibility and allowed freedom in managing aspects of the program.	/
	Previous teacher	/	/	Inspired by previous English teacher's active and friendly approach.

(continued)

Incidents		Zhang	Lian	Tang
	Teaching-related	Confusion over teaching grammar points, impacting confidence. Success and failure in teaching changed her expectations.	Observed Dutch teacher's class refresh ideas on teaching. Finding suitable teaching material led to a deeper understanding.	Struggled to teach a new type of course, lacking confidence. Positive feedback from students increase commitment.
	Internship	/	Positive teaching experience in Britain boosted confidence for Dutch teaching.	Previous negative experience teaching in Poland decrease confidence.
	Other duties	Assisted students for Chinese competition.	Busy weeks and additional responsibilities reduced class preparation time.	Organized events which enhanced capabilities, despite challenges.
	Extra-curricular	Immersive communication with students in comparison to normal classes.	/	/

3.4.1.1 The identity construction of Zhang during the survival stage

Zhang encountered many challenges in adapting to the new teaching environment. The challenges were primarily related to two aspects. According to Zhang, the first obstacle was adjusting to daily life in the Netherlands, such as seeking out the appropriate apartment, sorting rubbish, paying in the supermarket, and so on. These difficulties caused her to lose focus on teaching at the beginning, which negatively affected her ability to adapt quickly to her new position as an international teacher.

The second challenge was increasing students' enthusiasm for the course and allowing them to engage actively in her class. Zhang illustrated her role as an artist, actress, and scaffolder in her metaphor. As she stated：

> *The teacher is like an actor or actress who stands on stage, attracts their audience, and is willing to receive positive feedback from them. In this new setting, however, it appears as though I am failing to do so.*

Zhang described herself as a teacher with high intercultural competence who is well suited to deal with cross-cultural differences. Sometimes the inefficiency of her teaching and interactions with Dutch students led to a decrease in her self-efficacy as a teacher. Zhang was aware that she was not as well prepared as she had believed.

Despite the challenges associated with adapting to a new environment, Zhang was enthusiastic about teaching abroad. In her statement, Zhang asserted that, as a teacher without a degree in foreign language teaching, she lacked linguistic and pedagogical knowledge. In this two-year teaching period, she was willing to enhance both theoretical and practical skills in foreign language teaching.

3.4.1.2 The identity construction of Lian during the survival stage

Lian was willing to gain cross-cultural experience in different countries and felt confident that she could adapt to the new environment. During the survival stage, most of her challenges were associated with the transition from one role to another. Lian was beginning her first professional career after graduating from her master's program, and in her reflections, she expressed concern about changing from *"a student"* to *"an independent teacher"*. In her words:

> *During my practicum, I was only required to complete the tasks that the principal assigned to me. I am now taking on more responsibilities with regard to organizing and designing, and I am responsible for making all decisions on my own. Adapting to my new role, especially in a new context, is really a challenge, I need some time to adjust.*

Lian described herself as an ambitious teacher who aspires to contribute significantly to the field of CFL education. However, her

exploration of teaching was limited because of a lack of sufficient teaching materials and targeted teacher training. Due to the burden and time involved in preparing lessons on her own without adequate resources, she had little time to reflect on her teaching or make improvements. As she stated：

> Many schools' resources are not open to the public. If every school provided open resources and cooperated, it would be much easier for teachers, especially novice teachers. I hope there will be a platform for exchanging teaching materials between schools and among countries.

Although exploring the teaching all on her own was an extremely difficult task, Lian stated that, by searching for appropriate teaching materials and trying to find a better teaching method, she gained a better understanding of CFL teaching for children.

3.4.1.3 The identity construction of Tang during the survival stage

Tang was excited about beginning a new career and life in a foreign country. According to her, at this point, her main challenges included adjusting to the working style at the new school and teaching the course she was assigned.

Tang took some time to adjust to her new job at a new school. In comparison to her previous school, she stated that the new school had stricter management practices. At this school, new teachers'

lessons were observed by experienced teachers, which Tang felt added a great deal of pressure. Additionally, besides teaching, Tang also took on the responsibility of organizing events on her own, which she had never done before. Tang was confident in her ability to teach, but when it came to organizing activities, she admitted she had much to learn.

It was Tang's goal to become a teacher with broader skills. She was willing to teach a variety of courses, but she was not allowed to do so. Although Tang did not wish to teach children, she had no say over the types of courses she would teach. As she put it:

> *It is always necessary to maintain tension in CFL classes with children because they are emotional. After the class, I am usually exhausted. Teaching children is so hard and tiring, I am still struggling to find a better way to teach them.*

Tang was a teacher who was passionate about CFL teaching and enjoyed living and teaching in an intercultural context. According to Tang, it took her three months to adjust to the new environment. She stated in her reflection that she did not experience much cultural shock at the beginning and was able to adapt to the new context without much difficulty.

3.4.1.4 Summary

The Survival Stage of teacher identity development, as manifested by these three teachers, was marked by intense adjustment challenges as they strove to navigate a new and often unfamiliar environment.

Overall, the survival stage is characterized by teachers navigating uncertainties and trying to find a balance between personal adaptation and professional competence. It sets the foundation for their evolving identities as educators within an intercultural context. The characteristics of three influential factors at the survival stage are illustrated in the Table 3.3 below.

Table 3.3 *The characteristics of three factors during survival stage*

Factors	Similarities	Differences	Interpretation
Context	All participants struggled with adjusting to unfamiliar environments, including cultural expectations and resource constraints, which impacted their identity construction.	- **Zhang:** Struggled significantly with daily life adjustments outside school. - **Lian:** Previous overseas teaching experience facilitated smoother adaptation. - **Tang:** Found stricter school management and resource limitations challenging.	Participants faced a vulnerable phase where adapting to new environments, both in-school and out-of-school, was central to their survival. Lian's prior exposure to similar intercultural settings gave her an advantage, highlighting the role of experience in easing transitions.
Secondary characters	Interaction with students was pivotal for shaping identity, with cultural learning differences influencing competence development.	- **Zhang:** Faced challenges with students questioning her authority. - **Lian:** Benefited from highly motivated students, which helped stabilize her teaching identity. - **Tang:** Struggled to engage Dutch students, testing her adaptability and resilience.	Students were a major influence on how participants viewed themselves as teachers. Zhang's authority issues and Tang's engagement struggles highlight the cultural gaps in expectations, while Lian's positive experiences demonstrate the stabilizing effect of motivated students.
	Collaboration with colleagues was helpful but varied in accessibility and degree of support.	- **Zhang:** Received helpful guidance and suggestions from colleagues. - **Lian:** Found limited opportunities for idea exchange due to a lack of colleagues teaching the same subject. - **Tang:** Maintained a collaborative attitude but had fewer interactions with peers.	Support from colleagues played an important role in building teacher identity. While Zhang benefited from guidance, Lian's limited peer exchange reflected the isolating nature of teaching specific subjects in intercultural contexts. Tang's collaboration hints at perseverance despite challenges.

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Factors	Similarities	Differences	Interpretation
Incidents	Teaching successes and failures significantly influenced self-efficacy and confidence.	**- Zhang:** Experienced decreased confidence due to grammar teaching challenges. **- Lian:** Success in finding suitable teaching materials boosted her confidence. **- Tang:** Positive teaching experiences in a Dutch school enhanced her optimism; event organizing developed her skills.	Incidents acted as catalysts for identity construction. Zhang's struggles illustrate the fragile confidence in the survival stage, while Lian and Tang's positive experiences show how success in teaching or events can lead to increased competence and professional growth.

3.4.2 Exploratory stage: second and third semester

The exploratory stage started at the beginning of the second semester and lasted for one year. Teachers in this stage moved beyond basic adaptation and started to experiment with different teaching methods. They had overcome the initial hurdles of survival and began to explore how to enhance their effectiveness as educators. There was an increased focus on improving pedagogical skills and adjusting teaching methods to meet the needs of culturally diverse students. Teachers also started to critically reflect on school policies, curriculum settings, and other administrative tasks, questioning what works and what does not. Teachers were more engaged in interactions with students, colleagues, and the broader community. They sought out ways to understand cultural differences and adjusted their methods accordingly. Table 3.4 shows an overview of the three influential factors at the exploratory stage.

Table 3.4 *Examples of participants' experiences at the exploratory stage*

		Zhang	Lian	T'ang
Context	**Out-of-school**	Teaching in the Netherlands felt rewarding, enjoyed communication style.	Adapted to the context and like the overall environment in the Netherlands. / Learning Dutch language was beneficial for adapting to the context as well as teaching.	Adapted to the context and like the overall environment in the Netherlands.
	In-school	Disagreed with some school decisions and curriculum settings / More involvement in administration, more understanding of institute.	Workload from both teaching and administration caused pressure. / Took one semester to adapt to everything in the new school.	Workload from both teaching and administration caused pressure. / Took one semester to adapt to everything in the new school.
	Teaching resources	Insufficient open resources hindered the work of teachers.	Found suitable materials by herself after dissatisfaction with textbooks.	Dissatisfaction with textbooks but managed to find some online resources.
	Teacher training	/	Lack of training led to self-exploration of effective teaching methods.	Lack of training led to self-exploration of effective teaching methods.
Secondary characters	**Students**	Students' engagement and feedback influenced teacher's commitment.	The connection to the new context because of students' positive feedback. / More efficient classes due to familiarity with Dutch students' learning style.	Students' engagement and feedback influenced teacher's commitment. / More efficient classes due to familiarity with Dutch students' learning style.
	Colleagues	More efficient classes due to familiarity with Dutch students' learning style. / Communicating and learning from colleagues.	Preferring to complete work on her own, not willing to reflect on teaching with colleagues.	Communicating and learning from colleagues.

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(continued)

		Zhang	Lian	Tang
Secondary characters	**Dutch language teacher**	Inspired by the Dutch teacher's teaching methods. Planning to apply Dutch teacher's methods to her class.	Inspired by the Dutch teacher's teaching methods. Planning to apply Dutch teacher's methods to her class.	/
	Family member	Having her daughter study in a Dutch school helps her understand Dutch culture deeper.	/	
Incidents	**Teaching-related**	Self-efficacy is negatively impacted by experiences in teaching at a Dutch secondary school.	Self-efficacy is positively impacted by experiences in teaching at a Dutch primary school. Inefficient at managing her time at work	Her confidence as a teacher has increased with the progress of her students.
	Attending Dutch language course	Realized the big difference in Dutch way of teaching. Being able to think from the perspective of a language learner.	Realized the big difference in Dutch way of teaching. Implementing Dutch teacher's way of teaching in her class.	/
	Other duties	/	Stress caused by administrative tasks.	Benefited from administrative tasks.

3.4.2.1 The identity construction of Zhang during the exploratory stage

In Zhang's reflection, it was evident that she gained a greater sense of confidence as an international teacher at this point in her career. Her curiosity regarding cultural differences and intercultural communication kept her interested in staying in the Netherlands for a longer period of time.

Zhang made significant changes in her teaching based on her observations in the Dutch language course. It appeared that her experience with the Dutch language course had led her to rethink the role of the teacher in the classroom, as well as how she could make the classroom more efficient. In her words：

> *Students must complete many assignments and study some content on their own before class, the teacher only explains some main points and answers students' questions during class. I find this method of teaching to be very different from my own approach.*

She was also able to think from the perspective of a language learner, thus having a comprehensive understanding of the obstacles students face in their studies. With greater exposure to Dutch culture and educational settings, Zhang gained a better understanding of the people and culture in the new context by comparing the differences between China and the Netherlands.

Nevertheless, the exploratory phase was not without its challenges. Despite Zhang's best efforts, she was unable to engage

students in class and improve their interest in learning in a Dutch secondary school. Giving students more freedom and taking less responsibility was something she knew she needed to do; however, it was difficult to completely change her mindset. Sometimes she returned to her previous teaching approach unconsciously. As Zhang put it：

> *While understanding the theory is one thing, changing the existing teaching method and stepping outside one's comfort zone is another.*

In addition, aside from teaching, Zhang was overwhelmed by additional responsibilities, such as administration and conducting academic research. Although she was willing to spend more time reflecting on her teaching practice and making improvements, she was too busy to initiate the changes she desired.

3.4.2.2 The identity construction of Lian during the exploratory stage

Lian's reflection reveals that, at the exploratory stage, she was already comfortable with her teaching context and had fewer concerns about transitioning to her new role as an independent international teacher. At this stage, Lian's primary concern was her professional development. In her opinion, there was a lack of proper training, leading to teachers exploring matters on their own. In her words：

> *The current teacher training is primarily focused on pedagogical skills. I am interested in attending more*

training that can help me to develop as a good teacher
and help to advance my professional development.

In Lian's opinion, she had developed her own teaching method, particularly regarding the way she taught children. Lian described herself as a teacher who reflected a lot on her practice and was willing to continually make progress. As she stated：

My experience teaching in a Dutch primary school
provided me with the opportunity to gain a better
understanding of the learning characteristics of Dutch
students, as well as to adjust my teaching methods to
teach more efficiently. I am pleased that my lessons are
well received by my students.

In addition, having attended classes in the Dutch language and attempting to integrate the Dutch method of teaching languages in her classes helped her to refine her teaching abilities.

In the exploratory stage, there were changes visible in Lian. At the beginning of the two-year teaching program, Lian expressed her ambition to make a substantial difference and to create her own teaching system related to CFL teaching for children. After learning more about the overall state of CFL education in the Netherlands, she was less ambitious than she had been before. As she put it：

Now, I realize the constraints of the broader
environment，and the limited ability and energy I have. I

do not believe I am capable of making the significant
changes I once believed I could make. At this point, I am
focusing on finishing my current job to a good standard
and making the contributions I can in this field.

3.4.2.3 The identity construction of Tang during the exploratory stage

At the exploratory stage, Tang indicated that she had already gotten used to the working environment and enjoyed working in the Netherlands. Her familiarity with the Dutch working style enabled her to work more smoothly with her colleagues. Since she joined the new school, she had been responsible for organizing some events and handling some administrative duties. She stated that these things had trained her ability and motivated her to improve. Tang described herself at this stage as Tang "version 2.0".

Even though Tang had been teaching Chinese language to children in a new school for several months, she still felt frustrated as she did not know how to interact with them appropriately. As she put it：

My students can sometimes drive me crazy. It is
definitely my preference to teach teenagers or adults if I
have the choice.

However, Tang had undergone some changes at this point. Although she complained about the difficulties associated with teaching children and expressed her unwillingness to do so, she tried

her best to prepare for class and aid her students in their learning. Additionally, Tang gained the trust of her students and was able to establish a positive relationship with them. In her reflection, Tang stated：

> *When you are unable to change the current state, the only thing you can do is adjust your attitude and try your best to complete your task.*

In describing her plans for the future, Tang described herself as a teacher who enjoyed the present and did not think and reflect too much. It should be noted, however, that she expressed a willingness to extend her contract and teach in the Netherlands for an extended period in the future.

3.4.2.4 Summary

The Exploratory Stage marks a transition from basic adaptation to active engagement, where teachers start to refine their teaching methods and assume more responsibility within the school. This stage represents a period of experimentation and reflection, where teachers start to assert their professional autonomy while continuing to learn and adapt. The characteristics of the three influential factors is illustrated in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5 *The characteristics of the three influential factors during exploratory stage*

Three factors	Similarities	Differences	Interpretation
Context	All participants transitioned from basic adaptation to deeper engagement, taking on more responsibilities in school activities.	**Zhang** critically questioned school decisions, signaling reflective growth. **Tang** efficiently utilized teaching resources, demonstrating growing independence. **Lian** smoothly adapted to the system, showing confidence in her role.	This stage reflects a shift from survival to active participation. Teachers start to shape their professional identities by reflecting on their environments and asserting autonomy. Zhang's critical awareness indicates a step toward defining her role, while Tang and Lian's resourcefulness highlights growing competence.
Secondary characters	Students remained a central influence on teacher identity, as their engagement directly affected the teachers' confidence and teaching strategies.	**Zhang** struggled with low student motivation, which reduced her professional commitment. **Lian and Tang** benefited from positive student engagement, which reinforced their confidence and strategies.	Student engagement serves as a mirror for teachers' self-efficacy. Zhang's struggles underscore the challenge of teaching disengaged students, showing how external feedback can shape internal confidence. Lian and Tang's positive experiences highlight how supportive student interactions can empower teachers and inspire strategy development.
Incidents	Key incidents like attending Dutch language courses or working in new contexts provided transformative learning opportunities, broadening perspectives and inspiring growth.	**Zhang's** experience with Dutch educational freedom challenged her existing beliefs. **Lian** adapted smoothly to new methods, reflecting confidence. **Tang** used administrative challenges to develop broader competencies despite initial overwhelm.	This stage emphasizes the transformative power of reflection and adaptation. Zhang's experience highlights the impact of exposure to new educational paradigms, while Lian's smooth integration shows the role of confidence in adopting innovative practices. Tang's ability to grow through challenges demonstrates resilience and the potential for non-teaching tasks to support holistic identity development.

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3.4.3 Proficient stage

The proficient stage started at the beginning of the last semester. Teachers had established their own teaching styles and approaches. They were capable of handling challenges independently and effectively used their accumulated experiences to refine their practices. Teachers were more comfortable in their roles and actively engaged with students, colleagues, and other stakeholders. They could adapt quickly to new challenges, understood students' needs more deeply, and cultivated a personal philosophy of teaching. The focus was on contribution and professional mastery. Teachers in this stage contributed to curriculum development, mentored other teachers, and played an active role in school-wide activities. Table 3.6 shows an overview of the three influential factors at the exploratory stage.

Table 3.6 *Examples of participants' experiences at the proficient stage*

		Zhang	Lian	Tang
Context	**Out-of-school**	Enjoyed cultural exchange. Learning about cultural differences and their impact on teaching.	Adapted to Dutch context, but challenges and tasks kept coming.	Adapted to Dutch context, but challenges and tasks kept coming.
	In-school	Satisfied with current workload. Teaching new course led to new challenges.	Established her own teaching style. Teaching new course led to new challenges.	Unsatisfied with current workload. Negative attitude towards some activities in school.
	Teaching resources	Challenges from using online platform.	Struggled with resource availability.	Struggled with resource availability.
	Teacher training	Some trainings too vague and not targeted. Reflected on training and adjusted teaching beliefs.	Some trainings too vague and not targeted.	Training opportunities are limited.
	CFL working conditions	/		Low pay and unstable working conditions. There is a lack of professional development and career paths for CFL teachers.
Secondary characters	**Students**	Building rapport with students, teaching went smoothly.	Satisfied with students' outcomes. Students' positive feedback was encouraging.	Building rapport with students, teaching went smoothly. Students' positive feedback was encouraging.

(continued)

Secondary characters		Zhang	Lian	Tang
	Colleagues	Colleagues were professional, learned a lot from them.	Little communication with colleagues.	Decreased reliance on colleagues.
	Teacher educator	Gained new insight into intercultural language teaching from a teacher educator.	/	/
	Parents	/	Tough parents, difficult to communicate.	/
Incidents	Teaching-related	Struggled with new course initially but adapted.	Struggled with new course initially but was able to teach it effectively.	The new course brought challenges, but less nervous at beginning compared with last semester.
	Other duties	/	Taking on managerial responsibilities brings new challenges as well as opportunities for growth.	/
	Renewal of contract	Extend the contract, willing to make contributions to overseas CFL teaching.	Extend the contract, ready for new challenges.	Fail to extend the contract, Disappointed but had to accept it. This two-year experience in the Netherlands was unforgettable.

3.4.3.1 The identity construction of Zhang during the proficient stage

After two years of international teaching in the Netherlands, Zhang described herself as a more professional and confident teacher. In her opinion, the process of identity transformation was valuable. Zhang showed a liking for the Dutch context in several aspects, which led her to worry less about adaptation and focus more on improving her teaching. The comfortable and safe environment ensures that she is in a secure environment for the further refinement of her professional identity.

In this stage, Zhang thought that she had succeeded in becoming a professional teacher. She changed her mind, however, after teaching a new course she had never taught before. As she put it:

> *The first lesson was a complete mess, I even doubted my ability to teach. I was a little surprised as I thought at this point, I would be capable of teaching any course.*

According to her, this was an opportunity for her to enhance her professional knowledge. Furthermore, she realized that a teacher should always strive to be a lifelong learner. She would therefore continue to reflect and improve as a teacher. This example demonstrated that although Zhang thought her identity had already transformed in a new setting, new challenges would continue to arise. While dealing with challenges, her teacher identity will be constantly reconstructed.

Considering two years of teaching in the Netherlands only the beginning, she decided to teach in the Netherlands for at least one more year. In her opinion, she had completed the transformation process, and now was the appropriate time for her to make additional contributions to overseas CFL education. Based on her teaching experience and reflections from teacher training, she wished to explore a new approach to teaching Chinese as a foreign language, integrating characteristics of the Chinese language and culture. Her objective was not only to make progress on the practical level but also to contribute on the theoretical level. In her words:

> *Having taken the root in the past two years, now it is the time for upward growth.*

3.4.3.2 The identity construction of Lian during the proficient stage

Lian's contract was extended, and she decided to work in the Netherlands for one more year. In her statement, she expressed her enjoyment of the working environment and believed that she had already adapted to the pace of work in the Netherlands. It was evident that Lian was more confident about herself as a teacher at this point in her career. She demonstrated a high level of self-efficacy in several aspects, including her competence in teaching, and her ability to deal with administrative issues. According to Lian's reflection, after almost two years of CFL teaching in an intercultural context, she became more prepared and organized, and developed a systematic way of teaching.

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She would indeed face challenges when teaching new courses, but she believed that she had already transitioned into a professional and independent teacher, and that she could overcome challenges in a short amount of time. In addition, Lian was proud of being assigned the responsibility of managing a teaching site in a new city by her school. As a result of managing this site, she believed that her management and communication skills had significantly improved. As Lian put it:

> *I am now not only a teacher who is good at teaching but also able to take responsibility for the development of the school.*

Lian appeared uncertain when discussing the future. She admitted that she developed a lot from this two-year overseas teaching experience and became a more professional teacher. She realized, however, that teaching CFL overseas is an unstable occupation. In the end, she knew that she would have to find a more stable position. Consequently, she was considering whether to continue in this profession or pursue a PhD.

3.4.3.3 The identity construction of Tang during the proficient stage

Tang indicated that her experience as a CFL teacher in the Netherlands for two years was unforgettable. During this period, she learned and improved a great deal. Two years of teaching changed her profoundly, giving her a new perspective on this career, and on herself. Despite Tang's desire to stay in the Netherlands longer, the institute did not

extend her contract. It was disappointing for her since she enjoyed working in the Netherlands.

She expressed that being unable to continue teaching in the Netherlands would not affect her passion and love of teaching. Besides, as a CFL teacher, she remained confident in her abilities. Tang pointed out that it is difficult for CFL teachers to remain in a location for a long period of time and that they are always on the move. As she put it:

> *Many of my former classmates and colleagues have left this profession because their career paths and professional development are unclear. But it is difficult for me to give up this job since I am passionate about it. As long as I am capable, I will continue to teach CFL until one day I become tired of it.*

In the past, Tang described herself as a teacher who enjoys the present moment and does not give much thought to the future or her career goals. Tang realized, however, that she still did not possess adequate knowledge regarding language teaching theory after two years of overseas teaching. She was willing to participate in more teacher training courses in the future for the purpose of furthering her professional development. Due to Tang's awareness of her shortcomings, she began to reflect more on her practice as a teacher and consider ways of growing professionally.

3.4.3.4 Summary

The Proficient Stage represents the point at which teachers become comfortable and confident in their roles, having successfully navigated the challenges of adaptation and experimentation in earlier stages. Overall, the Proficient Stage is marked by a blend of autonomy, confidence, and continued professional development, where teachers not only excel in their immediate teaching practices but also refine their broader teaching philosophy and approach. Table 3.7 presents the similarities and differences among participants across context, secondary characters, and incidents during the Proficient Stage.

Table 3.7 *The characteristics of factors during the proficient stage*

Three factors	Similarities	Differences	Interpretation
Context	All participants became confident and comfortable in their roles, transitioning from adaptation to active contributors in the school setting.	**Lian** developed her teaching style from scratch, reflecting a personalized approach. **Zhang** faced challenges with online platforms but adapted, showing her ability to integrate technology.	Confidence and competence merge in this stage, as teachers feel less like outsiders and more like skilled contributors. Their growing understanding of resources and strategies drives their development.
Secondary characters	Participants increasingly relied less on colleagues, signaling growing self-reliance.	**Zhang** continued seeking guidance from a teacher educator, emphasizing the ongoing importance of mentorship for professional growth. **Lian** exhibited significant independence.	The role of secondary characters evolves in this stage. Teachers balance independence with collaboration and mentorship, reflecting a blend of autonomy and the need for external support in specific areas.
Incidents	All participants showed resilience and adaptability when facing new teaching challenges, using them to refine their teaching methods.	**Zhang** initially struggled with a new course but improved over time. **Lian** leveraged past teaching experiences to build confidence and autonomy. **Tang** excelled in solving challenges related to teaching Chinese characters.	Resilience and adaptability define this stage. Teachers not only refine their skills through challenges but also use these experiences to strengthen their teaching philosophy and teacher identity.

3.4.4 Impact of the factors at different stages

The progression from the survival to the proficient stage demonstrates a clear trajectory of growth in teacher identity, where initial struggles evolve into opportunities for learning and ultimately result in professional confidence and independence. The importance of adapting to the context and interacting with students and colleagues highlights the intertwined nature of internal identity development and external environmental factors. Across all stages, incidents served as turning points, helping teachers reflect on their abilities and adjust their practices. Over time, teachers gained the ability to leverage these incidents for refinement and growth rather than merely reacting to them. Table 3.8 shows the similarities and differences of the factors across the three stages.

Table 3.8 *Impact of the factors at different stages*

	Similarities Across	Differences Across Stages	Interpretation
Context	Context consistently shaped identity through adaptation to a new school environment and managing cultural differences.	**Survival Stage:** Teachers focused on emotional and psychological adjustments to adapt to in-school and out-of-school contexts. **Exploratory Stage:** Teachers began questioning school policies and engaging more deeply. **Proficient Stage:** Context became a backdrop for refining methods and achieving autonomy.	Teachers transitioned from **reactive adaptation** (in survival stage) to **critical engagement** (in exploratory stage) and finally to **proactive independence** (in proficient stage). These changes reflect a gradual move from managing external pressures to focusing on internal professional growth and mastery.
Secondary Characters	**Students:** Students consistently impacted teacher identity construction through their engagement levels and cultural perspectives.	**Survival Stage:** Teachers struggled with authority and adjusting to behavior. **Exploratory Stage:** Teachers experimented with methods to engage students. **Proficient Stage:** Students' feedback affirmed competence and refined teaching methods.	The role of students evolved from a **source of challenge** (survival) to **partners in improvement** (exploratory) and ultimately to **validators of competence** (proficient). The increasing focus on refining methods in response to student feedback highlights the importance of student-teacher dynamics in shaping teaching identity.

	Similarities Across	Differences Across Stages	Interpretation
Secondary Characters	**Colleagues:** Colleagues provided varying levels of support across stages, contributing to teacher identity construction.	**Survival Stage:** Colleagues acted as guides, helping with acclimation. **Exploratory Stage:** Teachers collaborated and learned from colleagues. **Proficient Stage:** Teachers relied less on colleagues due to increased confidence but still valued professional advice.	In the survival stage, reliance on colleagues reflects the need for **support and guidance.** By the exploratory stage, collaboration with colleagues indicates growing confidence and a willingness to **exchange ideas.** In the proficient stage, reduced reliance on colleagues shows a shift to **autonomy**, but professional advice remains valuable for fine-
Incidents	Incidents, both challenges and successes, shaped teachers' self-efficacy and teaching beliefs at all stages.	**Survival Stage:** Incidents led to fluctuating confidence and self-doubt. **Exploratory Stage:** Incidents became opportunities for learning and perspective shifts. **Proficient Stage:** Incidents were used to refine skills and enhance professional growth.	Incidents played a pivotal role in professional identity construction at each stage. In survival, challenges often **undermined confidence,** while in exploratory, they became opportunities for **growth and learning.** By proficient, incidents were used as **reference points** for skill refinement and confidence building.
Summary	Participants across all stages shared struggles with adaptation, challenges with students, and reliance on colleagues to some degree.	Differences emerged in how participants' experiences, resilience, and circumstances influenced their progression from survival to exploration and confidence.	The gradual shift from **adaptation to mastery** illustrates the evolution of teacher identity. Teachers progressed from reactive adjustment (survival) to exploring and experimenting (exploratory) and finally to self-assured professionals (proficient), reflecting a maturation process shaped by internal and external influences.

3.5 Duscussion and conclusion

This study delves into the dynamic process of identity construction among teachers in an intercultural setting, specifically within the context of Chinese teachers' experience of teaching in the Netherlands. The construction of teacher identity involves an ongoing process that transforms through social practice (Liu et al., 2023; Dimitrieska, 2024). As a result of this period of teaching overseas, CFL teachers acquired a more agentic identity than they had when they began teaching. The findings reveal that agentic identities were determined because of the experiences through teaching in an intercultural environment, as well as interactions with members of the teachers' community and with students from different cultures.

In addition, our study fills the gap in the literature by focusing specifically on Chinese language teachers in cross-cultural settings, a population often overlooked in identity research. By analyzing teacher identity development through context, secondary characters, and incidents across three distinct stages, we provide a granular understanding of how these factors interact to shape identity over time. This approach goes beyond general teacher identity frameworks, offering a model tailored to the unique challenges faced by Chinese language teachers.

3.5.1 Identity construction as a never-ending process

The findings suggest that the construction of teacher identity is a continuous process requiring participants to engage in social practices in a new context. We found that the three participants, who all have a

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different educational backgrounds and teaching experience, went through three comparable patterns of identity development, despite the variations in their stories. The stories align with Rosenfeld et al.'s (2022) study, which revealed that the experience of entering a new context is similar to that of a new teacher entering the teaching profession. Even though some participants were experienced teachers, they had to deal with challenges and conflicts arising from the teaching and socialization process in the intercultural context. Identity reconstructions are inherent in this process. Hence, the constant reconstruction of identity among participants reaffirmed the construction of teacher identity as shifting, unstable, and a never-ending process (Brunetti & Marston, 2018; Gholami et al., 2021). Besides, it is context-dependent and framed by social, political, and cultural discourses (Deniz, 2015; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020).

Despite participants in the present study having passed the struggling stages and reaching a relatively high level of self-efficacy, challenges continued to arise during the Proficient stage. Through overcoming challenges and seeking ways to improve themselves, teachers believed they could continue to reassemble their teacher identity and continue to develop professionally.

3.5.2 Refinement of teacher identity through overseas teaching

The new context and different workplace expectations teachers encountered abroad often clashed with their perception of their identity and forced them to negotiate between their professional identity and their new reality, so they could integrate into schools and deliver their

work (Liu et al., 2024). Our findings indicated that the process of reconstructing teacher identity began with some challenges posed by the new teaching context and their new role as international teachers. Conflicts raised by unfamiliarity with the teaching context, misinterpretation of the context's teaching goal, and concerns about interaction with students from other cultural backgrounds led participants to refine their identity as teachers. Even though participants in the current study had experienced previous challenges and conflicts, they were able to develop their competence in several aspects as they completed their teaching tasks, learned to think from the learner's perspective, interacted with others in the intercultural setting, and discussed teaching practices with peers. In this way, they developed a more refined teacher identity at the end of their teaching period in the Netherlands.

According to Zen et al., (2022), individuals take on a new identity when they join a community of practice where learning occurs through collaborative interactions. Our research provides evidence that teachers were able to reconstruct their teacher identity through interaction with and support from school leaders and cooperating teachers in the new context. The findings highlight the importance of the teaching environment for teachers' success in overseas placements, as well as for their experiences to enhance their evolving professional identity by offering pedagogical value and/or personal growth opportunities.

In this research, we further found that teachers reconstructed their teacher identity through the interaction with their students, especially when these students are from another cultural background

than their own. Having the opportunity to interact with foreign students in an intercultural setting enabled language teachers to reflect on the way they teach, thus prompting deep self-reflection. Through exploring and questioning their professional and personal identities, teachers gained a more nuanced and multifaceted sense of self.

3.5.3 *Chinese language teachers' identity construction in intercultural settings*

Unlike teachers in more familiar language contexts, Chinese language teachers often face additional challenges, such as low prioritization of Chinese language courses in foreign educational systems, language barriers that hinder communication and resource acquisition, and divergent cultural expectations regarding teaching methods, such as the more hierarchical teacher-student relationship in Chinese culture versus the egalitarian relationships in Western schools. These challenges influence how CFL teachers perceive themselves and their role in the classroom, requiring them to reconcile traditional Chinese teaching values with local educational norms.

In addition, Chinese language teachers often experience transformative growth through critical incidents, such as administrative challenges, exposure to different teaching philosophies (e.g., Dutch educational freedom), or resource constraints. These experiences push them to adapt their teaching styles, develop new strategies, and blend Chinese and foreign pedagogical methods, creating a hybrid professional identity.

The stage-specific analysis further highlights the gradual evolution of CFL teachers' teacher identity, emphasizing their journey from survival to proficiency. This uniqueness underscores the complexities and richness of identity construction in the group of CFL teachers, providing valuable insights for researchers and practitioners alike.

3.5.4 Limitations and future directions

The current study has some limitations that need to be addressed in future studies. Firstly, the participants in this study were selected by purposive sampling, and the chosen teachers may not represent the broader population of CFL teachers in the Netherlands or elsewhere. A second concern was the fact that we did not have access to the participants to do a member check when the findings were complete, and we do not know how they would have regarded their own identities as represented in this paper's findings. As such, the findings of this study are "an interpretation" and not "the interpretation" (Gholami, 2021). The current study also suggests that more research attention could be paid to exploring specific strategies that effectively support teachers' identity reconstruction and examining the long-term impacts of intercultural teaching experiences on professional development. This would provide deeper insights into fostering resilient and adaptable teaching professionals in an increasingly globalized world.

3.5.5 Conclusion

The study contributes to a new understanding of international teachers' identity development in an intercultural context. Furthermore, the

findings highlight the development of teacher identity as an ongoing, dynamic, and unstable process, and illustrate how teaching overseas presents a unique opportunity for teachers to refine their identities and facilitate their professional development. In light of this, foreign language teachers, including both novices and experienced teachers, are recommended to have the opportunity to "learn in an intercultural and international environment" (Sercu, 2006, Fackler, et al., 2021). Through experiential learning activities such as exchange programs, they will acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to become effective intercultural teachers.