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Identity Positioning in Teaching Intercultural Communication: A Case Study of Chinese EFL Teachers



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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers position their identities when teaching Intercultural Communication (IC), an interdisciplinary subject. With data collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis of three experienced EFL teachers at Chinese universities, thematic analysis revealed: (1) Teachers adopt strategic roles as “organizers,” “guides,” “transmitters,” and “midwives” in IC pedagogy; (2) Their identity evolution progresses from casual taster to IC promoter, apprentice to independent practitioner, and student to creative professional; (3) Sustained IC teaching expands their identities beyond EFL teachers to encompass IC instructors, learners, and researchers. Findings highlight engaging in IC pedagogy can simultaneously reshape language teacher identity, enhance teaching practice, and foster professional development. Additionally, intercultural educators must renegotiate their legitimacy and adopt new roles to meet the demands of IC pedagogy. The study offers insights for EFL teacher development in intercultural education and specialized content teaching contexts.

Keywords: Teacher identity, positioning theory, EFL teachers, Intercultural Communication, China

Introduction

The global push for interculturally competent graduates has catalyzed curricular reforms in language education, leading to the widespread adoption of an intercultural approach. As a result, Intercultural

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Communication (IC) has become a core component of contemporary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs – a significant shift that requires teachers to reconstruct their professional roles. EFL instructors are now expected not only to teach language but also to train students in intercultural competence, an expanded responsibility that marks a departure from traditional EFL teaching (Díaz, 2016; Gandana & Parr, 2013).

In the current study, IC will be understood from both a disciplinary and a curricular perspective. As a research field, IC is dedicated to investigating the mechanisms underlying interaction, coexistence, and cooperation among individuals and groups from diverse cultures (Zhang & Sun, 2024). It encompasses not only communication studies but also draws on insights from anthropology, linguistics, psychology, and other domains (Kulich & Tong, 2025). From a curricular perspective, particularly in the context of foreign language education, IC represents a fundamental pedagogical objective reframed as intercultural (communicative) competence (Byram, 2021), transforming beyond linguistic proficiency in language instruction. As a course, the pedagogical issues related to IC, including course content, resources, teaching techniques, are closely aligned with the discipline. For the purposes of this research, IC is used interchangeably to denote either a field of inquiry or a taught course.

The interdisciplinary nature of IC presents profound challenges, both practically and mentally, particularly for EFL educators whose professional training remains anchored in traditional linguistic paradigms. Emerging scholarship has begun interrogating EFL teachers' cognitive schemas and instructional strategies in IC contexts (Qian, 2023), yet a crucial dimension remains underexplored: the complex relationship between intercultural teaching praxis and educators' identity (re)formation. This oversight proves particularly consequential given that developing intercultural pedagogic expertise fundamentally constitutes an identity negotiation process (Zheng, 2019), one that may challenge teachers' established English teacher identity and propel them toward "intercultural teacherhood" (Tan et al., 2021, p. 4), where teachers may feel inadequately prepared for IC teaching. Thus, investigating teacher identity work along with their IC teaching praxis will yield insights into the human factor of implementing educational practices.

The current study addresses this gap through employing positioning theory as an explanatory theory and analytical lens (Davies & Harré, 1999; Green et al., 2020; Kayi-Aydar, 2021), which conceptualizes identity as dynamically co-constructed through discursive practice and social interaction.

China's educational landscape provides a strategically significant research context, having institutionalized IC instruction within tertiary EFL programs since the 1980s (Kulich & Wang, 2015; Van Maele & Jin, 2022). The nation's implementation of IC curricula has cultivated a substantial cohort of practitioners whose sustained engagement with intercultural pedagogy offers rich empirical terrain for investigating identity evolution. Focusing on this population, the study employs a qualitative case study design to address the following research questions:

1. How do EFL teachers position themselves when they deliver IC instruction?
2. Through what trajectories do their identities transform as they endorse IC teaching?
3. What are the professional consequences of their identity positioning after they engage in IC pedagogy?

By examining the aspects of identity positioning in relation to IC teaching, this research makes dual contributions to intercultural education scholarship. Theoretically, it extends positioning theory applications beyond language teacher cognition into the underexamined realm of identity construction within the context of intercultural teaching. It further enriches the theory through this empirical study.

Practically, it identifies leverage points for teacher development programs to support educators through identity transitions inherent in implementing intercultural curricula.

Literature Review

Teacher Identity in Foreign Language Education

Teacher identity is widely recognized as a dynamic and evolving construct that is intimately linked to pedagogical practice (Lindahl & Yazan, 2020; Wenger, 1998). In the field of language education, a significant body of research has focused on pre-service or novice teachers, especially as they transition from learners to professionals (Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Tsui, 2007). These studies have shown that identity construction is a dialogic process shaped by classroom experiences, institutional roles, and evolving beliefs about teaching.

More recently, scholars have shifted attention to experienced teachers, exploring how they reconfigure their identities in response to curricular shifts or expanded responsibilities. For example, Qin and Wang (2018) demonstrated how EFL teachers moved from identifying primarily as practitioners to embracing pedagogical and research-focused roles once they took the responsibilities of translation instructors. Chen and Huang (2022) found translation and interpreting teachers construct their role identities as trainers/educators, researchers, and practitioners and these sub-roles interact and contribute to overall translation and interpreting teacher identity. Hu and Hashim (2025) examined the identities of English Medium Instruction (EMI) teachers and found that these educators were primarily identified as content teachers, but were also occasionally seen as English language teachers, learners of English, and learners of pedagogy.

These findings suggest that professional identity remains dynamic and malleable throughout a teacher's career, particularly when teachers are required to navigate new subject domains or reorient their pedagogical goals. Understanding how teacher identity evolves in response to such shifts is crucial, particularly in the context of teaching IC as a new direction in EFL education.

Intercultural Teaching and Identity Work

Intercultural foreign language teaching emphasizes the integration of language and culture through critical comparison, reflective inquiry, and contextual understanding (Byram, 2021; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Oranje & Smith, 2017; Zhang, 2007). However, recent scholarship argues that interculturality must also be understood as a form of collaborative identity management in interaction, where learners and teachers co-construct multiple identities rather than “exchange” fixed cultural facts (Borghetti, 2019). This poststructuralist view positions identity as fluid, relational, and enacted through discourse: an orientation that places new demands on teachers who must mediate identity negotiations in the classroom rather than simply transmit cultural content.

Sercu's (2006) multinational study was among the first to argue that foreign language teachers must assume a new professional identity, one that synthesizes linguistic instruction with the development of intercultural competence. Menard-Warwick (2008) conducted case studies of two transnational English teachers in the United States, with a focus on their cultural and intercultural identities. The study found that these identities became resources for their pedagogy and affected their approaches to intercultural teaching in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. Moloney (2013) implemented an intervention intercultural language training program for native speaker teachers of Chinese in Australian schools. The study revealed teachers' adherence to a Chinese education schema but they

were also open to adopting, adapting, and bridging pedagogical cultures if given relevant guidance. In the Chinese context, Gong et al. (2021) demonstrated how teachers of Chinese as a foreign language in Hong Kong international schools navigated multiple, and at times conflicting, identity positions. These included roles as cultural bearers, transmitters, learners, and mediators, as they worked to foster students' intercultural understanding.

However, compared to the body of work on the general integration of intercultural elements into language curricula, far less attention has been paid to how EFL teachers reconstruct their professional identities when tasked with teaching stand-alone IC courses; assignments that often extend beyond their formal disciplinary training. This study seeks to address this critical gap.

Some notable exceptions offer valuable insights. Gandana and Parr's (2013) case study of an early career Indonesian English teacher documented the tensions between curriculum implementation and identity formation when the teacher assumed responsibility for an IC course for the first time, including the unintentional confirmation of stereotypes due to essentialist framings of Indonesian and other cultures as well as the occasional inconsistencies between the stated beliefs and instructional practices due to contextual factors. Root et al. (2013) identified four dialectical tensions IC instructors must navigate: objectivity versus subjectivity, personal versus professional, learner versus teacher, and comfort zone versus challenge. These dynamics underscore the importance of identity work in effective IC pedagogy and affirm "the critical role that an instructor's identity plays in the design and delivery of any IC course" (p. 5). More recently, Tan et al. (2021) introduced the concept of intercultural teacherhood to capture the complex identity negotiations faced by Chinese EFL teachers offering IC courses to mixed class of Chinese and international students, where both the course content and the diverse student backgrounds are inherently intercultural. These teachers, lacking formal training in IC, initially felt inadequate, but gradually developed a sense of professional legitimacy through sustained teaching practice. In addition, recent research highlights that IC teaching requires teachers to adopt an interpretive and dialogic pedagogical stance, where they design learning around meaning-making and mediate students' interpretations in interaction (Wang, 2023).

Collectively, these studies highlight the transformative potential of IC teaching, where language teachers face multiple tensions related to their pedagogical practices, professional identity, teaching expertise, and, at times, the challenges of managing intercultural classroom. To navigate these complexities, teachers must move beyond traditional language teaching paradigms.

Building on this literature, the present study investigates how Chinese EFL teachers position and reconfigure their professional identities through long-term engagement with IC pedagogy.

Positioning Theory and Identity

The study employs Positioning Theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) as its theoretical framework. The term "position" is used to capture the dynamic aspects of selfhood, which is "constantly in process" and "only exists as process" (Davies, 2000, p. 137). The theory views identity as co-constructed through discursive practices and social interactions, emphasizing its dynamic and relational nature. It suggests that individuals "position" themselves and are positioned by others through these practices. Given its close connection to identity, it has increasingly been employed as a powerful theoretical framework to analyze identity.

In educational contexts, positioning analysis helps explain how teachers situate themselves within the social and ideological contexts of their classrooms, and how these self-positions affect pedagogical decisions and interactions with learners. Studies have highlighted that positioning plays a crucial role

in shaping the identities that teachers project or develop, as well as in the challenges they encounter when constructing or maintaining their professional identities. Furthermore, teachers' positional identities have considerable implications for the types of instruction and support that students receive (Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018). For example, Whitsed and Volet (2013) explored how adjunct foreign English language teachers were positioned, tacitly or explicitly, in the context of internationalization in the Japanese university sector. Weng (2023) examined the case of a graduate teaching assistant's self-poisoning with an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in a composition class and found that the teacher adopted three core identity positions: a considerate ESL teacher, an experienced and knowledgeable researcher, and a limited writing instructor.

In the context of IC teaching, Positioning Theory provides a framework for exploring how EFL teachers navigate the tensions between their responsibilities as language teachers and the legitimacy of teaching IC. It also sheds light on how teachers respond to the various expectations placed upon them by national policies, institutions, and students.

Methodology

Context and Participants

Within China's educational system, English is a compulsory subject throughout primary, secondary, and tertiary education due to its status as an important international language. For university students, the cultivation of intercultural competence is emphasised as one of the core objectives of EFL instruction. This pedagogical priority is formally institutionalized through national policy documents including *Guidelines for Teaching Undergraduate Foreign Language Majors* (2020) and *Guidelines for College English Teaching* (2020). Moreover, in these two guideline documents, IC is formally defined and described for the first time as a core course and a module respectively, emphasizing its pivotal role in fostering students' ability to engage in effective communication across cultural boundaries. While there are nuanced differences in their focus: the former being more theoretically-grounded in the IC discipline and the latter being more application-oriented and comparative, both documents reflect a comprehensive national educational strategy aimed at preparing Chinese students for meaningful and effective engagement in an increasingly interconnected world. As IC becomes an integral component of the English curriculum in these guidelines, EFL teachers are expected to deliver this course effectively.

In line with this context, the methodological design was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do EFL teachers position themselves when delivering IC instruction?
2. Through what trajectories do their identities transform as they engage in IC teaching?
3. What professional consequences arise from their identity positioning within IC pedagogy?

These questions informed participant selection, interview design, and the analytical procedures.

The current study followed the principle of purposive sampling (Cohen et al., 2018). Initially, 14 EFL teachers who had taught the IC course for at least three rounds were recruited with their informed consent, individual interviews were conducted with each of them. Ultimately, three of them, Claire, Benson, and Grace, were chosen as core participants for in-depth analysis in this study. Their inclusion was primarily based on their representation of different periods in the history of EFL teaching, ranging from the initial introduction of IC to its full integration within the EFL community and national policy. Each participant thus represents a distinct point in time, reflecting the professional and societal influences at the macro level on EFL education. By examining these

cases collectively, the study provides a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences of EFL teachers from different generations, highlighting how the rights, duties, and responsibilities of IC EFL teachers have evolved over time, thereby ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the research phenomenon. While the specific course titles varied slightly across institutions, all courses shared a common focus on intercultural communication studies and were conducted in English. The selected courses spanned 32 to 40 credit hours, with class sizes ranging from 24 to 60 students, reflecting typical undergraduate course configurations in Chinese higher education.

Information on the core participants is given in Table 1, using pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1 *Core Participants' Background Information*

Name	Sex	Educational background	Teaching English	Teaching IC
Claire	Female	MA in Linguistics	36 years	25 years
Benson	Male	MA in Linguistics	28 years	11 years
Grace	Female	PhD in Intercultural Communication	19 years	11 years

Claire comes from University L, a prestigious comprehensive university in eastern China. Inspired by a course in her MA programme in the early 1990s, she began to develop “Language, Culture and Communication”, a pioneering IC course she has continuously refined. By the time she participated in this study in 2019, Claire had taught this course through 20 complete iterations, adapting content for both English majors and non-specialists.

Benson works at University K, a top-ranked institution distinguished by its rigorous science and technology orientation in south-east China. Motivated by both institutional curriculum reforms and personal scholarly interest, he designed and implemented the course “Intercultural Communication” in 2008 specifically for non-English majors. When he participated in this study in 2019, he had offered this course more than 10 times.

Grace holds a position at University Y, a traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) college in eastern China. Following the completion of her Master’s degree with a specialization in IC, she promptly designed and taught the course “Intercultural Communication” as an elective tailored for her TCM students in 2008. By 2019, she had taught the course over 20 times.

Data Collection

The data for this study were mainly collected through semi-structured interviews, supplemented by documents and field notes from class observations.

Data collection started with semi-structured individual interviews with each teacher, focusing on (1) their educational backgrounds, (2) their IC learning experiences, (3) their cognitions and practices related to IC teaching. These interviews were conducted several weeks prior to class observations. Following this, non-participant classroom observations of each participant were performed, spanning six to eight class periods, with detailed field notes taken alongside audio recordings. Subsequently, stimulated recall interviews were held with each teacher twice, focusing on specific course content, activity design, and pedagogical reflections, after class observations had been completed. All interviews were conducted in Chinese, the native language of the participants, to allow for more comfortable and expressive responses. In total, there were nine interviews (one interview before class observations and

two stimulated recall interviews after class observations for each teacher, numbered C1-C3, B1-B3, G1-G3) that lasted 7 hours 25 minutes and were transcribed verbatim into 88,726 Chinese characters. Member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) were carried out by sending the transcripts to the interviewees to ensure respondent validation.

In addition to interviews and field notes from class observations, the participants' curriculum materials, publications, and approved curriculum projects were also collected to inform the current study. Due to space constraints, this paper primarily focuses on the analysis of interview data, with other data added where necessary.

Data Analysis

To better capture the identity dynamics involved in IC teaching, an integrated analytical framework is adopted, combining Kayi-Aydar's (2021) multilayered framework for positioning analysis with adjustments inspired by Ye and Zhao's (2018) identity development trajectories. Built on Positioning Theory, which views identity as co-constructed through discursive practices and social interactions (Davies & Harré, 1990), Kayi-Aydar (2021) develops a comprehensive and systematic analytical framework to explore identity negotiation across time and settings through three interrelated layers: Layer 1, analyzing storylines and identifying self-positions; Layer 2, examining the relational positioning continuum; Layer 3, exploring the social consequences that emerge from these positions.

While Kayi-Aydar's framework provides a comprehensive structure for analyzing identity negotiation through three interrelated layers, it primarily focuses on relational aspects and does not fully address the developmental nature of teacher identity. Specifically, Layer 2, which examines relational positioning, tends to capture static stances without tracing the evolution of identity over time. To better account for the dynamic aspects of teacher identity, this study adapts Layer 2 by incorporating insights from Ye and Zhao (2018), who conceptualize teacher development through the identification of their identity trajectories. This adaptation reframes the process as a positioning trajectory. This revised layer tracks how teachers' positional stances shift, develop, and are renegotiated across different temporal and contextual domains. By integrating this modified layer into Kayi-Aydar's original framework, the study preserves the relational and multi-layered analysis while enhancing its ability to capture the emergent, non-linear dynamics of teacher identity in IC teaching contexts.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data in this study. Specifically, a hybrid approach, blending deductive and inductive coding along with theme development (Xu & Zammit, 2020), was used.

First, for the deductive coding, guided by the integrated analytical framework, main categories were determined, namely, teachers' self-positions in IC teaching, teachers' positioning trajectories in the process of IC teaching, and consequences of teachers' identity positioning as a result of IC teaching.

Next, for the inductive coding, driven by the data, subthemes, i.e. teachers' identities reconstructed in their IC teaching, were identified using a combination of within-case analysis (Miles et al., 2014) and cross-case analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The within-case analysis was conducted first to pinpoint the roles that teachers positioned themselves respectively in their IC teaching. In vivo codes were applied for analysing teachers' self-positions (research question 1). Next, based on Pennington's (1995) teacher change cycle when situated in a new teaching context, how the participating teacher adjusted their IC teaching and identity reconstruction were outlined regarding positioning trajectories in the process of IC teaching. In this manner, each teacher's IC teaching practices and transformative experiences in their professional activities were examined within their specific contexts and their newly evolved identities related to IC teaching were identified (research question 2).

Subsequently, a cross-case analysis was conducted to discern the consequences of the teachers' identity positioning in their IC teaching. Through constant comparison and contrast, recurrent patterns in their positioning were identified and interpreted, revealing a range of social, cognitive, moral, and behavioural consequences (research question 3).

Results and Findings

Teachers' Self-Positions in IC Teaching

The foundational layer of positioning analysis involves the identification of dominant storylines and their corresponding positionings. In this study, the teacher-student relationship emerges as a key storyline, conceptualized through the lens of dyadic construct (Kayi-Aydar, 2021).

Within this relational storyline, teachers explicitly position themselves as “organizers”, “guides”, “transmitters”, and “midwives” in their IC classes, illustrating a dynamic and flexible teaching identity. Rather than adhering to a traditional, one-directional model of teaching, they emphasize a collaborative approach that encourages students to take ownership of their IC learning, thereby fostering a more interactive and student-centered classroom environment.

Claire asserts that she is primarily an organizer instead of an authority in her IC teaching. As she articulated,

Though the teacher-centered approach remains widely embraced in China, I consciously adopt the role of an organizer rather than an authority figure in my IC class. Even the great philosopher Aristotle humbly acknowledged that he was no wiser than others. Truth, he believed, is uncovered through discussion and debate. Therefore, I encourage students to think critically and express themselves more actively through structured discussions. (C1)

Claire demonstrates a deliberate self-positioning that departs from the traditional teacher-as-authority model prevalent in Chinese classrooms. By identifying herself as an “organizer” rather than an authority, Claire enacts a professional identity that emphasizes facilitation and guidance. She references Aristotle's view to legitimize her positioning. By invoking this perspective, she frames her IC pedagogical approach as one that values students' active engagement and critical thinking.

Similarly, Benson moves beyond the traditional instructor role, instead positioning himself as a guide for students' IC learning. As he elaborated,

In this classroom, I consciously reject the traditional model of teacher dominance. Rather, I expect to provide direction for students in their IC learning journey, just like a guide who can see further along the path. Crucially, my role isn't to lecture while students passively absorb knowledge, but to design interactive activities that strengthen their problem-solving and critical thinking skills. (B1)

Benson challenged the traditional model of teacher dominance, which often results in passive learning for students, and instead positioned himself as a guide who provides direction while fostering students' autonomy in their IC learning. This positioning not only reflects his pedagogical philosophy but also highlights his active role in shaping the learning experience, where the teacher-student relationship is more dynamic and reciprocal.

Unlike Claire and Benson, Grace articulates a dual positioning as both a transmitter of IC knowledge and a midwife of her students' IC learning. As she explained,

What distinguishes the IC course from other English classes is that it goes beyond linguistic study by integrating key concepts, theories, and interdisciplinary knowledge from the IC field. My primary responsibility is to effectively convey these foundational elements. And it is also important to encourage students to articulate what they've experienced, observed, and reflected as part of their IC learning process. In this regard, I view my role as akin to that of a midwife, as Socrates once suggested — facilitating the birth of ideas and nurturing the intellectual growth of students. (G1)

In the first part of her description, Grace positions herself as responsible for conveying key concepts, theories, and interdisciplinary knowledge from the field of IC, positioning this content as distinct from traditional language teaching. This positioning underscores her role as a knowledge transmitter, responsible for bridging the gap between students and the complex content of IC. She further adopts the metaphor of a “midwife,” which reflects her view of herself as a facilitator of students’ intellectual development. In this capacity, she emphasizes the importance of encouraging students to actively engage with their own experiences, observations, and reflections. This self-positioning as both a transmitter of IC knowledge and a facilitator of intellectual growth reflects a more interactive, student-centered approach to teaching that extends beyond the confines of traditional EFL instruction. Through this lens, Grace actively negotiates her teaching identity, blending the unique content of IC with the foundational goals of language education. Her positioning reflects a dynamic, flexible approach to teaching that fosters students’ engagement with both the content of IC and their own intellectual development.

By explaining their roles, rights, and duties in IC teaching, the participating teachers actively engaged in identity positioning. These self-constructed positionings served to foreground two distinctive features of IC pedagogy: first, its departure from traditional teacher-centred language instruction models; and second, its emphasis on active student engagement and critical thinking. By positioning themselves as organizers, guides, transmitters, and midwives, teachers actively challenge the hierarchical, top-down approach typical of traditional education, thereby creating a more dynamic, participatory IC learning environment.

Teachers’ Positioning Trajectories in the Process of IC Teaching

Positioning continuum is concerned with an evolving positioning cluster of “rights and duties in developing story lines” (Kayi-Aydar, 2021, p. 6). It highlights the dynamic nature of positioning that occurs both temporally and contextually. As Green et al. (2020) note, this process unfolds “within and across time, events/episodes, and configurations of actors, within and across social spaces in classrooms and other social contexts” (p. 119). In this process, various identity potentials and performance styles may emerge. As the participating EFL teachers embarked on their IC teaching journeys, a process of identity negotiation was initiated, leading to the progressive development of new professional identities. Drawing on Pennington’s (1995) framework of chronological analysis to examine the teachers’ accumulated IC teaching experiences, this section outlines the distinct identity reconstruction trajectories of each teacher throughout their engagement with IC pedagogy.

Claire: From a Casual Taster to an Enthusiastic Promoter of IC

Claire underwent a dynamic transformation in her professional identity through her engagement with IC, evolving from a casual learner to an enthusiastic promoter of the field.

In the late 1980s, Claire studied in a joint Sino-British MA programme, which primarily focused on linguistics. However, a course offered by Professor H from Britain called “Language, Culture and

Communication” stood out. This course was distinctive because it explored intercultural interactions, with the professor drawing on many of her personal experiences. Claire’s interest was piqued and, as a student, she eagerly embraced the subject. As she later recalled,

In the class, Professor H shared numerous personal anecdotes about intercultural encounters during her time in Hong Kong. For instance, she was initially confused and even frustrated when a gentleman asked her “Have you eaten yet” only to walk away, as she had mistaken it for an invitation for dinner. On another occasion, while waiting at a bus stop, she was equally puzzled when people inquired, “Are you waiting for the bus?” She simply responded, “Yes, I’m waiting for the bus” and wondered why anyone would ask such an obvious question. Later, she realized these were just customary greetings in China. ... I found these stories both captivating and enlightening. In a way, Professor H was the one who led me into the world of intercultural communication. (C1)

Though Claire did not expect it, Professor H’s class offered her an opportunity to taste and experience IC firsthand, which she found captivating. This experience inspired her strong desire to provide her own students with a similarly enriching educational experience. Shortly after completing her MA program, she began teaching a course under the same title, i.e. “Language, Culture and Communication”, and has continued to do so ever since. In the early stages, practical teaching materials and textbooks for such a course were scarce in China. To address this, Claire adapted some of the resources she had acquired from Professor H’s classes while simultaneously developing her own instructional materials, carefully tailoring them to the context of Chinese EFL education. In this way, she became one of the pioneering educators who laid the foundation for IC teaching in China.

In recent years, she has felt an increasing sense of responsibility to promote IC education. As a veteran English teacher and scholar, she has been frequently invited to deliver lectures on foreign language learning for students not only within her university but also in various other settings. She consistently seizes these opportunities to encourage students to incorporate IC learning into their language study. Furthermore, she regularly serves as an expert trainer in professional development programs for both foreign language teachers and organizational staff involved in international affairs. As she explained:

I work with teachers at different levels. For primary and secondary school teachers, who typically have limited IC knowledge, I mainly help them realize the importance of intercultural teaching and provide suggestions on what they can do in their class. With university teachers, I delve deeper into the field of IC by introducing fundamental concepts and theories, then connecting them to college English curriculum. And for organizational staff, I emphasize developing intercultural sensitivity to help them minimize potential intercultural misunderstanding and conflicts in their work. (C3)

Overall, Claire’s initial exposure to IC, primarily through Professor H’s instruction, marked a pivotal shift in her positioning from a linguistics-focused student to an enthusiastic learner deeply engaged with IC topics during her MA studies. This transformation not only sparked her personal interest but also repositioned her as an active participant in the field, embracing IC as an area of academic inquiry and practice. This shift in her identity as a learner motivated Claire to adopt the role of an IC curricular pioneer and educator in China, thus translating her personal engagement into a broader social and institutional contribution. As Claire’s pedagogical experience and scholarly involvement in IC grew, her professional positioning evolved further into that of a responsible promoter of IC education. Transcending the conventional scope of the classroom teacher, she positioned herself as a multiplier of IC literacy, deliberately cultivating communities of practice that integrated specialized IC content with EFL teaching and learning. This trajectory illustrates how Claire’s professional identity has been

dynamically co-constructed through sustained engagement with IC, enabling her to extend the relevance of intercultural learning beyond the traditional EFL classroom.

Benson: From a Humble Apprentice to an Independent Practitioner of IC

Benson's journey in IC reflects a progression from a humble apprentice to an independent practitioner, characterized by a series of self-directed learning experiences, active engagement with the academic community, and the development of a distinctive teaching philosophy.

Benson discovered his interest in intercultural communication while pursuing his MA in linguistics in the early 2000s. Intrigued by the field, he began exploring various IC-related books and gradually immersed himself deeper in the subject. In 2008, when his university encouraged teachers to develop electives for advanced English learners, he seized the opportunity to design and teach the course "Intercultural Communication" independently. Conscious of his lack of formal academic training in IC, Benson dedicated himself to ongoing learning in the process of teaching IC, particularly by engaging with a diverse array of IC-related literature.

While Benson's self-directed learning significantly enriched his IC teaching, he recognized its limitations. He understood the need for an academic community to support his professional growth. Consequently, he actively participated in IC-focused academic conferences, workshops, and short courses. By immersing himself in the professional community, he not only stayed up-to-date with the latest developments in the field of IC but also established valuable connections with other fellow IC practitioners and learned from their experiences. As he mentioned in one of the interviews,

I once attended a short course about IC in Beijing organized by Publishing House A (an influential foreign language press in northern China) and was inspired by many intercultural activities, especially those introduced by the lead trainer Professor B. She was a renowned IC scholar worldwide. I then immediately implemented some of these ideas in my classroom. ... Later on, I also attended the annual CAFIC¹ conference almost every year. On these conferences, I not only learned about the latest theoretical development of the IC field through keynote speeches by leading scholars but also got to know other IC teachers and practitioners. For example, I was happy to know Professor D and Dr. Z in the 2018 conference. It was very nice to talk to them and followed their research and publications. (B1)

In fact, he incorporated the *Bafa Bafa*² experiential learning activity, originally demonstrated by an American scholar, into his IC class, and also adopted the acting out strategy shared by a Chinese teacher at one of the workshops he attended. Additionally, he was profoundly influenced by a prominent IC trainer regarding the goal of intercultural training and teaching, namely, to broaden the horizons and enhance the abilities of trainees or students. Fully embracing this perspective, he systematically integrated it into his own IC teaching practice.

While Benson enthusiastically engaged with these learning opportunities and applied what he learned in his own classroom, he also developed a personal teaching philosophy for IC. He firmly believed that IC teaching should transcend mere knowledge transmission and instead prioritize fostering students' intercultural attitudes and awareness. Central to his pedagogical approach was the cultivation of students' self-cultural awareness. More specifically, Benson placed strong emphasis on guiding

¹ CAFIC, China Association for Intercultural Communication.

² *Bafa Bafa*, an intercultural simulation game.

students to critically understand and reflect on Chinese culture. To realize this objective, he introduced a dedicated module titled “Know Yourself” in the revised course syllabus and compiled a series of tailored teaching materials, with the explicit goal of enhancing students’ comprehension of core Chinese worldviews from an intercultural perspective.

In addition, for each IC class, Benson invited international friends with rich intercultural experiences into his classroom as guest speakers. In one observed lesson, both a French and a Pakistani who had lived in China for many years participated. When asked the purpose of this practice, he explained,

The topic of today’s lesson is intercultural adaptation. I invited them to share their personal experiences of adapting to a new culture. Their real-life stories make abstract IC concepts, such as culture shock and reverse culture shock, more tangible and relatable for students. Moreover, the face-to-face interaction allows students to engage directly by asking questions and receiving first-hand responses, creating authentic intercultural exchanges. There are additional benefits as well. For instance, today’s guests come from France and Pakistan, and they speak English with distinct accents. This offers students a practical opportunity to recognize linguistic diversity, reinforcing our earlier discussions on varieties of English in verbal communication.
(B2)

In summary, Benson’s journey in IC pedagogy began with his recognition of the need for formal training, positioning himself as a self-motivated learner who sought opportunities to deepen his understanding through conferences, workshops, and interactions with scholars and peer IC teachers. By constantly applying IC methodologies learned to his class, he legitimized his role as an IC educator. Drawing on his experiences, Benson developed a personal teaching philosophy focused on self-awareness, exemplified by the introduction of the “Know Yourself” module. This approach reframed intercultural competence, emphasizing not only on understanding the “Other” but primarily on a critical understanding of the “Self.” In this way, Benson positioned himself as a reflective practitioner, aware of his own identity and its influence on teaching practices. Moreover, Benson’s efforts to create authentic intercultural exchanges and implement innovative teaching methods further solidified his identity as an independent and proactive practitioner in the field. For instance, the inclusion of international guests with different accents of English provided students with an authentic opportunity to know varieties of English in realistic settings. This consistently anchors his pedagogical positioning within his foundational identity as a language teacher. By fostering genuine intercultural interactions while maintaining a clear focus on the practical aspects of English learning, Benson skillfully navigated the intersection of language teaching and intercultural competence.

Grace: From a Devoted Student to a Creative Professional of IC

Grace’s journey in IC represents a dynamic progression from a devoted student to an innovative professional, marked by her initial role as a diligent learner, followed by her reproduction of the discipline, and ultimately her emergence as a creative practitioner.

Grace chose IC as the focus of her MA program in 2006, embarking on three years of systematic study in the field. This rigorous academic training allowed her to develop a thorough understanding of IC, encompassing its historical development, foundational theories, and seminal publications. Additionally, in 2008, she participated in a specialized IC summer school in the USA. These dedicated IC studies and training experiences not only solidified her theoretical foundation but also bolstered her confidence in teaching the subject.

Upon earning her MA degree in 2009, Grace promptly set up the course “Intercultural Communication” at University Y, eager to apply her acquired knowledge to her students in the classroom. In the initial years, she structured the course based on her own learning experiences. The curriculum centered on key IC theories and concepts (such as high- and low-context cultures, culture shock, and face negotiation) as well as major IC themes (including nonverbal communication, intercultural adaptation, and intercultural competence). In this way, she effectively carried forward the tradition of IC education.

While offering this course continuously for many years, Grace remained engaged with the latest developments in the IC field through independent study and visiting scholar positions at domestic and overseas universities in 2013 and 2018. These professional development opportunities not only deepened her expertise but also prompted her to reflect critically on her IC teaching methods. Furthermore, through her persistent dedication, she was admitted to a PhD program in 2020, embarking on another phase of advanced academic training in IC. Reflecting on her learning journey, she noted,

My MA studies were the most foundational, as it ushered me into the IC field and provided a systematic overview of the discipline. The summer school experience was particularly enriching — I participated not only as a student but also as a volunteer. Combined with my visiting scholar experience in the USA five years later, these opportunities allowed me to immerse myself fully in IC, gaining extensive international and intercultural exposure. More importantly, these learning opportunities inspired both my IC teaching and research. Now, I’m looking forward to further growth from my PhD studies. (G1)

With her expanded academic training in IC, Grace proactively redesigned the course. Aligned with University Y’s mission to cultivate internationally competent TCM professionals, she revised the curriculum by integrating TCM elements into each IC topic. Explaining the updated course objectives and syllabus, she stated,

I have two key objectives for this course now: first, to deepen students’ identification with TCM, and second, to foster their ability to communicate TCM globally, particularly in English with an international vision. To achieve this, I’ve restructured the syllabus to blend IC themes with TCM-related content. For instance, while retaining core IC topics such as (1) Culture and Intercultural Communication, (2) Language and Culture, (3) Nonverbal Communication, (4) Values, and (5) Intercultural Adaptation, I’ve incorporated five corresponding TCM elements: (1) Intercultural Transmission of TCM, (2) TCM Translation, (3) Nonverbal Differences Between TCM and Western Medicine, (4) Core Values in TCM vs. Western Medicine, and (5) TCM’s Global Adaptation. (G1)

Grace then built on these ideas to refine the course curriculum. Drawing on these efforts, she applied for several course development grants and got approved. Later on, she published journal articles exploring various aspects of IC pedagogy for TCM students, contributing to the broader academic discourse.

Unlike Claire and Benson, Grace deliberately chose IC as the focus of her MA program, engaging in specialized summer schools and rigorous academic training. After earning her MA, she initially structured the IC course based on her own learning experiences, grounded in core IC theories. She then expanded her expertise through visiting scholar programs both domestically and abroad, culminating in her pursuit of a PhD in IC. These experiences, alongside her continuous reflection on IC pedagogy, positioned her as a committed learner dedicated to advancing her expertise. The most significant shift in Grace’s trajectory was her repositioning as a creative professional. By integrating TCM elements

into her IC curriculum, she crafted a new hybrid pedagogy. This move redefined her role, granting her the agency to reinterpret and localize IC theory. In doing so, she emerged as a creative practitioner, reshaping the boundaries of IC teaching.

In summary, the three teachers developed distinct approaches to learning and teaching IC, leading to different identity reconstruction trajectories. Claire emerged as a pioneering figure in IC instruction within foreign language education, consistently championing its development. Benson took on the role of an enthusiastic explorer, actively pursuing self-directed learning and professional growth in IC pedagogy. Grace demonstrated distinctive expertise by utilizing her rigorous academic background to address the unique intercultural needs of TCM students.

Consequences of Identity Positioning as a Result of IC Teaching

The final layer of analysis examines the consequences or broader implications of the identified positions. Teaching IC courses consistently positioned the teachers as conscious IC educators, persistent IC learners, and active IC researchers. These interrelated positionings generated profound consequences across social, cognitive, and moral dimensions, fundamentally shaping their professional practice and development.

Social Consequences

In terms of social consequences, the teachers gained authority in IC pedagogy and developed a unique professional persona that distinguished them from traditional EFL teachers. Their dedication to IC teaching transformed them into experienced IC instructors and educators. Years of consistently teaching the IC course allowed them to refine their pedagogical skills. Notably, all three teachers independently initiated the IC course at their respective universities, becoming their institutions' first IC instructors. Initially, their teaching relied heavily on prior IC knowledge or textbook materials. However, with accumulated experience and deeper student understanding, they grew more competent and adaptable, illustrating Wenger's (1998) assertion that identity is "an experience and a display of competence" (p. 152). Extensive classroom practice with continuous reflection improved their teaching skills as teachers of IC. Their influence even went beyond the classroom.

Take Claire as an example: she began teaching IC in the early 1990s, positioning herself as one of the pioneers in China. Due to her accumulated teaching expertise, relevant publications, and recognition in the IC field, she was invited to serve as an IC authority to train teachers and international staff at different levels and also the judge for competition featuring intercultural competence. Compared with Claire, Grace had fewer years of IC teaching, but her IC expertise led to her role as a guidance instructor for a contest showcasing students' intercultural competence. Her pedagogical and scholarly expertise directly contributed to her team's notable success.

This recognition elevated teachers' standing within the IC community, positioning them not only as language teachers but as specialized IC educators and experts. Their positioning expanded their interactional sphere beyond the classroom, integrating them into the broader educational community.

Cognitive Consequences

The cognitive consequences were equally significant, emerging directly from the teachers' positioning as persistent learners of IC.

For instance, Claire first encountered IC incidentally during her initial MA program in linguistics, after having worked as an EFL teacher for several years. This initial exposure later motivated her to pursue a second MA program centered on cultural studies, reflecting a shift in her positional identity toward specialization in the field. Different from Claire, Benson began through self-directed study, extensively reading IC literature. Upon finding his “community of practice” (Wenger, 1998), he actively positioned himself within it by participating in academic conferences, short courses, and training programs focused on IC. He also took initiative to interact with other IC teachers and scholars, reinforcing his identity as an active participant in the IC field. Grace consistently engaged in structured professional development, including MA studies, summer schools, visiting scholar programs home and abroad, and ultimately a PhD, all with a concentrated focus on IC. Her long-term commitment reflects a stable positioning as a dedicated IC learner and academic.

For all of them, IC learning was an ongoing, dynamic, and non-linear phenomenon (Day et al., 2007) that prepared and accompanied their IC teaching all the time. They exhibited strong autonomy in their learning, engaging not only in structured professional development but also in deliberate self-directed learning (Louws, 2017), fostering their professional growth. Such deep and continuous learning, marked by internalization (Johnson, 2009), empowered them to “create new professional knowledge... in a way that challenges previous assumptions and creates new meanings” (Timperley, 2011, p. 5). Over time, this learning gradually reshaped their professional identities.

This sustained positioning facilitated the internalization of new knowledge and pedagogical techniques, as the teachers strove not only to teach IC but also to continually refine their comprehension of it. Through ongoing learning, they systematically redefined their pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Shulman, 1986) related to IC instruction. Their growing expertise thus constituted a dynamic, recursive process: cognitive growth reinforced their positioning as authoritative IC educators, which in turn continuously reshaped their understanding of effective IC teaching.

Moral Consequences

Furthermore, positioning as IC instructors involved a moral commitment that transcended linguistic pedagogy.

Though all the IC courses in this study were established as an alternative English course for advanced learners, the curricular goal went beyond linguistic skills. Their course syllabi indicated this clearly. Take Benson for example, he wrote in the syllabus explicitly that the course aims to “help students understand the basic concepts and theories of intercultural communication, cultivate a diverse and open mindset, familiarize them with and master practical intercultural communication skills, and lay the foundation for smooth communication with people from other cultures in the future.”

The teachers did not focus solely on the linguistic aspects of the course content or merely provide facts about the society and culture of English-speaking countries (Borghetti & Qin, 2022) but were responsible for shaping students’ attitudes toward cultural diversity, fostering empathy, and promoting reflection on cultural differences. This moral responsibility led them to take intentional actions in breaking down stereotypes, challenging ethnocentrism, and promoting empathy. By confronting issues like stereotyping and ethnocentrism in their course content, the teachers not only influenced their students’ intercultural competence but also modeled ethical behavior and critical thinking in the classroom. Their strong awareness that they were not only EFL teachers but also IC educators contributed to the effectiveness of their IC teaching. This supports the claim that “good teaching ... is grounded in the identity of the teacher” (Root et al., 2013, p. 3).

Behavioral Consequences

Moreover, the accumulated IC teaching practice sparked academic curiosity, leading them to become IC researchers. While Claire and Benson initially pursued linguistically oriented MA programs, their involvement in IC teaching shifted their focus to IC studies. Grace, in contrast, had always centered her MA and PhD research on IC. Most of their research projects and publications stemmed from their IC pedagogy, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between their teaching and research. Reflecting on their pedagogical strengths and weaknesses further enriched their research insights.

Their identity as researchers of IC strongly supported and legitimized their teaching of IC. Engaging in research is an integral part of their scholarly identity. Borg (2010) asserts that teachers' engagement with research provides "a source of improved professional practice" (p. 391). Through both engagement with research, i.e. reading and using relevant literature on IC, and engagement in research, i.e. conducting research, their identities as scholars of IC were constructed and reinforced. They utilized and adapted literature as a resource for classroom activities to deepen students' understanding of IC concepts and theories. Conducting research also enabled them to address challenges in IC pedagogy and implement IC curriculum reform. Indeed, they actively sought solutions to the obstacles they encountered in their teaching by conducting research. Ultimately, their growing academic expertise fostered increased confidence and authority in their IC teaching.

Discussion

This study investigated how experienced Chinese EFL teachers position and reconstruct their professional identities when teaching IC, an interdisciplinary subject within the foreign language curriculum. Through an integrated analytical framework combining Positioning Theory and identity development perspective, the findings illuminate how engaging in IC pedagogy can simultaneously reshape teacher identity, enhance practice, and promote professional development.

Reshaping Teacher Identity

The study's findings support and extend prior research emphasizing that intercultural teaching constitutes a significant site of identity negotiation (Ortaçtepe, 2015; Sercu, 2006). As observed in this study, teachers adopted a range of flexible self-positions, including organizers, guides, transmitters, and midwives. All of these emphasize the importance of student engagement in the classroom and rejecting the traditional authoritative role of the teacher commonly seen in Chinese tertiary education. This shift aligns with previous scholarship (Gong et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2021) suggesting that intercultural educators must renegotiate their legitimacy and adopt new roles in response to the demands of IC pedagogy.

Unlike novice teachers who typically experience significant identity challenges, navigating tensions between their new role and previous learner identities (e.g., Han & Zhang, 2025), the teachers in this study did not undergo the same identity crises because they were already well-established in their EFL teacher identity. Their previous experience allowed them to navigate the complexities of adopting IC pedagogy with ease to some degree, without facing the kinds of identity disruptions often reported in studies about novice teachers. Their challenge was not one of foundational identity construction but of expansion and adaptation. The interdisciplinary nature of IC curricula shifted the focus away from traditional linguistic aspects; however, their professional backgrounds provided a solid foundation for adaptation.

The interdisciplinary nature of IC, which combines aspects of linguistics, cultural studies, and pedagogy (Zhang & Sun, 2024), requires teachers to step beyond their traditional expertise. In response, the teachers in this study engaged in continuous learning and applied new pedagogical approaches to the classroom. This process of integrating IC content into their established EFL teaching framework gradually led to the development of a more complete pedagogical content knowledge about teaching IC (Zhao & Zhang, 2025), which they subsequently translated into classroom practice. Consequently, they successfully adjusted and extended their existing EFL teacher identity, strategically repositioning themselves within the classroom and adopting roles that transcended traditional language instruction.

Furthermore, as “curriculum creators and developers” (Gandana & Parr, 2013, p. 232), these teachers had more control over the content and teaching methods, allowing them to align the course objectives with both their own interests and their students’ needs. This autonomy may have contributed to a smoother transition into IC pedagogy, as they were able to implement and modify the curriculum based on their professional judgment, without feeling the pressure of external expectations. In this study, the teachers did not report such tensions and their English teacher identity was not questioned or challenged by their engagement with IC pedagogy. For them, IC teaching was not an additional burden (Tan et al., 2021), but an opportunity for professional growth.

Enhancing Pedagogical Practice

As the teachers engaged more deeply with IC teaching, they not only reshaped their identities but also enhanced their pedagogical practices. The teachers adopted methods not commonly used in traditional EFL classrooms and adjusted their teaching strategies to accommodate the needs of their students. The emphasis on intercultural competence required a shift from a purely linguistic focus to one that embraced cultural awareness and communication skills. This shift was evident in their classroom practices, where they actively engaged students in discussions on cultural differences, communication styles, and intercultural dynamics. They also employed a range of intercultural teaching methods, including simulation games, case studies, and other interactive approaches.

The adoption of these new pedagogical methods was not without challenges. Initially, some teachers, such as Benson, experienced what Tan et al. (2021) refer to as “unstable intercultural teacherhood,” particularly in terms of a lack of holistic and up-to-date knowledge about IC. However, they quickly adopted a learner identity, bridging knowledge gaps through continuous IC-focused professional learning, including both intensive and extensive reading of IC literature, participation in short courses and training programs, attendance at academic conferences, and the pursuit of visiting scholar opportunities. Their proactive learning allowed them to integrate IC content effectively into their teaching. This learning process was not only a professional necessity but also a personal journey that contributed to their development as IC educators. The teachers’ ability to handle dialectical tensions, particularly between their roles as learners and teachers (Root et al., 2013), played a crucial role in their successful integration of IC into their teaching practices.

Promoting Professional Development

The process of integrating IC pedagogy into their practice also facilitated significant professional development. As the teachers deepened their understanding of IC and its role in language education, they found themselves increasingly engaged in research and scholarly activities related to IC. Two of the three teachers in this study, Claire and Benson, transitioned their research focus from primarily linguistics to exploring intercultural issues, reflecting their expanding expertise in the field. This

shift in research focus, combined with their practical teaching experience, allowed them to publish academic papers, present at conferences, and establish themselves as scholars in the field of intercultural education.

This process of professional development also reinforced their teacher identities, as they navigated the challenges of becoming both teachers and researchers in the field of IC. As Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) argue, teacher identity is a process of reinvention, and the teachers in this study demonstrated how sustained professional growth, coupled with a commitment to lifelong learning, can lead to the reinvention of their teaching selves.

National, Institutional, and Personal Influences

The process of identity positioning observed in this study was not occurring in a vacuum but was shaped by a confluence of factors across multiple levels.

At the national level, policy directives mandating the development of intercultural competence and the integration of IC courses into university English curricula provided the overarching imperative. They played a significant role in shaping teachers' understanding of IC and their motivation to engage with it. At the institutional level, curriculum reforms that encouraged teachers to develop new courses based on personal interest and student need created a supportive space for innovation. As Gandana and Parr (2013) note, institutional and policy directives mediate educators' practices, and in this study, the institutional context facilitated teachers' engagement with IC pedagogy as all three teachers in this study voluntarily took the initiative to establish the IC course independently at their respective universities. At a personal level, the teachers' strong agency, lifelong learning orientation, and willingness to adapt were critical factors. By taking ownership of their learning and their courses, they were able to gain legitimacy as IC educators and experts in intercultural teaching.

The synergy between these national, institutional, and personal factors was instrumental in establishing and sustaining the teachers' IC teaching legitimacy, illustrating the multi-layered nature of professional identity transformation.

Conclusion

This study explored how experienced Chinese EFL teachers construct, negotiate, and develop their professional identities through the sustained IC teaching. Analysed through the lens of Positioning Theory, the research identified three interrelated dimensions of identity work: discursive self-positioning in the classroom, the dynamic and ongoing evolution of professional stance, and the broader expansion of identity portfolios beyond language instruction.

The findings demonstrate that IC teaching provides fertile ground for identity reconstruction, enabling teachers to adopt flexible roles and to evolve into interdisciplinary educators, continuous learners, and reflective practitioners. Importantly, these emerging identities were not seen as replacing their foundational role as English teachers but rather as enriching and extending it. The study reveals a dynamic interplay in which teachers actively navigate their positions within the discursive practices of the IC classroom, resulting in a profound reinvention of their professional identities.

The implications of this study are both practical and policy-relevant. As the integration of IC into EFL curricula becomes increasingly common across global contexts, teacher education programs must go beyond technical training. Programs should foster reflective practice, peer collaboration, and sustained

professional learning to help teachers navigate new role, recognizing teachers as co-constructors, such as curriculum designers, materials developers, and practitioner-researchers. At the institutional level, long-term support mechanisms like mentorship schemes, professional learning communities, and research-informed development pathways are vital. Equally important is cultivating a climate of trust. Ultimately, fostering students' intercultural competence requires first providing teachers with supportive space to develop as intercultural professionals themselves.

While this study provides important insights, it also opens avenues for further inquiry. First, future research should explore how novice teachers negotiate identity when first introduced to IC teaching, especially in under-resourced or peripheral institutions. Longitudinal studies could explore how teacher identity evolves with professional learning and its impacts on instructional choices and student outcomes in IC courses. Additionally, comparative research across different educational systems, such as Confucian-heritage, Western liberal, or multilingual postcolonial systems, could reveal the cultural specificity of teacher positioning. Understanding teacher identity as fluid and interactionally co-constructed is crucial to supporting sustainable intercultural education, particularly as IC becomes integral to EFL curricula.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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