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“For me, it is important to maintain self while adapting.” Understanding Chinese foreign language teachers’ identity in an intercultural context

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative exploratory study addresses how Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) teachers perceive their identity in an intercultural context in the Netherlands. In this study with twenty-one native Chinese-speaking language teachers, empirical data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Foucault’s poststructuralist view of identity is employed to conceptualize teachers’ identity. The findings show teachers’ perceptions of their identity are shaped by their cultural and educational background, as well as their teaching experiences in an intercultural context. CFL teachers’ professional identity adapts during the process of interacting with students from another cultural background. Although CFL teachers sometimes struggle during this process of transformation, they generally showed willingness to adjust. The findings indicated that even if teachers’ identity reconstruction is inevitable in the cross-cultural setting, most CFL teachers hold onto their primary Chinese identity. Implications for teacher professional development and teaching Chinese in intercultural settings are discussed, for instance, the need for pedagogical courses that fit the Dutch educational context and consider the Chinese language’s specific features, and for the creation of a collaborative CFL teaching community.

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Introduction

Teacher identity plays a crucial role in effective teaching and stands at the core of the teaching profession (Karimi & Mofidi, 2019; Trent, 2020). In the last twenty years, globalization in education has increased teachers’ mobility, particularly in the field of foreign language teaching and learning (D. Wang et al., 2013). Teachers may be required to teach in a context that is far removed from their own home cultures. Hence, the development of the intercultural dimension of language teaching has imposed new demands on teachers. According to Zen et al. (2022), in order to effectively teach in an intercultural environment, teachers must possess particular international and professional competences which benefit their professional identity development in a new context. The change of their professional identity when teaching abroad is a dynamic process involving constant experimenting, reflecting, exploring, and responding to challenges (Borg, 2003). In order to help teachers gain the required competences, it is necessary to understand the identity formation of language teachers in intercultural settings. However, previous research on language teachers’ identity is mainly based on

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English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, which limits the application of the results to teachers of other languages, such as Chinese (L. Wang & Du, 2016).

A growing number of people worldwide show interest in learning about Chinese language and culture, thus the demand for qualified Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) teachers is increasing. Adapting to a new educational system and culture might change CFL teachers' views on teaching and consequently reshape their professional identity. Changing roles and identities requires CFL teachers to relinquish the familiarity and comfort of a role they are familiar with and experience the uncertainty of an unknown role in a new context (L. Wang & Du, 2014). CFL teachers might feel frustrated during the change process. Yet research on CFL teachers and their practices remains sparse, and only a limited number of studies have examined CFL teachers' identity (re)construction in intercultural settings. In order to help international CFL teachers overcome the challenges in the intercultural environment and facilitate their successful transition, more research on CFL teacher identity is needed.

Taking the above into consideration, this study explored CFL teachers' identity in the Netherlands. The Netherlands was one of the earliest countries in Europe to introduce Chinese as an elective course in secondary schools, where it has been offered as a centrally-assessed exam subject since 2007 (Zhou, 2010). A growing number of Dutch people show interest in learning about Chinese language and culture. However, most studies on CFL teachers and their practices have been conducted in the US (Yue, 2017), Australia (R. Moloney & Xu, 2016), and the UK (Yang, 2019), which may indicate that we have little knowledge regarding CFL teaching in the Dutch context. Therefore, the four-year research project of which this study forms a part explores how native-speaker CFL teachers construct and transform their identity while teaching CFL in the Netherlands. The broader project aims to broaden the scope of language teaching research by incorporating a cross-cultural lens to gain a more in-depth understanding of the factors affecting teacher identity. Drawing on qualitative interview data, the current study investigated how CFL teachers experience, perceive, and cope with the process of developing their identity in an intercultural context. The current study provides not only valuable insights for the professional development of CFL teachers, but also for improving the quality of Chinese language education. Additionally, the results of the current study are likely to be relevant and applicable to CFL practices in other European countries, where teachers might face similar challenges to those in the Netherlands.

Literature review

Understanding teacher identity through a poststructuralist lens

In the current study, Foucault's poststructuralist view of identity is employed to conceptualize teachers' identity. Teacher identity is defined as a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of "how to be", "how to act" and "how to understand" their work and their place in society (Sachs, 2005). Yazan (2018) claimed that the poststructuralist theory of identity combines both individual functions and sociocultural processes. An integrated notion of identity rather than a dichotomy between individual functioning or socio-cultural processes provides an approach that refuses the singularity of each "component" of identity formation (Zembylas, 2005). Thus, adopting a poststructuralist lens allows us to explore the identity of language teachers comprehensively.

On the one hand, in poststructuralist theory, individual functions such as teachers' personal beliefs and value systems, cultural background, experience of teaching and learning, and education experiences all play a vital role during identity construction (Li, 2022; Varghese et al., 2005). For example, De Costa and Norton (2017) argued teachers' sense of identity is based on their existing values and beliefs about how a teacher should behave properly in the classroom. Moreover, Reeves (2018) claimed these values are normally influenced by teachers' cultural backgrounds. In the case of language teachers who work in an international environment, students are usually from backgrounds that differ from their own in terms of language, nationality, and/or ethnicity. Hence, scholars

have asserted that the national and/or ethnic cultural differences negotiated in language classrooms comprise a particular dimension of teachers' professional identity (Fichtner & Chapman, 2011).

On the other hand, cultural and political context is also emphasized by poststructuralist theorists investigating identity (Yazan, 2018). For instance, Weedon (1997) argued that, through a poststructuralist lens, even small events within a particular cultural and political context are significant in constructing teacher identity as they are subjected to discursive practices. In addition, De Costa and Norton (2017) claimed that identity is constantly becoming and transforming in a particular context. For language teachers who work in an overseas environment, this is especially true. According to poststructuralists, as teachers' working environment changes, their identity as teachers is constantly contested (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Given the purpose of this study, which was to provide significant attention to the way foreign language teachers construct their identity within a particular cultural context, poststructuralist identity theory is appropriate for our investigation.

Chinese foreign language teachers' identity in an intercultural context

Working in an intercultural context, language teachers may experience linguistic and cultural mismatches with their students from different cultural backgrounds (Yue, 2017). This is the same for native-speaker CFL teachers. These mismatches provide a fertile ground for observing how international teacher identity shapes and reshapes in an intercultural context.

Previous studies have reported that Chinese educational culture strongly influences how Chinese teachers perceive themselves in an overseas context (Liao et al., 2017; R. Moloney et al., 2015). Conflicts can be seen in CFL classrooms because students and teachers from different cultures sometimes work from different scripts (R. A. Moloney, 2013). According to some studies, Chinese teachers tend to be authoritarian and teacher-centred (R. Moloney & Xu, 2016), whereas students from western contexts expect more autonomy and interaction (Leeman et al., 2020; Willemse et al., 2015). As a result, the construction of CFL teachers' professional identity might involve challenges, such as having difficulty in retaining students (G. X. Zhang & Li, 2010), lacking in-depth communication with students and colleagues (L. Wang & Du, 2016), and having low self-efficacy beliefs regarding designing intriguing class activities (Yang, 2019). These challenges reflect CFL teachers' dilemma of how to integrate their educational beliefs shaped by traditional Chinese culture with the pedagogical principles commonly applied in the local context (R. A. Moloney, 2013; Yue, 2017).

Despite conflicts between Chinese teachers' conception of their roles and Western students' educational needs, transition in Chinese teachers' beliefs has been noted by researchers (R. Moloney et al., 2015; Ye & Edwards, 2018). Ye and Edwards (2018) study suggested that overseas teaching experience changed CFL teachers' perceptions of the world, enhanced their national pride, and increased their appreciation of otherness. Moreover, results from undefined study showed that CFL teachers appear to be in various stages of transition in three areas: personal convictions, teaching methodology, and expectations. According to H. Zhang et al. (2020), CFL teachers enter the profession because of their desire to share the Chinese language and culture with people in other countries. Even if CFL teachers' professional identity in an intercultural setting is transforming, their personal identity, which has a core of "being Chinese", does not change (L. Wang & Du, 2014).

The present study

Canrinus et al. (2011) argued that as a dynamic and multidimensional construct, teacher identity cannot simply be perceived directly. Rather, it must be explored from a broad perspective. Some scholars have broken teacher identity into various domains (Brenner et al., 2018). Each domain may function as a set of meanings that represent a part of what teacher identity might be, and therefore each domain has the potential to guide teacher behaviour. From a poststructuralist perspective, teacher identity is understood as a socially shared and coherent set of meanings that define the particular professional role of teachers (Hanna et al., 2019). In other words, each meaning reflects

a small part of what teacher identity is. The six domains of teacher identity (Self-image, Motivation, Commitment, Self-efficacy, Task perception, and Job satisfaction) in Hanna et al. (2019) study provide a useful basis for research into the development of teacher identity. These six domains have been proven to be important and relevant demarcations of teacher identity in previous studies (Carrillo & Flores, 2017; Van Lankveld et al., 2017). Therefore, through a poststructuralist lens, the current study explored CFL teacher identity through a multifaceted view by categorizing teacher identity into the following six domains from Hanna et al. (2019) literature review on teachers' identity: (1) self-image (The way in which individuals view themselves as teachers); (2) motivation (Motivations to be or to become a teacher); (3) self-efficacy (Teachers' belief in their capability to organize and perform their daily teaching activities effectively); (4) task perception (The objectives of foreign language teaching); (5) teaching commitment (Commitment and/or dedication to becoming/being a teacher); (6) job satisfaction (How teachers feel about the work and work situation). This approach to categorizing was used to establish a tool to analyse and interpret the empirical data presented in the current paper.

Therefore, by exploring the complexities of CFL teachers' identity in the cross-cultural setting, the present study aims to contribute insights into CFL teachers and enrich existing research on language teachers' identity. The primary research question is as follows:

How do native-speaker CFL teachers perceive their identity in the intercultural context of the Netherlands?

Methodology

Context and participants

In the Netherlands, CFL teachers mainly work in secondary schools, Confucius institutes, and language schools. According to Nuffic (<https://www.nuffic.nl/en>), the Dutch organization for internationalization in education, in 2022, about 25 out of 648 secondary schools in the Netherlands were members of the national network for Chinese teaching. These schools either offer Chinese as an optional subject or as a part of the curriculum. Official figures regarding secondary schools offering Chinese programmes outside of the Nuffic network are not available. Confucius institutes (CI) provide CFL teaching in three cities in the Netherlands. Courses in the CI are offered to broad target groups, including adults, university students, adolescents, and children. Teachers in the Confucius Institutes have undergone intense professional training to teach Chinese in international settings. Finally, language schools hold Chinese classes in weekends. These schools were born out of the Dutch-Chinese community's desire to provide a space for Chinese immigrant children or children of mixed parentage (Chinese-Dutch) to engage with the Chinese language and culture in the Netherlands. The Stichting Chinese Onderwijs in Nederland [Foundation for Chinese Education in the Netherlands] lists 39 Chinese language schools (www.chineesonderwijs.nl) (accessed January 2023). Some of the larger Chinese language schools have up to 800 students on roll at one time.

CFL teachers in the Netherlands typically work in one or more of the above settings. The CFL teachers in the current study are native-Chinese speakers who either came to the Netherlands to work in the Confucius institutes or who lived in the Netherlands for several years before becoming a CFL teacher. To gain a better understanding of CFL teacher identity, both groups were included in the current study.

A purposeful sampling technique was adopted to recruit CFL teachers from Confucius institutes and secondary schools across 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 native-speaker CFL teachers' characteristics. Some of these teachers also had a second teaching job in a language school. Access to CFL teachers was obtained via the first and second authors' professional network and advertising through the Nuffic network. Teachers' backgrounds were taken into

Table 1. Participant information (using pseudonyms).

Participants	Location of school	Years of CFL Teaching Experience			Students	Teaching context
		Netherlands	China	Other Countries		
Du	Northwest	2	2	2	Adults; Adolescents	Confucius institute
Zhu	Northwest	6	4	/	Adolescents	Confucius institute; Secondary school
Xia	Northwest	4	/	1	Adults; Adolescents	Confucius institute
Feng	North	2	/	/	Adults; Adolescents	Confucius institute
Gao	Middle	15	8	/	Adolescents	Secondary school; Language school
Jia	Middle	20	/	/	Adolescents	Secondary school; Language school
Han	Middle	5	/	/	Adolescents	Secondary school; Language school
Zhuo	Northwest	2.5	/	/	Adolescents	Secondary school
Wu	South	8	3	/	Adults; Adolescents	Secondary school; Language school
Xu	Southeast	1 ¹	12	/	Adults; Adolescents	Confucius institute
Lu	Northwest	7	2	/	Adults; Adolescents	Confucius institute
Shen	North	2	/	2	Adults	Confucius institute
He	North	2	/	2	Adults	Confucius institute
Dong	Southeast	3	/	/	Adults; Adolescents	Confucius institute
Su	Middle	25	/	/	Adolescents	Secondary school
Shen	South	12	/	/	Adults; Adolescents	Secondary school;
Gu	South	7	/	/	Adults; Adolescents	Secondary school; Language school
Tan	South	15	/	/	Adolescents	Secondary school
Qin	South	9	/	/	Adolescents	Secondary school
Xie	Northwest	12	/	/	Adolescents	Secondary school
Wei	Middle	5	/	/	Adolescents	Secondary school

consideration to ensure diversity in representation of geographical areas, teaching experience, and ethnic backgrounds. The schools where the participants work are geographically diverse, covering nine cities in Netherlands. All 21 participants are females (see Table 1), which reflects the “female-dominated language teaching profession”, as stated by R. Moloney et al. (2015).

The current study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of ICLON Leiden University Graduate School of Teaching in March 2021. All information has been stored and processed confidentially.

Procedure and instrument

Data was collected using individual semi-structured interviews. This qualitative approach was suitable for studying teachers’ perceptions and opinions (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The interviews were conducted in Chinese by the first author between March and July 2021. As a former CFL teacher from China, living in the Netherlands, the first author has a similar professional, cultural, and linguistic background to the participants, and was relatable to them. Nonetheless, she attempted to be an “outsider” during the interview process to provide the participants with enough space to answer. Considering the inherent power dynamics within research, particularly in humanitarian settings, the interviewer repeatedly reminded the interviewees that they were the experts, that we were there to learn from them, and that there was no right or wrong answer as we sought to understand their perspectives and experiences in teaching CFL.

Due to COVID-19, the interviews were conducted online. The interview outline was based on poststructuralist theory, and had two main components: the personal aspects of identity and the context aspects of identity. The outline included questions to identify teachers’ educational background and professional experience, as well as starting questions like “How do you describe yourself as a CFL teacher?”, “Do you enjoy your role as a CFL teacher?” to explore participants’ perceptions of

their identity. Spontaneous follow-up questions were asked to expand on some particular points that came up in the interviews. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The interview recordings were transcribed ad verbatim for further analysis.

Data analysis

The inductive-deductive thematic method was employed to analyse the data. Analysis began with careful reading of the transcribed data to become familiar with the content. Then the transcribed texts were coded based on a concept-driven approach (Schreier, 2012), drawing upon the six domains of identity in Hanna et al. (2019) systematic review study. After categorizing the related texts into six domains, the next step was to further explore these six domains using an inductive method. The first author conducted the inductive thematic analysis, identifying themes under each domain, followed by an analytical summary of each domain. In order to enhance trustworthiness of the current study, the second author (an expert in language teaching and intercultural teacher education) and another researcher checked the consistency of codings in four sample transcripts in translation. In addition, constant comparison (Mertens, 2019) was employed to assess participants' responses to interview questions, categorize quotes into six domains according to the perspectives expressed, and examine differences within each domain. Throughout the process, the research team met to discuss and resolve any discrepancies between coding and the summaries.

Results

The purpose of the study was to explore how CFL teachers construct and transform their identity while teaching in an intercultural context, in line with poststructuralist theory (Norton & Toohey, 2011), which holds that teacher identity is fluid, dynamic, and changes over time. The findings suggested that in addition to teachers' individual functions, the intercultural context in which they work significantly influences all six domains of teachers' identity. The findings will be presented per domain on the basis of quotations from the interviews.

Self-image

With regard to their image of themselves and their role as a CFL teacher, participants mentioned that they are proud of being CFL teachers and believe they play a critical role in students' growth. The example quotes in Table 2 suggest that intercultural teaching experience influences teachers' perceptions of their roles. Some teachers' perception of their roles has changed after a few years of overseas working, which indicates that identity is fluid, dynamic, and changes over time. While

Table 2. Overview of the domain self-image.

Domain & Definition	Sub-themes	Example quotes from the participants
Self-image: In what way do individuals view themselves as teachers.	Perceptions changed over time	"In the beginning, I thought I should be a good role model. I expected my students to obey the instructions, and all listen to me. Now, my ideas have changed. I started to understand that I am students' cooperative partner and learning facilitator". [Dong]
	Retaining previous perceptions	"Even though in the Netherlands, learners prefer more interactions in the class, I still believe an ideal teacher is someone who hold a dominant position in class. Giving the initiative back to students may cause chaos". [Du]
	Integrating views from both sides (China and Netherlands)	"I need to adapt to the Dutch cultural and educational setting as soon as possible. In the meantime, as a CFL teacher whose main duty is to share the Chinese language and culture, I should keep my Chinese part. It is important to maintain self while adapting". [Gao]

some teachers maintain their previous opinions, and others have tried to integrate views from both sides (China and the Netherlands).

The change of some participants' perception of their roles can be seen in the current study, which indicates that identity is fluid, dynamic and changes over time. During the first two years of teaching, some teachers believed that they were the ones who represented authority in class, a characteristic they believed was influenced by Chinese authoritarian and teacher-centred teaching methodologies. After working in the Netherlands for several years, their description of themselves changed from a "good role model" to a "cooperative partner", from someone who "represents authority" to a "learning facilitator" and "guide". Even though participants pointed out that adapting to a new culture is not a straightforward process, their renewed understanding of themselves as CFL teachers demonstrated their readiness to make adjustments to facilitate Dutch students' learning.

Yet some teachers said that even though they are working in another country, they retained their previous perceptions regarding their role as a teacher. According to these teachers, an ideal teacher would hold a dominant position in class. Additionally, some participants stated that they would not change their strict teaching style even though Dutch students sometimes complained. They believed that in order to facilitate the learning of a language, teachers should put pressure on their students by assigning them lots of assignments and tests.

Nine teachers reported that neither a teacher-centred view nor a learner-centred view of their roles is appropriate; these teachers held the similar opinion that they wanted to find an area in the middle. This "middle area" [Xu] suggests that these participants desired to retain some aspects of their previous teaching beliefs while adapting them to the new context.

To illustrate this point further, data from the interviews suggests that some participants mentioned themselves as a bridge and a "middle person" [Xu] between China and other countries. The term "middle person" indicates that participants saw themselves as representatives of their own country (China) and desired to cultivate a connection between China and other countries.

Motivation

Teachers expressed a broad range of reasons for becoming a CFL teacher in the Netherlands. While some mentioned mainly extrinsic motivators, some appeared to be more intrinsically motivated, either due to their love for language and teaching or because they believed they were making a valuable contribution. Still others were both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated. Additionally, altruistic motivation and cross-cultural interest are another two important factors motivating participants to pursue a career as a CFL teacher. The sub-themes under the domain motivation are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Overview of the domain motivation.

Domain & Definition	Sub-themes	Example quotes from the participants
Motivation: Motivations to be or to become a teacher.	Extrinsic motivators	As an immigrant in a foreign country, sometimes I feel extremely lonely. I seldom have the chance to speak Chinese, and it seems like there is no link between me and my motherland. Teaching Chinese gives me the chance to use my mother tongue a lot. Isn't it great? [Jia]
	Intrinsic motivators	Chinese language and literature are charming. Being a CFL teacher offers me the chance to explore more about language, besides, I like to convey knowledge to more people, sharing makes knowledge more valuable. [Wei]
	Cross cultural interest	I am a person who likes to try new things. This job gives me a chance to communicate with people from other countries, and lets me know more about the world. I have met many interesting people, this is one of the reasons for me to continue to be a CFL teacher. [Shen]
	Altruistic motivators	I became a CFL teacher mainly because I am willing to make changes in my students' minds and lives. I know as adolescents, my students have to deal with many uncertainties. Being a teacher gives me the chance to motivate my students and prepare them for a better life. [Gao]

Not all the teachers expressed strong motivation. Three teachers seemed to lack defined reasons: they became CFL teachers only because they wanted to find a job that is related to their university major. Another two teachers started to teach because of the lack of other job opportunities.

Among the extrinsic motivators, the interview data suggests that one reason to become a CFL teacher in a foreign country is because this job gave them opportunities to use their mother tongue, which made them feel less homesick. Besides this, participants reported that the sincere relationship between teacher and student actively encouraged them to become a CFL teacher. One teacher described herself as a *“bookish person”* [Dong] who did not like to deal with complicated interpersonal relationships. She thought being a teacher was the right choice for her in this regard.

Some teachers started to teach because of their love for language and teaching itself. Their passion for Chinese language and culture inspired them to become CFL teachers. Additionally, their desire to spread the charm of Chinese language led them to travel abroad and share their knowledge with a broader audience.

Experiencing and learning about foreign cultures and, to a lesser degree, communicating with people from other countries were the most frequently mentioned reasons for becoming a CFL teacher. Ren started to teach partly because of the opportunity to work where everything was new to her. Likewise, Shen clearly referred to communicating with more people as a strong reason for choosing to teach internationally. The quotes *“willing to know more about the world”*, *“interact with students from different cultural backgrounds”*, *“enjoying working in the new educational system”* demonstrate cross-cultural interest as one of the major motivations for participants to become a CFL teacher.

It is worth noting that most participants cited altruistic motivation as one of their main motivations for entering the language teaching profession. One altruistic motivator is bringing about change in people and society. Quotes such as *“guiding uncertain adolescents”*, *“making changes in students’ minds”*, *“preparing adolescents for a better life”* illustrate the desire of CFL teachers to effect a positive change in society and especially among adolescents.

Another altruistic reason cited by participants was to contribute to the development of Chinese education. CFL was described by some participants as *“a new subject lacking much attention”*, which motivated them to make their own contributions to the field. Furthermore, participants expressed their willingness to *“make the two sides [Chinese and Dutch] meet and understand each other better via language”* [Tan].

Self-efficacy

With regard to the interviewees’ perception of their own capability as a CFL teacher in the Netherlands, the data suggests that unfamiliarity with the new cultural and educational context may decrease teachers’ confidence in their ability in terms of managing classes, explaining grammar, and improving students’ engagement. Those who had been teaching for a longer time observed that their self-efficacy had in some respects increased with experience, while in others it had not. In some cases, the transition to the Dutch context had affected their self-efficacy even after years of teaching experience in China. Example quotes are shown in the [Table 4](#).

Teachers with less teaching experience (either in China or in the Netherlands) expressed their overall lack of confidence. *“Every class is a challenge”*, *“new problem keeps occurring”*, *“I am incompetent at many things”* all illustrate novice CFL teachers’ low efficacy beliefs regarding teaching in a new environment. In the interviews, these participants attribute their lack of confidence in teaching in the Netherlands to their unfamiliarity with the Dutch educational system.

Four participants expressed their lack of confidence in improving students’ engagement. For example, Dong, with three years of teaching experience in the Netherlands, reported having difficulty involving students in class activities despite the availability of many books providing guidance. As a result, low efficacy beliefs derived from engagement of students led to some negative

Table 4. Overview of the domain self-efficacy.

Domain & Definition	Sub-themes	Example quotes from the participants
Self-efficacy: Teachers' belief in their capability to organize and perform their daily teaching activities effectively.	Unfamiliarity with the new educational context	Yeah, we have books that give us advice on engagement of students, but when the teaching context is different, things get more complicated. Without a textbook that fits the Dutch context, how to arouse students' curiosity in learning Chinese is a problem bothering me. [Dong]
	Proficiency in Dutch matters	I majored in teaching Chinese as a foreign language, and know lots of teaching skills and strategies. But when it comes to the real class, it is hard for me discuss some grammar points or cultural themes deeply with my students because of my limited Dutch language proficiency. I seldom have in-depth communication with my students. How to teach them efficiently is a problem to me. [Feng]
	The value of teaching experience	I am confident about my ability to make my students follow the rules, either in China or in the Netherlands. Prior experience taught me to be an easygoing person after class, but be strict during class. Building prestige is important, I think I am capable of keeping my students under control. [Gao]
	The impact of previous teaching beliefs	Most Chinese students are quiet and follow the teacher's instructions, I didn't need to make much effort to manage the discipline. In the Netherlands, I noticed that students prefer a friendlier atmosphere in class, which means I can't force them to do things in the Chinese way. Classroom management is a big headache to me. [Zhu]
	The value of intercultural teaching experience	I have been a CFL teacher in the Netherlands for many years, and have taught different kinds of students. Through trial and error, I have learned how to deal with disruptive behaviour in the class. It is not a hard task for me. [Shen]
	Familiarity with the Dutch educational context	Years of working in the Netherlands make me familiar with the Dutch educational system. My Dutch is pretty good, it helps me to gain respect from my colleagues and students. I am confident about my ability in involving Dutch students in classroom activities and teaching them effectively. [Xie]

emotions such as stress and burnout. The decline in the number of students made some teachers doubt their ability as teachers.

The results reveal that Dutch language proficiency is another important factor influencing the self-efficacy of CFL teachers. Although some participants regarded themselves as competent in teaching strategies, they were unable to communicate effectively with their students due to their limited Dutch language proficiency. Consequently, teachers' confidence regarding the efficiency of their classes was adversely affected.

In contrast to these examples from the less experienced teachers, participants with more overseas teaching experience expressed overall high self-efficacy beliefs in their abilities as a teacher. These teachers know what kind of mistakes their students will make in class, and can be prepared in advance. In addition, experiences of success teaching in either China or the Netherlands enhanced teachers' beliefs about their ability in classroom management.

When asked about their ability to cultivate students' interest in Chinese, participants with more extensive experience as teachers in the intercultural setting showed high self-confidence. These teachers knew how to adjust themselves to the Dutch environment, thus they were confident in motivating their students to come back to their class.

There is, however, evidence that long teaching experiences do not always lead to a high level of self-efficacy, particularly if the educational culture in the new context differs from the previous one.

Some teachers mentioned that they came to the Netherlands following extensive teaching experience in China. In the first few years in the Dutch context, they nevertheless had doubts about their abilities in classroom management.

The findings further reveal that being familiar with the educational culture partially contributes to CFL teachers' high self-efficacy. As these teachers explained, "*the situation is different between countries*" [Shen]. They believed it to be necessary for them to become familiar with "*the learning styles of Dutch students*" [Xie] first, then they can gain more confidence in calming down students in class. Participants reported that they used to think being serious was critical for managing the class. In the process of adjusting to the Dutch context, they tried to build a more equal relationship with students and using some new and alternative instructional strategies. As one participant put it, "*When you establish rapport with learners, your self-efficacy beliefs improve accordingly*" [Xie].

Task perception

When talking about the objectives of CFL teaching, some participants expressed a heavily linguistic orientation. They focused on helping students to pass the language proficiency test and improve their communicative competence. In order to reach this goal, some teachers believed they need to push students to work harder, while other teachers thought letting students have fun is more important. Other participants tried to find a middle area. Some participants went beyond the

Table 5. Overview of the domain task perception.

Domain & Definition	Sub-themes	Example quotes from the participants
Task perception: The objectives of foreign language teaching.	Helping students to pass language proficiency test	For me, the examination is a good way to test one's language level. Learning a language without reaching a specific goal is meaningless. As a Chinese teacher, I encourage my students to take the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) by the end of their courses. It is proof of their language level. [He]
	Improving students' communicative competence	The ultimate goal of teaching Chinese is not how much new vocabulary the students have or how much grammar they know, it is whether the students are able to express themselves clearly and make native speakers understand them in real life, even with a limited vocabulary. [Qin]
	Pushing students work harder	Sometimes the teacher needs to push students to work hard. Of course, a lot of homework is needed. If I just keep students happy and do a lot of activities during the class, they will learn nothing in the end. [Qin]
	Having fun is the top priority	I try my best to make my class as fun as possible, in order to retain students' interest in learning Chinese. I don't have any rigid standards, students learn happily in my class. They need to have interest first, it is the base for their further development. [Han]
	Integrating Chinese and Dutch approaches	It's not wise to push my students too hard, but learning Chinese requires effort and memorization. If I simply adapt to the generic interactive approach like in the European foreign language classes, my students may achieve nothing in the end. It is better to integrate my Chinese approach of teaching with the requirements of the Dutch context. [Xie]
	Raising students' cross-cultural awareness	Since students may not have an accurate idea of their own culture and identity, it is language teachers' job to stimulate their curiosity about the difference between their own language and languages of other countries, and guide them to explore more. I hope from my courses, students can have a clearer understanding of who they are as well as of their own culture. [Shen]
	Arousing students' critical thinking	As a Chinese teacher, of course, I want my students to like Chinese language and culture. But if the students in my class only accept and repeat what I am telling them, I don't think it's a successful class. It is necessary to inspire them to think by themselves and provide them chances to express their own ideas. [Tan]

focus on language, and prioritized objectives such as raising students' cross-cultural awareness and critical thinking. A summary of the domain Task perception can be found in Table 5.

According to teachers who focused more on the linguistic side of CFL teaching, the primary goal of language teaching should involve key factors like language accuracy. They thought teachers' duty was to help students have few pronunciation and grammatical mistakes. Some respondents stated that when teaching the Chinese class, their first concern is helping learners to pass the language proficiency test. It was further explained by these teachers that this test-originated method of teaching is a result of their previous learning experiences in China. Based on this finding, it is evident that teachers' educational backgrounds and pre-existing beliefs about teaching are important factors in determining how they perceive the teaching goals.

Five teachers referred to improving students' oral and written communicative competence as their educational goals. They hope after learning for a while, their students are able to express themselves clearly, even with a limited vocabulary. In order to reach this goal, some teachers believed much practice is needed in and after class. They emphasized the importance of pushing students to work hard and giving them lots of homework.

Other teachers had different ideas in this respect. After years of teaching, they found that *"a strict Chinese teaching approach"* did not work for Dutch students, who they noticed were quite autonomous. Those participants stated that their top priority is letting learners have fun, and helping learners to cultivate and retain interest in learning Chinese.

Five teachers reported that there is a distinction between the Chinese context and the Dutch context in terms of teaching approaches. Being a strict teacher and giving students lots of homework and tests are normal in China, while participants reported that after-school homework is forbidden in some schools in the Netherlands. In order to manage this context difference, some teachers tried to find a happy medium, *"integrating Chinese approach of teaching with the requirements of the Dutch context"*. [Xie] The happy medium illustrates a significant change in the perception of the task of CFL teachers after working in an intercultural context for some time.

Apart from the linguistic side of CFL teaching, some teachers prioritized other objectives, such as raising students' intercultural competence. *"Developing a clearer understanding of their own culture"* and *"curiosity about other countries' languages and cultures"* [Shen] indicate that participants were willing to use language learning to enhance students' cross-cultural understanding.

Moreover, some participants said they were influenced by Dutch educational culture, and think the goal of teaching is to teach students something that they could have for a lifetime. The quotes *"exploring by themselves"*, *"expressing their own ideas"* demonstrate these teachers' desire to help students develop a critical view of the world through language learning.

The teachers' perceptions of appropriate CFL teaching materials emphasized the importance they attributed to materials being relevant to students' real life and to their contribution to the development of students. Some participants reported that the commonly used CFL teaching materials are not related to students' experience and do not include content that is interesting for them. *"Developing teaching materials relevant to Dutch students' cultural backgrounds and daily life seems to be a matter of urgency"*. [Zhuo]

Teaching commitment

Most participants regarded CFL teaching as their lifelong career and were highly committed to the teaching profession. They were willing to engage in professional development, spent time on preparing lessons and offered extra consulting in their free time, although they felt their efforts were not always appreciated by students. Not all teachers shared these high levels of commitment to CFL teaching, which might be influenced by contextual factors, like student numbers or schools' support. Table 6 illustrates the subthemes under domain teaching commitment.

Some teachers mentioned that teaching Chinese as a foreign language is not only a job to them, but a career about which they are passionate. For instance, Jia used *"ardently love"* to

Table 6. Overview of the domain teaching commitment.

Domain & Definition	Sub-themes	Example quotes from the participants
Teaching Commitment: Commitment and/or dedication to becoming/being a teacher.	Engaging in professional development	I like my job, so I always care about my professional development. Although teacher training and communication in CFL teaching are not easily accessible in the Netherlands, I try to participate in these on a regular basis. Because I know if I want to stay in this profession, I need to keep refreshing my knowledge and learning from peers. [Zhu]
	Spending time on preparing lessons	When I first started teaching Chinese as a foreign language, I always tried my best to be fully prepared. I didn't only prepare the contents in the textbook but also searched for some related materials myself. Every semester, my lesson preparation notebook was full. [Gao]
	Offering extra consulting in free time	In our Chinese way of being a teacher, I am willing to sacrifice my spare time to give students extra classes without being paid. I think students would be pleased about this. But in the Netherlands, I found that my efforts are not all appreciated by Dutch students, they are unhappy and even said that if I continue to teach longer than the regular class length, they will immediately write an email to report me. Of course, when hearing this, I am so disappointed. Now I am confused about how to do this job properly. [Du]
	Falling numbers of students	I am passionate about being a CFL teacher for sure, but I'm not sure how long I will still be in this job. Because Chinese language education is not as important as other foreign languages in Europe, actually, people's interest in learning Chinese is declining these two years. I may choose a different occupation in the future. [Wei]
	Lack of support from school	My school used to give me enough support, but in the past two years, it seems that my school doesn't have interest in facilitating the Chinese course any more. Lack of job security makes me lose interest in this job. [Gu]

describe her feelings about CFL teaching, Tan (with 15 years of CFL teaching experience in the Netherlands) stated that "*Regardless of salaries and outside barriers, I like being a CFL teacher too much to give up*".

Whilst not all participants are dedicated to their job as intensely as Jia and Tan, most teachers showed their willingness to stay in the teaching profession, although teacher training and support networks in CFL teaching are not easily accessible in the Netherlands. Five teachers stated that they are enthusiastic about participating in related training and conferences in order to improve themselves. These teachers' concern for their professional development is indicative of their high level of commitment to their career as CFL teachers.

Teachers discussed various practices that they were committed to, including spending much time and effort on preparing lessons, providing students with individual feedback, and spending free time searching for materials for students. "*Every semester, my lesson preparation notebook is full*". [Gao]

In spite of the high levels of commitment expressed by teachers like Gao, some teachers felt that their efforts are not appreciated by their students. CFL teachers expressed their willingness to "*sacrifice spare time to assist students learn*", while they felt Dutch students showed negative attitude towards "*extra consulting*" and "*longer teaching hours*". This suggests that CFL teachers' understanding of what makes a teacher does not align with the learning expectations of students from another cultural background. The lack of appreciation from students affects the emotions of CFL teachers, thereby affecting their passion for teaching.

Not all teachers expressed such high levels of commitment to the teaching profession as displayed in the examples above. In some cases, changes in conditions, such as falling numbers of students, affected their commitment. Although participants were passionate about CFL teaching, they were considering changing their occupation due to decreasing interest in learning Chinese in the Netherlands.

Table 7. Overview of the domain job satisfaction.

Domain & Definition	Sub-themes	Example quotes from the participants
Job satisfaction: How teachers feel about the work and work situation.	Supportive working environment	When I first started to work here, I was not familiar with the Dutch educational system. The lectures and workshops provided by school helped me a lot. In addition, our school has a meeting for teachers every week. In the meeting, teachers share teaching experiences with each other, like sharing useful teaching tools, or discussing the problems encountered in their class. I learn a lot from that. [Shen]
	Support from peers	In my first teaching year, I didn't adjust to the teaching here and felt frustrated when I failed to manage class. Having someone to learn from, and to ask for opinions helped me a lot. Now, as an experienced teacher, I am happy to share resources with other teachers. [Wei]
	Slow working pace	In China, I once worked 40 days without having a day off, working overtime was quite normal. However, here in the Netherlands, leaders of my school almost never push me. I like the slower working pace, working here is a great idea for me. [Du]
	Immature CFL teaching system	Compared with English, French or Spanish, Chinese as a foreign language is a relatively new subject. This course doesn't have a mature teaching system, or many teaching materials. [Zhuo]
	Difficulty of getting the necessary qualification	Now, if you want to be a CFL teacher in a Dutch school, you must have a teaching qualification, which is difficult to obtain, especially for foreigners. Therefore, some CFL teachers lost their job because they failed to get the necessary qualifications. [Xie]
	Limited number of students	In the Netherlands, the number of CFL teachers is limited; I am the only one in my school. Preparing and teaching lessons all on my own sometimes makes me feel distressed. [Qin]

Lack of support from school is another contextual factor that influenced participants' teaching commitment. Some participants reported that their school no longer appeared to be interested in facilitating the Chinese course. They lost interest in their work due to the lack of job security. The findings suggest contextual factors play a vital role in influencing CFL teachers' commitment to the teaching profession.

Job satisfaction

Some participants were satisfied with being a CFL teacher, in terms of supportive working environment, support from peers, and low working pace. Other teachers expressed ambivalent feelings of satisfaction with their jobs due to the immature CFL teaching system, insufficient income, and the difficulty of getting the necessary qualifications. Table 7 shows some example quotes from participants.

Teachers emphasized the significance of the school's support and mentioned that this is directly related to their job satisfaction. The supportive working environment was the major reason for some participants to continue to teach, even if it took them several hours to commute to work every day. They emphasized that schools helped them a lot, especially during the first few years. The lectures and workshops provided by the school helped participants become familiar with the Dutch educational system. Additionally, some participants expressed their appreciation for the amount of autonomy their schools provided. For instance, Guo reported that she has the "freedom to choose, and have a say in what goes on in the classroom", which made her job "much easier".

Some participants believed cooperating with other language teachers helped them to work more efficiently, thus improving their job satisfaction. The first year of teaching was frustrating for some because of their unfamiliarity with the Dutch teaching system. Having colleagues to learn from and ask for opinions helped them a lot. This demonstrates the importance of peer support, particularly for teachers who are new to cross-cultural teaching.

In terms of working conditions, five teachers expressed their job satisfaction when they talked about the slower life and working pace in the Netherlands. They enjoyed being a CFL teacher in the Netherlands mainly because the intensity of working here is not as strong as that in China.

The interview data revealed that many secondary schools employ only one CFL teacher due to the limited number of students. Teachers in these schools have no opportunity to share ideas and get support from a direct colleague, which makes them feel isolated and distressed. As a relatively new subject, CFL course doesn't have a mature teaching system or many teaching materials. Working alone in a foreign country exacerbated teachers' negative emotions.

Teachers emphasized the difficulty of getting qualifications for being a teacher in the Netherlands, especially for people who are not Dutch. Therefore, some participants lost their job because they failed to get the necessary qualifications.

Some teachers showed a negative attitude towards the external incentives of this job. They complained that due to the limited number of students, it is hard to take CFL teaching as a full-time job. Only "six or eight classes every week" (Qin) is not enough for them to "get a sufficient income" (Xie). As a result, some CFL teachers have left or are planning to leave this profession.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings from the current study suggest that the intercultural context affects all six domains (self-image, motivation, self-efficacy, task perception, commitment, job satisfaction) of teachers' identity, as identified by Hanna et al. (2019). Furthermore, teachers stressed the importance of shifting perceptions of their own roles and in their objectives in being a teacher. This process of transformation was not experienced as easy. It is sometimes full of challenges. In addition, for CFL teachers whose primary duty is to share the Chinese language and culture, teacher participants believed that it is vital to maintain their sense of self as Chinese, even though their professional identity is in a continuous state of change.

Process of transforming as a teacher

A transformative process could be observed in CFL teachers' beliefs regarding their roles. At the early stages of participants' careers, they tended to perceive themselves as effective role models who enjoy a great deal of authority, which echoes the authoritarian and pastoral roles noted in previous studies of Chinese teachers (R. Moloney et al., 2015). Teachers with longer teaching experience in the Netherlands tended to regard themselves as learning facilitators. Having an equal relationship with students and preparing lessons according to students' needs and interests seemed evident for them. The transition from an authoritarian role to a facilitator role implies that teachers in the current study were making efforts to adjust their pre-existing beliefs. Besides, in contrast to previous studies suggesting that CFL teachers may lack cross-cultural awareness and believe the ultimate goal of CFL teaching is imparting knowledge and transmission of language and culture (L. Wang & Du, 2016), teachers in the present study revealed extended conceptions of the objectives of CFL teaching. Apart from the linguistic side of CFL teaching, teacher participants' discourse on the goals of CFL teaching emphasized cultivating students' cultural awareness, developing their critical reflection, and making changes in students' growth, which is perhaps influenced by Dutch schools' educational aims of fostering students' intercultural competence and improving their critical thinking (cf., Leeman et al., 2020; Willemse et al., 2015).

These findings imply teacher participants had acquired a sense of the "Dutch Chinese teacher" role. In other words, teachers' extensive practice in a Dutch context and their interactions with Dutch students and colleagues seemed to improve their understanding of the Dutch school culture and educational systems. A deeper understanding of Dutch educational culture by CFL teachers further confirms what Leigh (2019) and Kayi-Aydar (2015) have discovered in their research. People not only make spaces, but spaces also make people, by constraining them as well as providing them with

opportunities for constructing their identities. Our findings on the transformation of teachers' self-image and task perception further supports Yang's (2019) study, which claimed that teachers' perception of their roles could be shaped by their teaching experience in specific contexts rather than by their ethnic-cultural background. Cross-cultural teaching and living experiences in the Netherlands allow CFL teachers to compare different educational cultures in the Netherlands and China, encouraging them to reflect on their professional identity and other aspects of teaching.

Challenges in the process of transforming

Although most teachers in our study expressed their willingness to adapt to the new educational context, they did not all experience the transformative process as easy. Challenges were identified in several areas, such as handling disruptive behaviours in class, cultivating students' interest in learning Chinese, the number of students who choose Chinese courses, and access to professional support.

The challenges derived from classroom management and students' involvement highlight that some teachers' beliefs and practice are restricted by their educational background and previous teaching experiences in the Chinese context, and might be exacerbated by teachers' lack of knowledge of pedagogy in the Dutch school context. That appeared to be why, similar to CFL teachers in some previous studies (R. Moloney & Xu, 2016), teachers in the present study were struggling to understand Western teaching beliefs and teaching approaches. In line with previous studies about CFL teachers (Liao et al., 2017), some challenges that the participants reported revealed that cultural differences may contribute to a certain ambivalence in teachers' perceptions of their identity. Cultural divergences were observed when the participant teachers reported a tendency to devote extra time to teaching after school time, but that this was not appreciated by their Dutch students. These teachers explained that Chinese students usually embrace such opportunities.

Another challenge found to influence CFL teachers' identity reconstruction is the absence of an active professional support system, i.e., appropriate teaching resources and peer support. Inadequate teaching resources congruent with Dutch teaching contexts cause difficulties for teachers' adjustment and make it harder for the teachers to motivate students. Some previous studies have also noted the lack of appropriate teaching materials as an unsolved issue of overseas CFL teaching (Ye & Edwards, 2018). Furthermore, due to the status of Chinese as a subject with a limited number of students, the CFL teaching community is small, meaning that teachers sometimes need to deal with instructions, classroom management, and communication on their own, without sharing ideas with peers. Different from Yang's (2019) study, which indicates that CFL teachers may lack enthusiasm for social networking, teachers in this study emphasized the importance of building connections and cooperating with other CFL teachers. Among some teachers in the current study, limited opportunities to exchange ideas with peers led to professional frustration and insecurity. Such struggles affirm findings of previous studies about teachers who work abroad (Walters et al., 2009). Yet teacher participants showed their willingness to attend more teacher training and conferences. This suggests that, despite the difficulties teachers may face when working in a new educational context, they are making efforts to manage the tensions between the demands of the new context and their professional needs.

Keeping Chinese identity

The current study's findings indicate that even if identity transformation in an intercultural context is inevitable, teachers' primary Chinese identity does not change. Previous studies have noted teachers may hold a "core identity" when working in a cross-cultural setting (L. Wang & Du, 2014). This core identity seems to be anchored in their native Chinese identity rather than the "Western-oriented" one that connects to the environment they work in. CFL teachers emphasized that adapting to the new educational context should involve more integration rather than assimilation (cf., Bennett, 2004). Likewise, teachers in the current study wanted to find a middle way, valuing teaching beliefs from both educational

cultures, and learning from both sides. R. Moloney et al. (2015) have mentioned *middle ground* in their studies, which refers to the space in which East meets West. This *middle ground* provides a useful notion for the space in which transition occurs. In line with previous research (Casinader, 2014), our findings indicate that teachers need to develop and become aware of transcultural thinking modes that include and reflect diverse cultural perspectives in order to model an educational environment that embraces and values cultural diversity, rather than holding it up as a barrier. These findings further support the idea that language teachers intellectually engage with their cultural affiliations by embracing but not internalizing “the other” culture (Fichtner & Chapman, 2011). Furthermore, the current study found that an important motivation for teachers to participate in CFL teaching is their desire to share the Chinese language and culture with people in other countries. This motivator has also been noted in a recent study (H. Zhang et al., 2020) exploring pre-service CFL teachers’ job motivation. Participants’ wish to contribute to a better and deeper understanding of China around the world implies that among multiple forms of identities CFL teachers may develop in different contexts, these teachers maintain their sense of self as Chinese.

Limitations and directions for future research

This study adopted a qualitative method, and the sample that was investigated was relatively small. Furthermore, as the current study chose a cross-sectional design, the processes of identity *development* have not been studied. Longitudinal designs might be needed to investigate what kinds of stages CFL teachers go through when teaching in an intercultural context and how their professional identity is reconstructed over time. Furthermore, the current research only included data from teacher interviews, without observations of what happens in class and how teachers’ identity shapes their teaching practice. Future studies could collect data through classroom observation or employ video scenario studies and learner perspectives to understand the interplay between CFL teachers’ professional identity and teaching practice.

Implications for practice

The existing CFL training programme typically addresses pedagogical and professional issues regarding the intercultural context on a general level, which may not be appropriate for beginning teachers who are not originally from the Netherlands. Based on our findings, it seems that more targeted training programmes could be provided for CFL teachers, for example, introducing the Dutch educational system and Dutch educational goals through in-service teacher training courses. Besides, teacher education institutes can also consider setting up pedagogical courses that, in addition to the interactive and cooperative approach used in Europe’s modern foreign languages classrooms, also take into consideration the specific features of the Chinese language. Moreover, the findings reveal CFL teachers in the Netherlands find it difficult to access teaching resources; open resources and professional sharing platforms could be developed in order to assist teachers in their teaching practice.

Another implication for schools and teacher education institutes is the recommendation to build an encouraging and collaborative CFL teacher community. Due to the limited number of students, most teachers are the only CFL teacher in their school. Teachers showed willingness to participate in reflective conversations with other CFL teachers on their teaching practice, to share teaching experiences, to observe peers’ teaching, and to provide positive and constructive feedback. A concrete practical step to increase support for teachers could therefore be to set up a buddy system with novice and experienced teachers. Teachers with more extensive overseas teaching experience could be cognizant of the transformative process of their identity in an intercultural context, and might help novice teachers to build their professional identity from the very first steps.

Note

1. All of this teacher's teaching experiences in the Netherlands prior to data collection had been online because of COVID-19. This may have influenced her experience.

Highlights

- CFL teachers' identity is influenced by their cultural background and their teaching experiences in an intercultural context.
- CFL teachers' professional identity is in a continuous state of change in a cross-cultural setting.
- The process of identity transformation is sometimes full of challenges.
- CFL teachers hold their primary Chinese identity uniformly in an intercultural context.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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