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CHAT as a Lens Unveils the Intercultural Gaps of Three Chinese Language Teachers in the UK: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores intercultural challenges faced by three Chinese language teachers in UK schools. While most research focuses on English and European language educators, little is known about Chinese teachers' experiences abroad. Using Cultural Historical Activity Theory and a multiple case study design, data from interviews, journals, and observations reveal shared and divergent challenges shaped by background, language skills, and support networks. The findings underscore the role of formal CPD, peer networks, and individual agency in intercultural learning, arguing for context-responsive, sustained, and community-oriented professional development tailored to the needs of Chinese language teachers.

1. Introduction

Globalization has led to a rise in the internationalization of education, as evidenced by the rapid growth of transnational education, which refers to educational offerings that extend across national and regional boundaries (Lai et al., 2016). The diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences that staff members bring to educational settings offer significant opportunities for professional development among teachers, highlighting its potential to inspire and facilitate the professional growth of educators (Hoare, 2013).

Teachers working in international contexts – particularly foreign language teachers teaching abroad – are deeply influenced by multicultural environments, which in turn shape their self-negotiation processes and career development. Sojourning abroad is often accompanied by a myriad of challenges (i.e. Roskell, 2013; Sadovets, 2017; Smith, 2014).

Previous studies mainly focused on these challenges, yet little attention has been given to understanding their underlying causes and how teachers adapt through continuing professional development (CPD) to bridge intercultural gaps. Additionally, the existing body of literature on intercultural teachers highlights the dominance of Western knowledge systems in institutional policies, teacher training curricula, and classroom practices (Clifford et al., 2012; Maddamsetti et al., 2018). In many cases, pedagogical norms rooted in Euro-American traditions are

uncritically adopted as universal, resulting in a one-way transmission of advanced practices from dominant (Western) to non-dominant (non-Western) contexts. For example, the mainstream western educational norms such as student-centred learning, constructivist approaches, and certain classroom management models, while "local knowledge systems" involve the culturally embedded teaching practices and epistemologies the Chinese educators bring from their home country (Gao, 2010; Ye, 2017). For Chinese language teachers in the UK, this dynamic may suppress or marginalize their prior teaching knowledge, culturally grounded pedagogical beliefs, and classroom strategies. The absence of reciprocal, two-way exchanges and mutual respect among multicultural teaching staff has prompted criticism of transnational education programmes, with some scholars accusing them of promoting "knowledge capitalism" (Olssen & Peters, 2005) and "linguistic and cultural imperialism" (Coluzzi, 2012; Djerasimovic, 2014), where knowledge is commodified and hierarchized along geopolitical lines.

Previous studies have pointed to such unequal power relationships among teaching staff in international schools, often noting that teachers from non-dominant cultures must continuously adapt to institutional expectations that may not align with their own professional backgrounds (Sun, 2012; Yue, 2017). For instance, Chinese language teachers may feel pressure to adopt unfamiliar teaching styles or content frameworks without reciprocal engagement from their colleagues or institutions (Gao, 2010; Lai et al., 2016). However, specific mechanisms through which they adapt – particularly through CPD and workplace learning – remain underexplored.This study, guided by Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT, Engeström, 2001), takes three Chinese language teachers as a case example to analyse the diverse intercultural challenges they face within their unique working environments. It explores the specific intercultural difficulties they encountered, how these teachers adapt to such challenges, and how their working contexts, in turn, influence their professional development choices.

This study addresses two research questions:

RQ1: What intercultural gaps have emerged among the three Chinese language teachers while teaching in UK schools over eight months?

RQ2: How have the three teachers cross the intercultural gaps through continuing development within their workplace activity systems?

In this study, CHAT serves as a theoretical framework, enabling the researcher to engage with the participants in developing contextual understanding and identifying key components that raise important issues in teacher education. By analysing the interactions and relationships of Chinese language teachers within an activity system, the complexity and the dynamic nature of their actions are unravelled and interpreted. It is worth noting that the aim of adopting this theoretical framework is not to generalize findings, but rather to explore the intercultural challenges faced by individual teachers and their unique strategies for negotiating CPD.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1. Intercultural Competence and Teacher CPD

Cross-cultural transition is widely recognized as a potentially challenging and transformative life experience. Scholars such as Berry (1994) suggest that such transitions often give rise to intercultural gaps – differences in values, communication styles, behaviours, and expectations between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds – which can lead to misunderstandings or conflicts. These gaps frequently manifest as anxiety, stress, and disorientation, particularly when individuals encounter unfamiliar environments where previously effective social norms no longer apply (Mumford, 2000).

For teachers working abroad, these challenges are well-documented. For instance, Roskell (2013) highlighted that British teachers in South East Asia experienced misalignment between their pedagogical expectations and local hierarchical structures, leading to frustration and perceived professional stagnation. Dunn (2013) examined Indian teachers in the U.S., identifying difficulties in adapting to informal classroom dynamics, student autonomy, and unfamiliar curricular frameworks. Similarly, Shimura and Ralph (2009) documented American and British teachers in Japan who struggled with collectivist expectations, strict behavioural norms, and indirect communication styles. Clement and Outlaw (2002) showed that American student teachers overseas encountered confusion over local teaching styles, authority relations, and assessments, which led to initial disengagement and self-doubt.These studies collectively point to recurring intercultural gaps – linguistic misunderstandings, pedagogical incongruities, classroom management conflicts, and unspoken institutional norms. Some of these gaps are common among language teachers in general, who are more directly involved in linguistic and cultural exchange. Addressing these gaps requires developing intercultural competence (Genç, 2018). Overcoming the gaps requires teachers' intercultural competence. Perry and Southwell (2011) define intercultural competence as "ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures" (p.455). By exercising intercultural competence, teachers are able to engage with cultural differences and ultimately create experiences that align with those of individuals from other cultures (Deardorff, 2011).

This competence has been studied extensively and encompasses various aspects, including interpersonal skills (Byram, 2020), social interaction skills (Chau & Truong, 2019) and cultural empathy (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012). It is a continuous process, requiring time for individuals to undergo transformation (Deardorff, 2011). A fundamental aspect of improving teacher intercultural competence lies in adequate teacher continuing professional development (CPD) training tailored to diverse educational contexts. Research highlights the importance of equipping teachers with skills to engage students from various socio-cultural backgrounds effectively (Figueredo-Canosa et al., 2020; Tran & Duong, 2018). Studies also stress developing skills, reflection, fostering culturally responsible (Figueredo-Canosa et al., 2020).

CPD is an active goal-directed and self-regulated learning process where teachers are actively engaged in learning how to adjust their teaching to meet students' learning needs and their personalized professional goals (Webster-Wright, 2009). The non-linear nature of growth is also emphasized, underscoring collaborative

personal and social development throughout community of learning and teaching practice (Sadovets, 2017).

CPD refers to activities that provide teachers with new information or experiences, supporting their growth towards more competent or "accomplished" practice (Murrell, 2001). It encompasses both formal and informal activities (Desimone, 2009). Formal practice takes place in structured settings and involves group or individual activities like classroom discourse (Putnam & Borko, 2000), group discussions, mentoring (Gul et al., 2019), and performance evaluations (Stacey et al., 2020). It may also include judging teaching competitions, coaching, or applying new language and cultural practices (Diaz-Maggioli, 2003). Additional formal activities are school-based training, technology implementation and workshops (Pun, 2013). In-class practice often serves as a foundation for self-reflection, a "bottom-up" process deepening teachers' understanding (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Formal individual practices, such as higher education courses or attending conferences (Harper-Hill et al., 2022), are also essential for teachers' development (Tondeur et al., 2019). These perspectives informed this study.

Despite the growing body of work on language teacher CPD and intercultural competence, most existing studies have focused primarily on European languages and contexts, often within Western institutional frameworks. For example, Batt (2008) explores how French language teachers in Australia adapted to local learner expectations but largely within a Eurocentric CPD paradigm. Svoboda and Zagar-Sostaric (2019) examined CPD for German and Croatian teachers in multilingual classrooms, focusing on policy-driven frameworks in European Union contexts. Takam and Gillis (2021) analyse intercultural tensions in CPD programmes for African language instructors in Belgium but within institutions that continue to privilege Western standards. These studies highlight valuable insights but often overlook non-European perspectives, especially those of teachers from developing nations working in the Global North.

In particular, Chinese language teachers in Western countries face a unique set of challenges – both pedagogical and sociocultural – that remain underexplored. Dominant pedagogical practices, often rooted in Euro-American norms (e.g. constructivist or student-centred methods), can overshadow or devalue local knowledge systems embedded in Confucian educational traditions. This epistemological marginalization reflects broader critiques of transnational education, which has been accused of reproducing "knowledge capitalism" and "cultural imperialism" through the unidirectional transfer of educational models (Nesterova, 2019; Starks, 2022).

To counter this, scholars advocate for inclusive, critical pedagogies. Perumal (2016) argues for centring local epistemologies to achieve genuine social transformation. Ulfa et al. (2021) extend this by calling for pedagogical approaches that not only acknowledge but foreground marginalized voices and ways of knowing. These perspectives underscore the importance of transformative CPD that fosters mutual respect and epistemic justice, especially in intercultural, transnational educational settings.

2.2. *Intercultural Gaps Crossing & CHAT*

Rooted in Vygotsky (1978, 1987), socio-cultural theory, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) emphasizes mediation and culturally situated activities driven by transformation and oriented towards desired outcomes. Engeström (2001) highlighted that individuals and societies must be understood through their cultural tools and mutual agency. As such, CHAT offers a powerful framework for examining the complex, multi-layered systems in education and professional learning environments (Daniels, 2004; Jaworski & Potari, 2009).

CHAT has been widely applied to investigate professional learning (i.e. Blin & Munro, 2008; Ell & Major, 2019) and its relevance to intercultural professional contexts has also been explored. For example, Yang et al. (2020) reconceptualizes language teaching as a sociocultural activity, arguing that teacher practice is historically and culturally mediated. This framing helps to illuminate how teachers' past professional and cultural experiences inform their current actions in new educational contexts. CHAT serves as a robust model for analysing activities across historical and interdisciplinary contexts, revealing the often-unspoken motives behind professional growth (Foot, 2014; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013). In this study, language teachers must be understood in their institutional context with consideration of their individual background. Figure 1 shows an activity system model.

In this model, the subject represents the participants engaged in a given activity – in this study, Chinese language teachers working in UK educational institutions. The object is central to the activity system and guides purposeful actions. In this study, the object is conceptualized as adapting to a different institutional and cultural context, which entails negotiating pedagogical practices, managing classroom interactions, and developing intercultural competence. Peña-Ayala et al. (2014) note, the object is not merely a task but a culturally and historically shaped motive that drives activity. Blin and Munro (2008) indicated that "actions, which are intentional and carried out through a series of routinized and automated operations, are mediated by tools" (p.477). Tools are the purposive and effective artefacts, establishing a bridge for boundary-crossers (Wenger, 1999). Objects informs and transforms through engagement with tools, both tangible (e.g. textbooks, classroom technologies) and intangible (e.g. pedagogical beliefs, communication strategies).
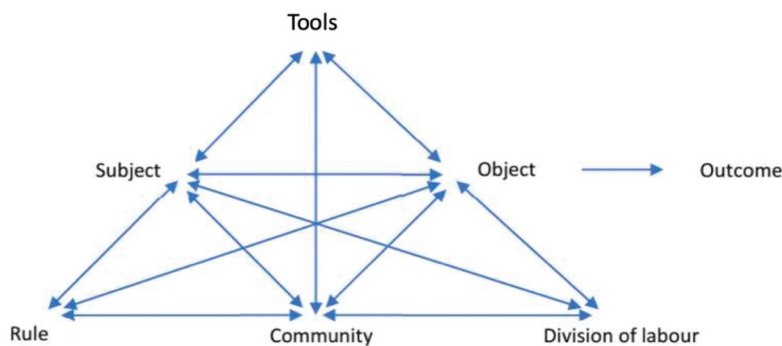
Figure 1. Activity system model adapted from Engestrom (Engeström, 2001, p. 135).

These tools mediate the teacher's actions, enabling or constraining their efforts to bridge cultural differences. AsChinese language teachers acquire intercultural competence, they negotiate how to make use of, transform or cultural and social tools. In the interaction, teachers negotiating and conceptualize tools.

Rules refer to the formal and informal norms governing behaviour within the system. For Chinese language teachers, this includes national education policies, school-level expectations, and broader socio-political dynamics of teaching in multicultural UK classrooms. These rules can simultaneously support and restrict their agency.

The community consists of colleagues, students, administrators, and other stakeholders with whom the teachers interact. This community shares norms and values that can influence the integration process (Hutchins, 1993). The division of labour outlines how responsibilities and authority are distributed across the community – crucial in shaping the teacher's role, professional autonomy, and engagement in collaborative work. The outcome of the activity system is the observable result of this culturally mediated process. In this study, the outcome is the teachers' evolving intercultural competence and their ability to adapt teaching practices to align with UK educational expectations. This transformation process involves navigating contradictions and tensions – what describes as expansive learning cycles (Engeström, 1987). These tensions can become productive drivers for change, activating a zone of proximal development not only at the individual level but for the activity system itself.

In the learning space, the participants negotiate the objects of the practise, and even reconceptualize the objects and tools of different activities (Engeström, 2001). It is important to study the ways in which participation is managed obtain the objects and the connection between the components of CHAT, and analyse learning as participation trajectories (Ludvigsen et al., 2011; Rasmussen, 2005). The notion of a participation trajectory provides a useful analytic lens to trace how Chinese language teachers – shaped by their prior educational and cultural contexts – progressively make sense of and respond to their host environments (Engeström, 2008; Rasmussen, 2005). Moreover, mapping the tools utilized and the nature of intercultural challenges encountered allows for a nuanced comparison across cases, illustrating how teachers adapt differently based on individual experiences and institutional contexts. Importantly, the object of adapting to a different institutional and cultural context does not negate the teacher's role as a language educator. Instead, it operates in tandem – becoming an embedded yet distinct aim that redefines how language teaching itself is enacted across cultural boundaries.

Given the diversity of Chinese language teachers' backgrounds and the complexity of the UK educational context, there is a pressing need to investigate how these educators make pedagogical decisions, what shapes their intercultural adaptation processes, and how their actions evolve over time. However, these issues are often overlooked in the literature. Thus, applying CHAT to analyse the professional experiences of Chinese language teachers in the UK not only illuminates their intercultural learning pathways but also offers broader implications for understanding globalized educational settings.

3. Methodology

Methodologically, guided by CHAT, this study adopted a multiple case study design. I recruited three Chinese language teachers taught learners at various levels in schools across England and who had distinct academic and professional backgrounds.

3.1. Participants and Their Schools

A purposive sampling strategy was used, considering participants' gender, workplace, teaching experience, and native or non-native Chinese-speaking status. According to previous studies (i.e. Gedik Bal, 2023), these all can be factors that influence how teachers perceive and respond to intercultural challenges, reflecting differences in educational and cultural backgrounds. To enhance diversity, a snowballing strategy was also employed, where one participant referred others. This process led to the recruitment of three participants, each representing a broader profile of Chinese language teachers.

The study was conducted in a natural, non-intervention setting. Participants completed an informed consent process, during which they were fully briefed on the study's aims, methods, and potential uses. They were informed of their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time without explanation. All data were kept confidential, and participants' identities were anonymized to maintain ethical standards and protect privacy. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the three participants.

The first participant is Alex, a male teacher from China. Alex came to the UK in 2019 to pursue a one-year master's degree. To be a qualified teacher in the UK, he later completed a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) and successfully became a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT),[2] worked in an academy (pseudonymously called Greendale) in July 2020. Alex's status as an NQT made him different from the other cases described of this study.

The second participant is Beatrix. Beatrix was born in England. Unlike the other study participants who are all native speakers of Chinese, Beatrix had no exposure to the Chinese language until she began an undergraduate degree in Chinese Language Studies in 2007 in the UK. Before being appointed as Head of Chinese at an independent school in London (pseudonymously named Diamond Hill) in January 2021, she had accumulated 10 years of experience teaching languages. Diamond Hill is a prestigious school with a long history and a strong academic tradition.

The third participant is Carol. Carol is a native-speaking Chinese language teacher in her early 30s. She was dispatched by the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC)[3] to teach the Chinese language at a primary school (pseudonym Waterfall Bridge) in the south of England. She had almost five years of teaching experience in UK schools. At the time of the study, she had nearly five years of experience teaching in UK schools. Waterfall Bridge is a mixed-gender foundation school that received a "Good" rating from Ofsted in 2020 and maintained a partnership with CLEC. Carol was the sole Chinese language teacher at the school. Unlike Alex and Beatrix, who had access to structured mentorship through QTS or PGCE pathways, Carol received no formal mentoring, making her experience notably more independent and self-directed.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants.

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Years of teaching experience	School name (pseudonym)	School type
Alex	Male	0.5	Greendale	Academy (KS3[1] - Six Form)
Beatrix	Female	10	Diamond Hill	Independent school (KS2 - Sixth form)
Carol	Female	5	Waterfall Bridge	Foundation school (KS1–KS2)

3.2. Data Collection

In this study, data was collected through semi-structured interviews, regular, periodic teacher reflection journals, and digital observations on an ad hoc basis of teacher CPD-related events for intercultural gaps crossing over a period of eight months, from January to July 2021. The three methods supplemented each other and were triangulated to capture different dimensions of their actions and to increase the validity of the study.

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source for exploring the CPD experiences of the three participants. Key questions focused on the intercultural difficulties they faced, their emotional responses, events attended, and motivations for participation. Reflective journals provided additional insights into participants' unique sociocultural activities and perceptions of working across cultures. When a teacher mentioned a specific CPD event in their journal, follow-up questions were asked in interviews to explore these experiences in greater depth. Interviews and journals were complemented by digital observations conducted during relevant CPD events, when feasible. These observations offered contextual data that were not captured through other methods and helped to triangulate and deepen understanding of teachers' experiences. Observation findings also informed subsequent interview questions. All three data collection methods were conducted online. Table 2 below demonstrates the different sources of data for each participant and the time of data collection.

From January to August 2021, with each participant, four interviews were conducted with each participant. The time of Carol's enrolment in this study took place at a slightly different time from the other two participants. Rich data was obtained across the timeline. One synchronized coffee talk event with Alex and two unsynchronized events of online Chinese teaching competition with Carol were observed. The researcher did not have the opportunities to have event observation with Beatrix because she did not attend any open CPD activities in the eight months of the study.

3.3. Data Analysis

In this study, data analysis employed a combination of inductive (Charmaz, 2005) and deductive approaches (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) within a grounded theory-informed framework. The analysis of intercultural challenges was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge directly from participants' narratives, shaped by their teaching contexts and past experiences. In contrast, the analysis of CPD behaviours and reflections was guided deductively by CHAT framework. Specifically, data segments were categorized according to the six CHAT components. At the same time, the coding process remained open to additional emergent themes, ensuring a flexible and iterative analysis process. To enhance clarity and transparency, Table 3 is an example mapping key data themes and codes to CHAT components.

4. Findings

4.1. Intercultural Gaps of the Participants

The three participants encountered a variety of interrelated challenges. Table 4 shows their main difficulties over the eight-month period.

Table 2. Data collection methods & timeline.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug
Alex	1st interview		2nd interview		3rd interview		4th interview	
		1st journal	2nd journal	3rd journal	4th journal	5th journal	6th journal	
		event observation						
Beatrix	1st interview		2nd interview		3rd interview		4th interview	
		1st journal	2nd journal	3rd journal	4th journal	5th journal	6th journal	
Carol			1st interview		2nd interview		3rd interview	4th interview
			1st journal	2nd journal	3rd journal	4th journal	5th journal	6th journal
					event observation		event observation	

Table 3. Data themes mapped to CHAT components.

Data Theme (Inductive)	CHAT Component (Deductive)	Example Codes	Participant Quote
Behavioural management struggles	Rules/Community	"Classroom authority norms," "UK vs. Chinese expectations"	"Chinese students obey; UK students' question" (Alex, Interview 2)
Use of mentor meetings for adaptation	Tools	"CPD sessions," "Peer feedback"	"Mentor taught me differentiation strategies" (Alex, Journal 3)
Marginalization as CLEC teacher	Division of Labour	"Visitor status," "Lack of recognition"	"I'm just a visitor here" (Carol, Interview 2)
Peer-supported language learning	Community/ZPD	"Collaborative fluency building," "Native-speaker support"	"My colleague helps me practice chengyu" (Beatrix, Journal 1)

Table 4. Intercultural challenges of the three participants.

Intercultural gaps encountered by the participants	Alex	Beatrix	Carol
Behavioural management	X		X
Meeting local students' diverse learning needs	X	X	X
High expectation on students vs. students' below standard performance	X		X
Different teaching and learning style between two context	X	X	
Special issues raised from the Chinese language		X	
Different policies between the two countries			X

Table 4 summarizes the key intercultural challenges encountered by the three participants, reflecting differences in classroom behaviour, pedagogical expectations, and educational values. While some issues – such as addressing diverse learning needs – were shared across all participants, others were shaped by individual roles and contexts. Encountering these gaps reveal deeper tensions between Chinese and UK educational norms, particularly around authority, student engagement, and institutional belonging. Together, they illustrate the complex, multi-layered nature of intercultural adaptation addressed in RQ1

4.1.1. Alex

4.1.1.1. Behavioural Management.
Behavioural management always entails some cultural differences. Alex was angry with English students' unruly behaviour.

Classroom management is a very big task. Foreign pupils are different from Chinese domestic ones after all ... Chinese students do as teachers tell them, but the students here [in England] don't. The local students do not focus on exam results as much as Chinese students, so they are not as motivated to study as Chinese students, and they do not worry at all (2nd Interview).

In Confucius culture, students are expected to respect and obey teachers, with academic success highly valued as a way to honour the family and secure future opportunities (Guo, 2016). In contrast, UK education encourages individuality, critical thinking, and active classroom participation, placing less emphasis on exam pressure (Ye & Edwards, 2018). These cultural differences in educational values and behaviour can cause misunderstandings for teachers like Alex, who are used to a more disciplined and exam-focused environment.

4.1.1.2. Meeting Local students' Diverse Learning Needs.
Working in the UK incorporated a wide range of work besides simply teaching the Chinese language. "In England, teachers are required to take various strategies to support students' different learning styles. By contrast, in China, students do whatever the teacher instructs them to do" (1st Interview).

In traditional Chinese education, students are expected to follow teachers' instructions and focus on lectures and note-taking, with teachers as the central authority (Zhou & Li, 2015). In contrast, the UK's student-centred approach encourages participation, discussion, and varied activities to meet diverse learning needs. As Alex learnt in PGCE training, UK teachers use games and activities to make lessons engaging. However, despite this training, he still struggled to find effective strategies for addressing student's needs in the classroom.

4.1.1.3. The High Expectation on Students Vs. students' Below Standard Performance.
In the Chinese education system, students are expected to meet high academic standards through hard work, discipline, and rigorous exam preparation. Success is often closely tied to effort, with a strong emphasis on accuracy, memorization, and measurable outcomes (Littlewood, 2000). In contrast, UK schools value a more relaxed, student-led approach, where lessons aim to be engaging, enjoyable, and exploratory, prioritizing student well-being, creativity, and independent thinking over exam-driven performance. Alex believed that local schools' requirements for students were too loose and pointed out that pupils met neither the standards of GCSE[4] exams, nor his expectations.

Here [in England], lessons should be fun, and teachers need to give students space to explore by themselves. I am not particularly understanding why they are doing it, and this is why Chinese is particularly hard to learn here (1st Interview).

4.1.1.4. Different Learning and Teaching Styles.
As Alex presented, he found that British teachers were relentlessly positive when talking with parents or students. However, this was contrary to his previous learning experience in China. As Alex explained, "In China, teachers are more inclined to focus on students' shortcomings, to stimulate their potential, and to allow them to improve and move towards higher standards. But in the UK, teachers seem to only see students' merits" (2nd Interview).

4.1.2. Beatrix
4.1.2.1. Meeting Local students' Diverse Learning Needs.
Beatrix observed wide gaps in students' Chinese proficiency at Diamond Hill, where learners came from diverse language backgrounds. Their abilities varied greatly and were not necessarily linked to age or year group. In contrast, Chinese classrooms are more uniform, with students grouped by age and given the same homework, regardless of ability. Chinese teachers rarely adapt materials for different learning needs. Beatrix noted that "while some students spoke Cantonese or Mandarin fluently, many lacked reading and writing skills, making it challenging to address their varied language abilities" (3rd Interview).

4.1.2.2. Different Learning and Teaching Styles.
Beatrix reflected on the intercultural gaps between China and the UK. In China, students tend to listen passively and accept knowledge from teachers without question. In contrast, UK students prefer fewer things

to memorize and more interactive activities, like worksheets. Beatrix found it challenging to shift Chinese students from passively agreeing to thinking independently and creatively (1st Interview).

4.1.2.3. The Special Issues Raised from the Chinese Language.
As a non-native Chinese teacher, Beatrix faced challenges due to limited subject knowledge. Teaching Chinese characters required repetitive writing and reading, as they take a long time to master. "Students repeat them, repeat them, write them out, write them out . . . they just need to use them lots and lots" (3rd Interview). Beatrix also struggled with culture-specific content, especially traditional idioms like chengyu, which native speakers understand quickly. She explained that non-native speakers, like herself, lack the intuitive grasp of cultural expressions, making it harder to teach these aspects naturally. This added to the intercultural teaching challenges in her classroom.

4.1.3. Carol
4.1.3.1. Behavioural Management.
Carol, a native-speaking Chinese teacher, while she had worked in the UK for almost six years when this study was conducted, she still perceived student behaviour to be a solid challenge. From her previous experience, Carol said that Chinese students are quiet in the classroom. No one dares to talk during classes, and students absolutely obey school rules and the teacher's requests, whereas British students are distracted and hyperactive during class. "I don't have a particular way to manage the students (who particularly has big behaviour problems)" (4th Interview).

4.1.3.2. Meeting Local students' Diverse Learning Needs.
Carol admitted she was not experienced in accommodating all students' needs, as her past education in China followed a uniform approach. In China, students of mixed abilities are grouped together, allowing stronger students to support weaker ones, and teachers maintain the same expectations for everyone. This grouping strategy is rooted in educational philosophies that value collective learning and peer assistance as essential components of student development (Xudong & Li, 2020). In contrast, UK classrooms often group students by ability, with additional support provided for lower-ability groups. Carol found this system required her to lower expectations for some groups, which was unfamiliar and challenging compared to the more collective, peer-supported learning style in China (2nd Interview).

4.1.3.3. The High Expectation on Students Vs. students' Below Standard Performance.
Similar to Alex, Carol also complained about the slack learning style of students at Waterfall Bridge.

I feel awful. Lots of students don't do homework at all . . . I even can assume who will submit the homework and who will not (1st Interview).

4.1.3.4. Different Policies Between the Two Countries.
As mentioned before, Carol was a CLEC delegate teacher supporting Chinese language teaching in Confucius classrooms. Without teaching qualification recognized by the local educational bureau, she was "a visitor" rather than "an accepted teacher" belonging to Waterfall Bridge. This made her feel marginalized in the school.

Once I had a meeting with the Chair, he asked me, "How do you think of OUR students?" Then I suddenly realized that I was actually just a visitor. (2nd Interview).

4.2. Participants' Behaviours for Intercultural Gaps Crossing in Activity System

During the eight months of the study, each participant took corresponding actions to accommodate intercultural gaps. CHAT is applied as a theoretical and analytic framework for analysing their behaviours and is visualized for their intercultural gaps crossing trajectories.

4.2.1. Alex

Figure 2 shows Alex manoeuvred the CPD tool for catching the object for gaps intercultural crossing through over a period of eight months.

4.2.1.1. Subject. The subject in this activity system is Alex. His personal values, prior experiences, and intercultural expectations influenced how he perceived and responded to the challenges of UK classrooms. Initially shaped by a teacher-centred, exam-driven system, Alex had to critically reflect on and gradually adjust his beliefs and practices to align with the UK's student-centred, wellbeing-oriented culture.

4.2.1.2. Object. The object evolved over time as Alex's understanding deepened. Initially, it was to gain classroom control and manage behaviour effectively. Later, this broadened to include meeting students' diverse learning needs, understanding local educational values, and developing differentiated teaching practices. His shifting objects highlight that intercultural professional development is a dynamic, ongoing process.
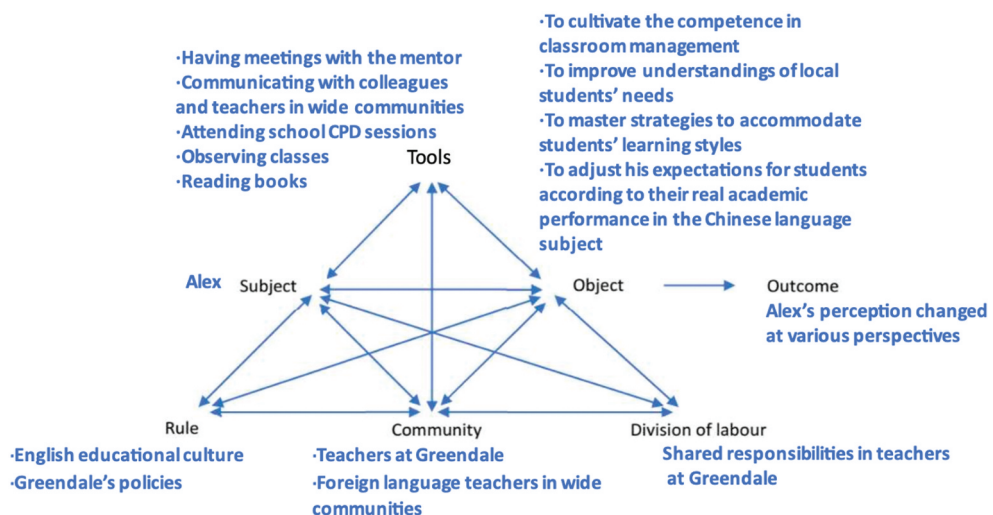

Figure 2. Alex's intercultural gaps crossing trajectories.

4.2.1.3. Tools. Alex employed multiple CPD tools to work towards his objects, including: mentor meetings (1st Interview), CPD sessions (1st to 6th Journal), class observations (3rd Journal), conversations with colleagues (3rd Journal), professional reading (6th Journal) and virtual talks with other Chinese teachers (2nd Interview). These tools mediated his learning by providing both practical strategies (like behaviour management techniques) and cultural understanding (like the concept of differentiation). He sometimes applied multiple tools for one object (e.g. improving classroom management) and sometimes one tool for multiple objects (e.g. NQT meetings addressing management, relationships, and differentiation simultaneously).

4.2.1.4. Rules. Rules shaped what was expected and valued in Alex's new environment, both formally (school policies) and informally (educational culture). For example, UK expectations around differentiated teaching, positive relationships, minimal homework, and holistic student support contrasted sharply with Chinese norms. These rules structured what was considered good teaching and framed Alex's professional development trajectory, pushing him to adopt new approaches.

4.2.1.5. Community. Alex's CPD journey took place within a broader professional community. At Greendale, this included colleagues, mentors, CPD organizers, and other language teachers, both within and beyond the school. These social connections provided essential support, advice, and shared practices, helping Alex navigate cultural gaps and adapt to UK teaching expectations.

4.2.1.6. Division of Labour. The division of labour at Greendale and in the wider educational community assigned specific roles and responsibilities. For example, mentors guided NQTs, CPD leaders provided training, and experienced teachers served as models during class observations. This system distributed expertise and resources, giving Alex structured and informal learning opportunities to gradually move from a presenter-like teacher identity to a facilitator role.

4.2.1.7. Outcome. Over eight months, Alex's perceptions and practices shifted meaningfully. He moved from frustration and uncertainty to confidence in using varied management techniques and differentiated strategies. He began valuing student-teacher relationships over authority and recognized that UK education prioritizes effort, wellbeing, and personal development as much as academic performance.

When asked about the biggest improvement of the past academic year during the fourth or the last interview, he said:

> I feel the biggest improvement (during this half-year) is that I don't have to be angry with students' behaviour issues. I am very calm. I (now) have a variety of methods, according to the different students (characteristics) ... there are various means I can follow'. (4th Interview)

Similar improvement was observed in other areas of practice as well. He gradually, aimed to understand and follow the local educational culture and school policies. After two months, his perceptions towards students' academic performance changed.

The biggest difference between China and the UK is the local schools don't push students to meet the highest level in academic but require students making the best efforts in the subject, and also put emphasis on the support from the teachers' (3rd Interview).

4.2.2. Beatrix

Figure 3 shows how Beatrix works at interculture gaps crossing.

4.2.2.1. Subject. Beatrix is the subject in this activity system – a non-native Chinese language teacher working in an intercultural teaching environment. Her personal goals focused developing effective teaching skills in the UK classroom context, while navigating intercultural expectations and professional challenges.

4.2.2.2. Object. Beatrix's objects were multiple and evolving. Key aims included: improving her Chinese language proficiency, especially in vocabulary, idiomatic expressions (like *Chengyu*), and spoken fluency; enhancing her subject knowledge and teaching strategies; gaining insight into effective curriculum design and differentiated instruction. While she achieved noticeable progress in language ability and teaching awareness, the object of fully mastering curriculum design to suit diverse learners remained a continuing challenge.

4.2.2.3. Tools. Beatrix made use of a wide range of tools to work towards these objectives: (1) Anki and Speechling for vocabulary and speaking practice (1st to 6th Journal); (2) Chinese newspapers (e.g. People's Daily) to improve reading skills(1st to 6th Journal); (3) Class observations (both observing and being observed) for reflective practice (1st to 6th Journal); (4) Daily communication with colleagues for immediate support and feedback (1st to 6th Journal); (5)Discussions with peer teachers from her personal and professional networks (e.g. with a Chinese teacher
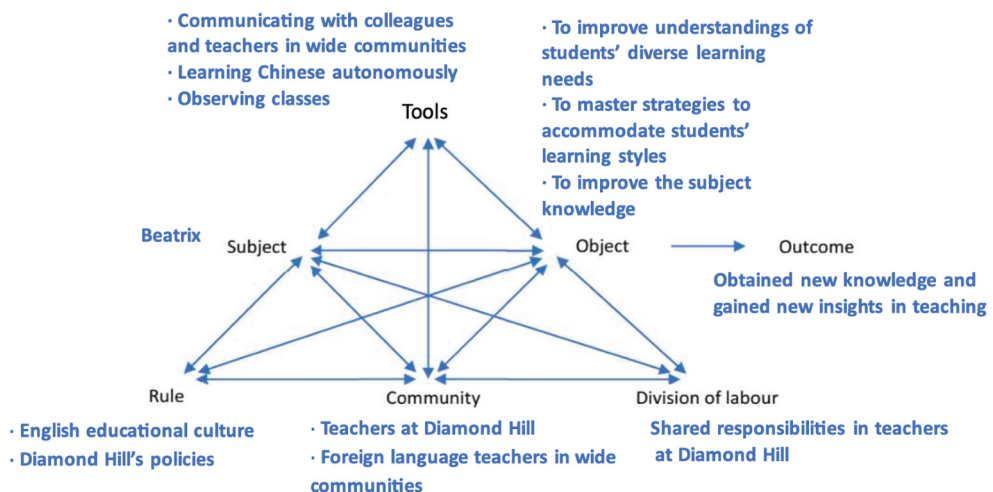

Figure 3. Beatrix's intercultural gaps crossing trajectories.

in Hong Kong); (6) Chinese speaking classes at school with a native-speaking colleague (1st and 3rd Journal). These tools mediated both her professional learning and language development, offering both formal and informal learning opportunities.

4.2.2.4. Rules. Beatrix's activity was structured by similar rules to those affecting Alex – including school policies, teaching expectations, and broader norms of UK educational culture. These rules emphasized student-centred, differentiated teaching, frequent formative feedback, and strong spoken communication skills. They shaped the teaching approaches which were acceptable and valued within the Diamond Hill community.

4.2.2.5. Community. Beatrix was supported by multiple overlapping communities: colleagues at Diamond Hill, with whom she interacted daily, other Chinese language teachers within and outside her school who observed and advised her, her personal networks, including Chinese-speaking peers abroad, and native Chinese-speaking teachers offering in-school language practice. This network provided her with advice, teaching resources, cultural insight, and practical classroom strategies.

4.2.2.6. Division of Labour. Like Alex, Beatrix's learning and teaching took place within a structured division of labour. Mentors, peers, and language specialists each contributed different expertise. Observers and mentors provided feedback; native-speaking colleagues offered language support; and professional networks contributed new ideas and teaching methods. Beatrix herself took on the dual roles of language learner and teacher, actively contributing to her own CPD through autonomous study and peer collaboration.

4.2.2.7. Outcome. Over time, Beatrix made meaningful improvements in her Chinese language proficiency, expanded her subject knowledge, and gained new insights into intercultural teaching practice. However, some challenges remained – especially in curriculum design for diverse, mixed-ability learners. These experiences reflect how CPD is a gradual, evolving process shaped by both personal effort and intercultural professional contexts.

4.2.3. Carol
Figure 4 shows how Beatrix works at interculture gaps crossing.

4.2.3.1. Subject. Carol is the subject of the activity system. Her professional focus was on developing strategies to accommodate diverse students' learning styles, improving her classroom management, and enhancing her ability to teach Chinese effectively in the UK. While motivated by a genuine passion for teaching, Carol faced challenges adapting to the educational context in the UK, particularly due to perceived limitations in career advancement as a Chinese language teacher.

4.2.3.2. Object. Carol's objects were centred on: mastering strategies to accommodate diverse student learning styles by observing and adapting lessons, developing effective classroom management techniques through feedback, collaboration, and the use of assistant teachers, understanding the unique teaching demands of Chinese language
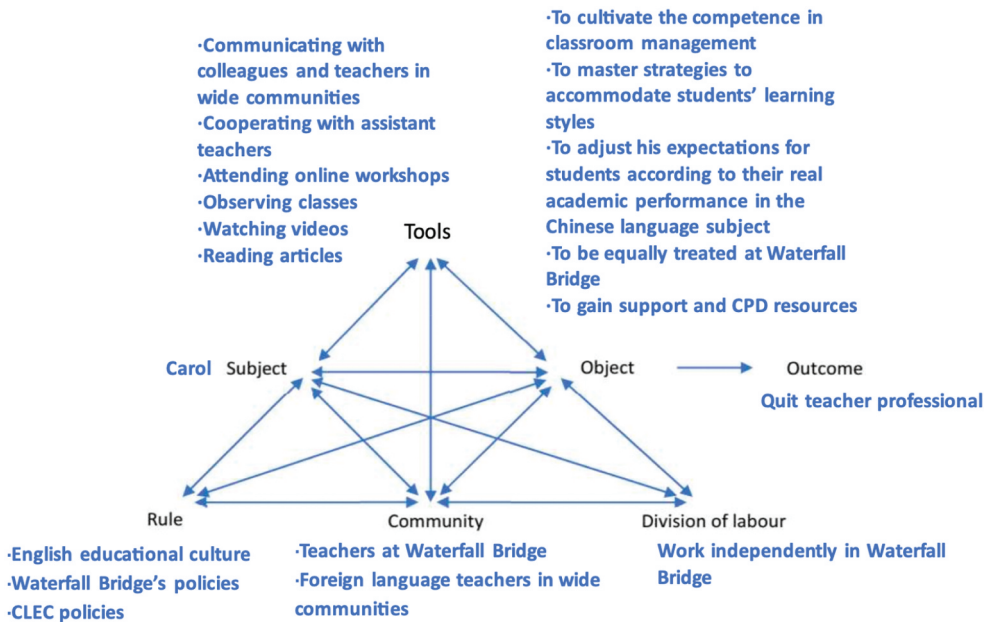
Figure 4. Carol's intercultural gaps crossing trajectories.

education for non-native speakers in the UK. Despite her efforts, Carol ultimately struggled with the lack of clear career prospects and support for Chinese language teaching in the UK, which affected her long-term commitment to the profession.

4.2.3.3. Tools. To achieve her professional goals, Carol used various tools: classroom observations (5th Journal), feedback from colleagues (5th Journal), collaboration with assistant teachers for behaviour management (2nd and 4th Interviews), workshops and articles on Chinese language teaching methodologies (4th Journal), and online resources such as recorded seminars (3rd Journal). These tools provided both practical strategies and insights into adapting her teaching methods.

4.2.3.4. Rules. Carol's activity was shaped by several rules, including Waterfall Bridge policies on classroom practices, such as grouping students based on ability and using assistant teachers for behaviour management. CLEC policies also influenced her approach to Chinese language teaching. Like the other participants, Carol experienced UK educational rules that emphasized student-centred learning and differentiated instruction. She found that learning classroom management "small tips" was essential, though they were not initially communicated to her.

4.2.3.5. Community. Carol's community included her colleagues at Waterfall Bridge, assistant teachers, and other Chinese language teachers in the UK. Through regular communication and collaboration, Carol shared resources and gained diverse perspectives. However, she found limited support specifically for Chinese language teachers.

4.2.3.6. Division of Labour. In her division of labour, Carol was the primary Chinese language teacher, working with assistant teachers to manage behaviour and support diverse student needs. She engaged in professional development independently, attending workshops and reading teaching methodologies. Despite her efforts, Carol faced limited career advancement in Chinese language teaching, ultimately deciding to leave the profession.

4.2.3.7. Outcome. Carol's intercultural gaps crossing trajectory led to improved teaching skills and classroom management abilities, especially in adapting to diverse student needs. However, her experience also reflected frustration with the lack of professional growth and support for Chinese language teachers in the UK, ultimately leading her to leave the profession. Despite this, Carol's passion for teaching remained strong, particularly in seeing student progress, though the structural limitations of her role in the UK led to a different outcome than she had hoped. At the end of the study, Carol said,

> I actually feel like teaching Chinese very much, whether to kids or adults. I am so proud to see their progress in learning, but I can't see the clear professional prospects as a Chinese language teacher teaching in the UK. It is tough in terms of my circumstances. (4th Interview)

5. Discussion

5.1. Key Findings

Guided by CHAT, this study explored what the intercultural gaps of three Chinese language teachers were while teaching in UK schools and their CPD approaches to cross the gaps. In response to the first research question, the findings reveal that each teacher encountered distinct intercultural difficulties. For Alex, a NQT, challenges included differences in behavioural management, responding to diverse student learning needs, mismatched expectations regarding student performance, and contrasting teaching and learning styles. Compared to the other participants, Beatrix – a non-native Chinese language teacher – faced fewer intercultural challenges. Her concerns primarily centred on accommodating student diversity, adjusting to different pedagogical styles, and navigating language-specific issues in Chinese instruction. Carol, a teacher dispatched by CLEC, encountered difficulties in behavioural management, diverse learning needs, mismatched expectations, and differing educational policies between the UK and China.

A shared intercultural gap across all three teachers was the challenge of addressing students' diverse learning needs. Beatrix's experience – despite teaching in both Chinese and English across two countries for over 10 years – shows that even experienced teachers found student diversity a persistent challenge, particularly within the multilingual and multicultural context of Diamond Hill.

5.2. Intercultural Gaps and Teaching Challenges

This reinforces findings from previous research that intercultural challenges are influenced by national education systems, school policies, and teachers' academic and professional experiences (Karousiou et al., 2019). Effective intercultural competence requires not only knowledge about other cultures but also the skills to navigate cultural differences in communication (Byram, 2008). Teachers must exhibit intercultural sensitivity and adaptability. Moreover, this study highlights that while many teachers acknowledge the importance of intercultural competence, there remains a gap between their understanding and the practical integration of intercultural strategies in daily teaching

While some of the challenges identified corroborate previous findings from transnational contexts – including the US (Liao et al., 2017; Yue, 2017), New Zealand (Sun, 2012), Hong Kong (Lai et al., 2016), Australia (Moloney, 2013), Canada (Duff & Lester, 2008), and the UK (Wang, 2011), — this study contributes a new perspective by distinguishing the experiences of native and non-native Chinese language teachers. In particular, Beatrix's challenges, linked to Chinese language proficiency and cultural knowledge, fill a notable gap in the literature, which has largely focused on native-speaking Chinese teachers.

These intercultural gaps required the teachers to actively develop cultural competence. The persistence of these challenges underscores that intercultural competence is not a fixed skill but an ongoing, iterative process shaped by continuous CPD, critical reflection, and social interaction (Deardorff, 2015). Although all three teachers demonstrated perceptual growth over the eight-month period, they faced ongoing, context-specific challenges that required further learning and adaptation – aligning with the CHAT view of activity systems as dynamic and historically situated (Foot, 2014).

Building on prior research suggesting that intercultural gaps are pervasive in education (Bakhov et al., 2024), this study extends the discussion by emphasizing that issues of differentiation and student diversity are enduring, context-dependent tensions. For example, Alex struggled to adapt to the UK's expectation of tailoring lessons for students with varied abilities, often feeling lost when students did not respond to his standardized teaching approaches. Beatrix, though experienced, faced difficulty meeting the diverse language backgrounds of her students – some were fluent in Cantonese or Mandarin but lacked literacy skills – which made it hard to use a single approach in class. Carol also found it challenging to lower expectations for mixed-ability groups and was unfamiliar with adjusting materials or outcomes based on students' performance levels. These examples illustrate that addressing student diversity required more than general cultural awareness – it demanded sustained, practice-based CPD focused on differentiation strategies within the UK context.

5.3. CPD Approaches and Adaptations

In terms of the second research question, each participant took adaptive actions to acquire intercultural competence and made more or less changes in the zone of proximal, and these approaches, analysed in light of the six components of CHAT also varied across individuals. The three teachers, both collectively and each individually, adopted a wide range of approaches.

Alex's rapid adaptation reflected his access to a well-supported, structured CPD environment. Regular NQT meetings, school-based workshops, and informal advice created a strong community of practice. His mentor was key in helping him internalize UK-specific approaches to differentiation and classroom management, supporting Tran et al. (2020) finding that structured, contextualized CPD accelerates intercultural teacher adjustment. The blend of formal training and informal peer support enabled Alex to swiftly bridge intercultural gaps, especially in shifting from teacher-centred to student-centred teaching.

Beatrix's partial success highlights the added complexity of navigating both linguistic and subject-based interculturality. As a non-native Chinese speaker, she faced dual challenges: adapting to UK classroom norms and improving her own language and subject knowledge. While she made use of tools like Anki, Speechling, and conversation groups, her pedagogical support was inconsistent. This supports Zhao (2023) argument that intercultural CPD for second-language teachers must address both cultural and disciplinary needs.

Carol's eventual withdrawal reveals structural gaps in CPD and professional networks for Chinese language teachers in the UK – a gap underexplored in existing literature (Zhang & Heydon, 2014). Despite her motivation, she faced fragmented support, limited guidance, and scarce career opportunities. This lack of inclusive professional communities and culturally responsive CPD made it difficult for Carol to adjust to local classroom norms and sustain her professional identity, contributing to her decision to leave. All three teachers used a combination of formal CPD, peer observations, online resources, and informal advice. However, the availability and efficacy of these resources varied significantly.

5.4. Theoretical Contributions

This study affirms that intercultural gaps are deeply embedded in systemic and structural factors such as school policies, cultural expectations, and community support, echoing Tran et al. (2020) argument about the importance of structured CPD communities. For example, Alex's success in adapting quickly to UK pedagogical norms was supported by a robust, school-based CPD culture, whereas Carol's struggle and eventual withdrawal highlighted gaps in professional networks and culturally responsive support (Zhang & Heydon, 2014). In addition, all three teachers drew on a combination of formal CPD sessions, peer observations, online resources, and informal classroom tips to adapt their practice. However, the availability and effectiveness of these resources varied. Consistent with previous studies (e.g. DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009; Romijn et al., 2021), this study argues that regardless of subject focus, integrating multiple CPD approaches within intercultural competence offers teachers greater opportunities for growth and improvement. UK rules such as minimal homework, mixed-ability classrooms, and behaviour management through relational strategies often conflicted with their prior expectations. This gap, well documented by Figueredo-Canosa et al. (2020), called for deep pedagogical adjustments in intercultural gaps crossing.

Align with previous studies (Wong, 2010), this study argues that supportive professional communities – or their absence – were decisive in whether these gaps were successfully navigated. Alex benefited most from a strong school-based CPD culture,

while Carol faced a fragmented, unsupportive environment. This confirms prior studies (Tran et al., 2020; Zhang & Heydon, 2014) showing that intercultural teaching gaps are not solely personal challenges but structurally produced through differing educational rules and the community structures surrounding CPD.

6. Conclusion

Teacher learning towards achieving professional competence in a new institutional and cultural environment is often highly personalized and shaped by support networks. This study addresses a gap in current understanding by exploring the complexity of intercultural competence and CPD. It highlights that teachers' intercultural needs, choices, and behaviours regarding CPD are multi-faceted. More importantly, through a multiple case study design, this research demonstrates that these elements are closely tied to individual teachers' distinct backgrounds and working contexts. The findings underscore the importance of analysing how various factors interact to influence teachers' intercultural choices and CPD actions. They also reveal that each teacher's needs, decisions, and behaviours form a unique profile, calling for more nuanced and differentiated forms of support.

It is noteworthy that, although the study participants shared a common goal of acquiring intercultural competence to bridge intercultural gaps, they had diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences. Alex, a native Chinese speaker and UK-trained NQT, struggled with classroom discipline and student-centred teaching. Beatrix, a non-native Chinese speaker with bilingual teaching experience, faced challenges with Chinese subject knowledge and cultural nuances. Carol, a CLEC-dispatched teacher, lacked UK-recognized qualifications and felt marginalized in her school. These differing intercultural and professional profiles shaped how each navigated the challenges. Each case presented a distinct culture-related trajectory. By identifying the specific obstacles and opportunities each participant encountered and how they responded, this study offers deeper insight into the long-term challenges and developmental pathways of Chinese language teachers. The intercultural communication challenges they faced prompted processes of self-negotiation and motivated individual actions.

Moreover, existing literature on language teacher learning and CPD remains limited, particularly with respect to case studies focusing on Chinese language teachers working in school settings. In this respect, the current study fills a significant gap and offers important insights into the dynamic and individualized nature of teachers' intercultural goals, choices, and actions. It enriches our understanding of language teachers' CPD pathways, especially in transnational and cross-cultural contexts.

7. Implication

This study offers practical recommendations for language teacher education and support, particularly for Chinese language teachers working in intercultural and transnational contexts.

First, intercultural gaps should be understood as ongoing aspects of teacher professional development, requiring continuous engagement rather than one-time training.

Second, schools need to design CPD programmes that specifically develop intercultural communication skills, tailored to each school's unique culture and policies, to effectively meet teachers' diverse learning needs.

Third, the findings highlight the importance of building inclusive professional communities and sustained support networks within schools, as these structures significantly influence teachers' ability to navigate intercultural challenges and integrate new pedagogical practices.

8. Limitations and Future Research Directions

While the study makes meaningful contributions, it also has limitations. The purposive selection of a small sample, the focus on only three individual cases, and the relatively short eight-month timeframe limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, potential biases – both on the part of the researcher and the participants – should be acknowledged, particularly given the use of self-reported reflective journals and interviews.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes valuable knowledge to both CPD theory and the use of CHAT in educational research. Methodologically, it demonstrates that reflective journals, interviews, and observations – when used within a CHAT framework – are effective tools for capturing the ongoing, socially-situated, and emotionally complex nature of teachers' intercultural experiences. This study shows that CHAT provides a powerful lens for future research on language teacher development by foregrounding the interaction between past experiences, present contexts, and future professional aspirations.

This comprehensive data collection captures the emotional, cognitive, and social complexities of teacher intercultural experiences in rich detail, offering nuanced insights rarely documented in existing research. These methods helped illuminate nuanced shifts in beliefs, tensions in daily practice, and the relational dimensions of professional adaptation.

Future studies could build on this by exploring larger and more diverse samples over longer periods to better understand how intercultural competence evolves across career stages. Moreover, given the novel insights into non-native language teachers' dual challenges, future research should further investigate tailored CPD models that integrate both linguistic and pedagogical intercultural training. The methodological approach here serves as a model for such research, demonstrating how multiple, longitudinal data sources can deepen our understanding of teacher adaptation processes in transnational settings.

Notes

1. A key stage is a stage of the state education system in the UK setting and the educational knowledge expected of students at various ages. For more information, please see https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum
2. This is a category of teacher in the UK that refers to those who have obtained a Qualified Teacher Status but have not yet completed the statutory 12-month programme known as the

"induction for newly qualified teachers." For more information, please see https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/induction-for-newly-qualified-teachers-nqts.

3. In the UK, some schools have partnered with the Confucius Institutes and established Confucius Classrooms where native Chinese-speaking teachers from China (often known as Hanban teachers) are sent by the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation (formerly known as Hanban or the Confucius Institutes Headquarters) to teach Chinese language and culture.

4. GCSE stands for General Certificate of Secondary Education, a qualification typically taken by students in the UK at the end of their secondary education. For detailed information, please see https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/gcse-subject-content

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Disclosure Statement

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