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Frances Yiyang Zhang

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Boundaries and transcendence: a tale of a newly qualified Chinese language teacher teaching in a UK school

Frances Yiyang Zhang 

Confucius Institute, Goldsmiths University of London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Teacher professional development (PD) is shaped by context in a complex way. Teachers encounter diverse challenges and take personalised and situated actions for their PD. Previous studies have mainly focused on teachers' difficulties in general but have rarely explored how they overcome these difficulties and how their negotiations fluctuate. Adopting the framework of boundary crossing for teacher PD, this study examines a newly qualified Chinese language teacher's professional boundaries while teaching in a UK school, and approaches of boundary crossing. Using a longitudinal approach and a single-case design, and following the four boundary-crossing mechanisms – identification, coordination, reflection, and transformation – this study argues that new boundaries present a challenge to reflection, leading to a new cycle of boundary-crossing mechanisms. This study contributes to understanding of how newly qualified language teachers navigate professional challenges and provides insights into effective strategies for teacher PD in diverse educational contexts.

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Teacher professional development; boundary crossing; Chinese language teacher; newly qualified teacher; intercultural context

Introduction

Professional development (PD) is gaining heightened importance in the modern age as individuals strive to keep pace with the rapid developments in society, acquire advanced technical skills, and attain sustainable professional growth. In educational settings, PD serves as a catalyst, motivating and inspiring teachers, thereby enhancing their commitment to teaching practices and consequently contributing to the improvement of students' academic performance (Arifin, Suryaningsih, and Arifudin 2024).

Scholars have previously pointed out that teacher PD is situated and socially constructed (Korthagen 2010) and shaped by multiple situations in a complex way (Borko 2004; Webster-Wright 2009). When professionals move between different sites, learning can be facilitated through boundary crossing in a dynamic way (Akkerman and Bakker 2011; Engeström 2001). In the United Kingdom (UK), student teachers join an initial teacher training programme called Post Graduate Certificate in Education¹ (PGCE) to get the teaching certificate. The first year after graduation from PGCE programmes are

CONTACT Frances Yiyang Zhang  yiyang.zhang@gold.ac.uk  Confucius Institute, Goldsmiths University of London, London SE14 6NH, UK

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referred to as the newly qualified teacher² (NQT) years. During the first years working in schools, NQTs are still part of the initial training programme. They are expected to continue working to provide evidence of meeting a predetermined set of standards to gain full qualification. For NQTs, the shift from being a student teacher to teaching independently in schools presents various challenges compared to those faced by experienced teachers, which may impact their perceptions of professional development (Tanguay and Many 2022).

Novice teachers adopt different approaches for teacher PD. However, previous studies have mainly focused on teachers' difficulties in general, rarely exploring how they cross professional boundaries, especially in an intercultural context, and how their negotiations fluctuate during the NQT years. As a result, this study explores the boundaries encountered by a NQT when teaching in a UK school and how these boundaries are crossed over time, with a focus on a Chinese language teacher.

Through the boundary-crossing framework developed by Akkerman and Bakker (2011), this study aims to reveal the mechanisms and boundary-crossing trajectories. The study adopts a situated and sociocultural perspective on teacher PD, from which teachers are seen as socially, culturally, and historically situated (Norton and Toohey 2011), and can only be understood as the unique individual (Pennington and Richards 2016). In short, this study attempts to address the following research question: 1) What boundaries did the newly qualified Chinese language teacher encounter when teaching in a UK school? 2) How did the newly qualified Chinese language teacher cross the boundaries?

Literature review

Teacher PD and boundary crossing

Teacher development is a complex and dynamic process, constructed upon a diverse array of interconnected knowledge bases and shaped by a multitude of influential forces (Borko, Jacobs, and Koellner 2010; Buehl and Beck 2015; Kraft and Papay 2014). It is a process of ongoing and life-long professional learning (Louws et al. 2017; Opfer and Pedder 2011) as teachers learn and improve their work on a daily basis (Meister 2010) and to see the results of their efforts after an extended period of time (Dorph and Holtz 2000). Boundary, in teacher PD, is ubiquitous at work. It refers to the space that teachers need to cross to achieve educational competence or professional advancement. Boundary crossing refers to the actions teachers take to overcome professional challenges. In another word, in order to meet with existing and emerging goals, teachers need to keep on learning themselves throughout their professional career (Beijaard, Korthagen, and Verloop 2007; Lieberman and Pointer Mace 2008). Boundary crossing is also risky, and involves friction and unease (Jacobs 2017). It is very complex and changes with time, place, contexts, cultures, and quality criteria (Akkerman, Bronkhorst, and Zitter 2013). It is noted that boundary crossing by learning new forms of activities which are not yet there, so they are learned as they are being created (Walker and Nocon 2007). Therefore, boundary crossing, no matter positive or negative, creates learning potentials (Akkerman and Bruining 2016; Engeström, Engeström, and Kärkkäinen 1995). In addition, boundary crossing is a personalised and contextualised process which not only associated with each individual teacher's current workplace, but also affiliated with the teacher's past

experience and cultural background (Flores and Day 2006). When teachers cross boundaries, they used various ‘boundary objects’ to overcome the difficulties or master new skills for teacher PD. Star (1989) introduced the concept of boundary object are those which allow people to build up a functional bridge to achieve the goals. Boundary objects vary in the educational field, such as partnerships (Harreveld and Singh 2009), peer groups (Tanggaard 2007), a consultant (Venkat and Adler 2008), and so on.

Given that teacher PD is seen as an unstable process (Opfer, Pedder, and Lavicza 2011), not even defined or understood ahead of time (Watson and Michael 2016), teachers may face diverse boundaries during the process of life-long learning. This process involves merging insights, techniques, and strategies from various educational domains to create nuanced and adaptive approaches to teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond 2016). Effectively boundary crossing requires a dynamic skill set that includes such as adaptability, cultural competence, and the ability to integrate best practices from different educational contexts (Bowles and Arnup 2016; Larson and Bradshaw 2017).

Akkerman and Bakker (2011) reviewed 181 studies in their synthesis of the literature on boundary crossing, identified four potential mechanisms that can take place at boundaries: *identification*, *coordination*, *reflection*, and *transformation*. The theoretical framework systematically summarises the relationship between boundary theory and learning potential, which also provides a valuable theoretical basis for teacher PD. Identification ‘entail[s] a questioning of the core identity of each of the intersecting sites. This questioning leads to renewed insight into what the diverse practices concern’ (142). The identification mechanism triggers the behaviour of drawing a line between the two sides, due to each individual having his or her own identity which is not recognised or accepted by others easily. In teacher PD, an identification mechanism typically occurs in an early stage when teachers realise their shortcomings and aim to find approaches to improve themselves in a specific way to achieve the career goal. Coordination usually occurs when practices and methods are identified, so that different practices work in concert with each other, even if there is conflict or no consensus reached in the process. In teacher PD, coordination is established by instrumentalities (boundary objects) and enhanced by repeatedly crossing different practices. Reflection results in an expanded set of perspectives and thus a new construction of identity that informs future practice. It creates a possibility for teachers to look into the approaches for PD. Teachers look at themselves through the eyes of others world. Transformation is characterised by the fact that the conflicting issues or a variety of ideas at the beginning have been accepted by each other in this process. ‘Characteristics of transformation involve confrontation with a shared problem, a hybridisation of perspectives and sometimes also activities, and crystallisation of new ideas, tools or procedures’ (Zheng, Zhang, and Wang 2019).

The concept of boundary has been adopted in various educational studies, such as school–university partnerships (Sewell et al. 2018; Tsui and Law 2007), community of teacher practice (Cobb et al. 2003), teacher management and leadership (Druskat and Wheeler 2003), interdisciplinary teaching and learning (Spelt et al. 2009; Weinberg and Harding 2004), and new technologies of virtual classrooms (Lipnack and Jeffrey 2008). Most of them focused on large group of teachers; however, few studies have investigated teachers’ boundaries and boundary crossing for teacher PD by examining each individual’s social cultural background and unique working context. Gabbard (2016) argued that boundary crossing is a dynamic and long process and requires a fresh look into long-

standing practices and conscious efforts. Akkerman and Bakker's (2011) conceptual framework is favourable for analysing teacher PD mechanisms when teachers engage in teaching in an intercultural context. It provides a useful lens for the present study to look into how the newly qualified intercultural teacher crosses boundaries for PD while teaching in a foreign country, which has received little attention in the current literature. It is worth noting that the aim of adopting this conceptual framework is not to generalise but to unravel the boundary-crossing trajectories of individual teachers and their unique negotiations for PD.

Newly qualified teachers and transcultural communication

Social cultures, shaped by policies and historical contexts, give rise to diverse educational cultures worldwide (Banks and McGee Banks 2010). This diversity manifests in distinct educational philosophies and teaching and learning styles that extend beyond national borders (Banks 2015). Each region's unique historical background, governance structures, and societal values contribute to the formation of its educational culture. These differences underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of various educational systems, highlighting the importance of acknowledging and respecting diverse approaches to teaching and learning on a global scale.

Transculturalism advocates for 'cosmopolitan learning' (Rizvi 2009), aiming to foster a different perspective on knowledge and interactions amidst the evolving cultural exchanges facilitated by global flows and networks in transcultural collaborations. A competent language teacher engaged in transcultural communication (Baker 2022) is described as one who is plurilingual or multilingual, capable of understanding social phenomena from a transcultural perspective, and grasping different values and behaviours in classrooms (Byram 2020). The spaces for teachers' transcultural learning are 'characterised by multiple ties and interactions linking people and interactions across borders and nation states' (Rizvi 2010, 3), where teachers navigate through cultural and linguistic boundaries, and even transcending them.

Teaching in an intercultural context is especially challenging for newly qualified language teachers. These boundaries may include difficulties related to various aspects, such as intercultural communication, managing linguistic diversity in the classroom, developing intercultural competence, and navigating cultural differences. For example, previous scholars have argued that novice teachers struggle with understanding and adapting to different cultural norms and expectations, which can impact their ability to effectively engage students from diverse backgrounds (Kidwell 2019; Syam, Resyadi, and Putra Sanusi 2023). In Dickson et al.'s (2014) study, the author found that novice teachers often find it challenging to balance their teaching responsibilities with their personal lives, especially when dealing with unique intercultural relationships with colleagues. Lap, Duyen Ngoc, and Thanh Thao (2022) highlighted that novice teachers face obstacles in developing their professional identity and reconstructing their teaching practices. They also encounter difficulties related to classroom assessment practices, such as shifting the focus from summative to formative assessment to better inform instructional practices and student learning processes (Parra and López 2024).

Only few studies have highlighted the challenges faced by NQTs from various countries working in UK schools. Research suggests that the qualifications and backgrounds of

these teachers significantly influence their choice of school, with higher-qualified NQTs often deterred from working in more challenging environments. This phenomenon affects the distribution of teachers across different school settings (Brown 2015). The preparation received by NQTs is crucial in determining their readiness for the demands of the profession. For example, a survey of newly qualified doctors in the UK revealed that many felt inadequately prepared for their clinical roles, highlighting the critical need for effective training and support for new professionals (Cave et al. 2007). Previous studies show the difficulties of NQTs in general; however, rare studies analyse intercultural language teachers' professional boundaries. Newly qualified intercultural teachers are required to possess various skills, especially transcultural communication skills across various aspects, and sometimes fostering a culturally inclusive teaching and learning environment within the classroom (Pathak et al. 2024) while also embracing epistemological plurality in their knowledge base (Acton et al. 2017). However, questions regarding how teachers acquire transcultural competence, negotiate challenges, and engage in self-reflection remain ambiguous in previous studies.

In addition, as previously presented, boundaries differ across individuals from different backgrounds and in various school or programmatic contexts. Rarely do studies describe an individual teacher's awareness by demonstrating dynamic decision-making from diverse perspectives, or discuss the corresponding strategies taken by teachers for boundary crossing by analysing the data through the lens of a theoretical framework. It should be noted that teachers' perceptions change over time, and 'learning about oneself and gaining reflexive knowledge of social and cultural practices' (Alred, Byram, and Fleming 2003) is a cognitive and fluid process. Detecting changes, 'being reflexive and critical of one's own values, assumptions and knowledge are essential to achieve ultimate transformative change and professional growth in intercultural contexts' (Gu 2005). In addition, a transcultural perspective integrates critical and complex approaches to teacher PD, serving as a foundational element in transcultural communication research and offering an alternative perspective to avoid 'knowledge capitalism' (Patrick 2013) and 'linguistic and cultural imperialism' (Coluzzi 2012; Djerasimovic 2017). Therefore, taking a newly qualified Chinese language teacher in the UK as an example to understand the multi-dimension of factors related to his PD approaches provides a window to educational settings worldwide.

Methods

Guided by boundary-crossing theory, this study adopted a longitudinal, single case design to examine a newly qualified Chinese language teacher boundary and boundary crossing in PD. A case study is an inquiry about a phenomenon 'set within in a real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident' (Yin 2009). 'Examining individual behaviour is the gateway for the researcher to enter into and vicariously experience the activity of the subject' (Yamagata-Lynch 2003). Porter et al. (2000) argues that 'longitudinal data enable us to document teaching practice before and after a professional development activity and to examine the extent to which changes in teaching practice can be attributed to participation in the professional development activity' (8). For the present study, the constant changes, and the process

of those changes, of the newly qualified Chinese language teacher were traced and interpreted. This study does not aim to generalise the research findings but to uncover the PD trajectories of novice intercultural teachers. In this study, the longitudinal approach provided a larger perspective of the participant's non-linear, dynamic, and personalised boundaries and boundary-crossing process.

Participant of the study

Alex is a male teacher from China. He was an NQT working in an academy (pseudonymously called Greendale) located in a rural village in southern England. He studied English language and literature as an undergraduate in China. Alex worked as an administrator and a teaching assistant in an educational company before moving to the UK. At that time, he taught English to students after class. However, due to his lack of teacher certification, he was unable to work as a qualified teacher in state schools in China. Alex came to the UK in 2019 to pursue a one-year Master's degree in Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages at a prestigious university that is internationally regarded for its education programmes, including language education and teacher education. To be a qualified teacher in the UK, he also pursued Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) and successfully became an NQT Mandarin Chinese teacher at Greendale in July 2020.

In England, teachers can either join a PGCE programme or pursue a bachelor's degree in education with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) to become certified. Regardless of the route, teachers must fully meet the teachers' standards³ and pass assessments to obtain their teaching certificate. These standards apply to NQTs as well and encompass two major aspects: teaching, and personal and professional conduct. Within the teaching category, there are eight sub-points, each containing three to five specific requirements. On one hand, the numerous criteria reflect the high standards for teachers in England. On the other hand, teacher training in England is subject to significant regulation and control, impacting the autonomy of student teachers. The prevailing culture in England emphasises compliance and regulation, potentially hindering the development of professional agency among teachers (Beauchamp et al. 2015). Although teachers are trained and regulated according to these standards during their training programmes, they still encounter various boundaries, as did Alex.

Context of the study

Greendale Academy is a mixed 11–18 school and sixth form located in southern England with more than 1500 students. In England, academies are inspected by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), so they follow the same rules as other state schools, and students sit the same exams, such as GCSE.⁴ According to Ofsted's most up-to-date report from 2013, Greendale was rated as 'outstanding'.

As per the school rules, mentors are appointed for NQT teachers to help them on a daily basis. Besides Chinese teaching, he was also involved in the school's administration and extra curriculum activities.

Data collection and analysis

When considering the use of longitudinal studies, it is crucial to focus on their capacity to detect changes over time rather than solely on the duration of the study period itself. In this study, six months is sufficient to examine changes and capture the participant's negotiations and actions for teacher PD. The current study took place over from January 2021 to July 2021. During this six-month period, in consideration of the contact difficulties resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, four individual interviews were conducted online, that is, January, March, May, and July, approximately representing the four boundary-crossing and PD periods of the study. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Six monthly journals were collected from him, one synchronous event, and his social media posts associated with teacher PD were observed.

The use of semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity for in-depth discussions on specific topics related to teacher PD. Reflective journals enabled the participant to record his personal reflections and experiences throughout his PD journey. Digital observation of events allowed for the collection of real-time data on teacher behaviour and actions, while social media was used to track the online interactions and activities of participants. In addition, artefacts that the participant provided were served as supplementary data, such as teaching materials, online technological teaching resources, etc. Additionally, after each interview and digital observation, a case-based memo was written reflecting on the self-negotiation of the participant in light of his PD choices. Together, these methods provided a comprehensive and multi-faceted view of the participant's unique PD trajectory and the various challenges and opportunities he encountered along the way and increased the reliability of the study (Connelly 2016).

In this study, the coding of boundaries for the participant was guided by grounded theory (Pidgeon and Henwood 2004), which involves generating theories directly from the data. This process followed an inductive approach, meaning themes and patterns were allowed to emerge naturally from the data without preconceived categories (Charmaz 2005). Conversely, for coding the boundary-crossing data, I employed a deductive approach, which starts with a predefined theoretical framework and applied it to the data. This deductive approach was guided by the boundary-crossing analytical framework (Corbin and Strauss 2015), focusing on four mechanisms, and was supplemented with inductive elements to refine the analysis further.

Utilising established frameworks (Charmaz 2005; Corbin and Strauss 2015; Creswell 2013) and drawing from four qualitative data sources, the study employed a four-stage analytical process: 1) open coding, where initial categories are identified; 2) focused coding, which refines these categories; 3) theoretical coding, which identifies relationships between categories; and 4) classifying themes into theoretical frameworks. It is important to note that these steps were not followed in a strictly linear sequence. Instead, the analysis involved multiple iterative rounds, moving back and forth between these stages to ensure the rigor and quality of the analytical outcomes. This approach aimed to capture the complexity and richness of the data.

In this study, was conducted in a natural context without any intervention by the researcher. The participant was informed fully about the purpose, methods, and

intended possible uses of the research, as well as what the participation in the research entailed and what rights he had as participant. The participant was informed, through an informed consent process, that all data were kept confidential, and his identity was anonymised.

Findings and discussion

Working at boundaries

Identifying boundaries with strong confusion

The identification mechanism involves a process of questioning that leads to renewed insight into the nature of diverse practices (Akkerman and Bakker 2011). At the outset of the study, Alex encountered various impediments. During our initial interview in January, he explicitly identified two specific challenges that were particularly salient: managing student behaviour and adapting to different educational cultures.

Excerpt one

The biggest challenge for me is students' behaviour management. I am struggled in dealing with students and pondering how to maintain a good relationship with them. I think it takes time.

Managing student behaviour is universally challenging for teachers, especially for an NQT. Alex expressed particular concerns regarding this boundary. This challenge is further complicated by the differences between traditional Confucian philosophy and the UK's educational culture. In traditional Confucian educational philosophy, teachers hold a position of authority within the classroom, and students are expected to demonstrate respect for their teachers by regarding them as gurus (Weiming 2012). Students are often expected to remain silent, comply with rules, raise their hands when answering questions, and are not allowed to challenge the instructions of their teachers. In contrast, within the educational culture of the UK, teachers often prioritise establishing a less authoritarian relationship with students (Mora 2013), resulting in students' looser behaviours. The boundaries for managing student behaviour in the UK were vastly different from what he was accustomed to in his native culture, leading to a culture shock that required him to adapt his teaching approach accordingly.

Excerpt two

I actually don't understand why the school doesn't allow us to leave homework for more than 40 minutes.

In Chinese culture, diligence is also regarded as a positive virtue (Francis, Mau, and Archer 2017), particularly in the context of education. According to Chinese traditional education philosophy, teachers believe that students can achieve a deeper understanding of knowledge through repetitive practice (Li and Wegerif 2014). Alex felt confused about Greendale's educational rules.

Intercultural boundaries prompted Alex to critically question the rationality and efficacy of British educational practices, leading to a dialogical process of identification

(Akkerman and Bakker 2011) and enabling him to discern the contrasting educational cultures between the East and West. To engage in transcultural communication, Alex participated in dialogue with colleagues and participated in workshops (January, February, reflective journal). Negotiating and navigating these boundary objects require him to have skills that allowed him to lead productive teacher PD.

Coordinating with mentor and questioning the local educational rules

The coordination mechanism entails the communication or cooperation of two parties (Gulati, Wohlgezogen, and Zhelyazkov 2012). During the second interview conducted in March, Alex identified additional boundaries that he faced in his teaching practice. These included his difficulty in implementing differentiated teaching methods to meet the diverse learning needs of his students. Despite receiving guidance from his mentor, Alex reported that he struggled to internalise various teaching and behaviour management skills.

Excerpt three.

Here [UK schools'] emphasis on teachers' differentiated skills for students with different learning needs. However, shouldn't students meet teachers teaching objects? Can every student meet teachers' object if teachers treat students differently?

Differentiation is a necessary skill that is highly emphasised in the QTS teachers' standards. It is helpful in enhancing students' self-esteem and ensuring optimal learning experiences for each individual (Tomlinson 2015). However, Alex expressed reservations about the effectiveness of this differentiated approach and questioned its validity, because in his previous learning experience, the Chinese educational system is characterised by a pedagogical approach that prioritises high expectations for all students and often highlights a top-performing student as a model for others to follow (Li and Wegerif 2014).

Excerpt four.

Teachers here [in the UK schools] must have multi-task management skills. For example, the mentor came to my class this Wednesday. He told me the strategies of calling attendance while letting students doing the worksheet . . . [another example is] when students enter the classroom with noise in the morning, teachers have a series of instructions for students to follow.

Excerpt five.

I have not taught as UK schools' style. I pursued a master's in education, and passed the PGCE training, but do not have much experience in teaching Chinese language in local schools. I have not got my own teaching style. I am still learning.

As a newly qualified intercultural teacher, much of the knowledge of working in a local school was new to Alex. He recognised that he still had much to learn. At this stage, he cooperated with his mentor (February, March, reflective journal; March, interview) for boundary crossing. The mentor's regular observation of Alex's classes and subsequent feedback were instrumental in guiding his implementation of diverse strategies in the

classroom. While Alex made efforts to integrate the recommended approaches, the mastery of teaching skills is a long-term process that requires sustained commitment and practice. Apart from communicating with his mentor, some other boundary objects, such as having formal meetings with colleagues, observing experienced teachers' lessons, and attending virtual PD workshops (March, April, reflective journals), were employed by him for teacher PD.

According to Akkerman and Bakker (2011), the coordination mechanism involves 'dialogue between diverse partners is established only as far as necessary to maintain the flow of work' (143). In Alex's case, communicative connections (Akkerman and Bakker 2011) with his mentor, colleagues, and attendees of virtual workshops supported his boundary-crossing efforts. Throughout the process, although there was some level of cooperation, Alex also experienced a degree of confusion. This confusion occurred in his daily work, leading him to adopt dynamic behaviours to learn and adapt, compensating for his lack of experience and transcultural communication skills. Consistent with trans-perspectives, he engaged in transcultural communication by traversing through and across cultural boundaries, rather than merely existing in between them.

Reflecting the gaps and changing strategies

Reflection happened when Alex evaluated his practice, and accordingly changed his boundary-crossing strategies for teacher PD. During the third interview in May, Alex reported that he had modified his teaching strategies to better accommodate the diverse needs of his students. This change was informed by his own reflections on his daily classroom practice on accordance with his mentor's guidance.

Excerpt six.

I feel like I am not timid now. I was frustrated about the hectic teaching schedule and expected all of them [students] can fully obtain the knowledge. But now, I used some different teaching strategies, such as printing out the new Chinese characters for them to learn after class. Students in my class are free to choose different level of homework. It's up to them.

Excerpt seven.

I set a new rule for my students. Students can decide how many times they write the new Chinese characters. But, if someone doesn't pass the small test the next day, the student will rewrite the homework and retake the test.

In the process of practice, by adjusting his behaviour in daily practice as well as in various PD actions, Alex discovered methods for applying differentiated teaching in Chinese language subjects. In his boundary crossing for teacher PD, Alex employed new boundary objects, such as reading books and sharing ideas with friends (May, June, reflective journals)

Transforming himself for continuous learning

'Transformation leads to profound changes in practices' (Akkerman and Bakker 2011, 146), which resulted in the self-positioning of Alex. After a six-month period of study, he reported a significant transformation in his teaching approach. At the beginning of this

study in January, he viewed himself as a ‘presenter’ with a primary focus on the delivery of content and methodology. However, by the fourth interview conducted in July, he reported that he had transitioned to a ‘facilitator’ role, emphasising the provision of support to students in their learning process. By adopting a facilitator’s role, Alex encouraged students to take ownership of their learning, promoting active engagement and participation from his students, fostering essential skills, such as time management and self-discipline (July, interview). He also perceived that maintaining teacher–student relationships was easier after six months.

Excerpt eight.

I was easy to get angry with students’ behaviour issues at the beginning, but now, I am not irritated. Probably because I had high expectations for students. I got mad when they did not follow my instructions, so I have been thinking about how to maintain good relationship with students ... I used different tactics to different students now.

In addition to his teaching and teacher–student relationship transformation, Alex also highlighted the importance of versatility for teachers in the UK, who are required to accommodate various responsibilities. However, despite his evolving teaching approach, he remained concerned about classroom management and various NQT requirements for teachers. He struggled with the diverse NQT requirements, which added difficulties to his boundary crossing for teacher PD.

Excerpt nine.

I think classroom management is still a challenge for me because local pupils are very different from Chinese pupils. Sometimes just one or two naughty students impact the whole class. It is [classroom management] a big issue for me. Tackling the students is the precondition of being a good teacher.

Excerpt ten.

The UK government have high requirements in each aspect for teachers, I am still struggled with fulfilling the requirement, managing the students, considering different students’ learning needs, taking care of them, keeping them safe, being versatile ... It is complicated ... I have a lot of things to learn.

Alex interacted with local educational culture through combining elements of two sides alongside with reflection, negotiation, question, and continuous efforts while working on transcultural communication towards teacher PD. Although he attempted to various cross intercultural boundaries, questions and confusion still existed in this mechanism.

Discussion

In a nutshell, Alex as a newly qualified Chinese language teacher teaching in a UK school encountered diverse professional boundaries. He negotiated and took various actions in boundary crossing for teacher PD. This study aims to answer the two research questions.

1) What boundaries did the newly qualified Chinese language teacher encounter when teaching in a UK school?

In the six months of this longitudinal study, Alex confronted five major professional boundaries: managing student behaviour issues, the educational cultural disparity between China and the UK, mastering differentiated teaching skills, multi-task management skills, and a lack of teaching experience.

It is noted that teacher professional boundaries do not exist in a linear process, which differs from Leithwood's (2014) view. For example, Alex expressed concerns about his differentiated teaching skills in the Chinese language. Although he reflected on the gaps and adjusted his strategies, these boundaries were only partly accommodated by the middle of the study and still existed at the end. These findings suggest that boundaries can fluctuate over time for all teachers. The longitudinal design of the present study enabled an understanding of the dynamic nature of the difficulties that newly qualified intercultural teachers face in schools, which has rarely been reported in previous studies.

2) How did the newly qualified Chinese language teacher cross the boundaries?

The findings show that the participant took various actions to cross professional boundaries, including engaging in dialogue with colleagues, participating in workshops, learning from his mentor, observing experienced teachers' lessons, attending virtual PD workshops, reading books, and sharing ideas with friends. The study also found that the participant's transcultural communication occurred in daily contexts as a neutral action, sometimes even unconsciously. He adopted a transcultural approach, viewing different strategies 'through the eyes of other worlds' (Akkerman and Bakker 2011, 145), which Boland and Tenkasi (1995) termed perspective making. This study further argues that whether through perspective making or perspective taking, his reflective practice resulted in a broader range of insights and potentially fostered a new identity that could shape his future professional practice. Over the six-month period, the four mechanisms of boundary crossing – identification, coordination, reflection, and transformation – occurred. Although Alex felt less overwhelmed compared to the beginning of the study, he continued to struggle with issues such as student behaviour management and the high demands placed on teachers in the UK. In the process of boundary crossing for teacher PD, Alex negotiated boundaries and utilised different boundary objects over time, which, in turn, raise new doubts and questions regarding teacher professional boundary crossing.

This study, with its longitudinal design, emphasises the importance of changes through learning and the evolving approaches to teacher PD. Just as the participant's boundaries shifted over time, his boundary-crossing strategies also varied. For example, during the identification stage, Alex communicated with colleagues and participated in PD workshops to understand the local educational culture and master student management skills. In the reflection stage, however, he relied on different boundary objects, such as communicating with his mentor and observing experienced teachers' lessons. Consistent with Russ, Sherin, and Gamoran Sherin (2016), who proposed that change is one of the major facets of teacher learning, the findings of this study suggest that teachers' evolving insights and the changes they experience over time are fundamental to understanding the complexity of boundary crossing and approaches to professional learning.

Conclusion

Adopting the framework of boundary crossing for teacher PD, this study adopted a longitudinal approach, single case design, and examined a newly qualified Chinese language teacher's intercultural boundaries when teaching in a UK school and the process of boundary crossing and the associated factors.

Echoing previous studies (Guo, Li, and Pang 2019; Marx and Moss 2011), this study highlights that intercultural boundaries among language teachers present both tensions and learning opportunities in boundary crossing for teacher PD. These boundaries are rooted in the teachers' inherent philosophies and the distinct educational cultures within the local context. The present study also argues that the intricate nature of intercultural boundaries, and navigating these boundaries, can pose considerable challenges, at times rendering the subject difficult to overcome. Additionally, when adopting a micro-cultural perspective, teachers contend with daily boundaries, underscoring that these routine occurrences might be universal challenges confronted by individual teachers in various capacities.

Akkerman and Bakker (2011) have contended that the four mechanisms, identification, coordination, reflection, and transformation, do not occur in a linear process. The present study agrees that the boundary-crossing mechanism is a dynamic and fluctuating process that occurs across a temporal span. However, this study argues that some intercultural boundaries were crossed at the end of the investigation, which result in the negotiation of distinct identities. On the other hand, new boundaries present a challenge to reflection, leading to a new cycle of boundary-crossing mechanisms.

Responding to Yamagata-Lynch's (2003) assertion that 'tensions arise when the conditions of components cause the subject to face contradictory situations that hamper the attainment of the object' (103), this study argues that transformations are not stable or harmonious, no matter horizontal or vertical; rather, they are described by inner contradiction that caused by tensions of intercultural gaps. For example, while Alex felt less overwhelmed than he had at the beginning of the study, he still faced difficulties with managing student behaviour and meeting the heavy demands on teachers in the UK. In addition, the reflection mechanism holds potential for boundary crossing when different boundary objects are incorporated into practice. Attitudes towards intercultural boundaries determine future efforts in boundary crossing for teacher PD. For instance, Alex mentioned that he had adjusted his teaching strategies to better meet the diverse needs of his students. This reflection and positive attitude enhanced his ability to navigate challenges.

A previous study argued that teachers in 'transcultural communication are seen moving through and across cultural and linguistic boundaries and in the process transcending those boundaries' (Baker 2022). However, this study argues that to acquire transcultural communication skills, engagement is not simply moving across the borders; rather, teachers are required to examine how cultural references, practices, and identities are constructed and negotiated in interaction, along with transcultural engagement in boundary crossing for teacher PD, moving through and across borders and, in the process, altering the very nature of those boundaries.

Few studies have described newly qualified intercultural language teachers' awareness of boundaries, or discuss corresponding strategies taken by teachers for boundary crossing. The present study fills the research gap, suggesting that boundary crossing is an ability to develop oneself based on clear self-positioning. Boundary crossing is not a one-shot action; rather, a cyclical, iterative process that involves continuous negotiation and reflection. The dynamic nature of boundary crossing underscores the importance of creating opportunities for language teachers to engage in cross-cultural experiences, which can enable the development of transcultural competence. By engaging in boundary crossing, teachers can negotiate the boundaries between different cultural groups, leading to a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse perspectives.

The previous study suggested that dialogue among diverse partners is established only to the extent necessary to maintain workflow (Akkerman and Bakker 2011). However, this study emphasises that continuous questioning persists throughout this stage. Such doubt does not impede boundary crossing; rather, it enhances reflection and leads to further involvement in boundary crossing actions for teacher PD.

Implication

This study has important implications for intercultural teacher education, particularly in preparing newly qualified intercultural teachers for diverse and culturally complex classrooms. One key recommendation is for universities and teacher training bodies to develop tailored courses that address the specific needs of teachers. These courses should incorporate both theoretical and practical components that focus on intercultural competence, classroom management strategies in diverse settings, and the use of differentiated instruction to meet varied student needs. Such programmes should also offer simulations and role-playing exercises to help teachers practise handling real-world scenarios they might encounter in intercultural contexts.

Emphasising teachers' awareness and reflection is crucial for understanding and navigating boundary crossing. Teacher education programmes should incorporate reflective practice as a core component, encouraging teachers to continuously evaluate their experiences and strategies in managing cultural differences. This could involve structured reflective journals, peer discussions, and mentoring sessions where teachers can share their challenges and insights. Facilitating opportunities for teachers to engage in self-reflection and peer reflection can help them become more aware of the situated factors that influence their professional development and boundary-crossing efforts.

In addition, this study has significant implications for understanding and fostering transcultural communication in educational settings. A transcultural perspective, which emphasises viewing situations through the eyes of other worlds, offers a new dimension to research and practice by crossing and transcending borders between languages and cultures. Teacher education programmes should therefore encourage teachers to adopt a transcultural mindset, which involves not only understanding and respecting cultural differences but also integrating diverse cultural perspectives into their teaching practices. This can be achieved through activities such as intercultural dialogues, exchanges with teachers from different cultural backgrounds, and collaborative projects that require cross-cultural collaboration.

Due to the geographic constraints associated with COVID-19, I could not observe classroom teaching, teacher meetings at school, or PD events outside schools. In addition, my study was restricted to six months. Future studies may consider longer timelines, looking into language teachers' PD as a professional and life path to help people further understand the cultural encounters and interactions.

Notes

1. A postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) is an academic qualification. It is a one- or two-year higher education course in England which provides training in order to allow graduates to become teachers within schools. For more information, please see <https://getintoteaching.education.gov.uk/what-is-a-pgce>.
2. Newly qualified teacher (NQT) is a category of teacher in England referring to those who have gained Qualified Teacher Status but have not yet completed the statutory 12-month programme known as the 'induction for newly qualified teachers'. Please see the detailed information at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nqt-support-and-inductions-from-september-2020/information-for-schools-and-newly-qualified-teachers-nqts-preparing-for-nqt-induction-from-september-2020>.
3. Teachers' standards are issued by the Department for Education in England. It is a guidance for school leaders, school staff, and governing bodies. For more information, please see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teachers-standards>.
4. The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is an academic qualification in a particular subject, taken in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. GCSEs are the main qualification taken by 14- to 16-year-olds. For more information, please see <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/gcse-subject-content>.

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Notes on contributor

Frances Yiyang Zhang is currently a lecturer and convenor in Chinese Studies and the Chinese Language, taking a leading role in academic affairs at the Confucius Institute, Goldsmiths, University of London.

ORCID

Frances Yiyang Zhang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3611-2891>

Ethics statement

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from GSE/SSIS Ethics Committee. It was implemented in accordance with the ethical policies of the University of Exeter as well as the Ethical Guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (2018). This study was conducted in a natural context without any intervention. Through an informed consent process, the participant was informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, as well as what their participation in the research entailed and what rights they had as participants. The participant was also informed that all data would be kept confidential, and their identities would be anonymised. All the data were handled in full compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and only be accessible to the researcher (and the supervisor). Following the recommendation of the University Ethics Committee, all data were collected online for this study, which was conducted when many COVID-related restrictions for research were still in place.

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