

Researching Identity in Language Teachers – Current Challenges and Implications

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ABSTRACT

Language teacher identity has been at the forefront of pedagogical research in recent years; this has become particularly important due to the demographic changes seen throughout the world since 2015; since then, there have been significant changes in the cultural landscape of schools in general and language teaching in particular, which presents unique challenges for teachers in their process of identity construction. This study aims to explore the transformative nature of language teacher identity in two settings: teaching in online classrooms in one's home country, and teaching in online classroom abroad. The research will explore how cultural identity shapes an educators' relationship with students, how one's own cultural identity influences methodological and pedagogical choices, how these can improve literacy in the young adult classroom, as well touching upon the relevance of cultural identity is in a developing teacher. The findings revealed a general consensus on the need to gear pedagogical practices towards a student-centered approach; they further showed a general split in how teachers view the role that cultural identity plays in the classroom: while some felt that local cultures hindered their approach to teaching, others felt it helped build rapport and understanding between teachers and learners.

Key words: Teacher Identity, Second-Language Teaching, Online Education, Cultural Identity, Second-language Culture

INTRODUCTION

Language teacher identity, formation and pedagogy have had a long-standing link in education. As noted by Pennington and Richards (2016), within the last two decades, two things have become evident: the need to explore the transformation of such development on a larger scale, and understanding the ways in which language teachers develop as educators under institutional influences and cultural forces, both of which implicitly impact pedagogical approaches found to be involved in teacher identity. Van Lankveld et al. (2016) introduce five systematic psychological processes involved in the development of teacher identity:

1. Appreciation
2. Connectedness
3. Competence
4. Commitment
5. Career trajectory

These five psychological processes are constructed in a social context, and identified as a perpetual cyclic pattern that influences the development and evolution of a teacher. Earlier research by Akkerman and Meijer (2011) suggests that teachers fall into what is known as the 'collective regard', an approach that believes teachers become the role in which their environment influences intrinsically. However,

more recent research (Barkhuizen, 2017; De Costa and Norton, 2017; Lawrence and Nagashima, 2019; Macias et al. 2020) has taken a much different focus, rejecting Akkerman and Meijer's research on the 'collective regard' as well as Lankveld's five psychological processes. Instead of synthesizing teacher identity to a discursive narrative of following a systematic process, these latter researchers argue there may be more evidence to suggest the shifting and changing of constructs that affect teachers today. It isn't to say that the five psychological processes and the collective regard are invalid; perhaps it should be looked at in a less systematic way and more in an interchangeable, ever-changing manner. Social contexts that shape and threaten the identities of language teachers have become as relevant to education as learning itself. Thus, examining language teacher identity and identity construction in relation to pedagogical choices to improve literacy provides us with a more coherent reality of the effects of language teaching, globalization and the growing complexities experienced by modern educators.

When language teachers enter the field of teaching in a foreign country, intersecting cultural and personal dimensions are at play. For instance, their role as a teacher, their nationality, race, educational background, gender or their age; teacher development combined with the complexities and the interplay of these dimensions, added to existing social

differences is another factor that may have a strong impact in the way a teacher views him or herself in the classroom in relation to the perceptions of students; this is where Deng et al. (2018) connect the above statement: where there are cultural and social differences, they see it as a response to the dynamic sense of identity. Bukor (2015) and Zhu et al. (2018), like Deng, acknowledge a strong link between identity formation and emotions cultivated by their environment. The idea of language teacher identity and self-formation further explored by Miller et al. (2017) demonstrates that not only cultural dimensions should be considered, but that identity may additionally be formed through conflict, contradiction and change, a theory recognized by Darvin and Norton (2015) but also in alignment with Deng et al.'s (2018) dynamic sense of identity.

BACKGROUND - VYGOTSKIAN SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY AND THE LINK TO TEACHER IDENTITY

The influence of teachers' earlier-held beliefs, self-identity and cultural identity has long supported the development of teachers in their professional identities (Edwards and Edwards, 2017). However, shifts in identity are highlighted where teachers are in what is called "border crossing" (p. 99), a term coined by Janmohamed (1992) in the early days of teacher identity formation research. The phrase sought to illustrate an Australian teacher in Japan, mastering the Japanese language but also holding on to what remains of their Australian identity. If we apply Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory to teacher identity, it would be concomitant to suggest that teachers create a different identity to support their current context and adapt, while educators who teach outside of their home country explore the fundamental challenges of balancing cultural identity and establishing pedagogical credibility in their workplaces (Fichtner and Chapman, 2011). Mutekwe (2018) claims that cultural representation and the globalization of educators bring forth critical framing of teacher identity and, much like Vygotsky, the sociocultural perspective relies considerably on social interactions with students, colleagues and institutions. The teacher, who is perceived to be inexperienced outside of their home country may feel inadequate, but find that they are highly proficient and competent in their home country, which in turn influences methodological and pedagogical choices in the classroom. Golombek (2017) asserts that teachers, through the link of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, go through "constructs of dissonance and contraction" (p. 151) within their environment, which could be interpreted as a misalignment with their beliefs within their cultural lens. On the opposite side, Teng (2017) argues that in sociocultural contexts, pedagogical approaches and teacher identity are processes in which teachers build and construct from emotional models that "is self-evident, and these aspects form an integral part of the teachers' identity formation while playing a pivotal role in teaching (p. 117)." However, Golombek (2017) raises the point that knowledge of pedagogical approaches and instructional techniques do not align "goal-oriented teaching opportunities necessary

with instructional practices" (p. 152). We can conclude from the differing views that while emotions are an integral part of teacher identity, we cannot exclude perceived cultural identity as being a factor. While language teachers face dichotomies that are central to sociocultural theory (Brownell, 2017; Fielding, 2013), the construct of identity is positioned by historical forces as well as self-inquiry. Golombek and Klager (2015) explore how pedagogical approaches are altered when teachers are faced with cultural factors that resonate within institutional influences. Gao (2012) uses the term 'imagined identity' (p. 1) to describe the identity transformation that a teacher goes through by embedding and adapting behaviors by others around them. If we use the previous example of the Australian teacher in Japan, their personal identity as a teacher from a specific nationality could be a conflicting experience as they construct a *new* identity, one that is presented to students in a Japanese context, with pedagogical aspects and practices that reflect their new identity, including observations about who they are.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- a. Does cultural identity shape a teacher's relationship with their students? If so, how?
- b. Does a teacher's cultural identity shape their methodological and pedagogical choices in the classroom?

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 12 teachers participated in the study, all of whom were currently teachers employed across seven countries: the United Kingdom, the United States, Brazil, Chile, Japan, Taiwan, and Greece. The participants present a wide range of experience teaching outside of their home country, as well as relevant experience teaching in their homeland. The group draws comparisons from a variety of different cultures, each bringing a unique background to the research. The participants taught their classes in English; most participants were language teachers, while others were subject teachers who deliver instruction in English to second-language learners. Data was collected via a Google forms survey in a span of four weeks beginning January 2021.

METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

This qualitative pilot study was carried out to gather data from 12 teachers in seven different countries. The data gathered in tables 1 and 2 were in the form of an anonymous online questionnaire that had four multiple choice questions and three open-ended questions where the participants were asked to express in writing as many details as they chose to disclose. The multiple choice questions were to categorize demographic information. The method used by survey were measured using self-reports from the participants, where they state their perspectives on particular observations they've encountered as a teacher. The design method was a means to collect a narrative of individual teacher experiences that could be investigated through different cultural perspectives. The rationale for this research was to gain important cultural perspectives

Table 1. Cultural identity questionnaire

Participants	Do you feel that at a teacher's identity shapes their relationship with students? (yes/no)	Extraction from notes
1.	Yes	Depends on the cultural diversity of the classroom
2.	No	Teacher must adapt to students' environment
3.	Yes	Sharing cultural similarities brings teachers and students closer
4.	No	Teachers must learn to adapt to the cultural norms of that country
5.	Yes	Sharing the same attributes is important
6.	No	Helping students adapt to their environment is more important as a teacher
7.	Yes	Being culturally different connects the students and teachers
8.	Unsure	Because of the cultural differences, there can be misunderstandings in instructions
9.	Yes	It's important to use relevant issues from my culture to teach students in another
10.	Yes	It builds rapport as well as understanding and acceptance as a teacher

Table 2. Cultural identity and pedagogical choices questionnaire

Participants	Does your own cultural identity shape your methodological and pedagogical choices in the classroom? (yes/no)	Extraction from notes
1.	No	Methodological and pedagogical choices should reflect the students' environment rather than one's own
2.	Yes	It is important to make aware to the student the importance of thinking about topics that may be considered culturally inappropriate in their own home country
3.	No	Teachers should be sensitive to the students' cultural backgrounds and teach lessons around that
4.	Yes	It's important to make pedagogical choices that benefit the students even if it differs from their cultural way of learning
5.	Yes	It's important to make pedagogical choices that benefit the students even if it differs from their cultural way of learning
6.	No	The school would not appreciate outside influence on the students
7.	Yes	Deliberate planning of lessons that touch upon issues in cultural identity is important
8.	Yes	I use references from my background, but it doesn't always translate to a successful lesson because the students cannot relate
9.	No	Students do not understand nor need to be influenced in your cultural identity
10.	No	Adapting to your students' environment is more important pedagogically

of teachers working abroad and at home using a language different than their students'. As mentioned in the introduction, available research has shown that the role of a teacher's cultural background may have an impact on pedagogical choices in the classroom (Klager, 2015; Teng, 2017; Gao, 2012). While existing social differences are complex, the dynamic between teacher identity and classroom practices is especially important to note if environmental factors should be considered, similarly to the example provided in Teng's (2017) study which showed institutional influences and cultural factors at play.

The questionnaires sought to understand cultural identity in the classroom through personal background (e.g. how the

participant feels about perceived positions of identity in a classroom, cultural awareness and pedagogical choices in the classroom) and the targeted open-ended questions aimed at addressing the research questions. Although the data yielded by the study did not answer to the research question in a definitive manner, it still provided with rich data that deserves to be dissected in light of the aforementioned theories. The complete questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

Eliciting meaningful responses was a key factor in this preliminary study. As cultural identity does not present itself in a homogenous, organized path, participants were encouraged to write about their experiences and their

interpretation of what they define as their cultural identity. Their accounts revealed that there is distinctive correlation between cultural identity, pedagogical choices and teacher identity. If we look back at Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, we can see that social circumstances are vital to identity (Teng, 2017; Golombek, 2016) and the environment is fundamental in forming cognitive awareness. If we turn the sociocultural theory toward teacher identity, pedagogical and methodological approaches in the classroom highly influenced Janmonhamed’s (1992) “border crossing” theory mentioned earlier. The participants have also placed an enormous value on the characteristics of a teacher. A significant realization of sociocultural theory comes in the way of interconnectedness in the relationship between pedagogical knowledge, theoretical knowledge and recognition of teacher characteristics. As mentioned above, Fichtner and Chapman (2011) express the importance of balancing perceived cultural identity and balancing pedagogical knowledge, though “reorganization creates a new lens through which they interpret their understandings of themselves” (John and Golombek, 2016, p. 6). Furthermore, the findings as shown in Table 2 highlight some of the struggles that language teachers face while teaching abroad, such as pedagogical challenges that may be problematic due to language limitations, acknowledging tensions ascribed from perceived notions of clashing cultural affiliation, and assertiveness in the role as a teacher in a foreign country.

The open-ended questionnaires in both Table 1 and Table 2 allowed for the participants to reflect on what they conceive of as cultural identity and the roles they have as teachers in relation to how they carry out their pedagogical practice. Looking back at Gao’s earlier ‘imagined identity’ is especially important here, as the dimension of identities is not only prevalent in the participants who participated in the questionnaire but it also demonstrates sociocultural theory in a practical outlook; a person’s self-understanding is related to social factors that are linked to agency (Kanno, 2020) and imagined identities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Background

The participants’ ages ranged from under 30 (16.7%), 30-30 (66.7%), 40-49 (8.3%) and 50+ (8.3%) (Figure 1).

As Figure 2 shows, 75% of the participants identify as women and 25% identify as men.

According to Figure 3, 25% has 0-3 years of teaching experience, 16.7% has 4-7 years of teaching experience, 50% has 8-15 years of teaching experience and 8.3% has 16+ years of teaching experience.

As the results in Figure 4 indicate, 58.3% of the participants work in a foreign country, 25% work in their home country, 8.3% work in their home country but teach online to foreign students, and 8.3% teach online to students within the same country. The focus here was not to draw comparisons with teachers who teach online specifically, but to achieve an inherent variety within a sample group.

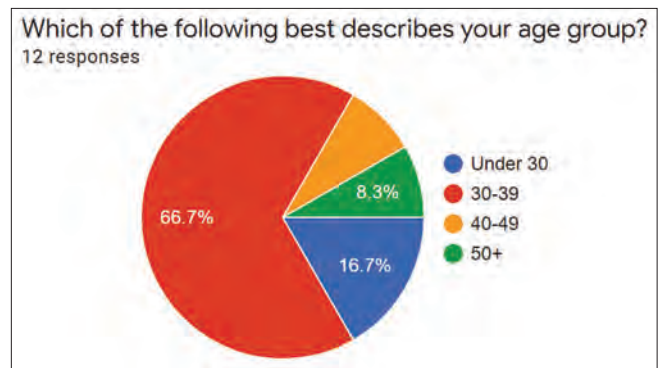


Figure 1. Profile of candidates by age group

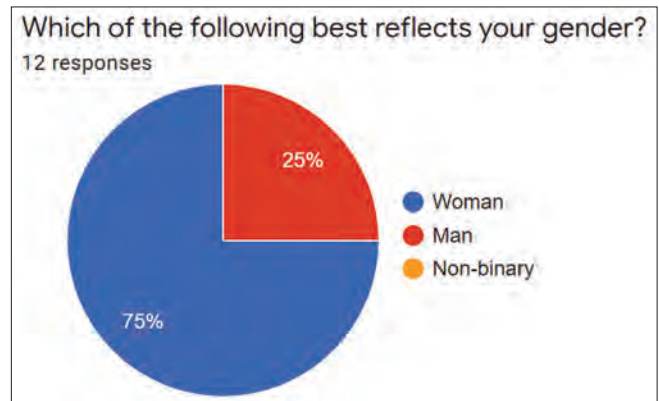


Figure 2. Profile of candidates by gender

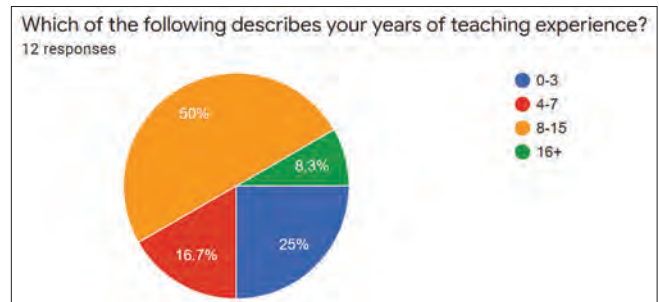


Figure 3. Profile of candidates by years of teaching experience

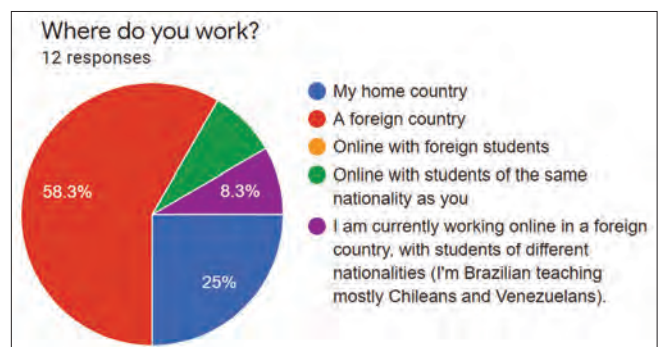


Figure 4. Profile of candidates by where they work

Analysis of Data

Open-ended question 1: Do you feel that at a teacher’s identity shapes their relationship with students?

In this question, six out of ten participants have addressed that cultural identity is a factor that shapes their relationship with students. Three participants did not answer this question, and three participants disagreed. While six teachers agreed that cultural identity is a factor, Vygotsky's notion that teachers construct a different identity to support their current context is therefore challenged. The participants agreed to some degree that cultural identity is a factor, but is not conclusive because the participants also expressed notions that Van Lankveld et al. (2016) introduced earlier on, namely connectedness, which attributes to having a strengthening effect to students via their cultural identity.

The participants were asked to give an open-ended answer; below is a chart constructed to extract the general attitudes and notions. The full scope of the answers will be detailed in the Appendix B.

The general 'yes' answers relate to sharing attributes to similarities based on cultural aspects to build rapport and understanding between the teachers and the students. The general 'no' answers share a similar interpretation of the teacher adapting to the students' environment rather than put the teacher's identity as of importance. With this small sampling of participants, it is rather incomplete as to give a definitive answer on the matter as it is rarely systematic in a classroom setting.

Open-ended question 2: How does your own cultural identity shape your methodological and pedagogical choices in the classroom?

In the next open-ended question, most of the participants use some aspect of their culture to teach and influence their students, bringing us back to Van Lankveld et al.'s (2016) psychological processes rejected by the modern researchers (Barkhuizen, 2017; De Costa and Norton, 2017; Lawrence and Nagashima, 2019). Some participants challenged their students' cultural perceptions as an exercise to inspect their own learning. However, it is still recognized by the teachers that local cultures where they are hinder their approach to teaching. The participants were asked to give an open-ended answer; below is a chart constructed to extract the general attitudes and notions. The full scope of the answers will be detailed in Appendix B.

Within these participants, it was a 50/50 split amongst how the teachers felt in relation to how their cultural identity shapes their methodological and pedagogical choices in the classroom. 50% responded that it was important to make choices that they feel would benefit the students, even if it is not a way that is practiced in their learning environment. The teacher's cultural identity in this case would perhaps help the students to think critically of their own learning, their own identity and aspects of relevant topics that could impact them in their own country. 50% of the participants answered no, citing that methodological and pedagogical choices should be reflected in the students' environment, and teachers should adapt rather than disrupt. Of course, in this small sample, it is inconclusive to lean toward one answer as all classrooms have unique circumstances and vary depending on the school, the ethos of the school and the teachers. It can be safe to assume that most participants, even in a

definitive yes or no answer, they share similarities in how learning should be geared: student-centered approach to learning, regardless of personal cultural influences.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Research in language teacher identity that strive to find a connection between pedagogical and methodological choices poses challenges in perspective and accuracy due to contextual factors of the nature of each individual participant. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) state that even the latest literature on teacher identity is only a concept. Exploration of identity connected with education has long been researched since the 1930s (Taylor, 2017), but has often delineated emotion from factors that "shape the expression of identity" (p. 176), and such limitations can alter the authenticity of the research based on the environment the participant is in, state of mind and responsiveness. Arguably, the sociocultural context of this research is to examine the different angles of assumptions that language teachers share in a classroom outside of their familiar culture.

Future studies in teacher identity and pedagogical approaches could pose questions that could elicit more meaningful evidence, however, in order to identify and rule out too much individual context; it may also be important to create a wider study using activities where researchers have more control over to hone in on collective data rather than individual information. For instance, perhaps future studies could place more emphasis on their place of employment, student literacy rates in relation to environmental factors; researchers (Holland & Gomez, 2013; Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Van Lankveld et al., 2016) have shown that a like-minded community sustains certain elements of uniformity in its data whereas the data collected here provided a flexible approach to participants but failed to obtain data due that could have been more widely used to the sample size of the participant pool as well as the formulation of the research questions. I believe that had I had a bigger sample size and questions that were better targeted to language teacher in particular, the data gathered could have produced more detailed, thorough findings.

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APPENDIX A – QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Which of the follow best describes your age group?
 - a. Under 30
 - b. 30-39
 - c. 40-49
 - d. 50+
2. Which of the following best reflects your gender?
 - a. Woman
 - b. Man
 - c. Non-binary
3. Which country do you consider your home? (short answer text)
4. Where do you work?
 - a. My home country
 - b. A foreign country
 - c. Online with foreign students
 - d. Online with students of the same nationality as you
5. Which of the following describes your years of teaching experience?
 - a. 0-3
 - b. 4-7
 - c. 8-15
 - d. 16+
6. Open-ended question 1: Do you feel your cultural identity shapes your relationship with your students? How?
7. Open-ended question 2: How does your own cultural identity shape your methodological and pedagogical choices in the classroom?

APPENDIX B – RESULTS FROM THE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Open-ended question 1: Do you feel that at a teacher's identity shapes their relationship with students?

Participant 1: Yes, it does. I think only if the racial/cultural makeup of the classroom is more diverse. I think having similar backgrounds or similar struggles and being able to empathize with them more impacts and shape that relationship.

Participant 2: I try to teach lessons that are culturally neutral because I think it's more accessible that way. Additionally, I do not think my students are interested in my culture so I adapt to theirs.

Participant 3: Yes, I definitely think my cultural identity shapes the relationship I have with my students. The understanding I have of the factors that have shaped my identity has allowed me to explore these aspects with them and by doing so we have become closer. The dialogue that takes place in the classroom when discussing what shapes our cultural identities has been spontaneous and incredibly rich.

Participant 4: I have learned to adapt to the country's cultural rules and ideologies. My cultural identity effects on my professional decisions significantly.

Participant 5: To some extent, yes. My students and I are from the same country and we share the same language and value. This helps us to understand each other better than if we didn't share these attributes.

Participant 6: As a relatively new teacher, I have noticed that I feel more comfortable teaching international students

than home students. I believe I also try harder to help them adapt to a completely new environment, something that I have also experienced in the past.

Participant 7: Absolutely. Being from another country and teaching a foreign language makes me an object of curiosity for most of my students. They normally ask me many questions that they wouldn't ask a teacher with their same nationality, for example. And quite often these questions lead to interesting conversations that widen my cultural perceptions as well as my students'.

Participant 8: I am uncertain about this. I have not had a large number of students from other countries or cultures in my career, but I have always had a good rapport with most of my students. A couple of times, though, there have been misunderstandings because I was not familiar with these students' customs or 'codes'. However, I have never experienced an unpleasant situation or something similar. I believe that what shapes relationship with students is empathy and sympathy which are values that all human beings should have.

Participant 9: I'm an American woman in a foreign country; I'm also sensitive to issues about sexism and discrimination. When I'm able to, I try to use my own knowledge and experiences to encourage my students, especially those that may face racism for being a mixed race, to have pride and speak up for themselves. I don't have many opportunities to discuss such things though, but I wish I could.

Participant 10: I approach these questions two ways. My cultural identity as I experience it affects the way I treat my learners. In one way it builds a unique rapport. If we see ourselves in the other, it creates a safe space. In particular, the aspect of my cultural identity that brings out the welcoming and nurturing aspects of my character enhance our relationship. They sense that I want them to feel comfortable and that I feel a responsibility to take care of their needs. The other way I approach this question is to consider how my learners perceive me culturally. Ironically, their misperceptions of my cultural identity sometimes enhance our relationship. I teach English to speakers of other languages and as a person of color who appears Muslim, many of my students don't automatically accept that I am a native speaker or a person whose culture is connected to the English language. They then see me as someone who has adopted and mastered the language, thus making me a role model.

Open-ended question 2: How does your own cultural identity shape your methodological and pedagogical choices in the classroom?

Participant 1: Although my home country differs from the country I live and work in at the moment, I never had the chance to teach in my home country. So, my impression is that my teaching methods reflect the culture of the foreign country.

Participant 2: I believe it's important for young people to think about topics that, culturally, may be considered taboo or dark. Living in the country I do, most students are unaware of political things or activism of any sort. When I meet students who are passionate about such topics, I engaged them in conversations in front of their classmates to encourage

learning. Additionally, this year I was able to teach a writing class to senior high school students and, because of their mature age, I required a “Current Events” topic. My students choose topics ranging from cyberbullying, racism in Japan, human trafficking, suicide, the 6th mass extinction, and even the US elections. I was very proud of them for learning to discuss these challenging topics in an L2.

Participant 3: I try to be sensitive to my students’ cultures. I make a point of getting learners to personalize the concepts we cover and my choice of resources if definitely affected by my cultural sensitivity. I may group learners for activities in a way that recognizes my cultural identity and theirs.

Participant 4: Sometimes my own cultural identity helps me to choose methodologies that are beneficial to my students. For instance, I know that many Chinese learners are used to passive learning, and they prefer to listen to teachers rather than express themselves in class. To encourage them to talk more, I usually design some communicative tasks in my class.

Participant 5: I don’t think it does, but I guess it’s different from Chinese methodologies. I try to teach students how to use their newly learned language in a meaningful environment rather than memorize and recalling vocabulary and sentences.

Participant 6: I tend to use more teacher-centered activities because I know the school doesn’t want my culture to influence them.

Participant 7: Every time I choose an activity for my students, I take into account some aspects my cultural identity (e.g., religious beliefs, values, sexual orientation, gender,

etc). For example, as a non-religious woman that is aware of the gender spectrum, I deliberately plan activities that encourage students to reflect upon these aspects of their own identities and examine them critically. I like to invite them to interrogate their own cultural identities. Also, I intentionally include the work of female Latin American, Afro Latin Americans and LGBTQI+ authors. I use materials such as newspaper articles that portray ways of being and behaving that challenge the status quo and make them question social norms/standards. But, as I mentioned in my answer to question, this decision-making process is the result of the constant examination of my cultural identity and its different aspects/elements, it is not something that happens randomly. It’s been a long journey to transform myself as an educator and to be culturally responsive.

Participant 8: This is something that I must pay attention to. Sometimes, when planning my classes, I use references from my own cultural background. However, sometimes they can’t relate to some elements of my cultural identity. Being a foreigner, I must adapt.

Participant 9: I am more aware of using clear, neutral pronunciation and not using colloquial language, as Scottish people have a reputation for being hard to understand because of the accent and cultural references in speech.

Participant 10: I always try to personalize the contents that are covered in class. For instance, I search topics connected with our national reality, current affairs, indigenous peoples, problems that may affect Chile in particular etc. However, at times there are foreign students in my class as well, so I do my best to incorporate elements that they can relate to as well.