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The Intersection of Professional and Cultural Identity: A Mixed-Methods Study of Expatriate Language Teachers' Adaptation Processes in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study investigated the adaptation processes of expatriate language teachers in Vietnam, where traditional Confucian educational values intersect with Western pedagogical reforms, creating distinctive challenges for professional identity development. The research employed an explanatory sequential design, combining survey data from 208 expatriate teachers with 39 in-depth interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. The findings revealed that professional identity navigation is significantly influenced by teaching experience and institutional context, with experienced teachers demonstrating higher levels of integration across professional domains. Cultural adaptation emerged as a critical factor in shaping teaching practices, moderated by institutional type and professional qualifications. The study identified a strong correlation between cultural empathy and professional identity development ($r = .56, p < .01$), suggesting that successful adaptation requires the development of hybrid professional identities. The results extend existing theoretical frameworks by demonstrating that professional-cultural identity integration follows a developmental trajectory rather than occurring through discrete adaptation events. These findings have significant implications for teacher preparation programs and institutional support systems in international education contexts, suggesting the need for targeted cultural components in professional development and differentiated support based on institutional context.

Keywords: professional identity; cultural adaptation; expatriate teachers; Vietnam

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Introduction

Vietnam's rapid integration into the global economy has transformed its educational landscape, particularly in the realm of English language education. The implementation of the Doi Moi economic reform policy in 1986 has positioned English as an essential tool for the country's international engagement, evidenced by its mandatory status with two hours of weekly instruction mandated across all K-12 educational levels. The government's recent Decision No. 1600/QĐ-TTg (2024) articulates ambitious targets for international integration in education, including universal foreign language proficiency standards and increased cross-border faculty mobility, underscoring the complex challenges facing the nation's evolving educational infrastructure. Recent studies indicate high participation rates in English language learning across educational levels, with particularly high engagement in secondary education, where enrollment rates in English medium instruction programs exceed 75% (Nguyen & Vu, 2024).

The Vietnamese government has demonstrated strong institutional commitment to advancing English language education through initiatives such as the National Foreign Language Project 2020, which aimed to modernize foreign language teaching within the national education system (Truong, 2024). This project established the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages as the national standard, reflecting the government's recognition of English proficiency as essential for socio-economic development (Nghia & Tran, 2020). However, despite these extensive reform efforts, concerns persist regarding the effectiveness of English language education, particularly in speaking and writing skills (Le & Nguyen, 2017). The growing demand for qualified English instruction, combined with local teacher capacity constraints, has driven substantial recruitment of expatriate language teachers, positioning Vietnam as one of the top five countries globally for new international school openings, with a 5% increase over two years (ISC Research, 2024).

Within this context, expatriate language teachers, categorized as self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), encounter complex cultural and professional adaptation challenges that significantly impact their teaching effectiveness and professional identity formation. Research indicates that expatriate teachers often struggle with unfamiliarity with local educational traditions and cultural norms (Bright, 2022). This cultural disconnect appears in various ways, from pedagogical approaches to professional relationships with local colleagues, creating what Bhabha (1994) describes as a "Third Space" where cultural and professional identities are continuously reconstructed. The adaptation process is further complicated by institutional and administrative factors, including unclear role expectations, bureaucratic procedures, and varying interpretations of professional standards (Wright, 2024). Studies have shown that expatriate teachers frequently experience *employment shock* during their initial period of adaptation, accompanied by feelings of confusion and professional dissatisfaction (Aycan, 1997).

These adaptation challenges are particularly acute in Vietnam's educational context, which presents distinctive characteristics that distinguish it from other international teaching destinations. The system combines deeply embedded Confucian hierarchical traditions emphasizing collective harmony, teacher-centered instruction, and indirect communication patterns with rapid Western-influenced pedagogical reforms promoting communicative approaches, student-centered learning, and explicit feedback mechanisms (Le & Nguyen, 2017). For example, while government policies mandate communicative language teaching approaches, classroom realities often maintain traditional teacher-authority structures where student questioning of instructional methods may be perceived as disrespectful (Tran et al., 2021). Similarly, Western-trained expatriate teachers' emphasis on individual student achievement and public error correction can conflict with local values prioritizing group harmony and face-saving behaviors (Poole, 2020). This creates ongoing tensions where expatriate teachers must navigate between collectivist educational expectations rooted in cultural values of respect for authority and individualist teaching methodologies emphasized in contemporary language education training programs.

While existing research has extensively documented the challenges faced by expatriate teachers in various contexts, there remains a significant gap in understanding how professional and cultural identities intersect specifically within the Vietnamese educational context. Previous studies have primarily focused on either cultural adaptation or professional identity development in isolation, rather than exploring their dynamic interplay. This limitation is particularly problematic in Vietnam's case, as the simultaneous presence of traditional Confucian educational values, socialist institutional structures, and rapid market-oriented reforms creates a unique tripartite tension that existing acculturation frameworks—typically developed in Western or more culturally homogeneous contexts—may inadequately address.

The complexity of Vietnam's educational environment suggests that conventional acculturation theories, which assume relatively stable host cultures, may be insufficient for understanding identity negotiation processes in contexts undergoing rapid cultural transition themselves. This study draws upon Berry's (1997) acculturation theory and contemporary perspectives on professional identity development to create a theoretical framework that accounts for these contextual specificities. Acculturation theory suggests that individuals undergo complex psychological and cultural changes when immersed in new cultural environments, manifesting through four distinct strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. This process intersects with professional identity development, which Pennington and Richards (2016) argue is constantly negotiated and reconstructed through interactions with students, colleagues, and the broader educational community.

Given these theoretical foundations and the identified research gap, this study aims to address three primary research questions:

RQ1: How do expatriate language teachers navigate their professional identity in the Vietnamese educational context?

RQ2: What role does cultural adaptation play in shaping their teaching practices?

RQ3: How do professional and cultural identities intersect during the adaptation process?

Literature Review

Professional identity of language teachers

The construct of professional identity in language teaching has evolved significantly from its initial conceptualization as mere self-perception to a complex, dynamic process shaped by multiple contextual factors and power relations (Pennington & Richards, 2016; Teng, 2024). However, research on expatriate language teachers has predominantly treated professional and cultural identities as discrete domains, limiting theoretical understanding of their intersection in cross-cultural contexts (Bailey & Cooker, 2019; Bunnell, 2017). Unlike teachers of other subjects, language teachers must navigate intricate intersections between linguistic competence, cultural positioning, and pedagogical expertise, particularly in cross-cultural contexts (Achieng, 2023; Gong et al., 2021). This complexity is further intensified by ongoing debates surrounding native versus non-native speaker status and its impact on professional legitimacy, though recent scholarship challenges this binary distinction (Widodo et al., 2020).

Professional identity formation in language teaching operates simultaneously at micro, meso, and macro levels, encompassing individual classroom practices, institutional policies, and broader

societal ideologies (De Costa & Norton, 2017). This multilayered nature becomes particularly evident in cross-cultural settings, where teachers must negotiate between their established professional beliefs and often divergent educational values. Institutional contexts play a crucial role in this process, as demonstrated by Tsui's (2007) longitudinal research, which revealed how institutional expectations and power relations significantly influence teachers' identity trajectories. Similarly, Ghiasvand et al. (2023) documented the complex negotiations teachers undergo when their professional identities conflict with dominant institutional discourses.

The development of professional identity in cross-cultural contexts requires more than technical competence or pedagogical expertise. Recent studies have illuminated the complex processes through which teachers actively position themselves within different cultural and educational paradigms (Mansouri, 2021). This positioning involves continuous negotiation between personal histories, institutional contexts, and broader sociocultural forces, often leading to either identity conflict and professional dissonance or enriched hybrid professional identities that integrate multiple cultural perspectives. The role of agency in this process has gained increasing attention, with research by Kılıç and Cinkara (2020) highlighting how teachers actively construct their professional identities through critical incidents and reflective practice.

Cultural adaptation and acculturation

The theoretical understanding of cultural adaptation and acculturation has evolved from simplistic, unidirectional models to more nuanced frameworks that acknowledge their multidimensional and dynamic nature. Berry's (2005) foundational framework identifies four distinct acculturation strategies - integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization - though recent research suggests these categories may be overly rigid for capturing the fluid nature of adaptation processes in educational contexts. The theory of cultural learning, as conceptualized by Tomasello et al. (1993) and refined by Tomasello (2016), emphasizes that adaptation occurs through deliberate engagement with cultural practices rather than mere exposure, highlighting the crucial role of agency in cultural acquisition.

In Asian educational contexts, adaptation presents unique challenges that extend beyond general acculturation theories. Hall's (1981) high-context communication framework, while valuable, may oversimplify the ways cultural communication patterns affect classroom dynamics. This complexity is particularly evident in environments where Western-trained educators encounter fundamentally different conceptualizations of teaching and learning (Cross et al., 2011; Vickers & Epstein, 2024). The Vietnamese educational context, with its distinctive blend of traditional Asian values and increasing Western influences, presents specific challenges that existing theoretical frameworks may not adequately address.

Recent research has highlighted the importance of viewing cultural adaptation as a bilateral process that transforms both the expatriate educator and the host institution (Fenech et al., 2020). This perspective challenges traditional models that place the adaptation burden solely on the expatriate. The Cultural Distance Paradox suggests that greater cultural differences may enhance awareness and preparation for cultural transitions, though this perspective has been criticized for overlooking individual factors such as cultural intelligence (Ang et al., 2007; Silbiger et al., 2020). The development of cultural competence emerges as a critical factor in successful adaptation, yet existing literature often treats it as a static endpoint rather than an ongoing process that directly impacts pedagogical success.

Vietnamese educational context

The Vietnamese educational landscape represents a complex intersection of traditional cultural values and contemporary reform efforts, creating distinct challenges for both local and expatriate educators. While the system has undergone significant modernization, deeply embedded Confucian heritage continues to influence pedagogical approaches and professional relationships within educational institutions (Tran et al., 2021). This cultural foundation manifests in teaching practices that emphasize hierarchical structures, collective harmony, and moral development alongside academic achievement. However, as Bengtsson (2016) argues, viewing Vietnamese education solely through a Confucian lens oversimplifies a sophisticated landscape shaped by multiple competing discourses: nationalist aims, socialist principles, and globalist-economist demands.

In English language teaching specifically, the implementation gap between policy rhetoric and classroom realities presents significant challenges. Despite reform initiatives promoting communicative approaches through the National Foreign Language Project, empirical evidence suggests that classroom practices remain predominantly teacher-centered, with a strong emphasis on grammatical accuracy and rote learning (Dao & Newton, 2021). This disconnect cannot be attributed solely to cultural resistance; rather, it reflects deeper structural and institutional constraints. The emphasis on maintaining face and group harmony often leads to professional environments where consensus takes precedence over individual innovation (Hallinger et al., 2021).

The positioning of foreign English teachers within this context reflects broader tensions in the field. While there exists an institutional preference for native English-speaking teachers, this ideological stance often confronts practical limitations related to qualification requirements and compensation structures (Selvi et al., 2024). Foreign teachers must navigate varying institutional expectations, cultural norms, and professional standards while reconciling their pedagogical approaches with local educational values. These challenges are particularly pronounced in environments where Western-trained educators encounter fundamentally different conceptualizations of teaching and learning (Ha et al., 2021).

Identity intersection in cross-cultural teaching

Previous investigations of expatriate teacher identity intersection have relied heavily on foundational frameworks that may inadequately capture the complexity of contemporary cross-cultural teaching contexts. Hall's (1981) high-context communication theory, while influential in cross-cultural studies, has been applied to teacher identity research without sufficient consideration of how educational contexts differ from general cultural interaction patterns (Cross et al., 2011). Similarly, early studies of expatriate educators often concluded that successful adaptation required either cultural assimilation or professional accommodation, overlooking the possibility of identity synthesis (Lai et al., 2016). These binary conceptualizations have limited theoretical development by treating cultural and professional dimensions as competing rather than potentially complementary forces.

The intersection of professional and cultural identities in cross-cultural teaching contexts represents a complex phenomenon that demands rigorous theoretical examination. While traditional frameworks have treated these identities as separate domains, emerging scholarship demonstrates their intricate interdependence, particularly in language teaching contexts (Ellis, 2016; Lee & Canagarajah, 2019). The process of identity negotiation is characterized by ongoing dialogue between established professional practices and new cultural imperatives (Bailey & Cooker, 2019), challenging conventional views of teacher identity as a stable construct (Poole, 2020; Wang, 2020).

Empirical evidence reveals significant variation in how teachers navigate this identity intersection. While some educators successfully integrate their professional and cultural identities to enhance teaching effectiveness (Lai et al., 2016), others experience "discursive dissonance" that can undermine their pedagogical practice (Kostogriz & Bonar, 2019). Zhu and Li's (2023) work demonstrated that transnational English teachers engage in sophisticated processes of identity negotiation, actively mediating between internalized professional practices and local pedagogical expectations. This negotiation extends beyond simple adaptation to encompass the creation of hybrid professional identities that transcend traditional cultural boundaries.

Critical analysis of current research reveals significant theoretical gaps in understanding identity intersection in cross-cultural teaching contexts. While existing studies have illuminated various aspects of this phenomenon, they have often failed to adequately theorize the dynamic interplay between professional and cultural identities or identify specific strategies that facilitate positive identity negotiation (Bunnell, 2017). Additionally, the predominance of research conducted predominantly in Western institutional contexts and reliance on narrative methodologies calls for more diverse theoretical frameworks and robust empirical approaches.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017) to examine expatriate language teachers' professional identity development and adaptation processes in Vietnam. The first phase collected quantitative data through a survey incorporating validated instruments measuring professional identity and sociocultural adaptation. The subsequent qualitative phase used semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected participants to explore their experiences in greater depth, following Patton's (2023) maximum variation sampling approach. This sequential design allowed the qualitative data to explain and elaborate on the quantitative findings (Denzin, 2017), providing a comprehensive understanding of how teachers navigate their professional identity and manage cultural adaptation challenges in the Vietnamese educational context.

Participants

For the quantitative phase, 208 teachers (126 females, 82 males) completed the online survey. Participants represented diverse nationalities, with teachers from the United States (12.5%), United Kingdom (10.1%), Australia (8.4%), Canada (7.5%), Philippines (22.3%), South Africa (15.4%), and other countries including India, Ireland, and New Zealand (23.8%). Their teaching experience in Vietnam ranged from 6 months to 8 years ($M = 3.2$ years, $SD = 1.8$), and their age ranged from 25 to 58 years ($M = 34.6$, $SD = 7.8$). Most participants (86.5%) held teaching qualifications, including TESOL/TEFL certificates (42.3%), bachelor's degrees in education (28.8%), and master's degrees in relevant fields (15.4%).

For the qualitative phase, 39 teachers were purposefully selected from the survey respondents using maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2023) to ensure representation across teaching contexts, experience levels, and national backgrounds. Selection criteria included years of teaching experience in Vietnam, type of educational institution, and reported levels of professional identity and cultural adaptation from the quantitative phase. This sample comprised 22 females and 17 males, with teaching experience in Vietnam ranging from 1 to 7 years. Semi-structured interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved (Guest et al., 2020), with no new themes emerging after 34 interviews.

All aspects of this research adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2017), including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and providing participants the right to withdraw at any time. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. The sample size for both phases exceeded the minimum requirements for statistical analysis and qualitative inquiry (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Clark, 2017).

Instruments

For the quantitative phase, two validated scales were adapted and underwent confirmatory factor analysis to verify their factor structure for the Vietnamese expatriate teacher context. The first was the 19-item Professional Identity Scale (PIS), adapted from Cheung's (2008) Teacher Self-Identity Scale, which measures teachers' professional identity across three domains: student needs (7 items), school issues (6 items), and personal growth and development (6 items). The adapted scale demonstrated good model fit ($CFI = .95$, $TLI = .94$, $RMSEA = .06$) and strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$). Respondents rate their commitment to professional practices on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very weakly, 5 = very strongly). Sample items include "Enhance students' learning outcomes" (student needs domain), "Commit to school goals in performing daily tasks" (school issues domain), and "Have passion for continuous learning and excellence" (personal growth domain).

The second quantitative instrument was Ward and Kennedy's (1999) Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS), adapted to measure expatriate teachers' behavioral adaptation. For this study, 29 items most relevant to educational contexts were selected from the original scale, measuring two key dimensions: Cultural Empathy and Relatedness (understanding local perspectives, values and intercultural communication) and Impersonal Endeavors and Perils (managing bureaucracy and challenging situations). The adapted scale showed acceptable model fit ($CFI = .93$, $TLI = .92$, $RMSEA = .07$) and strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$). Items are rated on a 5-point scale (1 = no difficulty to 5 = extreme difficulty). Sample items include "Understanding the local value system" and "Dealing with people in authority."

For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were developed based on the quantitative findings to explore teachers' experiences in greater depth. The interview protocol comprised open-ended questions across four key areas: professional identity development, cultural adaptation challenges, coping strategies, and perceived impact on teaching practices. The protocol was pilot tested with three expatriate teachers and refined based on their feedback to ensure clarity and relevance. Complete adapted instruments and interview protocols are provided in Appendices A and B. The interviews were designed to provide rich, contextual data to complement and expand upon the quantitative findings.

Data collection procedure

Data collection followed a sequential two-phase process from August to October 2024. The quantitative phase (August-September) involved distributing an online survey via Qualtrics to expatriate teachers through institutional networks and professional teaching groups in Vietnam, following Dillman et al.'s (2014) tailored design method for online surveys. The qualitative phase (September-October) comprised semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom with purposefully selected participants from the survey respondents. Each 45-60 minute interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Member checking was conducted with 22 of the 39 interview participants who verified transcript accuracy and preliminary theme interpretations within two weeks of their interviews. An audit trail documenting all analytical decisions and coding processes was maintained

throughout the data collection and analysis phases to ensure data trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data analysis

The analysis followed a sequential mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 28.0, beginning with preliminary analyses to assess missing data, outliers, and assumptions of normality. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using AMOS 28.0 to verify the factor structure of both adapted instruments. The Professional Identity Scale demonstrated good model fit (CFI = .95, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .06), as did the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (CFI = .93, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .07). Internal consistency was established through Cronbach's alpha coefficients, ranging from .82 to .89 across all subscales.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step framework. Interview transcripts were coded independently by two researchers using NVivo 14, with an initial intercoder reliability of 87%. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. The analysis proceeded from initial coding through pattern identification to theme development, with themes refined through constant comparison and peer debriefing to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness. In accordance with explanatory sequential design principles, qualitative themes were developed to explain and elaborate on quantitative findings, with interview data providing contextual depth and mechanistic insights into statistical relationships (Denzin, 2017). Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred through joint displays and narrative weaving (Creswell & Clark, 2017), allowing for complementary insights into expatriate teachers' experiences.

Results

Professional identity navigation in Vietnamese educational context

Analysis of the Professional Identity Scale demonstrated varying levels of commitment across the three domains among the 208 expatriate teachers surveyed (see Table 1). The personal growth domain exhibited the highest mean scores (M = 4.2, SD = 0.68, 95% CI [4.11, 4.29]), with particularly strong responses for "demonstrate passion for continuous learning" (M = 4.4, SD = 0.62, 95% CI [4.32, 4.48]). This quantitative finding was strongly supported by interview data, as exemplified by Sarah, who scored in the upper quartile for personal growth, who explained:

"Coming to Vietnam has completely transformed how I view professional development. Here, I'm not just teaching; I'm constantly learning - about the culture, about different teaching approaches, about myself as an educator."

Table 1
Professional Identity Scale Scores by Domain and Experience Level

Domain	All Teachers (N = 208)	Experience >3 years (n = 89)	Experience ≤3 years (n = 119)
M (SD) [95% CI]	M (SD) [95% CI]	M (SD) [95% CI]	
Personal Growth	4.2 (0.68) [4.11, 4.29]	4.3 (0.65) [4.16, 4.44]	4.1 (0.70) [3.97, 4.23]
Student Needs	3.9 (0.72) [3.80, 4.00]	4.0 (0.69) [3.85, 4.15]	3.8 (0.74) [3.67, 3.93]
School Issues	3.7 (0.81) [3.59, 3.81]	4.0 (0.75) [3.84, 4.16]*	3.5 (0.83) [3.35, 3.65]

The student needs domain showed moderate to high commitment levels ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.72$, 95% CI [3.80, 4.00]). Qualitative interviews revealed that this above-average score often reflected the complex navigation between Western teaching approaches and local student expectations. Six of the 39 interviewed participants described developing hybrid pedagogical approaches that integrated different teaching traditions. Michael, who scored in the upper quartile for student needs, described:

"Initially, I tried to implement purely communicative methods, but I've learned to blend these with local approaches. My students respond better to this hybrid style, and honestly, it's made me a more versatile teacher."

The school issues domain recorded the lowest overall scores relative to other domains ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 0.81$, 95% CI [3.59, 3.81]). Interview data provided crucial context for this finding, highlighting specific institutional challenges. Four participants specifically discussed institutional navigation difficulties, particularly regarding unwritten rules and hierarchical dynamics (David, Lisa, Mark, Sarah). Lisa, whose scores fell in the lower quartile for school issues, noted:

"Understanding the unwritten rules and hierarchical structures took time. What looks like simple policy on paper often involves complex interpersonal dynamics that aren't immediately apparent to foreign teachers."

Statistical analysis revealed significant differences in professional identity scores based on teaching experience in Vietnam. Teachers with more than three years of experience ($n = 89$) recorded significantly higher scores in the school issues domain ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 0.75$, 95% CI [3.84, 4.16]) compared to those with less experience ($n = 119$, $M = 3.5$, $SD = 0.83$, 95% CI [3.35, 3.65], $p < .05$, $d = 0.64$). Qualitative data helped explain this gap, as three veteran teachers with over four years of experience described developing what participants termed "cultural intuition." James, who scored in the upper quartile for school issues after five years of experience, explained:

"Now I can read situations better - knowing when to push for change and when to adapt to local norms. This wasn't something I could learn from a manual; it came through years of daily interactions and sometimes uncomfortable learning experiences."

Cultural adaptation's impact on teaching practices

Thematic analysis of interview data identified two primary adaptation challenges that explained the quantitative difficulty patterns: cultural-pedagogical disconnects and institutional mediation of adaptation. These themes emerged through systematic coding where initial descriptive codes were analyzed for underlying patterns explaining why certain adaptation areas scored higher in difficulty measures.

Analysis of the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale revealed varying levels of difficulty across the two primary dimensions, with Cultural Empathy and Relatedness showing moderate difficulty levels ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 0.84$, 95% CI [3.08, 3.32]) and Impersonal Endeavors and Perils indicating higher difficulty ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.92$, 95% CI [3.67, 3.93]). The theme of cultural-pedagogical disconnects provided explanatory depth for these patterns, particularly for the highest-scoring difficulty areas. The quantitative data indicated that language barriers ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.88$, 95% CI [3.98, 4.22]) and understanding local pedagogical traditions ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.85$, 95% CI [3.78, 4.02]) presented the most significant challenges. Eight participants described how these difficulties stemmed from fundamental misalignments between their pedagogical training and local educational philosophies, rather than surface-level communication issues. Emma, a language center teacher who scored in the upper quartile for adaptation difficulties, illustrated this disconnect:

"The biggest challenge isn't just the language barrier -- it's understanding the cultural nuances behind communication. Sometimes students' silence doesn't mean lack of understanding; it's often about maintaining harmony or showing respect. This realization completely changed how I approach student participation."

David, a university teacher whose adaptation scores also fell in the upper quartile, expanded on this pedagogical complexity:

"The language barrier isn't just about basic communication. It's about understanding the educational philosophy embedded in the language. Terms like 'active learning' or 'student engagement' can mean very different things in the Vietnamese context."

Table 2
Sociocultural Adaptation Challenges by Institution Type

Challenge Area	Language Centers (n = 87)	International Schools (n = 76)	Universities (n = 45)
Language Barriers	M (SD) [95% CI] 4.1 (0.88) [3.91, 4.29]	M (SD) [95% CI] 3.4 (0.82) [3.21, 3.59]*	M (SD) [95% CI] 3.8 (0.85) [3.55, 4.05]
Local Pedagogical Traditions	3.9 (0.85) [3.72, 4.08]	3.2 (0.79) [3.02, 3.38]*	3.6 (0.83) [3.35, 3.85]
Teaching Method Adaptation	3.8 (0.82) [3.63, 3.97]	3.2 (0.78) [3.02, 3.38]*	3.5 (0.80) [3.26, 3.74]
Classroom Management	3.7 (0.86) [3.52, 3.88]	3.1 (0.75) [2.93, 3.27]*	3.4 (0.82) [3.15, 3.65]
Assessment Practices	3.6 (0.84) [3.42, 3.78]	3.0 (0.76) [2.83, 3.17]*	3.3 (0.79) [3.06, 3.54]

Note. Scores range from 1 (no difficulty) to 5 (extreme difficulty). * $p < .01$ compared to language center teachers.

The second theme, institutional mediation of adaptation, directly explained the significant variation in difficulty scores across institutional contexts. Teachers in language centers ($n = 87$) reported higher difficulty scores in adapting teaching methods to local context ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.82$, 95% CI [3.63, 3.97]) compared to those in international schools ($n = 76$, $M = 3.2$, $SD = 0.78$, 95% CI [3.02, 3.38], $p < .01$, $d = 0.75$). University teachers ($n = 45$) demonstrated intermediate adaptation difficulty levels ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 0.80$, 95% CI [3.26, 3.74]). Eleven participants across different institutions described how organizational structures either facilitated or hindered their adaptation processes, with this institutional variation explaining statistical differences more effectively than individual characteristics alone. Rachel, an international school teacher who scored in the lower quartile for adaptation difficulties, exemplified the facilitative institutional environment:

"In international schools, there's often a more established framework for bridging cultural differences. We have professional development specifically focused on cultural adaptation, and our Vietnamese colleagues are used to working with foreign teachers."

This institutional mediation theme also accounted for the relationship between professional qualifications and adaptation success. Teachers with formal TESOL qualifications ($n = 88$) reported lower difficulty scores in adapting teaching methods ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 0.76$, 95% CI [3.04, 3.36]) compared to those without such qualifications ($n = 120$, $M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.85$, 95% CI [3.65, 3.95], $p < .01$, $d = 0.74$). Rather than representing individual competence differences, nine TESOL-qualified participants indicated that their training provided institutional legitimacy and confidence that facilitated adaptation processes. Mark, a TESOL-certified teacher who scored in the lower quartile for adaptation difficulties, explained this mediation effect:

"My TESOL training included modules on intercultural communication and teaching in diverse contexts. This theoretical foundation helped me anticipate and navigate cultural differences, especially in adapting my teaching style to local expectations."

Intersection of professional and cultural identities

Analysis of the combined Professional Identity Scale and Sociocultural Adaptation Scale data revealed significant correlations between professional identity formation and cultural adaptation processes. The interaction between these domains manifested differently across institutional contexts and experience levels (see Table 3). Qualitative data provided rich insights into how teachers experienced this intersection, as illustrated by Jennifer, an experienced teacher:

"Over time, I've realized that my identity as a teacher isn't separate from my cultural adaptation. The more I understand Vietnamese educational values, the more I've been able to develop an authentic teaching style that works in this context. It's not about choosing between Western and Vietnamese approaches – it's about creating something new that honors both."

Correlation analysis demonstrated strong relationships between cultural empathy scores and professional identity components, particularly in the personal growth domain ($r = .56$, 95% CI [.46, .65], $p < .01$) and student needs domain ($r = .52$, 95% CI [.41, .61], $p < .01$). Teachers who reported higher levels of cultural empathy (top quartile, $n = 52$) showed significantly stronger professional identity scores across all domains ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 0.62$, 95% CI [4.13, 4.47]) compared to those in the bottom quartile ($n = 52$, $M = 3.6$, $SD = 0.78$, 95% CI [3.38, 3.82], $p < .01$, $d = 0.98$). During interviews, high cultural empathy teachers frequently described what one participant termed "cultural bridging." As Thomas explained:

"Understanding my students' cultural background has become integral to my teaching identity. When I plan lessons now, I automatically consider both pedagogical and cultural dimensions. This integrated approach has made me a more effective teacher."

Table 3
Correlation Matrix of Professional Identity and Cultural Adaptation Dimensions with 95% Confidence Intervals

Dimensions	Personal Growth	Student Needs	School Issues	Cultural Empathy	Institutional Integration
Personal Growth	1.00				
Student Needs	.68** [.60, .75]	1.00			
School Issues	.54** [.44, .63]	.61** [.52, .69]	1.00		
Cultural Empathy	.56** [.46, .65]	.52** [.41, .61]	.48** [.37, .58]	1.00	
Institutional Integration	.45** [.33, .56]	.49** [.38, .59]	.62** [.53, .70]	.58** [.48, .66]	1.00

Note. $N = 208$. ** $p < .01$. Values in brackets represent 95% confidence intervals.

Multiple regression analysis revealed that cultural adaptation factors significantly predicted professional identity development ($R^2 = .48$, 95% CI [.39, .57], $F(4, 203) = 46.82$, $p < .01$). The strongest predictors were cultural empathy ($\beta = .42$, 95% CI [.33, .51], $p < .01$) and institutional integration ($\beta = .38$, 95% CI [.29, .47], $p < .01$). This quantitative finding was enriched by interview data that revealed the complex processes underlying this relationship. As Maria described:

"There was a turning point when I stopped seeing Vietnamese cultural norms as obstacles and started viewing them as resources for teaching. This shift didn't just change my teaching methods – it transformed how I see myself as an educator in this context."

Duration of teaching experience in Vietnam moderated this relationship, with stronger correlations observed among teachers with more than three years of experience ($R^2 = .56$, 95% CI [.44, .68]) compared to those with less experience ($R^2 = .41$, 95% CI [.31, .51]). The qualitative data suggested this difference reflected a developmental process. As James, a veteran teacher, explained:

"In my first year, I was trying to maintain my Western teaching identity while adapting to Vietnamese culture – like keeping two separate identities. Now, after five years, these aren't separate anymore. My professional identity has evolved to naturally incorporate both cultural perspectives."

This integration of quantitative and qualitative findings reveals a complex, dynamic relationship between professional identity and cultural adaptation, suggesting that successful expatriate teachers develop what might be termed a "culturally integrated professional identity" that combines elements of both their original and host cultural contexts.

Discussion

Professional identity navigation in Vietnamese educational context

The findings reveal a complex process of professional identity navigation among expatriate language teachers in Vietnam, characterized by varying levels of commitment across different domains of professional practice. The high scores within this sample in the personal growth domain ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.68$) suggest that teaching in Vietnam catalyzes significant professional development, supporting Pennington and Richards' (2016) assertion that professional identity formation is a dynamic process shaped by contextual factors. This study extends their framework by demonstrating that professional growth stems from reconciling disparate educational philosophies rather than addressing purely pedagogical challenges. Interview data from six participants revealed that this reconciliation process involves developing what they termed "cultural intuition" - the ability to navigate between different educational paradigms rather than simply adapting to local norms.

The above-average scores within this sample in the student needs domain ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.72$) reflect the challenging process of negotiating between original pedagogical training and local educational expectations. This finding aligns with Ghiasvand et al.'s (2023) observation of complex negotiations when professional identities encounter institutional discourses. However, interview analysis revealed that six participants described developing hybrid pedagogical approaches that actively integrate different educational traditions rather than merely accommodating local practices. This adaptation process appears transformative rather than assimilative, leading to integrated teaching identities that transcend traditional cultural boundaries.

The significantly higher scores in the school issues domain among experienced teachers ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 0.75$) compared to less experienced counterparts ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 0.83$) illuminate the temporal dimension of professional identity development. This finding challenges Tsui's (2007) emphasis on institutional expectations as primary drivers, suggesting instead that accumulated cultural understanding enables deeper institutional integration. Three veteran teachers specifically described developing sophisticated institutional navigation skills over time, indicating that professional identity development follows a developmental trajectory rather than occurring through discrete events.

The comparatively lower scores within the three domains for school issues ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 0.81$) highlight persistent institutional navigation challenges. This finding extends Bright's (2022) observations by suggesting that challenges stem from institutional structures rather than cultural differences alone. Four participants' accounts of struggling with hierarchical dynamics demonstrate that professional identity navigation requires institutional literacy beyond cultural adaptation. This empirical finding suggests expanding current frameworks to include institutional acculturation as a distinct component of expatriate teacher identity development.

Cultural adaptation's impact on teaching practices

The analysis of cultural adaptation's impact on teaching practices demonstrates complex patterns that significantly shape expatriate teachers' pedagogical approaches. The high difficulty scores within this sample for language barriers ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.88$) and understanding local pedagogical traditions ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.85$) indicate that cultural adaptation extends beyond superficial adjustments to fundamental aspects of teaching practice. These findings build upon Cross et al.'s (2011) work on educators in Asian contexts by demonstrating that challenges are deeply rooted in conceptual understanding rather than surface-level communication issues. Eight participants specifically described how familiar pedagogical terms carried different meanings in Vietnamese educational contexts, requiring reconceptualization of basic teaching concepts.

The significant variation in adaptation difficulties across institutional contexts provides empirical evidence for how organizational structures mediate adaptation processes. Language center teachers reported higher difficulty scores ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.82$) compared to international school counterparts ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 0.78$), indicating meaningful institutional differences. This finding extends Fenech et al.'s (2020) concept of bilateral adaptation by providing quantitative evidence for contextual mediation effects. Eleven participants described how their institutions either facilitated or hindered adaptation through structural support systems, with international schools providing more established cultural navigation frameworks.

The relationship between TESOL qualifications and adaptation success ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 0.76$ versus $M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.85$) demonstrates the practical value of targeted professional preparation. This finding adds specificity to Ang et al.'s (2007) cultural intelligence framework by showing that domain-specific training outperforms general cultural competence in teaching contexts. Nine TESOL-qualified participants attributed their adaptation success to theoretical frameworks that prepared them for cultural differences, suggesting that professional preparation operates through anticipatory cognitive mechanisms rather than reactive adjustment processes.

The adaptation processes described by participants reveal pedagogical innovation rather than simple accommodation to local practices. Six participants described developing teaching approaches that actively combined elements from different educational traditions, creating new pedagogical solutions rather than abandoning original methods. This finding suggests that successful cultural adaptation in teaching contexts involves creative synthesis rather than replacement of existing practices. Such processes extend beyond traditional acculturation models to encompass what might be termed *pedagogical hybridization* - the active creation of new teaching practices that draw from multiple cultural traditions while transcending the limitations of any single approach.

Theoretical and practical implications

The study advances theoretical understanding of professional identity development by demonstrating that cultural and professional identities integrate through developmental processes rather than discrete adaptation events. This finding extends existing frameworks that treat these domains as separate constructs. The concept of "cultural intuition" that emerged from veteran

teachers' accounts suggests that theoretical models should incorporate temporal dimensions accounting for accumulated cultural learning rather than assuming linear progression.

Teacher preparation programs can benefit from incorporating domain-specific cultural preparation based on the observed relationship between TESOL qualifications and adaptation success. Rather than relying on general intercultural competence modules, programs should integrate theoretical frameworks for understanding cultural differences within pedagogical contexts. TESOL-qualified participants attributed their adaptation success to anticipatory preparation mechanisms, indicating that professional education should address cultural-pedagogical integration specifically rather than treating cultural competence as separate from teaching expertise.

The institutional variation observed across educational contexts indicates that organizational infrastructure significantly mediates adaptation outcomes. International schools demonstrated more effective support systems compared to language centers, suggesting that institutions should develop structured frameworks for cultural navigation. Effective support systems should include ongoing mentoring relationships rather than front-loaded orientation programs, as participants described institutional navigation as requiring extended observation and interaction with local practices. Such approaches acknowledge the developmental nature of institutional integration while providing sustained support throughout the adaptation process.

Implementation of these recommendations requires recognition that adaptation success depends on both individual preparation and institutional facilitation. The temporal dimension of professional identity development suggests that retention strategies should acknowledge extended timelines for full integration. Educational administrators should design differentiated support approaches that combine initial cultural orientation with long-term professional development addressing the evolving challenges teachers face as they develop institutional literacy and cultural competence simultaneously.

Conclusion

This mixed-methods investigation into expatriate language teachers' adaptation processes in Vietnam provides significant insights into the complex interplay between professional identity development and cultural adaptation in cross-cultural educational contexts. The study demonstrates that successful adaptation involves more than mere acculturation; rather, it requires the development of an integrated professional-cultural identity that evolves through distinct developmental stages.

The findings substantiate three key conclusions. First, professional identity navigation in Vietnamese educational contexts emerges as a dynamic process mediated by institutional structures and cultural understanding, with experienced teachers demonstrating significantly higher levels of integration across all professional domains. Second, cultural adaptation profoundly influences teaching practices, with institutional context and professional qualifications serving as moderating factors. Third, the intersection of professional and cultural identities emerges as a developmental journey rather than a linear process, leading to the formation of integrated professional identities that transcend traditional cultural boundaries.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design prevents examination of temporal identity development processes, while the predominantly urban sample limits generalizability to rural contexts. Additionally, the descriptive statistical approach restricts generalization beyond this specific sample, and the qualitative data presentation emphasized quantitative illustration rather than comprehensive thematic exploration. Future research should

consider longitudinal approaches to track identity development over time and expand investigation into rural educational settings.

The findings carry significant implications for international education. Teacher preparation programs should incorporate targeted cultural components, while educational institutions should develop differentiated support systems based on institutional context. Future research directions might explore the long-term sustainability of integrated professional identities and investigate the role of digital technology in facilitating cultural-professional integration.

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of professional identity development in cross-cultural contexts by proposing a developmental model of cultural-professional integration. The findings advance beyond traditional acculturation frameworks by demonstrating how professional and cultural identities become fundamentally intertwined through teaching experience in cross-cultural contexts. This understanding provides a foundation for enhancing the effectiveness of expatriate language teachers and improving international educational practices.

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APPENDIX A
Professional Identity and Cultural Adaptation Questionnaire
SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

- 1. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Prefer not to say
- 2. Age: _____
- 3. Nationality: _____
- 4. Highest educational qualification: _____
- 5. Years of teaching experience in Vietnam: _____
- 6. Type of institution: ☐ International School ☐ University ☐ Language Center ☐ Other
- 7. Current teaching level: ☐ Primary ☐ Secondary ☐ Tertiary ☐ Adult
- 8. Teaching qualification(s): _____

SECTION B: PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY SCALE

Instructions: Please indicate how committed you are to the following practices as an expatriate teacher in Vietnam using the scale below:

- 1- Very weakly committed
- 2- Weakly committed
- 3- Somewhat committed
- 4- Strongly committed
- 5- Very strongly committed

Code	Item	1	2	3	4	5
Student Needs Domain:						
SN01	Enhance students' learning outcomes					
SN02	Help students apply what they have learned to their daily life					
SN03	Demonstrate flexibility and responsiveness in teaching					
SN04	Successfully motivate student learning					
SN05	Use assessment results to improve student learning					
SN06	Identify and support students' diverse learning needs					
SN07	Create an effective support network for students					
School Issues Domain:						
SI01	Commit to school goals in performing daily tasks					
SI02	Understand and follow school policies					

SI03	Promote coordination among departments to enhance work quality					
SI04	Serve as a role model showing concern for local/global issues					
SI05	Cultivate a caring school climate through collaboration					
SI06	Consider diverse family factors affecting students' learning					
Personal Growth Domain:						
PG01	Believe all students can learn					
PG02	Demonstrate passion for continuous learning					
PG03	Show respect for diversity					
PG04	Commit and dedicate to the teaching profession					
PG05	Collaborate and maintain team spirit					
PG06	Pursue professional excellence					

SECTION C: SOCIOCULTURAL ADAPTATION SCALE

Instructions: Please indicate the amount of difficulty you experience in Vietnam in each of these areas:

- 1- No difficulty
- 2- Slight difficulty
- 3- Moderate difficulty
- 4- Great difficulty
- 5- Extreme difficulty

Code	Item	1	2	3	4	5
Cultural Empathy and Relatedness:						
CE01	Making yourself understood					
CE02	Understanding local perspectives on education					
CE03	Understanding the Vietnamese value system					
CE04	Taking a local perspective on school culture					
CE05	Communicating with people of different ethnic groups					
CE06	Making friends with local colleagues					
CE07	Building relationships with students' families					
CE08	Understanding cultural differences in teaching approaches					
CE09	Seeing educational issues from the local point of view					
CE10	Understanding local pedagogical traditions					
CE11	Adapting teaching methods to local context					
CE12	Understanding local curriculum expectations					
CE13	Relating to school administrators					
CE14	Building trust with local colleagues					
CE15	Understanding local assessment practices					
Impersonal Endeavors and Perils:						
IP01	Dealing with school bureaucracy					
IP02	Following institutional rules and regulations					
IP03	Dealing with supervisors/people in authority					
IP04	Managing parent-teacher relationships					
IP05	Dealing with different work practices					
IP06	Adapting to local professional standards					
IP07	Handling workplace conflicts					
IP08	Dealing with language barriers					
IP09	Managing classroom behavior differences					
IP10	Adapting to school facilities/resources					
IP11	Understanding salary/benefit systems					
IP12	Dealing with work permit procedures					
IP13	Managing professional development requirements					
IP14	Following local educational policies					

APPENDIX B**Semi-Structured Interview Protocol****Professional Identity and Cultural Adaptation of Expatriate Language Teachers in Vietnam****INTERVIEW DETAILS**

- Duration: 45-60 minutes
- Method: Video conference (Zoom)
- Recording: Audio recording with participant consent
- Confidentiality: Pseudonyms will be used in all reporting

INTRODUCTION (5 minutes)

Thank you for participating in this interview. This discussion will explore your experiences as an expatriate language teacher in Vietnam, focusing on how you've navigated professional identity development and cultural adaptation. There are no right or wrong answers—I'm interested in your personal experiences and perspectives.

Your responses will remain confidential, and you'll be assigned a pseudonym in any reports. You may skip any question or stop the interview at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

[Confirm recording consent and begin recording]

SECTION 1: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT (5-7 minutes)

1. Can you tell me a bit about your journey to teaching in Vietnam? What brought you here?
2. How long have you been teaching in Vietnam, and what type of institution do you work in?
3. What were your initial expectations about teaching here, and how do those compare to your actual experiences?

SECTION 2: PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT (15-20 minutes)**2.1 Professional Identity Evolution**

4. How would you describe yourself as a teacher when you first arrived in Vietnam compared to now?
5. Can you think of a specific moment or experience that significantly changed how you see yourself as an educator here?
6. What aspects of your professional identity have remained consistent, and what has evolved?

2.2 Professional Competence and Growth

7. In what ways has teaching in Vietnam contributed to your professional development?
8. How do you approach continuous learning and professional growth in this context?
9. Can you describe a challenge you faced that led to significant professional growth?

2.3 Institutional Integration

10. How would you describe your relationship with the institutional policies and expectations at your workplace?
11. What aspects of working within Vietnamese educational institutions have been most challenging to navigate?
12. Can you share an experience where you had to balance your professional beliefs with institutional expectations?

SECTION 3: CULTURAL ADAPTATION PROCESSES (15-20 minutes)**3.1 Cultural Learning and Understanding**

13. How has your understanding of Vietnamese educational culture developed over time?
14. Can you describe a moment when you realized you had misunderstood something about the local educational context?
15. What strategies have you used to better understand Vietnamese educational values and practices?

3.2 Teaching Practice Adaptation

16. How have your teaching methods or approaches changed since you started working in Vietnam?
17. Can you give me an example of how you've adapted a lesson or teaching strategy to better fit the local context?
18. What aspects of your original teaching approach have you maintained, and what have you modified?

3.3 Relationship Building and Communication

19. How do you navigate communication differences with students, colleagues, and administrators?

20. Can you describe your experience building relationships with Vietnamese colleagues or students' families?
21. What have been the most significant communication challenges, and how have you addressed them?

SECTION 4: INTERSECTION OF PROFESSIONAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES (10-12 minutes)

4.1 Identity Integration

22. How do you see the relationship between your cultural adaptation and your professional development?
23. Have there been times when your professional identity and cultural adaptation felt in conflict? How did you resolve this?
24. Can you describe what being a successful teacher in Vietnam means to you now?

4.2 Ongoing Challenges and Strategies

25. What ongoing challenges do you face in balancing your professional identity with cultural expectations?
26. What advice would you give to a newly arrived expatriate teacher about navigating professional identity development here?
27. If you could change anything about how expatriate teachers are prepared or supported, what would it be?

SECTION 5: REFLECTION AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES (5-8 minutes)

28. Looking back, what has been most surprising about your experience as an expatriate teacher in Vietnam?
29. How do you see your professional identity continuing to evolve in the future?
30. Is there anything important about your experience that we haven't discussed that you'd like to share?

CLOSING

Thank you for sharing your experiences so openly. Your insights will contribute valuable understanding to how expatriate teachers navigate professional identity development and cultural adaptation. Within the next two weeks, I'll send you a summary of the key themes from our conversation for your review and verification. Do you have any final questions about the research or this interview?

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