

# NEGOTIATING PEDAGOGICAL CULTURES: CLASSROOM PRACTICES OF NATIVE ENGLISH-SPEAKING TEACHERS IN CHINESE UNIVERSITIES

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## ABSTRACT

Although many studies discuss native English-speaking teachers' (NEST) identities, most focus on beliefs, narratives, or institutional discourses rather than what teachers actually do in the classroom. To fill this gap, this qualitative multiple-case study examines how NESTs construct and negotiate their professional identities through classroom practices in Chinese universities. Drawing on classroom observations of four NESTs who are from America and Britain and working at two different universities in China, the study employs an integrative framework informed by sociocultural and poststructuralist perspectives to explore three interrelated processes: pedagogical negotiation, cultural mediation, and identity performance. Through inductive thematic analysis based on the classroom observation fieldnotes, the findings reveal that identity construction is a dynamic process enacted through everyday teaching practices, as teachers balance communicative pedagogies with local expectations rooted in exam-oriented traditions and hierarchical norms. Through classroom interaction, humour, and task design, the teachers mediated cultural and pedagogical meanings while performing and reshaping their professional selves. The study extends current understandings of language teacher identity by highlighting classroom practice as a key site of negotiation and identity performance for NESTs working in non-native English contexts.

**Keywords:** *Language teacher identity, NESTs, China, classroom practice, pedagogy, identity performance*

## INTRODUCTION

Research on language teacher identity (LTI) has increasingly emphasised its dynamic, socially constructed nature, shaped by teachers' interactions within specific sociocultural and institutional contexts (Varghese et al., 2005; Wenger, 1998). In the context of higher education in China, the recruitment of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) has accelerated as universities seek to internationalise curricula and enhance students' communicative competence; recent reviews and

empirical work show the continuing salience and contestation of the NEST/NNEST distinction in East Asian ELT policy and practice (Selvi et al., 2024). Recent studies further document a complex picture: while students and institutions often value NESTs for fluency and cultural authenticity, they simultaneously expect these teachers to adapt to local pedagogical norms and assessment regimes (Deng et al., 2023).

Although interviews and perception studies have shed light on attitudes toward NESTs, there is a growing call for research that examines how identity work is performed in situ, through everyday classroom practices. Multiple recent case studies and observational research have begun to address this gap by linking teachers' stated beliefs to their enacted classroom decisions, showing that negotiation between communicative ideals and local realities is an ongoing, embodied process (Wang & Lam, 2023). Moreover, student-centred investigations into instruction and learning in Chinese classrooms suggest that interpreting classroom behaviours (such as silence, participation patterns, and uptake) requires attending to the material, cultural, and institutional contexts in which NESTs teach (Zhou et al., 2024).

To build on these developments, this study focuses explicitly on classroom observations of four NESTs (Jean, Andy, Carl, and Dave) to examine how identity is performed and negotiated in practice. Drawing on sociocultural (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978) and poststructuralist (Bamberg, 2011; Butler, 1997) perspectives, the analysis foregrounds three interrelated processes, namely, pedagogical negotiation, cultural mediation, and identity performance as analytic lenses for understanding the situated and interactional construction of teacher selves in Chinese university classrooms. By situating rich observational data within this contemporary empirical landscape, the study responds to calls in recent literature for practice-based, multimodal analyses of NESTs' professional identity work in East Asian higher education with the following research questions:

1. How do NESTs negotiate pedagogical practices in response to students' learning preferences, institutional expectations, and local educational norms?
2. In what ways do NESTs act as cultural mediators, dealing with differences between Western communicative pedagogy and Chinese classroom culture?
3. How is teacher identity performed and manifested through classroom interactions, instructional design, and teacher-student relationships?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### ***Teacher Identity as a Socially Negotiated Construct***

Research on language teacher identity (LTI) has evolved to view identity not as a fixed or static attribute but as a dynamic, socially constructed, and contextually situated process (Varghese et al., 2005). Varghese et al. (2005) argue that teacher identity emerges through discourse, power relations, and pedagogical practices that shape how teachers position themselves within institutional and sociocultural contexts. Norton's (2013) notion of identity similarly emphasises the interrelation between language, power, and investment, foregrounding how teachers and learners negotiate their identities within unequal social structures. Building on these sociocultural perspectives, Barkhuizen (2017) frames teacher identity as a process of continuous negotiation between personal experience and professional context, emphasising narrative, emotion, and agency. More recent LTI scholarship continues to emphasise identity as fluid and emergent, shaped through teachers' everyday pedagogical and relational encounters. For instance, Weng et al. (2024) demonstrate how teacher identity shifts in response to emotional, institutional, and ideological pressures across instructional contexts, while Guo et al. (2021) show how NESTs in China construct ethical identities through their negotiation of local norms and classroom expectations. In East Asian contexts specifically, identity construction is deeply embedded in sociocultural hierarchies, race, and native-speaker ideologies (Lan, 2022; Wang, 2024). Taken together, these perspectives reaffirm that teacher identity cannot be fully understood through beliefs or narratives alone; rather, it must also be examined through classroom practices where identity is enacted, contested, and reshaped in real-time.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on sociocultural and poststructuralist perspectives to conceptualise language teacher identity (LTI) as a dynamic, contextually situated process. Within this framework, identity is not a fixed attribute but is continuously constructed and reconstructed through social interaction, pedagogical practice, and cultural participation (Varghese et al., 2005; Wenger, 1998). To interpret the classroom practices of the four NESTs in this study, the analysis integrates three interrelated constructs: pedagogical negotiation, cultural mediation, and identity performance. Each concept offers a distinct yet complementary lens for understanding how teachers construct and enact their professional selves in contextually situated ways. The concept of pedagogical negotiation is drawn from sociocultural perspectives on teacher cognition (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Johnson, 2006). It captures how teachers balance their personal beliefs, professional values, and institutional expectations in contextually responsive ways (Clarke, 2008; Tsui, 2007). Cultural mediation is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and extended by Kramsch (1993). It highlights teachers' roles as mediators who bridge diverse linguistic and cultural traditions in the classroom (Johnson, 2009; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), particularly obvious in cross-cultural EFL contexts such as China.

Meanwhile, identity performance emphasises the performative and discursive enactment of teacher selves through classroom interaction and embodied practice (Bamberg, 2011; Butler, 1997; Goffman, 1959). In other words, it foregrounds that teacher identity is not merely internal but is enacted through discourse, classroom interaction, and embodied practice. Recent research in East Asia underscores the relevance of these constructs, as NEST identity work is deeply shaped by native-speakerism, race, and institutional expectations (Lan, 2022; Wang, 2024). Together, these perspectives provide a multidimensional lens for understanding how NESTs in Chinese universities deal with complex pedagogical and cultural terrains to construct their professional identities.

**Pedagogical Negotiation.** The concept of pedagogical negotiation underscores how teachers continually adjust their instructional beliefs with the sociocultural and institutional realities of their teaching contexts. Within the field of language education, negotiation has been described as an essential process through which teachers make sense of and adapt to diverse classroom demands (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Johnson, 2006). For NESTs in China, pedagogical negotiation often involves mediating between communicative and exam-oriented approaches, between student-centred ideals and teacher-fronted traditions, and between their professional values and institutional expectations. Through this process, teachers face tensions between *who they are* as language professionals and *what they are expected to be* within local educational systems. Such negotiation thus becomes a site where professional identity is actively constructed and redefined.

Previous studies have highlighted that NESTs' classroom practices in non-Western EFL contexts frequently entail adapting their pedagogical preferences to align with students' linguistic levels, motivation, and culturally shaped learning habits (Trent, 2012). Recent work shows that these negotiations have become more complex amid shifting educational policies and intensified performance pressures in Chinese universities (Deng et al., 2023; Wang & Fang, 2020). NESTs are often required to modify activity designs, recalibrate their expectations of learner autonomy, and align their professional values with institutional demands. These pedagogical adjustments reflect deeper identity processes, as teachers continually negotiate who they are and are allowed to be within the Chinese EFL system (Guo et al., 2021). Pedagogical negotiation can therefore be understood as a dynamic process of recontextualization (Bernstein, 2000), in which teachers selectively integrate elements from different pedagogical traditions to fit their situated teaching realities.

**Cultural Mediation.** Cultural mediation refers to the process through which teachers interpret, translate, and reconcile differing cultural frameworks within the classroom. Rooted in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), the concept positions teachers as mediators who bridge the gap between their own linguistic and cultural backgrounds and those of their students. For NESTs working in China, cultural mediation extends beyond language instruction. In other words, it involves harmonising two pedagogical value systems: the Western communicative orientation that emphasises learner

autonomy and authenticity, and the Chinese educational tradition that values accuracy, hierarchy, and collective harmony (Holliday, 2005). This mediating role requires teachers to be sensitive to local expectations while maintaining their sense of professional authenticity.

Previous research has shown that NESTs frequently encounter moments of cultural dissonance when their teaching philosophies conflict with students' learning behaviours or institutional norms (Liu & Xu, 2011). Recent studies showcase that NESTs' success in China depends heavily on their ability to mediate cultural expectations and cultivate culturally responsive teaching identities (Guo et al., 2021; Lan, 2022). This aligns with Kramsch's (1993) notion of teachers as "intercultural speakers" who operate within a symbolic "third place," mediating between native and target cultures. Through cultural mediation, teachers construct hybrid pedagogical identities that blend Western communicative ideals with localised Chinese educational values. Thus, cultural mediation not only facilitates cross-cultural learning but also enables NESTs to articulate an evolving sense of *who they are* as professionals situated within a transnational teaching landscape.

**Identity Performance.** Identity performance conceptualises how teachers enact, display, and negotiate their professional selves through classroom interaction and pedagogical behaviour. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor and later sociolinguistic interpretations (Bamberg, 2011; Butler, 1990), identity is not viewed as a fixed attribute but as a dynamic process performed through discourse, body language, and interaction. In classroom contexts, teachers perform their identities through talk, gestures, feedback, and even sartorial choices that display authority, empathy, humour, or approachability. For NESTs in China, such performances are particularly obvious, as their visible and linguistic "foreignness" positions them as cultural others within the local educational context (Lan, 2022; Wang, 2024). Their identity work thus involves a continual balancing act between maintaining authenticity and adapting to institutional and student expectations.

In practice, identity performance among NESTs often manifests in how they design classroom activities, manage interactions, and present themselves as both language experts and cultural representatives. Research indicates that these performances are responsive to students' expectations and institutional constraints, which reflect teachers' efforts to establish legitimacy and relational harmony (Trent, 2012; Varghese et al., 2016). Recent research showcases that such performances include shifts in interactional style, modifications of personal narratives, and embodied practices which foster rapport and legitimacy (Weng et al., 2024). Thus, identity performance is not merely a reflection of self but an ongoing, situated practice that embodies the intersection of pedagogical intention, cultural positioning, and institutional negotiation.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is a case study drawn from a large research project from August 2023 to October 2023. Four participants have been selected to participate in the study by purposive sampling. The participant selection criteria are that they must be from native English-speaking countries and teach in universities. For the initial recruitment, the researcher contacted the potential participants through email. The main data collection is through classroom observation. According to Adler and Adler (1994), observation has been described as the "fundamental base of all research methods" (p. 389), regardless of whether in social sciences or in behavioural sciences. In addition, McKechnie (2008) stated that in qualitative research, observation "is one of the oldest and most fundamental research methods approaches. This approach involves collecting data using one's senses, especially looking and listening in a systematic and meaningful way" (p. 573). As classrooms are the main and common places where daily teaching practices occur, employing classroom observation in this study allowed the researcher to get first-hand information generated in the specific situation. At the same time, through the application of observation, the researcher was able to discover and notice components or phenomena that were common things or practices for the participants and their students in the classroom, but were critical elements in the topic area.

This study received ethical approval from the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee. All

participants were fully informed of the study’s purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written consent was obtained prior to data collection. Pseudonyms (Jean, Andy, Carl, and Dave) are used throughout the article to protect participants’ identities, and all identifying details were removed or anonymised. All data were stored securely in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines.

In this study, the researcher was not allowed to video-record the participants’ classes. At the moment when the researcher was sitting in the classroom as a non-participating observer, a classroom observation protocol was used to evaluate the class; moreover, detailed field notes, including the layout of the classroom, the number of students, activities, participants’ teaching procedure, etc., were all written down. The code for the field notes recording each participant’s class was formed by acronyms, e.g., JCF-1 stands for Jean’s first-Class field note, and ACF-2 stands for Andy’s second-Class field note. Each participant had been observed for six classes. Based on the classroom observation fieldnotes, inductive thematic analysis has been adopted to identify the themes, namely, pedagogical negotiation, cultural mediation, and identity performance. Based on the field notes, the researcher described the typical class scenario of each participant in the findings for further discussion. The four participants are teaching in two different universities, and their information has been summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
*The Four NESTs’ Information*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Years of Teaching Experience</b>
<b>Jean</b>	Female	UK	23 years
<b>Andy</b>	Male	USA	13 years
<b>Carl</b>	Male	USA	20 years
<b>Dave</b>	Male	UK	15 years

## **FINDINGS**

### ***Jean’s Classroom Scenario***

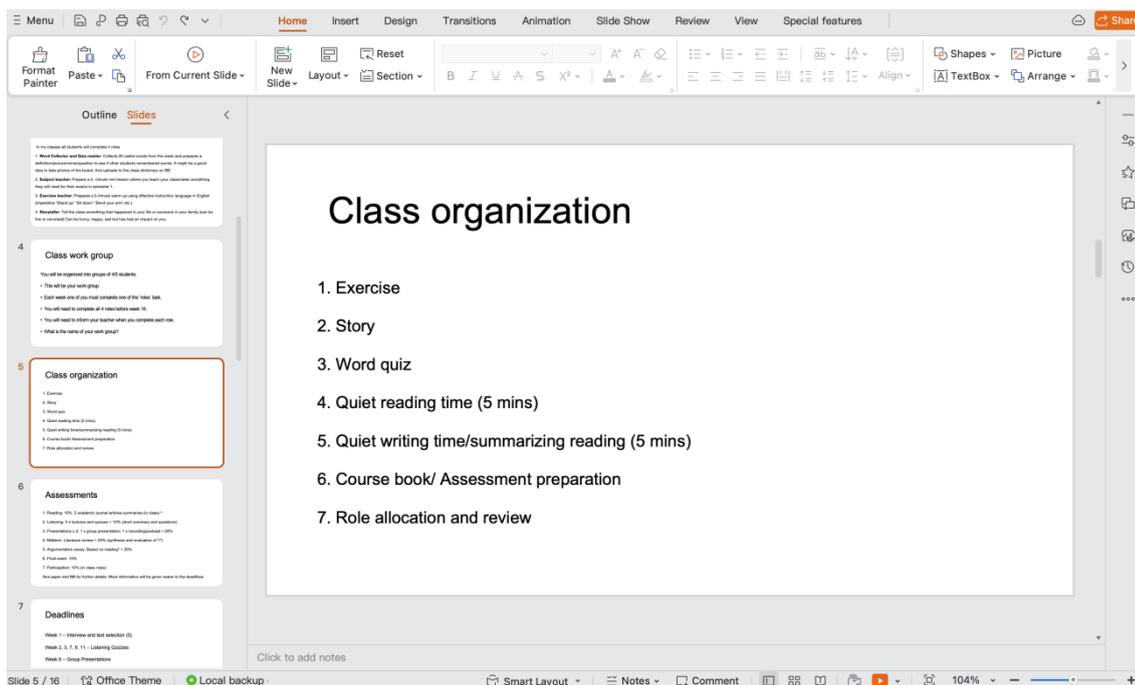
Jean taught four Level-3 English classes during the semester, each meeting twice a week. Each session consisted of two 50-minute periods separated by a 10-minute break. Class size ranged from 20 to 30 students, most were sophomore males, with a smaller number of female students. The classroom was new and well-equipped with multimedia facilities, whiteboards, and central air conditioning. Desks and chairs were lightweight and movable, allowing for flexible arrangements. In Jean’s class, students typically sat in five small groups, namely two on each side of the room and one in the centre, to facilitate group-based interaction.

Jean arrived about fifteen minutes before class. She greeted the early-arriving students and began preparing her materials, setting up the projector, opening her slides, and assisting students who were responsible for the day’s activities. As class time approached, students gradually filled the room, chatting quietly and settling into their seats. When the bell rang, Jean began the class with the first activity, “Exercise”, which is a short warm-up led by a student. Standing among the students, Jean followed the leader’s instructions as everyone participated in a five-minute session of the “Eight-Section Brocade,” a traditional Chinese fitness routine consisting of eight movements. The student leader had prepared a PowerPoint presentation with animated instructions, English explanations, and background music. The activity immediately transformed the classroom atmosphere from subdued to

lively. When it concluded, Jean praised the student for her preparation and English usage, clarifying the meaning of the word “brocade” and inquiring about her translation process. The student explained that she had used translation software but made her own revisions. Jean affirmed this self-monitoring and extended the discussion by introducing related vocabulary, linking language learning to the student’s initiative and cultural engagement.

The second activity, “Storyteller”, invited another student to share a personal story in English. On this occasion, a student narrated her experience of contracting COVID-19. Jean listened attentively from her seat, offering warm feedback on the student’s vocabulary and sentence construction while gently correcting verb tense and word form errors. The tone of this segment was reflective and personal, highlighting the classroom as a space for individual voice and emotional expression. The third activity, “Word Quiz”, was a vocabulary-based guessing game designed and led by a student. Using pictures and short English clues on a PowerPoint, the class competed against Jean to guess the target words. The light-hearted competition created laughter and energy in the room, engaging both teacher and students as equals in the learning process. The three student-led routines, including Exercise, Storyteller, and Word Quiz, occupied approximately the first 20 to 30 minutes of class time. Before closing this segment, Jean nominated three students to lead these activities in the following lesson, reinforcing shared responsibility and learner autonomy.

**Figure 1.**  
*Jean’s PPT*



After the warm-up activities, Jean transitioned to the main lesson, which integrated reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. She instructed students to engage in five minutes of silent reading, setting a countdown timer on her phone. Students were asked to select articles relevant to their academic majors or personal interests, ideally authentic materials from journals, databases, or science magazines. Jean emphasised the value of reading texts that would be meaningful for their future studies or careers. While students read, she circulated the classroom, glancing at their articles and taking brief notes in a small notebook. When the timer ended, she asked them to summarise their reading in short notes for another five minutes, then formed pairs or small groups to share and discuss their readings. The classroom quickly filled with animated conversation, and Jean joined different groups to listen, ask follow-up questions, or offer clarification. Depending on time, she sometimes repeated the reading–note-taking–discussion cycle before the bell marked the end of the first session.

During the 10-minute break, Jean remained in the classroom, sitting at the podium as a few students approached her for casual discussion about their coursework. When the second section began, she initiated a brief reading speed awareness activity. Since most students were unsure of their pace, Jean projected a short reading passage with a built-in timer. Students began reading when she clicked “Start” and raised their hands when finished. After roughly five minutes, Jean estimated their average speed at 120 words per minute. She then conducted a short comprehension quiz, encouraging whole-class participation, though few students responded. Recognising their hesitation, she did not press further and moved on to the next major task, which was a listening examination that contributed to their semester grade. Before the exam, Jean asked students to upload their selected reading materials to the online course platform, including full citation details. She explained that this would form a shared digital library for the class, allowing everyone to access each other’s readings and enabling her to track whether students later incorporated these sources into their essays.

For the listening examination, Jean played a TED Talk titled “How Language Shapes the Way We Think”, lasting fifteen minutes and presented without subtitles. As the video played, she wrote key vocabulary, idiomatic phrases, and thematic statements on the whiteboard. Afterwards, she invited students to express whether they agreed with the speaker’s viewpoints, but the class remained largely silent. Jean, appearing slightly disappointed, asked whether they found the material too difficult. When there was still no response, she chose not to push further and instead began explaining the vocabulary on the board. To ensure comprehension, she alternated between English synonyms, personal examples, and occasional Chinese translations. The class concluded with an online multiple-choice quiz of fourteen questions. Jean monitored submissions in real time, reviewed the answers collectively with the students, and ended the session as the bell rang.

### ***Andy’s Classroom Scenario***

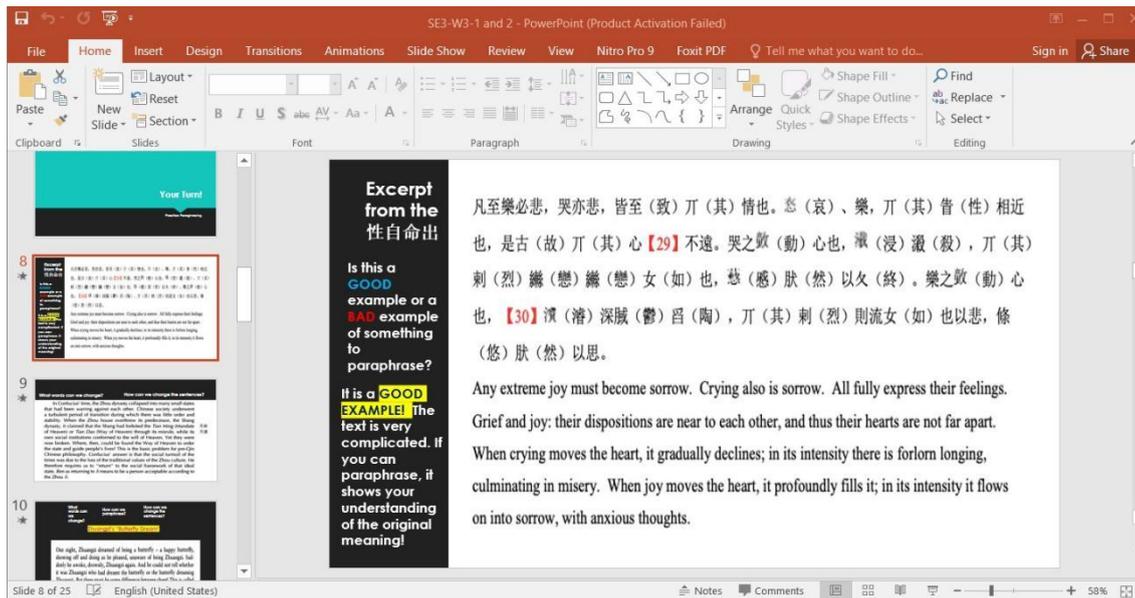
Andy taught a Level-3 English course at a university where all students, undergraduate and postgraduate, were required to take English classes offered by the Centre for Language Education (CLE). The Level-3 course served as an advanced bridge between general English instruction and English for Academic Purposes (EAP), focusing on preparing students for academic reading and writing. Andy taught four such classes, each comprising 20 to 30 students, mostly male. Each class met twice per week for two 50-minute sessions separated by a 10-minute break. Classrooms were equipped with multimedia facilities, air conditioning, and movable desks and chairs. In Andy’s classroom, the desks were arranged into five clusters, i.e., two on each side and one in the middle, with six seats per group to promote interaction.

The observed session began at eight o’clock in the morning. As students arrived, many appeared tired, reflecting the early hour. Andy entered the classroom a few minutes before class, greeted the students, and casually asked about their weekend. Only one or two students responded. It was Andy’s routine to check attendance after the bell and wait a few minutes before beginning the lesson to allow latecomers to settle. At 8:03, Andy opened his PowerPoint slides and began the day’s topic: “Paraphrasing and Summarising Using Chinese Philosophy and History.” He first asked whether students knew the meaning of paraphrasing. While a few responded, several latecomers quietly entered the room. Andy did not reprimand them but continued his explanation, linking the concept to plagiarism that was covered in the previous class. When students remained silent, Andy answered his own question and moved on, occasionally posing further questions to prompt engagement. However, only one particularly active student consistently volunteered answers.

When the slides introduced the use of synonyms in paraphrasing, Andy invited students to spend a few minutes brainstorming synonyms for six words (fair, funny, intelligent, lucky, mean, old) without using their phones or dictionaries. The room gradually became more animated as students collaborated within their groups. Afterwards, Andy invited volunteers to share their suggestions, responding with humour and encouragement. When students struggled, he offered hints or examples and occasionally slipped in brief Chinese phrases or self-deprecating jokes to maintain a relaxed atmosphere. The class, initially subdued, became visibly more engaged.

After the vocabulary activity, Andy announced, “Let’s have some fun.” The next slide displayed a short bilingual passage of the Chinese text from “Xing Zi Ming Chu”, an ancient philosophical work, and its English translation. Andy asked which version was easier to understand; the students agreed that the English translation was clearer, but could not explain why. Andy used this moment to highlight effective paraphrasing as the process of simplifying complex language. He then divided the class into five groups, assigning each one a sentence of the English passage to paraphrase, reminding them to change words or restructure the sentences. Since there were six sentences, students jokingly told Andy he should handle the last one himself. Laughing, Andy accepted their challenge, but with only a few minutes left, he dismissed the class early.

**Figure 2.**  
PPT of Xing Zi Ming Chu



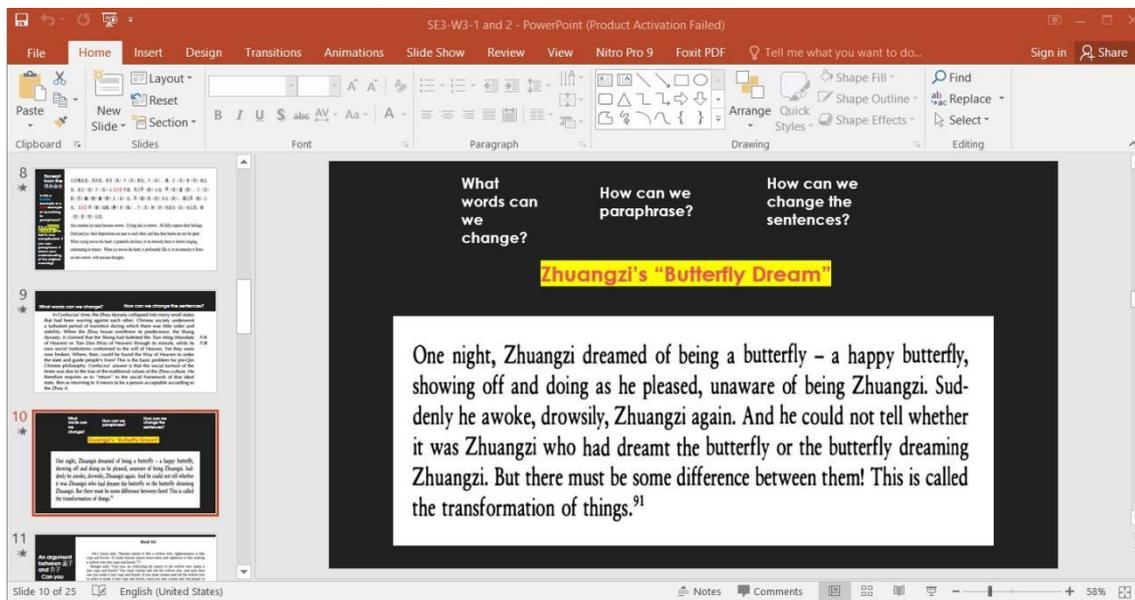
During the break, most students stayed in the classroom browsing on their phones, while Andy remained seated at the podium, occasionally chatting with individuals who approached him. When the second session began, Andy briefly reviewed paraphrasing techniques and gave students another five minutes to refine their group work. At this point, a minor incident occurred. One male student from Group 5 reacted to Andy’s instructions by exclaiming, “What?!” That was a tone Andy perceived as disrespectful. In response, Andy humorously nicknamed him “Mr What” and assigned him the remaining unclaimed sentence to paraphrase. Andy later explained that humour was one of his classroom management tools, often used to maintain authority while reducing tension.

During group discussions, Andy noticed that some students struggled to read the text on the screen, so he shared the PowerPoint file via the class’s online platform for easier viewing. He then moved between groups, starting with Group 5, listening to their discussions. Before leaving their table, he gently reminded the same student (Mr What) not to repeat his earlier outburst, clarifying that questions were welcome but should be asked respectfully.

After the discussion time ended, Andy asked a representative from each group to write their paraphrased sentences on the whiteboard. He then provided comments and feedback, such as praising creative phrasing while noting occasional grammatical or lexical issues. The final sentence was completed by Andy himself as a model for the class. The next task involved a short English passage from the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi’s “Dream of the Butterfly.” Students were again divided into groups to paraphrase the paragraph within six minutes. Andy circulated around the classroom, monitoring their work and answering questions. At one point, he discovered a student watching videos on his phone. He asked, half-jokingly, whether the class was too boring. The student quickly apologised and resumed the task, and Andy reminded him not to repeat the behaviour.

Although the discussion was supposed to last six minutes, Andy extended the time to ten after students requested more. When no group volunteered to share their results, he called on them sequentially. Only Group 2 presented their version before the bell signalled the end of the class.

**Figure 3.**  
*PPT of Dream of the Butterfly*



As students packed up, several said goodbye to Andy. The student, nicknamed “Mr What”, lingered to express discomfort with how Andy had addressed him earlier. Andy reflected that since it was still the course selection period, it might be best for the student to transfer if he could not adjust to his teaching style. For Andy, who taught four to five classes each semester, humour and informal address, such as calling students “Mr Biology” or “Mr Finance” when he forgot their names, were ways of balancing authority and approachability in large, diverse classes. He considered these playful interactions an important part of building rapport, managing participation, and constructing his teaching identity within the Chinese university context.

**Carl’s Classroom Scenario**

Carl taught a Level-1 English course at the university’s Centre for Language Education (CLE). This level aimed to build students’ accuracy, fluency, and communicative competence, laying the foundation for their later English study. Carl was responsible for four classes of around thirty freshmen, most of whom were male. Each class session is two fifty-minute periods separated by a ten-minute break. The classroom was equipped with multimedia facilities, e.g., a projector and whiteboard, and the desks were movable but currently arranged in five rows facing the podium.

Carl arrived punctually, usually about six minutes before class, dressed in neatly tucked shirt and trousers, projecting a formal and professional image. Before students entered, he connected his laptop to the multimedia system, played soft background music, and prepared his PowerPoint slides. The first slide clearly outlined the day’s lesson plan: “Listening for Signal Words (p.5), VLS Book (p.12) Situations, and Reader’s Theatre Introduction (BB).” His structured preparation and calm demeanour immediately set a tone of order and professionalism. As the bell rang, Carl began the class following the plan displayed on the screen. The first activity focused on listening for signal words. He wrote on the whiteboard: “This will help you take notes for listening journals: 1. Signal words; 2. Sequence words.” He then asked students to identify examples from the textbook, eliciting answers such as “first,” “in addition,” and “moreover.” While writing these words on the board, Carl responded with encouraging remarks, such as “excellent,” and added further examples. He explained that recognising signal and sequence words would help students identify key ideas when listening. His patient tone and methodical pacing reflected his emphasis on scaffolding comprehension, ensuring that students

at the beginning stage of university English learning could follow and internalise the lesson.

The second activity was a pair dialogue presentation based on a previous writing task. Each pair had prepared a short dialogue according to situational prompts from the textbook. Carl reminded students that the presentation was informal, emphasising that it was not graded and was meant for practice and enjoyment. To aid comprehension, he slowed his speech and wrote the key instructions on the whiteboard. He then set a five-minute timer for group preparation. When students requested more time, he readily extended it, showing flexibility and attentiveness to their learning pace. When presentations began, each pair stood at their seats to perform. Carl projected a Word document on the screen and typed selected excerpts from students' dialogues for the class to see. After each performance, he applauded and offered constructive feedback on pronunciation and vocabulary. When one group described a friend as a "fat friend," Carl gently suggested more tactful alternatives, such as "big guy," "heavy-set," or "jolly guy," before praising their overall effort. His corrections, always framed positively, reflected both linguistic sensitivity and cultural awareness, which are traits that suggested an identity as a mediator between language instruction and sociocultural appropriateness.

By the end of the first round of presentations, the bell rang for the break. Carl kept the relaxed atmosphere by playing soft music. Most students remained quietly in their seats. After the short intermission, the second round of presentations resumed. Carl maintained the same routine, namely, applause, constructive feedback, and praise, ensuring that every student had the opportunity to perform. In the latter half of the class, Carl introduced the Reader's Theatre project, which accounted for ten percent of the final grade. He explained that the course assessment comprised nine graded components, including writing portfolios, listening journals, debates, and creative assignments, each emphasising active use of English. Reader's Theatre, he explained, involved performing a short movie scene in English with expression and movement. Carl spent about twenty-five minutes explaining this task. He clearly outlined expectations in the projected document:

- Decide who is part of your Reader's Theatre group.
- Tell me your chosen movie by Week 5.
- You have one week (Week 4) to decide.

He reiterated that detailed guidelines were available on the online learning platform and played a two-minute demonstration video showing a successful performance. He highlighted the importance of voice, expression, and body language, emphasising that students could hold their scripts but should maintain audience engagement. Carl also displayed the grading rubric, asking students to review it as homework to understand assessment standards. His focus on transparency and clarity in assessment illustrated a pedagogical identity grounded in fairness and accountability. To further contextualise the assignment, Carl played a video clip of previous students' performances, pausing to explain the elements that made their delivery effective. He then showed students where to find movie clips and scripts uploaded on the university's platform. They could either select from his preloaded examples or choose their own Hollywood movie scenes, provided the content was rated PG, PG-13, or G.

With ten minutes left, Carl encouraged students to begin forming groups and selecting movies. The classroom atmosphere became lively, with animated discussions filling the room. Carl moved among the groups, answering questions and offering guidance. His interactions were polite and supportive, emphasising encouragement over correction. Even after the bell rang, many students continued their discussions enthusiastically, which was a sign of engagement fostered by his structured yet motivating approach.

Throughout his teaching, Carl displayed meticulous planning and systematic organisation. His calm, deliberate speech and detailed explanations reflected a teacher identity aligned with professionalism, responsibility, and respect for institutional expectations. At the same time, his responsiveness to students' needs, humour in feedback, and encouragement of participation indicated a relational and student-centred orientation. One small but revealing practice captured this duality: Carl marked a

small dot next to the name of each student he called on during class. This ensured that all students were engaged over time, demonstrating his commitment to fairness and inclusivity. In a word, Carl's classroom embodied a balance between structure and empathy. His use of technology, clear communication, and attention to both linguistic precision and interpersonal sensitivity reflected a teacher identity rooted in professionalism, fairness, and intercultural awareness that of a reflective practitioner who sought to guide students through English learning with both rigour and care.

### ***Dave's Classroom Scenario***

To illuminate how Dave's classroom practices contributed to his identity construction as an English language teacher in China, the following narrative reconstructs one of his oral English classes based on field notes recorded during classroom observations. The class took place in an old four-storey teaching building without elevators. The modest classroom, lacking multimedia facilities, was equipped only with blackboards, chalk, and fixed rows of desks. There were five rows on each side of a central aisle, each row seating four students, allowing for forty seats. A single standing air conditioner stood unused in the back corner. Near the front door hung a cloth organiser labelled Mobile Phone Storage Bags, but Dave never required students to use it. As he later explained, he preferred to allow students to use their phones for legitimate learning purposes, such as looking up words. This small detail reflected his flexible and student-centred orientation toward classroom management. Dave taught oral English to first-year students majoring in English and Business English. Each class met once a week for two consecutive forty-five-minute sessions separated by a short break. Most students were female, with about thirty-five to thirty-seven students per class. Because he had recently returned from England after a summer break, the university had assigned him to teach freshmen that semester. For Dave, the lessons were essentially the same across majors, as the course focused primarily on oral communication.

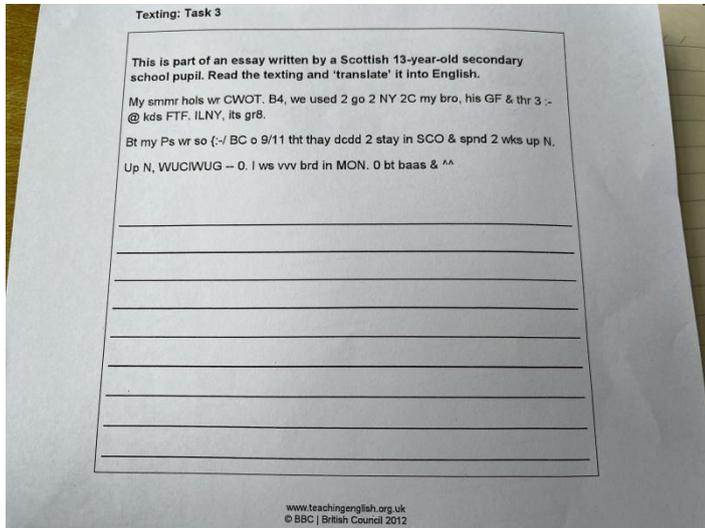
Five minutes before class started, most students were already seated, while one student managed the attendance sheet. Dave arrived three minutes before the bell, wearing a sweatshirt, casual pants, sneakers, and a hat, a style indicating informality and approachability. Upon entering the classroom, he immediately noticed a strong smell of food. Following the scent, he found a student with a meal on the desk. Laughing, Dave picked up the food and carried it outside, fanning his nose dramatically while saying, "Smelly!" The students laughed, and the atmosphere quickly became relaxed and cheerful.

When the bell rang, Dave began the lesson by writing "Abbreviation – a short form of a word or phrase" and "Acronym – a word formed from the first letters of a phrase" on the blackboard, followed by examples such as NBA, UK, NASA, and COVID-19. As the blackboard filled, he explained each term energetically, erasing sections as he moved on. He then introduced informal text abbreviations, such as B4, FYI, and xoxo. When students struggled to guess their meanings, Dave humorously explained that "xoxo" meant "kisses and hugs," demonstrating how typing it on WeChat would make kiss emojis "rain" across the screen. Curious and amused, the students eagerly tested it on their phones, laughing as the emojis appeared.

Dave's teaching blended humour, technology, and cultural reference, bridging linguistic content with students' digital and social experiences effectively. Next, Dave distributed worksheets printed from the British Council website, twenty abbreviations per sheet. He reminded students not to write directly on the handouts since they would be reused for other classes, and prohibited mobile phone use during the task. Each pair of students worked together while Dave walked around, offering hints and encouragement. At one point, he paused by a group of male students and jokingly asked if they had been smoking, claiming he smelled smoke. When they denied it, he went to the board and wrote, "3 out of 5 men in China die early because of smoking," urging them not to smoke before erasing the sentence. This spontaneous blend of humour, moral instruction, and care demonstrated how Dave often used unscripted moments to express personal values and engage students as individuals. Fifteen minutes before the end of the first session, Dave stopped the discussion and reviewed the abbreviations as a class. Rather than calling on individuals, he preferred collective participation, maintaining a collaborative learning atmosphere. He connected the vocabulary to aspects of British

culture, mentioning that weekends in the UK were often spent meeting friends in pubs. After checking all answers, Dave collected the worksheets and dismissed the class a few minutes early, taking a short break in the teacher's lounge.

**Figure 4.**  
*Worksheets from British Council*



Returning after the interval, Dave began the second session by distributing another set of paired worksheets. As he handed them out, he said “TYVM” (thank you very much), prompting some students’ curiosity. When one student replied in Chinese, Dave gently tapped his desk with the paper and quipped, “I don’t need a translator,” eliciting laughter. Soon after, when the students became too quiet while reading, Dave suddenly hit the closed wooden door beside the board and exclaimed that there was a “monster” behind it, which was an intentional burst of humour to re-energise the room. His lively use of performance and play helped sustain student engagement.

The next activity involved reading comprehension. Dave read the text aloud, clarified vocabulary, and interspersed explanations with anecdotes and historical trivia. When collecting the worksheets, he again used “TYVM,” to which one student cleverly responded, “STU” (same to you), earning Dave’s delighted praise. The final task was a diary translation activity. Students received a short diary written by a Scottish girl with abbreviations and emotive symbols, which they decoded into full English sentences. As students worked, Dave drew related images and emojis on the board: the World Trade Centre and “911,” expressive faces, and a map of Britain. His artistic and performative gestures captivated the class; he widened his eyes and screamed to demonstrate “shocked,” bleated like a sheep to illustrate “baa,” and mimed a mountain shape with his hands. These multimodal techniques reflected his effort to make meaning visible through embodiment and creativity.

As the lesson drew to a close, Dave wrote “CU nxt wk, x-x” on the board and asked what it meant. The students successfully interpreted “See you next week” but hesitated over “x-x.” With a mischievous smile, Dave explained that it represented the first letter of the Chinese Pinyin for “thank you,” prompting laughter across the room. The class ended three minutes early in a light, joyful atmosphere, reflecting Dave’s pedagogical identity as an approachable, humorous, and flexible teacher who valued both linguistic learning and human connection.

### **Cross-case Analysis**

Across the four observed classrooms, each NEST enacted distinctive yet interrelated pedagogical practices that revealed how their professional and personal identities were continuously shaped within the Chinese EFL context. Jean’s classroom was characterised by structure, scaffolding, and procedural clarity, reflecting her professional identity as a facilitator who valued organised instruction and linguistic precision. Andy’s classroom practice emphasised interpersonal warmth, humour, and

student engagement, constructing an image of a supportive and empathetic educator who sought to reduce students' anxiety and encourage participation through relational connection. Carl's lessons displayed a deliberate integration of communicative pedagogy with local expectations of accountability and assessment. His structured feedback and multimodal materials demonstrated his efforts to reconcile Western teaching philosophies with institutional norms in China. Dave's practice, by contrast, embodied creativity, spontaneity, and informality. Through humour, performance, and embodied language use, he built a dynamic and culturally responsive classroom atmosphere. Collectively, these classroom narratives illustrate how the participants' pedagogical choices functioned as performative acts of identity construction, shaped by ongoing negotiation between their personal beliefs, professional principles, and the sociocultural environment of Chinese universities. A cross-case thematic summary has been concluded in Table 2.

**Table 2.**  
*The Cross-Case Thematic Summary Table*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Pedagogical Negotiation</b>	<b>Cultural Mediation</b>	<b>Identity Performance</b>
Jean	Adjusted lesson pacing; flexible response to classroom cues	Interpreted Western materials for local context	Balanced "professional NEST" with "relatable foreign teacher"
Andy	Small-group modelling, scaffolded tasks	Addressed racialised expectations from students	Challenged stereotypes through teaching style
Carl	Task-based activities reshaped for large classes	Explained cultural references	Constructed calm, authoritative persona
Dave	Student-centred discussion formats	Navigated institutional constraints	Performed "approachable expert" in class

Thematically, three interrelated processes emerged from each participant's classroom practices. First, pedagogical negotiation captured how these NESTs adapted their teaching methods to align with students' proficiency levels, institutional expectations, and local educational culture, revealing the dynamic adjustment between imported pedagogies and local realities. Second, cultural mediation was evident in how the teachers positioned themselves as bridges between linguistic and cultural worlds, whether through Jean's explicit scaffolding of Western learning conventions, Carl's contextualised assessment practices, or Dave's use of humour and popular references to foster intercultural understanding. Third, identity performance encompassed how each teacher projected and enacted professional selves in classroom interaction, ranging from the authoritative facilitator to the empathetic mentor and playful communicator. Together, these processes underscore that the classroom served not merely as a pedagogical space, but as a site of identity work, where NESTs actively constructed, negotiated, and redefined what it means to teach English as foreigners within China's EFL landscape.

## **DISCUSSION**

Building upon these observed practices, the following discussion delves more deeply into how the four participants' classroom experiences illuminate the broader processes of teacher identity construction in the Chinese EFL context. The classroom observations of the four NESTs reveal distinctive yet interconnected ways in which they negotiated pedagogy, mediated culture, and performed professional identities within the sociocultural context of Chinese higher education. Although their teaching styles varied in structure, interaction, and classroom management, all four participants demonstrated an ongoing process of reconciling their own pedagogical beliefs with local expectations. By examining their pedagogical negotiation, cultural mediation, and identity performance, the analysis reveals how NESTs continually reconcile their professional beliefs, cultural backgrounds, and institutional constraints. Through this lens, the discussion explores how the classroom is not only a site of language teaching, but also as a complex social and cultural arena, where identities are enacted, contested, and redefined through everyday pedagogical interactions.

### ***Pedagogical Negotiation: Balancing Beliefs and Context***

Recent studies show that this process is rarely straightforward. Wang and Lam (2023), in a multiple

case study of native English teachers teaching oral communication courses in China, found that while NESTs tended to value interactive and communicative methods, they often modified these approaches to align with students' proficiency levels, participation styles, and institutional expectations. The study highlighted that teachers' identity work was visible in how they negotiated between maintaining their pedagogical ideals and accommodating local realities.

Across the four cases in this study, pedagogical negotiation is a key process through which the teachers adapted their instructional approaches to institutional and learner realities. Jean's lessons reflected a well-organised and student-centred approach that emphasised communicative competence, yet she consistently moderated her expectations to align with students' proficiency levels and the exam-oriented culture of the university. Her frequent scaffolding, visual aids, and explicit instructions signalled an effort to sustain interaction while managing the tension between communicative ideals and local demands for structure and clarity. Andy, similarly, sought to promote learner autonomy and collaborative learning. His use of group work, discussions, and reflective tasks illustrated a belief in the importance of active participation. However, his interactions also revealed a process of pedagogical negotiation: he adjusted his pace, clarified expectations, and moderated task complexity to respond to students' silence or hesitation. Carl's classroom practice demonstrated a balance between structure and creativity. His lessons combined task-based learning and performance activities, such as Readers' Theatre, that motivated students to use language meaningfully. Yet his careful time management, detailed rubrics, and consistent feedback indicated an awareness of the institutional need for transparency and assessment. His negotiation was both pedagogical and procedural, that is, integrating communicative methods within the constraints of course evaluation systems. Dave, in contrast, displayed a more spontaneous and performative teaching style. He emphasised humour, interaction, and engagement while using tangible tasks such as abbreviation worksheets and reading diaries. However, even within his lively classroom, negotiation occurred: he balanced entertainment with learning objectives, ensuring that his performative energy translated into pedagogical value rather than mere amusement.

Similarly, Xu (2025) examined how teachers' identities developed through professional learning and found that adaptation and reflexivity were central to sustaining effective practice. Teachers who actively negotiated between their pedagogical beliefs and institutional norms exhibited stronger professional agency and a more dynamic sense of self. In this study, participants such as Carl and Andy embodied such negotiation by designing activities like Readers' Theatre or peer discussions that combined communicative authenticity with structured scaffolding, reflecting hybrid pedagogical identities. Together, these observations highlight that pedagogical negotiation among NESTs in China is not a singular act but a continuous process of aligning personal teaching philosophies with students' expectations, institutional policies, and material realities. In doing so, these teachers embody what Johnson (2006) describes as the situated nature of teaching practice, which is an adaptive act shaped by contextual complexity.

### ***Cultural Mediation: Bridging Local and Global Perspectives***

Cultural mediation involves bridging diverse cultural expectations, communicative styles, and classroom norms. For NESTs in China, cultural mediation often manifests in how they interpret students' silence, attitudes toward authority, and preferences for accuracy over fluency (Hu & McKay, 2012). This mediation process reflects both intercultural communication and identity negotiation. Echiverri et al. (2021) investigated Chinese undergraduates' perceptions of native and non-native English-speaking teachers and found that while students appreciated NESTs' fluency and cultural authenticity, they also expected them to adapt to local learning styles and examination needs. This dual expectation required NESTs to mediate between being "authentic native speakers" and "effective local teachers." Similarly, Chen et al. (2023) revealed that Chinese university English teachers, though not all native speakers, constructed their identities through the interplay of professional, cultural, and institutional dimensions, often aligning themselves with values of harmony, effort, and respect for authority.

The four teachers in this study also served as cultural mediators, constructing bridges between the

communicative norms of English-speaking contexts and the learning traditions of Chinese classrooms. Jean's approach illustrated cultural sensitivity: she incorporated intercultural content while maintaining respect for students' learning habits, modelling an intercultural stance that validated both global and local perspectives. Andy, too, acted as a cultural intermediary, creating a supportive classroom environment that encouraged dialogue about cultural differences. His sharing of personal experiences and openness to students' interpretations positioned him as a facilitator of cross-cultural understanding rather than a transmitter of foreign norms. Carl's role as a cultural mediator was most evident in his Readers' Theatre and creative performance projects. By integrating elements of popular culture and collaborative performance, he introduced Western communicative and performative conventions, yet he scaffolded these practices with clear instructions and rubrics that resonated with local expectations for structure and assessment. This dual awareness reflects Kramsch's (1993) notion of the teacher as a symbolic bridge, capable of translating cultural values into pedagogical practice. Dave, perhaps the most explicitly performative cultural mediator, brought British culture into his lessons through humour, storytelling, and casual references to everyday life in the UK. His playful demonstrations, i.e., dramatizing idiomatic expressions or drawing cultural symbols on the blackboard, invited students to experience English as a living, culturally embedded medium. However, his mediation was not merely about cultural display; it also involved managing misunderstandings and aligning communicative norms with students' frames of reference.

Across these cases, cultural mediation functioned as a site of both opportunity and tension. The teachers' cultural identities granted them authority as authentic language models, yet they also faced the challenge of contextualising their cultural knowledge in ways that resonated with students' experiences. Their mediation practices thus reflected both pedagogical creativity and cultural humility.

### ***Identity Performance: Enacting Professional Selves in the Classroom***

The concept of identity performance further illuminates how these teachers constructed and enacted their professional selves through classroom interaction. Following Goffman (1959) and Butler (1990), identity is not a fixed attribute but an ongoing performance shaped by social context and audience reception. Recent research reinforces this perspective. Xu (2025) emphasised that identity development was closely tied to teachers' embodied engagement and relational practices, suggesting that identity is continually performed, evaluated, and reconstituted in interaction.

In the observations of this study, each participant performed their teacher identity differently. Jean performed with an identity of professionalism and care. Her calm demeanour, organised materials, and clear explanations projected credibility and respectability, which were the traits highly valued in the Chinese academic setting. Her performance blended Western pedagogical ideals of communicative teaching with local expectations of teacher authority. Andy's identity performance emphasised empathy, collaboration, and approachability. Through informal interactions, humour, and shared reflection, he positioned himself as a mentor and co-learner rather than an authoritative instructor. His relational performance exemplified the emotional labour of teaching in a cross-cultural context, where connection often serves as a bridge for pedagogical engagement. Carl's identity performance combined professionalism with creative enthusiasm. His detailed planning and organised instruction reflected a disciplined work ethic, while his interactive and performance-based tasks projected an image of the energetic, innovative foreign teacher. His consistent praise, clear feedback, and fairness in assessment reinforced his credibility and authority. Dave's performance was the most theatrical. His humour, improvisation, and storytelling projected an identity of the entertaining and approachable foreign teacher, an image that both engaged students and reinforced cultural stereotypes. Yet beneath the humour was a strategic use of performance as pedagogy, embodying linguistic and cultural meanings to facilitate comprehension and connection.

Through these performances, the four teachers negotiated belonging and legitimacy within the institutional and cultural landscape of Chinese higher education. Their identity performances were not isolated acts but responses to students' expectations, administrative norms, and personal beliefs. In this sense, their professional selves were relationally constructed, that is, emerging at the intersection of personal agency and contextual constraint (Alsup, 2006; Varghese et al., 2005).

### ***Interrelation of the Three Dimensions***

Viewed holistically, pedagogical negotiation, cultural mediation, and identity performance are deeply intertwined. Pedagogical choices both express and shape teachers' identities, while cultural mediation provides the contextual and relational fabric through which those identities are enacted. For Jean, Andy, Carl, and Dave, the classroom served as a performative stage where professional values, cultural understandings, and pedagogical intentions converged. Their teaching practices illustrate that identity construction is neither static nor individual, but an evolving, socially situated process embedded in everyday pedagogical interaction.

Ultimately, the four NESTs' classroom scenarios underscore the complexity of identity work in transnational teaching contexts. Each teacher's approach reflected an attempt to balance authenticity with adaptability while remaining true to their pedagogical ideals while navigating the cultural, institutional, and relational expectations of the Chinese university classroom. In doing so, they demonstrated that teaching is not merely the transmission of knowledge but the performance of self within contextually negotiated spaces of meaning.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study examined how four native English-speaking teachers, Jean, Andy, Carl, and Dave, constructed and performed their professional identities through classroom practices in Chinese universities. Drawing on the lenses of pedagogical negotiation, cultural mediation, and identity performance, the findings revealed that their teaching was far from a static application of imported pedagogies; instead, it was an evolving process of adaptation, reflection, and relational engagement. Each teacher's classroom became a site where global teaching ideologies intersected with local expectations, prompting continuous negotiation between personal beliefs, institutional constraints, and student needs.

These findings contribute to the growing literature on language teacher identity by emphasising that identity construction is enacted through everyday classroom practices rather than abstract reflection alone. They also highlight the importance of recognising NESTs as intercultural practitioners who must continually negotiate pedagogical and cultural boundaries in their host institutions. Future research could adopt longitudinal or comparative approaches to further trace how these negotiations evolve over time and across institutional settings. Ultimately, this study showcases that teacher identity, particularly in cross-cultural contexts, is a dynamic performance of professional, cultural, and personal positioning, and also a continual act of becoming within and across classrooms.

### ***Pedagogical Implications***

The findings of this study carry several implications for teacher education and institutional policy in EFL contexts. First, the NESTs' classroom practices reveal the importance of preparing foreign teachers for context-sensitive pedagogy. Professional development programs should therefore include orientation modules on Chinese educational culture, classroom interaction norms, and learner expectations to facilitate more effective pedagogical negotiation. Second, universities should view NESTs not merely as language experts but as cultural mediators who can bridge local and global perspectives on English learning. Institutional support that encourages collaborative teaching, reflective dialogue, and intercultural exchange among NESTs and Chinese colleagues can strengthen this mediating role. Third, recognising classroom practice as identity performance underscores the need to value diversity in teaching styles rather than enforcing uniform pedagogical models. Institutions should create space for teachers to enact their professional selves authentically while engaging critically with local practices. By fostering environments that encourage mutual adaptation, respect, and reflection, both NESTs and their Chinese students can co-construct more meaningful and culturally responsive English learning experiences.

### ***Limitations and Future Directions***

Despite the depth of qualitative insight gained, this study has several limitations that should be

acknowledged. The data were drawn from a small number of participants within selected universities in China. While this allowed for a nuanced understanding of individual identity construction, the findings cannot be generalised across all NESTs in China or other EFL contexts. In addition, students' perspectives were not directly examined, which could have provided a more comprehensive view of the co-construction of teacher identity in classroom interactions. Future research could address these limitations by adopting longitudinal and multi-site designs to trace identity development over time and across different institutional contexts. Including local teachers' and students' voices would also enrich the understanding of how NESTs' identity performance and pedagogical negotiation are perceived and shaped within broader institutional and cultural ecologies. Such inquiries would further illuminate the dynamic and dialogic nature of teacher identity in transnational educational spaces.

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