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Teacher returnees from overseas programs in the west: a narrative study in Vietnam

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In this narrative inquiry research, our focus was on exploring teacher identity within the context of the expanding field of language teacher education and professional development. Utilizing theories of teacher identities to analyze data from interviews and reflections, we observed that conversations and stories were frequently shared in social settings, with overseas teaching practices being a substantial influence on their reflections. The findings indicated that the participants' teacher identities continually changed and dynamically evolved, particularly influenced by their engagement in overseas educational programs. Upon their return, participants expressed hope in maintaining their newly transformed perspectives on teaching and learning. In conclusion, we discussed further research directions and implications to underscore the ongoing significance of this topic.

KEYWORDS

teacher identity, identity construction, intercultural development, higher education, Vietnamese education

Introduction

International education plays an important role in the success of teaching and learning in local settings, especially given the internationalization of education, which helps create employable teachers with the possibilities of producing high-quality academic experiences in order to transform classroom goals (Duong and Chua, 2016; Vu, 2020; Cao and Vu, 2022; Chi and Vu, 2022; Nguyen and Ngo, 2022; Vu et al., 2022; Nguyen and Ho, 2024; Tran and Vu, 2024). It means that teachers and learners are aware of what is needed to enable meaningful construction of useful knowledge and skills pertaining to teachers' professional development and learners' future work (Vu et al., 2022). Thus, many countries' governments have established policies to support local teachers of various subjects, including foreign languages, in order to obtain international qualifications to further support the communities they serve (Tran and Vu, 2024). Despite its importance, recent research has seemingly failed to closely examine Vietnamese teacher returnees of overseas programs, especially their professional growth, career sustainability, and pedagogical choices. However, in light of the growing literature on teacher returnees' international experiences, skill enhancement, and language development as a result of their overseas program participation (Tran, 2019; Dressler et al., 2021; Kissau et al., 2021), additional insights would significantly support teacher returnees' reflective and reflexive accounts of their dedication to the teaching profession and the sustainability of incorporating their

transformed perspectives to succeed in their long-term careers (Gong et al., 2022), thus advocating their employment prospects and employability (Tomlinson, 2017).

In this paper, we elaborate on the experiences of two Vietnamese teacher returnees under the lenses of teacher identity and intercultural communication (IC), especially given the future outlook on different roles such as English teachers, English-as-a-foreign-language or English-as-second-language (TESOL/EFL) educators, graduate students, and novice researchers, similarly found in many previous studies (Vu, 2020; Gong et al., 2022; Vu et al., 2022). Thanks to the participants' long-term endeavors to grow personally, academically, and professionally, they have an opportunity to strengthen their forms of capital, including dispositions and competencies, in order to communicate productively in many intercultural settings (Vu et al., 2022). In other words, they observed closely to relate others in diverse settings where they are able to continuously transform themselves to become effective and appropriate intercultural speakers, rather than remaining as isolated individuals within culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

To enrich the literature on teacher returnees' identity, this paper seeks to understand the teacher identity to be evolving in response to the Vietnamese language teachers' engagement in overseas educational programs. This paper begins with the literature section which defines key definitions, relevant theories, and concepts. Then, it will address methodology that is used to answer the questions regarding the research purpose. Following this, findings and discussions will be presented right before the conclusion and implications.

Literature review

The current research posits that overseas programs would positively impact teachers' attitudes and readiness to transform their teaching practices upon return. According to the currently available research on IC, the held belief is that international and intercultural experiences are important factors that influence language speakers' general success. On the one hand, several works suggest that the overseas experience could develop linguistic competence and confidence in English language use (Christiansen et al., 2018), thus improving their academic growth and lived experiences in intercultural settings where English is used (Gray and Savicki, 2015). In addition, the teachers' agentic abilities closely decide their development of capital (Nguyen and Ngo, 2022) and observe attitudes in language use with sympathy and human-centered goals of teaching and learning (Miller, 2009; Kinginger and Wu, 2018).

Regardless, there are downsides to overseas qualifications toward teachers' success, which should not be neglected. Teachers in overseas programs are potential victims of cultural marginalization – being inferior in terms of context-driven roles and multi-faceted competences (Gong et al., 2022) and, therefore, being unnecessarily misinterpreted of their personal identities when they belong to minority groups with TESOL/EFL accents and expressions, or alternatively called, a “nobody” (Kettle, 2005). Also, contrary to common belief, these teacher returnees do not seem to be supported by national, institutional,

and communal officials (Juyoung, 2016) because their teacher colleagues' goals to develop important areas of knowledge (grammar, learning skills, or sympathy) are only to help their learners perform well on tests, rather than improve their actual language skills and communicative competence (Choi, 2005; Miller, 2009). Students of overseas programs have to re-learn the traditional culture of learning (Gill, 2010; Clark and Dervin, 2014). Aligned with marginalization, the examples are demotivating factors that potentially prevent teachers from educational and pedagogical innovations.

Teacher identity

Teacher identity has been richly researched in higher education, including in TESOL education. To access a general view of teacher identity, there are three works translated into realistic use. Firstly, van Lier (2004) presents an ecological perspective based on a lens of the *conceptual self*. This lens remarkably supports that individuals should be able to negotiate their identities in connection with a wide range of contexts, including social, institutional and political. Interestingly, van Lier (2004) further elaborates that teacher identity is likely to be facilitated by teacher agency, which could be simply defined as teachers' capability of “mak[ing] choices, tak[ing] control, self-regulat[ing], and thereby pursu[ing] their goals as individuals leading, potentially, to personal or social transformation” (van Lier, 2011, p. 390).

In the same vein, Varghese et al. (2005) highlights that teachers, if interested in sustainable development, are advised to seek to define who they are. However, the question still remains as to how they can define themselves in different ways in response to the contexts in which they live and work. As long as their understanding of themselves is reached, they become more proficient to know that their teaching identity is subject to change over time. Varghese et al. (2005) argue that teacher identity is multiple, changing, and conflicting. In parallel, Wenger (1998) also suggests that teacher identity is necessarily and continuously changing because it is impacted by the cultural, political, and social setting, also called as “multimembership” in “multicommunities” by Nguyen (2016). For example, we would say that teachers are known and understood empathetically are decided by the context-driven nature, characteristics, actors in the school settings, the departments/ministries of education that primarily drive major implementations and school policy, and the broader communities/societies. Therefore, we can conclude that teacher identity is likely to be initiated, challenged, or developed under the circumstances in which relevant discourses occur.

Furthermore, Miller Marsh (2003) considers that the ways in which teachers can form and negotiate their evolving identities are closely associated with “a pattern of thinking, speaking, behaving and interacting that is socially, culturally, historically constructed and sanctioned by a specific group or groups of people” (Miller Marsh, 2003, p. 9). To summarize, the aforementioned characteristics prove that the teacher identity of any English teacher is not naturally formed after birth; rather, it is formed through a continuous process and reflects their participation within relevant personal, academic, and professional settings (Nguyen,

2019). Consequently, comprehending teacher identity is crucial for understanding and facilitating the growth of language teachers (Pennington and Richards, 2016).

IC and intercultural sensitivity

In the field of TESOL/EFL education, which highlights the importance of incorporating culture in teaching and learning, intercultural competence should be a goal for learners (Liddicoat et al., 2003; Kumaravivelu, 2008; Bahna, 2017; Vu, 2021; Vu and Dinh, 2021). According to Byram (1997), intercultural competence is embodied by a set of attitudes, knowledge, and skills relevant to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural settings. TESOL and EFL teachers and learners hold different roles in both international and domestic contexts, and therefore are encouraged to maintain proficiency in intercultural competence because the globalized world contains English language speakers that are quite linguistically and culturally diverse (Kirkpatrick, 2017). Thus, there must be an English language that adequately addresses the growing demands of cross-cultural and intercultural communication.

Closely associated with intercultural communicative competence (ICC), intercultural sensitivity (IS) is a necessary component of, and correlated with ICC (Chen and Starosta, 2000; Vu, 2021). IS has been broadly recognized as a primary focus of many relevant researchers (Chen and Starosta, 2000). To avoid misrecognition and misunderstanding of the two terms IS and ICC, the former refers to individuals' abilities to discriminate and experience cultural differences, with the latter describing those that tend to "think and act in interculturally appropriate ways" (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 422). IS is the first component that needs to be developed to achieve intercultural competence because, without the proper attitudes to see cultural differences openly and enthusiastically, language speakers tend not to actively seek L1 and L2 cultural knowledge that leads to effective and appropriate behaviors in intercultural settings (Byram, 1997).

Despite the importance regarding teacher identity and the inspiration of IC in research on teacher education and teacher professional development, the up-to-date insights that these two endeavors intersect in supporting the overseas teacher returnees' career engagement in their home countries have not been sufficiently found in Asian educational contexts. Most prevalently, the study by Tan et al. (2022) finds that TESOL teachers, younger ones in particular, despite having foreign educational qualifications and international work experience, tend to have the have certain attitudinal difficulties, and at times stay behaviorally critical, in dealing with intercultural encounters due to their significant loss of agency and gradual reduction of legitimacy, especially when working with the international students in their home classroom contexts. Some other relevant studies (e.g., Yang, 2017; Gong et al., 2022) have showed the interconnection between teacher identity and ICC, suggesting that the TESOL teachers have second-language knowledge to manage (non-)verbal communication with students and necessarily get involved in the "social co-construction of identity through teacher-stakeholder interactions" (Yang, 2017, p. 525) in support of themselves professionally and their students. Interestingly, Gong et al. (2022) further suggest that the TESOL

teachers should be aware of their professional identities, besides sociocultural identities, to determine their effective decision-making processes in various socially-engaged teaching contexts. Therefore, more attention should be placed to the teacher returnees' critical reflections on how their lived engagement in overseas intercultural settings would challenge or develop their teacher identity in their home settings where teaching careers are based.

To fill this gap, this research is going to explore the teacher returnees' sources of capital to be formed and developed over time, which directly transform their teacher identity and sense of ICC. In response to that, our research questions is:

How do Vietnamese teacher returnees shape and leverage their teacher identity in their teaching careers following overseas educational programs?

Theoretical concepts and methodological considerations

In order to understand the teacher returnee participants' story-based international experiences and the impact on their intercultural teaching practices, we also decide to adopt Bourdieu's (1986) perspectives on capital, field, and habitus, hoping to demonstrate the participants' movement of thoughts, personal stances, feelings, and behaviors along their journeys in pursuit of internationally recognized higher education degrees. We endorse Bourdieu's stances on capital, field, and habitus to analyze the teacher participants' reflexive narratives.

Bourdieu (1986) refers to *capital* as "its objectified or embodied forms, tak[ing] time to accumulate [and] a potential capacity" (p. 241–242). Culture is a dimension to understand how social acts are constructed and why people behave in certain ways. As to what Bourdieu (1986) calls *field*, it is a central understanding of capital in relation to places where many forms of capital (such as economic, cultural, social, symbolic) are likely developed (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Engaging in the field requires an *actor's* involvement with the *habitus* of the majority members (including *dispositions, attitudes, beliefs, and practices*), which newcomers should be able to acquire (Mutch, 2006, p. 163). Meanwhile, the new members (also *actors*) also have many possibilities to accept the unquestioned rules or norms (*doxa*), by building a bridge to fill what has been missing in their present *capital* to fully match the needs of realities in these new communities (that Bourdieu called *illusio*).

Through methodological analyses, their stories reveal that they utilized their available capital to acquire additional forms of capital, thus fulfilling their needs of social connection. To be specific, their economic capital is instrumental in helping them discover cultural values (*cultural capital*) and expand their social networks (*social capital*) (Bassey et al., 2019). Both forms of capital are prerequisite ingredients behind achieving elite professional standing and teaching effectiveness, as it makes up *symbolic capital* and newly formed cultural capital (Moore, 2013). The stories uncovered below demonstrate that their participation in international education and intercultural vibes (*field*) would be able to facilitate their launch of innovation in education,

ranging from classroom to school activities. In accordance with Bourdieu (1986), this, in part, suggested the relatedness of all life, between the field in which the study participants' *field* of experience and their (surrounding people's) enhances forms of capital.

The study

Research context

In the context of a globalized world, English has gained widespread popularity as a foreign language in Vietnam, with ~90% of Vietnamese students studying it across all levels of education (Nguyen et al., 2018). Despite this, the English proficiency of Vietnamese students remains relatively modest, attributed to various factors. The primary factor identified is the shortage of qualified teachers (Le, 2020). The landscape of English education and teacher training in Vietnam witnessed a crucial turning point with the launch of Project 20220 by the Vietnamese government (The Government of Vietnam, 2008). Recognized as "the most significant and ambitious foreign language reform in modern Vietnam" (Ngo, 2018, p. 48), this initiative allocated a substantial 85% of its nine-trillion-dong budget to enhance the language proficiency and teaching methodologies of educators (Le, 2020). This noteworthy milestone underscores the acknowledgment of the profound influence that teachers exert on the academic success of their students.

In Vietnamese higher education and beyond, many academic and professional communities are established with a hope to actively engage the pre-service and in-service teachers who would benefit by exchange a wide range of related practice inside and outside classrooms. The communities are in both informal and formal forms. Particularly, the communities discussed in this study are both locally and internationally situated as part of the participants' journeys to enhance their awareness, understanding, attitudes, and skills needed to succeed interpersonally with others (Nguyen, 2016). The establishment of these communities are based on the common grounds, in terms of learning, teaching, and researching that would seem to match the heightened needs and preferences of community leaders and members (Nguyen, 2016).

In engaging with research participants, we place a significant emphasis on embracing diversity within institutional cultures, encompassing organizational structures, academic programs, student demographics, and student services. This study is viewed as a component of longitudinal research, delving into the teacher identity of Vietnamese overseas teacher returnees within Vietnamese higher education institutions and examining how various factors may shape or be shaped by their teacher identity. The focus of this research is narrowed to teachers employed at public universities in major cities of Vietnam, where diverse teaching and learning cultures exist. The selected institutions for this study should offer degree programs in both English language and non-English language majors, ensuring a range of perspectives and experiences are considered.

Research methodology

For this research, we employed a narrative inquiry approach to examine the way "people by nature live storied lives and tell stories of those lives, and narrative researchers described such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). To minimize impacts of how hard it is to adapt to the home-teaching settings, the use of narrative inquiry approach is justified because the personally-and-professionally reflective stories of teacher returnees are important in order for the relevant parties to be able to support teachers when they return to work and sustain their motivation and dedication to their teaching career (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). This approach is implemented to tackle shortcomings in fluency, pronunciation, and pedagogical skills concerning English language teaching. The aim is to enhance proficiency and accumulate teaching experiences (Richards and Farrell, 2011; Le and Phan, 2013). The formation of a language teacher, as defined by Pennington and Richards (2016), is viewed in relation to "the person's language background and language proficiency" (p. 11).

Research participants: We used our professional network to select those who are expected to present a lot of exemplary insights into the research phenomenon. The research participants should meet the requirements: (1) being returnees from overseas educational programs within 5 years in aiding our comprehension of their initial phase of acculturation within local teaching environments and the cultivation of intercultural competences with the goal of enabling effective and appropriate communication with students possessing a variety of cultural backgrounds, (2) working at the higher education institutions at the time of research, (3) being eager to voluntarily share international and intercultural experience from education, and (4) committing to joining the research till the end including reading and verifying research findings and finding interpretation. After the two rounds of recruitment, we had five voluntary teachers, one of whom then dropped out due to personal reasons and other two were unable to remain committed until the end of the project. We ended up with two teachers, namely, Nam and Minh. They agreed to sign the consent forms, allowing the use of data for research purposes and agreeing to have the Vietnamese-based pseudonyms to avoid revealing their identity. In what follows, there is some key information about their academic and professional backgrounds.

Nam: Nam graduated from a leading university in the South of Vietnam in 2013. Contrary to his family's expectations, he started a job as an English teacher, even though he received an undergraduate degree in the field of Business and Banking. He pursued teaching because he was interested in transferring his academic knowledge of customer service in the field of education. He served as a caring teacher and supported a wide-ranging group of students with diverse ages, language proficiency, ethnic backgrounds, and learning preferences. He realized his position as a teaching assistant while completing his undergraduate degree facilitated his intuition of how to communicate with his students (as recipients of educational delivery) and how to help them achieve maximum satisfaction from his teaching services. Over time, his acquisition of foundational teaching knowledge and skills made him consider a teaching degree to help him fulfill his

job. He was intrinsically motivated to learn overseas in one of the Western English-speaking countries, particularly considering the diversity of other English language speakers' perspectives on what is needed for effective and appropriate communication in English, and how language skills can be achieved by teaching and learning. He believed that dedicating time and financial resources would provide him with the most authentic knowledge, aligning with Norton's (2016) assertion about the importance of investing in the target language of the English-speaking countries to gain a broader spectrum of symbolic and material resources. This investment, according to Norton (2016), enhances the value of one's cultural capital and social power. This, ultimately, made him deeply understand barrier-free language communication so as to inspire his students' acquisition of language usage economically. Therefore, it meant that he and his students could apply the English language in a way that mostly benefited themselves in terms of language expression and mutual understanding.

Nam's retrospective meaning-making helps unfold the importance of their stories. Necessarily, their life stories occurred within relevant social contexts and set clear examples and sufficient evidence. The narrative inquiry seems to allow shared responsibilities between the participants and me, with the stories of the latter being informed in text by the former. However, we remained committed and dedicated to upholding the authenticity and accuracy of the narratives in relation to what the participants performed as a storyteller.

Minh: Minh was born in a middle-class family in the North of Vietnam. Minh's mom was a housewife with limited educational accessibility. Minh's early higher education experiences were primarily in her countryside home, until she attended graduate school in the UK and US between 2013 and 2016 with a full scholarship. Her teaching career began in 2020 when she was in her second-year as a Business-major student. Her initial responsibility was to support lesson review and exam preparation for the freshmen. Her teaching interests increasingly flourished after being able to work with her students in developing her communication skills. As a result, her language proficiency also grew, as the courses that she was responsible for were fully instructed in English. She decided to pursue overseas education as a way to improve her teaching competence and access international experiences. After 4 years in two countries, she was awarded a Master's degree in Teaching and Learning and a Master's degree in Business and Management. Upon returning home, she worked as a course leader and was a Faculty of English-for-a-Specific-Purposes studies at a public university in the Northern part of the country. At the time of research, she had more than 5 years of teaching experience (as a Lecturer of English for Professional Purposes) and 2 years of leadership responsibility.

Having a close connection with Minh allowed us to initiate this study with the hope to deliver a meaningful message about the development of female language teachers of English, and particularly how identity would be reinforced by parental perceptions and support. Minh's perspectives help enrich gendered roles in the field of TESOL/EFL because they observe a country of culturally and linguistically heterogeneous settings, with a vast array of cultural stereotypes, misconceptions, and misbeliefs about females' social roles and undermined contributions in

society. Therefore, considering the lived stories of Minh through sociocultural perspectives is a key step to better educational policy-making projects and implementations.

Data collection

Conversations occurred over time with the teacher participants (Nam and Minh, pseudonyms), with the help of our mutual colleagues, who have worked with Nam and Minh on many educational projects over the past 5 years. Via months of face-to-face interactions and collaborative opportunities in research, we identified that these teachers had stories that formed multilayered insights about the impact of international education on academic careers back home – Vietnam. Their engagement in international academic environments significantly shaped their philosophies and determined their teaching career endeavors, including impressive contributions to their working environments to make them more inclusive and equitable.

The stories were recorded using many sources, such as the participants' three 450- to 500-word reflective notes and five recorded 65- to 70-min informal conversations with each participant in Vietnamese over the span of more than 6 months. The reflective notes were based on a list of questions, including questions about their initial undergraduate program, language teaching experiences, graduate program engagement, and post-study teaching jobs. In addition to that, the conversations were about the sharing of their personal interests in teaching, personal beliefs and perceptions, teaching workplaces, opportunities and challenges in teaching, and career crisis moments.

We, including the two participants, agreed on the purpose of this research, supported each other to write and develop the stories, and confirmed the material presented by each other was accurate. Due to the close connection between the two, they had little difficulty inspiring each other to commence the story-telling process and encouraging each other to address unclear points of view when needed. Writing their stories began after they obtained sufficient understanding and expectations regarding the research purpose, question, and expected outcomes. We were available for support when something unexpected occurred and assistance was needed. Notably, the writing process was completed both collaboratively and individually, meaning that they spent time writing at the same time and location, as well as separately.

Data analysis and ethical considerations

We conducted our research in three stages, including the first (transcribing, reading and understanding), the second (reporting), and the third (checking) the interviews and reflective pieces. Then, thematic analysis was employed to label and place the codes accordingly (Braun and Clarke, 2006), a strategy for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the dataset while this approach captures significant aspects related to the research question and represents responses or meanings in the dataset. Cross-checked codes among the themes are important to see any repetitions, before being drafted in the first report. The report

was reviewed by the participants for accuracy and sufficiency, thus enabling us to remove or add any codes if necessary.

In our qualitative approach, we prioritized trustworthiness as a guiding principle to ensure the integrity of the data collection, analysis, and presentation in this paper (Guba, 1981; Korstjens and Moser, 2018). We upheld credibility, transferability, and confirmability through practices such as prolonged engagement, triangulation, interaction with experts, reflexive practice, and meticulous documentation of the research process, thereby enhancing the overall rigor and reliability of this study.

Findings and discussion

Nam: postgraduate programs that informed his professional teacher identity

From culture shock to cultural understanding

When Nam arrived in the US as his destination to pursue his Master's degree in 2016, the language use and culture came as a surprise to him. His held stereotypes related to English language expression were challenged inside and outside the classrooms. At the multilingual and multicultural US-based higher education institution, he was exposed to both locally-standard (according to the institution's requirements and regulations) and internationally-experimental (according to the universal norms and values) experiences, which helped him build habitus for the better possession of competence, skills, and dispositions to succeed in the target culture (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). He was required to follow strict academic standards in the program to ensure high academic performance, particularly in regards to writing quality. He was challenged by his professors and academic advisors to deliver work that met the expected standards. In opposition to his beliefs, Nam made a strong effort to alter his ways of thinking influenced by Vietnamese expressions. Even though he previously received high quality writing education, he had some difficulties and challenges in connecting and presenting his ideas in such a way that is normally perceived by native English speakers because speech and writing patterns vary across different cultures and language groups. Those challenges, at large, likely impact the intrinsic motivation of international students to pursue newer academic fields (Kettle, 2005). He made quick progress to overcome criticism regarding his writing quality. He took an active approach to utilize the writing center and other academic resources to develop concise, understandable, and critical writing competence. Despite these challenges, his active learning assisted him in identifying and learning acceptable quality writing, while at the same time maintaining his authentic identity and voice as a writer, thus informing his new third-culture understanding and participation in the field, similarly observed in research by Clark and Dervin (2014). An author's voice is reflective of their logic of thinking, understanding of issues, use of examples to demonstrate critical analysis, and grammatical utterances. These positively-emancipated self-expressions privileged him, instead of positioning himself as an inferior player in predominantly standard communities. This privilege was also a highlight of his experiences, which were posited as internationally experimental. For example, Nam mentioned in his second reflection that:

I trust myself a teacher, a thinker, a user of language. I deserve to have my thoughts fully expressed and recognized. I know that learning is continuous and allows me to become a better thinker in language use.

In the second part of his fulfilling learning experience, he shared that he inherited a sense of belonging to the multicultural communities. His cohort of colleagues and his neighbors taught him to respect that he was part of a growing community. Importantly, he gained confidence to share his cultural perspectives with honor. Enjoying with the "multi-memberships" in "multi-communities" (Nguyen, 2016), he was seen as enthusiastically eager to learn about the target communities' multilayered worldviews to develop a sense of similarities and differences. Awareness of the two-sided ideas was helpful in forming his readiness and willingness to take prompt action in treating the community's people more ethno-relatively, meaning to consider cultural differences as equally valued. Using his voice, he also reinforced others to actively understand that the English language can help connect people across the globe and to create a celebratory home to diversity. Therefore, by means of the two facets of his experience, he maintained his augmented sense of language use. Nam also developed the belief that to achieve successful communication, rather than differentiate who is better at using standard English, understanding how culture influences their use of the English language is more effective. Appreciating diverse worldviews, he appeared poised for success not only in applying his acquired language knowledge (e.g., grammar and learning strategies) but also in empathetically connecting with his students upon returning to teaching roles (Miller, 2009). Nam shared in his first reflective piece that:

I value my identities. I value my language expressions and highly recognize my impacts on other communicators surrounding me.

Teaching to learn and assessing to grow

Nam acquired a comprehensive understanding of the practical use of the English language. Interestingly, the English language has evolved in light of globalization. The English language is a powerful vehicle for people to connect, share values, and build a better world. Aware of the prestigious status of English, Nam hopes that his students would be granted opportunities to retain their authentic identities. However, it does not mean that his students were discouraged from becoming a better version of themselves, rather they were encouraged to feel empowered by existing differences (Miller, 2009). From the interview, he proposed that:

If language does not differ from one context to another, language is not itself. Language is a mirror of speakers' emerging and revealing identities. I hope that my learners should be proud of their decisions on how to language and communicate in any kind of language being learned.

Recognizing existing differences equipped him and his students with the dispositions and competencies to enhance their

learning and ability to make decisions, particularly. According to this finding, it could be understood that the acquisition and development of (cultural) capital was not isolated from the agentic abilities of Nam, but his connection to the field that allowed him to be flexible and selective in his growth of competence. This insight is consistent with previous literature (van Lier, 2004; Cao and Vu, 2022; Nguyen and Ngo, 2022).

More importantly, Nam pursued an assortment of curricular and instructional strategies to invite his students to become responsible for their learning journey and, more broadly, life success (Miller, 2009). His overseas learning experience contributed to his notions which were based on self-determining learners to pursue contextual resources and educational opportunities, confirming the impacts of past learning experiences (Lortie, 1975; Cao and Vu, 2022) on their current teaching practices. Fundamentally, his sense of ownership for learning was a determinant for mistakes to be attributed toward sustainable self-growth. According to Nam, he shared with his students that mistake-making is good to enable identification of their lack of attention to something important. This view allowed his students to revisit their ill-attended areas of growth that deserved to be filled. This teaching decision prompted him to become an active listener and responsible teacher of student growth (Miller Marsh, 2003). In the third reflection, he suggested that:

Learning is not learning without any mistakes. I considered my students as builder-makers, meaning that they self-designed their own learning based on their needs. With my support, their design became clearer and transparently helpful toward their achieved success.

Nonetheless, this does not imply that Nam ignored the standard curriculum and instruction required for common ground, but that collaboration with his students was an important addition to meet his students' needs, and made learning more accessible to growth. In short, these teaching skills enabled Nam to actively make decisions to grow professionally as a teacher – similarly observed in former research (e.g., Chi and Vu, 2022; Nguyen and Ngo, 2022), based on his comprehension and balance of his and his students' cultural capital.

Closely aligned with Bourdieu (1986) when it comes to how to capitalize on his learning opportunities through capital and habitus, Nam's active engagement to develop capital stood in close relation to his personal and professional development. Moreover, his pursuit of sustainable development in teaching and learning promoted interculturality within his school and his professional communities. Nam's approach to support intercultural campuses was constructive in different forms and formats. Utilizing the strength of his social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), Nam saw his students as critical helpers of marginalized student populations and support to those in need. He built a platform to support his students to establish institutionalized cultural capital, regardless of level, discipline, or student status, to enhance their sustained impact on the school's learning environment, moving beyond his exclusive emphasis on the grammar-translation method to evaluate learners' linguistic production and language proficiency using high-stakes examinations. According to Murray (2020), this approach does

not yield any positive outcomes for the development of learners' communicative skills. In the interview, he used to share that:

I truly cared my student's possessing empathy and energy to transform themselves and others. I thought that without proper self-improvements, they would not be able to take into consideration. What seemed to be a success of my students was their initiation of larger comfort zones to accept more challenges and sustainability of open-minded perspectives about how challenge can develop themselves personally.

This establishment was justified by the fact that he was sympathetic to the students' feelings and dire needs of being deeply cared for and well-heard (Miller, 2009; Chi and Vu, 2022). For the purpose of enhancing social relationships, he made good contributions to the symbolic capital, showing his positions and roles toward his students' development in areas of study and personal life (Tomlinson, 2017). As a result, his educational projects also shed light on the fact that he helped his students build connections and prepare skills for life. The many bodies that represent faculty and students have stayed in touch with Nam, considered room for change, and paid attention to his suggestions for improvements needed for sustainable development.

Minh: postgraduate program to transform her professional leader identity

Minh's understanding of language not to be used as a weapon in communication

Like Nam's experiences, Minh carried with her a rich diversity of cultural capital to seek better positioning in her target communities. As such, she started to study English in high school and was placed in an English for Academic Purposes class. She exposed herself to English-language reading and video material. She recalled that her early language learning experiences increased her desire to explore the world and to speak with English speakers, as Nguyen et al. (2020) describes "being blinded from the complex and changing reality of English" (p. 2). She tried to balance between being a fluent user of English with advanced grammar, as part of teacher identity (Le and Phan, 2013), and being an effective speaker of English with simple language, as part of their attempt to avoid being a fluent fool (Bennett, 1997). Although she had experience with intensive English grammar lessons in high school, she attempted to make herself comfortable using the English language as a tool to see the beauty of the world and widen her knowledge of culture in different parts of the globe. In the interview, she recalled that:

I started to challenge myself regarding how to see a language through different lens, including syntax, phonetics, semantics, and pragmatics. I soon realized that language is unfixed in response to contexts and purposes of use.

While maintaining an optimistic attitude about the importance of knowing and using English in an effective way, she figured out how to access the English language in an authentic manner, ultimately attaining the status of a qualified language teacher

(Bennett, 1997; Le and Phan, 2013). Specifically, she discovered that she needed to build her language proficiency in a way that ultimately made her feel confident to face uncertainties of interculturality, such as social events and communicative issues, as observed in Nam's case and corroborated by other studies (e.g. Miller, 2009). Therefore, when she had access to English language education as part of her higher education programs, she tried to approach English to be understood practically, while at the same time she tried to understand the content of what she was trying to read, where language and culture were always connected to form the meanings, as depicted by Liddicoat et al. (2003) and Kumaravadivelu (2008). She appreciated the authors' voices, but tended to think critically about how she could position her own opinions, thus making it important to create new knowledge and understanding instead of adhering to one translation and cultural interpretation. In the third reflective piece, she wrote that:

Culture is necessarily referred to language that uses culture to represent something. I acknowledged that language learning is more than a challenge of absorbing as many vocabs as possible, but an understanding of how language works differently in given contexts.

In that way, she respected a variety of communicative strategies performed by many people coming from vastly different backgrounds of language and culture, which is a core feature of intercultural speakers (Byram, 1997).

The overseas settings created opportunities for the teachers to examine their lived experiences quite differently, specifically their willingness to become more understanding and sympathetic (Kinginger and Wu, 2018; Cao and Vu, 2022; Chi and Vu, 2022). Similar to Nam's mindset growth, Minh also used English to appreciate the inclusion. Her overseas experiences reminded her of the need to identify cultural diversities and language variations, rather than being placed in a category of native/non-native speakerism or seen as coming from the inner/outer circle (Freeman, 2020). Therefore, she did not necessarily communicate with native English speakers, but she considered her overseas experiences as a means of allowing her to connect with people that speak different languages. Furthermore, while she had initially shared anxiety about being unable to communicate overseas, her optimistic attitudes and awareness facilitated her to overcome cultural barriers and celebrate her beliefs of lived experiences in other culturally heterogeneous countries.

Minh's lived experiences to become an understanding teacher of her students and her future children

Minh was born in a culturally heterogeneous country challenging the roles of women in family, community, and society. In Vietnam, women continue to be considered to be better off as housewives and to take care of their parents, husbands, and their children (Tsai, 2006). However, the overseas experience helped Minh see that women's roles are more than taking care of their family, and their wide-ranging roles include building societies in collaboration with other people. The experience proved to transform her capital in response to the setting (linked to social

capital), as she engaged in a diverse setting (Bassey et al., 2019). For example, Minh observed that the females can be active members of communities in organizational leadership positions to make important decisions for the specific organization, and even the country that they represent. In other words, looking into the construction of her identity, according to Miller Marsh (2003) and van Lier (2011), helps us more comprehensively understand what Minh shared in the interview that:

I took a position of continuous learning and active using regarding English language. The overseas learning seemed to build my sense of becoming. Taking advantage of overseas learning possibilities and lived experiences, I become a more critical thinker in what I see is good for myself and valuable for my students.

Minh's wide-ranging experiences showed her that her roles could be equally as important to males, in terms of deciding organizational strategies and decisions. With a perceived understanding of how to provide excellent educational services to the English-as-first-language speakers, Minh knew that she needed to be dedicated to her teaching in a way that met the expectations of her language learners, which shaped herself as a strategic teacher with well-planned teaching strategies, as discussed in relation to the formation of teacher identity (van Lier, 2011). It means she knew sufficiently what her students needed and how she could develop her students' language competence. In detail, she attempted to holistically design her teaching by incorporating her students' interests in and preferences of learning as well as her well-informed blocks of required knowledge in accordance to the program's syllabus and assessment requirements. Benefiting from her past learning experiences overseas, her sufficient use of the English language in the other countries reminded her of the need to incorporate realistic and innovative teaching pedagogies to yield positive learning outcomes. Similar to Nam's scenario, both educators exhibited the ongoing development of their teacher identity, influenced by sociocultural experiences, including educational and professional contexts (Miller, 2009). Particularly within the teaching profession, they displayed a proactive approach in taking on an agentive role for the comprehensive development of teaching qualifications and personal attributes as foreign language teachers (Bennett, 1997; Le and Phan, 2013). In line with previous studies, these findings consistently align with the notion that teachers possess the competence to effect essential changes for overall teaching quality and the future success of students. They do not stand alone but find fulfillment in their roles as shapers of their learners' future (Freeman, 2020; Cao and Vu, 2022; Chi and Vu, 2022). For example, with this perceived sense of responsibility and commitment, she gradually considered her students at the center of her job satisfaction and cared deeply about her students' sustained growth in language use as a goal of her teaching effectiveness. Having said that, she concluded in her interview by sharing that:

I love teaching. Teaching energized me and offered me lots of hope. I knew that any job needs people's patience and determination. Having them in hand, there soon is likely to be more possibilities for the professionals. It's true for teaching staff.

Conclusion and implications

In this paper, we report on the cases of two Vietnamese teacher returnees after engagement in overseas higher educational programs. Using the theory of IS, we hypothesize that the teacher returnees would incorporate intercultural experiences into professional careers by various means, measured empirically by a narrative inquiry. Bennett's (1986; 2017) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity proposes a necessary movement from ethnocentric to ethno-relative worldviews to understand that differences need to be characterized and fully respected in order to acknowledge and celebrate diversity. It is often a process of learning that happens in settings of teaching and learning in support of language speakers' developed intercultural dispositions and competencies. Examined through the teacher participant's stories of lived experiences, the findings suggest that the research teachers would be able to transform their perspectives, understanding, and incorporation of their diverse worldviews into their personal, academic, and professional endeavors (Tan et al., 2022). This underscores the significance of comprehending cultural contexts, whether local or international, as crucial elements in broadening their perspectives, facilitating effective decision-making processes, and fostering potential transformations (Vu, 2020; Vu et al., 2022). However, the change that teacher participants experienced was necessary, although it does seem fundamental to resist some changes in cases when their passion to retain identity was helpful. When these teachers became curious about adapting and integrating themselves into a new setting, they frequently revisited these changes (Vu, 2020; Gong et al., 2022).

Looking closely at the stories of these teachers, there are a number of new insights to be taken from Vietnamese teacher returnees. As a result of the overseas programs undertaken by the research subjects, both teachers were able to autonomously diversify their choices of action in all aspects of their career (as aligned with previous works by Yang, 2017; Vu, 2020), as well as personal interactions, communicative skills, academic priorities, and professional decisions (van Lier, 2004; Freeman, 2020). These aspects of development are descriptively and inferentially reflective of the perspectives of Bourdieu (1986) regarding the teachers' transformation of capital to transform their families, schools, and societies. Descriptively, capital construction and development are not solely based on the teachers' expectations, but socially mediated by their lived experiences with others in the target culture and back in their home country. This, again, confirms that capital – especially cultural capital – is dynamically changing and directly informs the teachers' identities (cf. Vu, 2020; Vu et al., 2022). Before the overseas program, the teachers (Nam and Minh) used to passively implement top-down policies, but their experiences helped to develop their sense of confidence and ownership when facing cultural differences (Chen and Starosta, 2000; Vu, 2021).

The above transformations of the two teacher returnees also encouraged them to revisit their predetermined perspectives on how to teach English to their students in a more sensitive manner, which explicitly informs the IC skills of these teachers as they effectively understand the language as a form of cultural representation (Chen and Starosta, 2000; Hammer et al., 2003).

Therefore, they would rather pursue their teaching careers as critical builders of knowledge bridges to connect their students to the world of English speakers, and thus exchange their cultural knowledge and expand their social connections (Bahna, 2017). Secondly, in terms of the inferential perspectives, the overseas programs seems to be purposefully facilitate their growing awareness of identity construction in close association with their changing and transforming of capital (especially cultural) (Wenger, 1998; Varghese et al., 2005). In the case of Nam, he could better see himself as a more responsible and caring teacher who would consider students as the center of teaching pedagogies, and consider himself as a culture creator for his school campus in making an inclusive and fair learning environment for all (Gong et al., 2022). As for Minh, she tended to perform her leadership role in a more intercultural way and was able to take care of her colleagues in a strategic way. For example, she strategically communicated with her co-workers to strive for sustainable impacts on professional development over time. We found from our findings that their identities were developed as a result of their experiences, and impacted not only their classrooms but also their communities.

This study is not without limitation. The two teacher returnees could not allow for the overgeneralization of international education to impact the teacher returnees in general regarding identity formation and teaching practices. Hence, aligning with the contemporary emphasis on English language education's alignment with graduate employability, whether in teaching or learning contexts (Tran and Vu, 2024; Tran et al., 2024), we encourage future researchers to extend this scholarly inquiry. Specifically, we recommend a broader inclusion of teachers from various disciplines and contexts to provide concrete insights into theory and practice related to the internationalization of higher education. This approach aims to tackle a diverse range of complex challenges within the realms of teaching and learning, with a particular focus on foreign language education (Tomlinson, 2017; Tran et al., 2024). Alternative methodologies are encouraged to encompass a broader spectrum of perspectives that unveil teachers' stories, such as ethnography and narrative inquiry, to delve into the power of storytelling in strengthening their commitment and dedication to the teaching profession (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the University of Languages and International Studies. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants. Written informed consent

was obtained from the individuals for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

NTV: Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. TMHT: Writing – original draft. TTHL: Writing – original draft.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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