Boundary brokering for cross-cultural professional learning in international school contexts

Chun Lai\textsuperscript{a,}\textsuperscript{*}, Zhen Li\textsuperscript{b} and Yang Gong\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong; \textsuperscript{b}The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Although much research has been done on the internalisation of education, issues related to inter-cultural professional learning, especially in the school education context, remain underexplored. This study examines the potential of boundary brokering in facilitating cross-cultural professional learning in an international school context. This article reports the qualitative findings from an interview study with seven non-ethnic Chinese language teachers who resided at the borders of Chinese and western communities of practice on their boundary brokering experience in bridging the different norms of being and practice in the Chinese teacher community and the western communities in international schools in Asia. Interview responses from the participants show that the participants’ cultural brokering generated critical and eclectic perspectives and practices, and reshaped the power landscape in the workplace. At the same time, their cultural brokering was shaped by the interactions among power relations within and across communities of practice, social suggestions on cultural brokering and the boundary brokers’ self-positioning. The findings suggest that cultural brokering could serve as a potential teacher professional development tool to foster reciprocal learning across culture borders. The complex network of influencing factors at play suggests that, in order to facilitate positive cultural brokering, it is necessary to adopt a systemic approach that underscores resetting valued skills and expertise within and across communities, creating a positive school culture that encourages reciprocal learning and managing individual teachers’ brokering mentalities and capacities.

\textbf{Keywords:} brokering; cross-cultural professional learning; internationalisation of education; teacher professional development

Introduction

The current discourse on internationalisation in education has focused predominantly on the various economic, political and socio-cultural issues related to internationalisation in the higher education context (Montgomery, 2014; Lubbers, 2016; Leung & Waters, 2017). Limited research has been done to explore its implementation in the school education context (Egekvist et al., 2017) and its potential for the enhancement of intercultural understanding and skills for personal and professional development among students and teaching staff (Knight, 2004; Thompson & Hayden, 2012). The internationalisation of education, in many cases, involves the
interaction of culturally diversified student groups and/or teaching teams, and hence is full of cultural dissonance in the norms of being and practice. The dissonance, when bridged, may stimulate critical reflection of assumed norms of being and knowing, and induce hybrid educational practices and understandings (Knight, 2011; Feng, 2013; Keevers et al., 2014; Montgomery, 2014). Thus, educational contexts that feature internationalisation, such as international schools, hold potential for student and teacher professional learning across different socio-cultural communities of practice (Hoare, 2013; Starr, 2014). Previous research has examined how internationalisation has enhanced intercultural understanding among students (Ryan, 2013), but whether and how internationalisation may induce intercultural professional learning has remained an underexplored research terrain (Caruana & Montgomery, 2015; Knight & Liu, 2017).

This study aimed to explore how intercultural professional learning could be fostered in the internationalisation of education through examining the observation and experience of a group of non-ethnic Chinese language teachers from the USA, UK and Australia, working in international schools. These teachers were both influenced by their own cultural inheritances and versed in Chinese cultural and educational norms, and were working as members of a Chinese language team in western ideology-dominated schools. Different communities within the international schools might hold different norms of beliefs and practices. As these teachers resided on the borders of different communities, they could potentially play an important role in connecting these communities and bridging the differences in their practices. Examining their cultural brokering experience could help shed light on the nature of cultural brokering and the enabling and constraining factors thereof in the cross-cultural teaching context in general. Specifically, this study asked two research questions:

1. What shaped these non-ethnic Chinese language teachers’ cultural brokering?
2. Did cultural brokering generate professional learning?

Although these teachers represented a small population in the international schools, their insights are particularly valuable in that they are both insiders and outsiders of the communities they are affiliated with. Their unique positions enable them to make astute observations and reveal in-depth insights into the issue.

Research backgrounds

Internationalisation of education

Different definitions of the internationalisation of education have been proposed in the current literature. In the higher education context, Knight (2003) defines it as ‘the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, function or delivery of post-secondary education’ (p. 2). In the school education context, Heidemann (1999, as cited in Egekvist et al., 2017) conceptualises it as ‘the transformation process that takes place when transnational cooperation has clout at school’ (p. 8). Both definitions suggest close interactions among diversified national, community and institutional cultures in such education contexts (Starr, 2014).
International schools are a key dimension of the internationalisation of education at school level (Hayden, 2011). They are characterised by daily cross-cultural interactions among culturally diversified teaching teams that consist of expatriate and local teachers who differ in the economic, symbolic and cultural capital they bring to the school community (Bailey, 2015; Bunnell, 2017). The complex power relations between teaching staff members make international schools abound in cultural dissonance. Various forms of boundaries that divide, hierarchise and stratify the key players are often observed in these education contexts (Caffyn, 2013; Caruana, 2016; Lai et al., 2016). The hierarchical power landscape might induce the uncontested assumption of the superiority of the ideology, discourse and practices of some communities over those of others (Montgomery, 2014; Lubbers, 2016; Leung & Waters, 2017).

Nonetheless, the cultural diversity in international education contexts also brings potential for reciprocal learning across cultural borders and may contribute to the development of intercultural understanding and appreciation and cultural hybridisation (Knight, 2004; Keay et al., 2014). To realise the potential, it is essential to bridge the community boundaries within the schools so as to redefine the power relationships and achieve cultural pluralism without hierarchy (Howe & Xu, 2013; Keay et al., 2014; Leung & Waters, 2017). To explore the issue of community boundary brokering, we looked into Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of communities of practice for insights.

Boundaries and brokering

Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced the concept of communities of practice to explain how learning is a social practice that involves increasing participation and engagement in a ‘community of practice’. They referred to a community of practice as a group sharing common interests, concerns or passions, interacting regularly to contribute to a shared domain of human endeavour. Shared practices define the core competences within a community of practice, and participation in any community of practice involves the negotiation of these competences.

Shared practices naturally generate boundaries, because different communities of practice have ‘different ways of engaging with one another’ and ‘different histories, repertoires, ways of communicating and capabilities’ (Wenger, 2000, p. 232). Wenger (1998) hence introduced an associated concept of boundaries, to capture the often unspoken but significant differences that differentiate and separate communities of practice. Akkerman and Bakker (2011) explicitly defined boundaries as ‘socio-cultural differences between practices leading to discontinuities in action or interaction’ (p. 133). In education, the boundaries could exist in the linguistic, cultural and pedagogic dimensions (Leung & Waters, 2017).

Boundaries are ‘in a constant state of becoming’, being shaped and reshaped by the power relations between individuals and institutions (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009, p. 728; Leung & Waters, 2017). Boundaries divide communities of practice and bring potential dissonance and misunderstanding that pose hurdles for interaction and learning. But at the same time, they are also potential ‘generative space(s)’ where differences across communities of practice can be bridged and new insights
and unusual learning can arise (Wenger, 1998; Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Leung & Waters, 2017). Wenger (2000) regarded boundaries as potential assets of social learning that may induce ‘innovative learning’ (p. 234). According to Akkerman and Bakker (2011), boundary crossing may activate four ‘dialogical learning mechanisms’ (p. 150). It could induce a renewed look into how the practices of one community relate to those of another (identification). It could provide effective means of cooperation, such as translation of practices, to facilitate effortless movement across different communities (coordination). It could engender a heightened awareness of the conventions and assumptions of the practices of different communities, plus an expanded view and an appreciation of diverse practices (reflection). And it could stimulate fundamental changes in practice and foster the development of hybrid practices and their integration into daily practices (transformation).

These dialogical learning mechanisms can be mediated and facilitated by brokers, namely people who traverse communities of practice and introduce elements of practice from one community to another (Wenger, 1998). The tasks brokers engage in involve transferring some elements of one practice into another to establish connections across communities of practice through ‘processes of translation, coordination and alignment between perspectives’ (p. 109). Successful brokering brings learning into the transfer process. Brokers can fulfil their brokering task by translating and making use of boundary objects (artefacts, discourses or shared processes that support connections between different communities of practice), and by initiating and facilitating boundary encounters (interactions among people from different communities of practice) (Wenger, 1998; Star, 2010; Nordholm, 2016).

Boundaries and brokering in teacher professional learning

Research on teacher education has found that boundary brokering activities of various education players, such as school administrators, university supervisors, and teacher researchers, did help induce and facilitate teachers’ professional learning (Montecinos et al., 2015; Akkerman & Bruining, 2016; Bakx et al., 2016; Nordholm, 2016). Such learning involves broadened, critical and renewed insights into teaching practices and their associated philosophical rooting, and the development of the competencies, multiple perspectives and identities needed to cross multiple communities of practice (Wenger, 2000; Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Akkerman and Bruining (2016) conceptualised teacher professional learning as exhibiting at multiple levels: the interpersonal level, which involves the construction of shared understanding and practices and their associated philosophical rooting, and the development of the competencies, multiple perspectives and identities needed to cross multiple communities of practice; and the intrapersonal level, which involves changed positioning and practices within individuals.

In addition, some shaping forces of boundary brokering have been suggested. These include the dispositions and capacities of brokers (Williams, 2013; Bakx et al., 2016), the configuration of brokers (Akkerman & Bruining, 2016), the nature of the boundary objects (Nordholm, 2016), the recognition and support mechanisms for brokering (Akkerman & Bruining, 2016; Nordholm, 2016) and the community culture, such as openness or accessibility and alignment with community missions and needs (Bakx et al., 2016). Specific to boundary crossing in cross-cultural teaching contexts, the cultural values held by the communities and the power relations within
and across the communities have been found to influence the outcomes of cultural brokering (Wang, 2014; Leung & Waters, 2017).

The study

Within international schools, there are diverse communities of practice characterised by cultural dissonance and discontinuity of thoughts and practices. The multiplicity of communities makes possible the ‘generative and creative potential of borders’ (Leung & Waters, 2017, p. 1276). Intense cross-cultural interactions and engagement in this education context may maximise the possibility of cross-boundary learning (Wenger, 2000). How to harness the generative possibilities at the borders and facilitate trust and reciprocity across borders is a pressing issue to tackle (Howe & Xu, 2013; Keay et al., 2014; Leung & Waters, 2017).

International schools in some east and southeast Asian countries, such as Hong Kong, mainland China, Taiwan and Singapore, contain a significant body of Chinese teachers. Cultural boundaries have been reported to exist between the Chinese teacher community and the western communities at these international schools (Ryan & Slethaug, 2010; Lai et al., 2016). Chinese teachers, despite within-group variations, have been found to share common educational ideologies and practices that are different from those shared by their counterparts from the USA, UK and Australia (Moloney & Xu, 2015; Zhou & Li, 2015; Liu & Sayer, 2016). These communities are partly culturally shaped and partly contextually reinforced due to the socio-political hierarchies at these international schools and in society generally. This study elicited the accounts of a cohort of non-ethnic Chinese language teachers from the USA, UK and Australia to examine their boundary brokering experience in bridging the Chinese language teacher community and the western communities in international schools in Asia.

Methodology

Research context and participants

Seven non-ethnic Chinese language teachers, teaching at different international schools in east and southeast Asian countries, were recruited for this study. The international schools they worked in primarily served expatriate families and had large populations of non-local students. The schools’ enrolment size ranged from 1,000 to 1,600 students, and the percentage of local students in these schools ranged from 8% to 52%. These schools adopted non-local curricula such as US, Canadian, French, British and International Baccalaureate (IB). Because English was the medium of instruction in these schools, most of the teaching staff members and the senior leadership team were of western background, predominantly from the USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Chinese Mandarin was either taught as a compulsory or an optional language at these schools. The Chinese language teachers were the minority, averaging less than 10% of the schools’ teaching staff (ranging from 3% to 18%). The Chinese language teams at these schools consisted primarily of native Chinese speakers, and the participants in this study were often the only non-native Chinese speaker in the Chinese language team at their school.
International schools in east and southeast Asia were chosen because they have a body of Chinese teachers working in a western ideology-dominated schooling environment. The non-native Chinese language teachers were recruited because of their extensive knowledge and personal experience with the educational ideologies of their cultural origins, plus their training and professional experience with Chinese educational practices. Their in-depth understanding of, and personal experience with, both cultural and educational practices—and their Anglo-western origins and affiliation with the Chinese teaching profession—meant they had the potential to become cultural boundary brokers, the focal research issue in this study. Due to the small number of this cohort of Chinese language teachers at international schools in the region, the participants were recruited through a snowballing method. Email invitations were sent to Chinese language teachers of Anglo-western backgrounds known from professional contacts to elicit their voluntary participation. These participants in turn recommended other teachers in their professional networks who met the recruitment criteria. Consent was obtained prior to the interviews being conducted.

The seven participants were predominantly experienced Chinese language teachers who had extensive teaching experience in international schools in different parts of Asia. The participants were in their 30s to 50s. Three participants were from the UK, three from the USA and one from Australia. None of them had Chinese ethnic origin. All of the participants, except one who went to China during their teenage years, had K-12 education in their home country and studied Chinese as a second language in an undergraduate programme at university in their home country. Five of the participants had further educational or living experience in China or Taiwan, and all of them expressed a strong appreciation of the Chinese culture. All of them had more than 7 years of experience teaching Chinese in international schools, with the exception of one intern and one relatively new teacher who had 3 years of teaching experience. Three of the participants were female and four were male. Four of the participants had served or were serving as grade-level coordinators for Chinese subjects or were leaders of the Chinese team at the time of their interview.

Data collection and analysis

Because cultural brokering involves intentionality and reflexivity, open-ended interviews were conducted to register the participants’ subjective perceptions and accounts. The interviews were loosely framed around several general topics to give the interviewees sufficient room to speak freely about their experiences and feelings, to elicit their voices in greater detail and allow new questions to arise and co-constructive meaning-making to take place through the conversations (Mishler, 1986; Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). The interviews elicited information on the participants’ educational and work backgrounds, their perceptions of themselves as non-ethnic Chinese teachers at the school, the differences (if any) they perceived across the Chinese community and the communities of their cultural origins at the school and their evaluation of these differences, the influence of their Chinese colleagues on them and their experience influencing colleagues of different cultural backgrounds (if any). Individual interviews were conducted with each participant in their native language, English. Each interview lasted around 1–1.5 hours.
The interview guide was emailed to the participants the day before their interview. Prior to the interview, each participant was asked to take a few minutes to write down some phrases that described their identity at the school. The notes were used as a prompt during the interview. During the interview, the interviewees were given the freedom to elaborate freely on their perceptions and experiences, and the interviewers only asked follow-up questions for clarification and elaboration. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face at a place chosen by the participant, or online through Skype. In a few cases, follow-up emails were sent to elicit further elaboration or clarification of issues discussed during the interview. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and double-checked for accuracy by one researcher. The researchers conducted the interviews together, and immediately after discussed the interesting points emerging. Field notes were taken to record observations and the researchers’ immediate reactions. These field notes were used during data analysis to help generate the coding categories.

The interview data were hand-coded and thematic analysis was carried out. The data were analysed through a cyclical and evolving process of coding and recoding, and the themes were derived inductively from the data (Saldaña, 2015). The first cycle of analysis consisted of attribute coding and structural coding. The research questions and the literature on boundaries and brokering informed the structural coding, which cut the interview data into small data segments of different organisational categories (e.g. identified cultural boundaries, forces that influenced cultural brokering, outcomes from boundary crossing, etc.). For each data segment, data that were relevant and important to the study, or struck the researchers as interesting, were coded using the original language of the interviewees. A second cycle of analysis was then conducted to assess the utility of the codes generated from the first cycle of coding, and to recode, categorise or discard codes accordingly. Similar codes were aggregated into analytic categories. For instance, phrases such as ‘it’s not all bad’, ‘combine the best practices of both’ and ‘what is really great about western ideas, and what is really great about Chinese ideas’ were grouped into the analytic category ‘critical and eclectic attitudes’. The initial coding of the analytic categories was then compared across interviewees to find repetitious ideas and supporting evidence and to cross-validate the categories that emerged. Analytic memos during the data coding and the field notes taken after the interviews were used to facilitate data coding and categorisation (Maxwell, 2005). Pattern coding was then adopted, in reference to the literature on boundaries and brokering, to develop the major theoretical categories that revealed the relationships and interactions between the analytic categories. Pseudonyms are used when presenting the results.

Findings and discussion

The participants in general expressed a conscious awareness of their cultural brokering potential. The following interview extract from William is representative of the participants’ mentality: ‘Culturally, I’m kind of in between and I feel like that’s my position in the school. A lot of times people view me as that bridge, that in-between person’. William and others felt that familiarity with, and proximity to, different cultural practices
placed them in the unique position of bridging the cultural and ideological borders of the Chinese community and the communities of their cultural origins. Four participants explicitly mentioned the word ‘bridge’ when talking about their identity at school.

*Cultural brokering was shaped by power relations and positioning*

The participants’ accounts revealed two aspects of cultural brokering with different levels of success: they reported limited pedagogy brokering in terms of establishing understanding of, and respect for, different educational practices across communities; however, their communication brokering was much appreciated by both communities for facilitating effective communication and enhancing interpersonal relationships.

**Imbalanced power relations, social suggestions and self-positioning constrained pedagogy brokering.** All of the participants reported attempting to bridge pedagogical understandings and practices in one way or another. On the one hand, they recounted efforts to bridge their Chinese colleagues’ understanding of the pedagogical practices of their cultural origins. The participants discerned a pressing need to enhance their Chinese colleagues’ pedagogical considerations ‘from the perspective of a second language learner’. They described how they helped Chinese colleagues to value student perspectives through setting more realistic expectations for the students and adjusting resources and instructional practices to students’ needs and interests. On the other hand, they reported bridging some colleagues’ and parents’ understandings of some Chinese pedagogical practices by justifying the value of these practices, as reflected in the following account from Sue:

> I always make sure to tell the principals that although sometimes Chinese teachers’ ways of doing things are a little bit traditional, it’s not all bad. I told them ‘you need to look for the good stuff, too. You can’t throw the baby out with the bathwater’.

The participants’ pedagogy brokering potential was welcomed by their western colleagues. The participants spoke of being *hailed by the admin [the school principal] as their first foreigner in the Chinese department*, being welcomed as ‘someone who [has] come in with a pedagogy that is engaging, not textbook-driven nor test-driven’ and being exalted as ‘somebody in that department [Chinese department], with whom [they] may be able to talk a little bit more deeply about curriculum and things like that’. William reported being imposed the role of ‘infiltrator’:

> Some homeroom teachers were saying things like ‘finally we have somebody on the inside’, because they were a little disconnected from the Chinese department at times… They were saying, ‘We finally have a spy there, and we can make these connections more strongly with the Chinese department with your help’.

The social positioning of the participants as infiltrators and individuals who possessed superior pedagogies in an old-fashioned department arose from the dominant discourse in the schools on the inferiority of Chinese pedagogical practices. Such a mentality was reflected in the following quote from Sue:

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The Head of School wanted to know how to support their Chinese teachers. They felt that Chinese teachers were quite traditional and Chinese classes were like ‘sit still and listen to the teacher’; and then the kids very much disliked Chinese classes.

Thus, the participants were recognised by their western colleagues as people who held cultural brokering potential because of their shared pedagogical beliefs and practices. They were expected to bring changes to the Chinese team by ‘introducing some new ideas’ and ‘bringing different atmosphere to the team, probably a different approach’.

Unfortunately, the participants’ socially positioned roles as change agents to improve the status quo of the Chinese team, coupled with the imbalanced power landscape within the schools, limited the nature of their pedagogical brokering. Several participants shared their frustration over being powerless to impact their western colleagues’ pedagogical thinking. Sue lamented the lack of respect for the Chinese teachers:

The Chinese teachers already have a high level of respect for the western counterparts. But what’s missing is the high level of respect from the western teachers for the Chinese teachers. A lot of times, westerners look down upon Chinese education or traditional style.

When William tried to explain to his western colleagues how some Chinese teaching practices were both fun and enjoyed by the students, and highly effective at helping students achieve success in learning, his colleagues were close-minded and blindly rejected these practices. William quoted some colleagues as saying ‘Well, that’s a very Chinese way of doing it. We’re not going to do that’. He said he felt powerless to enhance his colleagues’ acceptance of some Chinese practices: ‘That’s an area where I hadn’t had really any impact on them’. Despite the participants’ cultural brokering efforts, they reported little evidence of their western colleagues’ acceptance of, and willingness to incorporate, Chinese practices to enhance their own teaching. Little professional learning at the interpersonal level took place, which was only evident in the activation of the psychological process of coordination where the school community projected some acceptance of the co-existence of some Chinese language teaching practices at the school. The limited learning across communities of practice intertwined with the power relations at the schools, as different communities of practice may carry different values and currency in the ‘landscape of practices’ and ‘learning and power imply each other’ (Wenger, 2010a, pp. 188–189). The participants’ accounts revealed that their brokering efforts were thwarted by the sweeping discourse of Chinese practices being traditional and in need of renovation and by the lack of school ethos, driven by the senior leadership, of reciprocal learning across communities. The lack of respect for Chinese teaching practices and the unofficial powers embedded in social discourses and practices, namely the western-superiority discourses in the schools, shaped the imbalanced power relations at the schools. Consequently, the participants’ cultural brokering has been socially positioned towards inducing changes in the Chinese team alone, which, to a large extent, limited the potential of cultural brokering in reshaping the power landscape at the schools. Thus, school ethos and positioning with regard to cultural brokering play an essential role. Positioning brokering purposefully as facilitating cooperation among different actors encourages learning for all parties and may bring lasting benefits (Collins-Dogrul, 2012).
participants’ accounts revealed that positioning cultural brokering with the ultimate goal of stimulating and supporting mutual learning across communities of practice, and building a school culture that appreciates and rewards reciprocal learning, are critical to realising the professional learning potential of cultural brokering at the interpersonal level and driving shifts in the power equation at the schools.

Moreover, social recognition and power hierarchies within the Chinese community were also reported to influence cultural brokering. Maria reported a limited sense of belonging to the Chinese team at her school; she said she was not valued by her Chinese colleagues due to her different pedagogical beliefs and practices. She claimed she was perceived as not being serious due to her play-based teaching practices:

*I think other Chinese teachers think I’m just down here playing. And I’m not really doing anything here except singing and playing games. We are not serious. I’m not serious. I’m not guessing. They’ve said that.*

The lack of recognition and acceptance from her Chinese team restrained Maria from turning her understanding of valuing student and parent perspectives in curriculum and instruction into brokering resources. At one point, she tried to make suggestions to her Chinese colleagues on a possible reconsideration of curriculum mapping based on findings from a survey she conducted on parental expectations of Chinese learning. She was turned down flat by the Chinese team leader: ‘*The administration shut that down and said they were not going to do that. So, you know, it’s in theory limited to what I could do as one person from this side*’. Thus, limited social recognition from the Chinese team constrained Maria’s cultural brokering potential.

More importantly, social recognition and power hierarchies were found to interact with the brokers’ self-positioning in shaping their motivation for, and engagement with, pedagogy brokering. The contrasting stories of William and Matthew best illustrate this interaction. William and Matthew both had varied work experience before becoming Chinese language teachers, and both reported musical expertise as part of their identity. However, they exhibited different profiles in using their music and cultural expertise for knowledge brokering: William actively used his musical expertise to create innovative Chinese teaching resources as boundary objects for pedagogy brokering; Matthew did not utilise his musical expertise at all in his work. This difference had something to do with their social and self-positioning within the power landscape at their school. Matthew was constantly reminded of his non-native-speaking status at his workplace; he was very curious about different Chinese dialects, but was told by his Chinese colleagues to focus more on improving his Mandarin pronunciation instead. This contributed to a strong sense of job insecurity and limited agency in assuming the brokering role. Heightened awareness of the deficiency in his Chinese language proficiency persuaded Matthew to maintain a low profile: ‘*I wouldn’t apply for any leadership position in Chinese until I’ve achieved native speaker proficiency. Then I can hold my head up*’. In contrast, William was valued by the director of Chinese at his school for his potential to bring new ideas and practices, such as integrating songs into Chinese language teaching. He also had a strong Chinese identity. He chose the word ‘egg’ (yellow inside and white outside) to describe his identity metaphorically, and described himself as a ‘*Chinese person trapped inside a white person’s body*’. Correspondingly, he felt a strong emotional connection with the Chinese community: ‘*In getting
to know me and realising how Chinese I am, I guess, in a way we’re family’. This self-imposed identity as part of the Chinese ‘family’ made him feel less bothered by his non-native-speaker status, and actively engage in cultural brokering. Thus, whether a potential brokering resource could drive cultural brokering was determined by the socially imposed power within the community and the boundary broker’s self-positioning.

The interaction of power relations and the brokers’ social and self-positioning were also found to shape the specific strategies the participants adopted in cultural brokering. The Chinese community regarded the ability to speak standard Chinese as a basic qualification of a Chinese teacher. The participants reported being told things like ‘You need to speak standard Chinese, not Chinese with foreign accents’. This reinforced non-native-speaker identity and the tight top-down control made Matthew take a rather condescending approach to adopting innovative pedagogical practices: ‘I especially enjoyed teaching low bottom set students. Traditional ways of teaching wasn’t working with them anyway. So, I was given freedom to do a bit more of that teaching approach’. Similarly, Jessie spoke about how being non-native Chinese speakers meant they were only accepted by the Chinese community as being suited to teach foreign but not native-speaking students. Concern over her non-native status made Jessie shift her brokering strategies away from serving as a role model of Chinese achievement and more towards being a model of metacognitive and cognitive language-learning strategies for her students. Sue had studied Chinese since junior high school and had received a Bachelor’s degree in Chinese from a well-known Chinese programme, which included a 1-year immersion experience in China. Her strong Chinese language background helped her gain a firm foothold in the Chinese teaching community in her home country: ‘I was like the regional expert because my Chinese was much better than the other teachers in the area’. This socially imposed and self-embraced language expert identity shaped her brokering orientation towards a modelling role connecting non-native-speaking students with the Chinese language: ‘I was like a model... I could model for them that it’s possible to achieve quite high levels’. Then she moved to China and worked in different international schools. The experience in China made her rethink her language expert identity: ‘After I moved to China, I started to realise that I was not an expert. Chinese was not my native language. So, I shouldn’t be regarded as a language expert’. This revised view of her Chinese language proficiency made her rethink her professional identity:

I started to ask myself ‘What’s my role there? What can I offer?’ Then I realised that I’m like a coach. Just like a basketball coach who observed the students’ development and then gave them advice based on that.

This new self-positioning made her shift the angle of brokering:

So, I changed. After realising this point, I started to tell my students every year: ‘My native language is not Chinese. So, I’m not an expert in the language. But I can help you and guide your learning. I’m like a coach. I may make mistakes in the language, but what you can get from me is how you can learn better’. So, I’m facilitating their learning.

The change in Sue’s perceived power within the Chinese community prompted changes in her self-positioning, which in turn shaped the shift of her brokering
strategy from being a role model for the students to serving them as a coach. Thus, the native/non-native dichotomy was found to be a major force that shaped power relations within the Chinese language teaching community, due to the Chinese teachers’ deep-rooted emphasis on the knowledge system and the language teachers’ linguistic expertise. The undervaluing of student perspectives and language teachers’ educational expertise, and the underscoring of teachers’ disciplinary knowledge, placed the participants at peripheral positions in the community and discouraged them from using their cultural capital to engage in cultural brokering.

The stories of the participants revealed that both official and socially imposed status-based sovereign powers (i.e. perceived inferiority and insecure status due to the boundary brokers’ non-native-speaker identity and the ‘top-down’ curriculum within the Chinese team) and the unofficial powers embedded in social discourses and practices (e.g. the undervalued play-based pedagogies by the Chinese team) were at play in shaping the participants’ agency and ability to utilise potential brokering resources for cultural brokering. Concurring with previous research findings (Allen, 2002; Vähäsantanen, 2015), the power relations within the community of practice shaped how the participants positioned themselves professionally at the schools, which influenced their cultural brokering agency and strategies. But at the same time, the participants’ self-imposed cultural and professional identities also worked to alleviate or augment the impact of the status-based sovereign powers.

Social suggestions facilitated uncontested communication brokering. Besides attempting to bridge the differences in pedagogical practices, the participants also recounted efforts to bridge communication breakdowns between colleagues from different cultures. The participants reported that their western colleagues felt ‘separated from the Chinese colleagues’ and compared speaking with their Chinese colleagues to ‘talking to a brick wall’. Sue recounted that her principal ‘felt that the Chinese teachers all stuck together and the Chinese teachers didn’t mingle very much’, and her principal asked her for help: ‘Tell me what I can do to try to reach out to the Chinese teachers’. The participants shared several success stories on how they helped enhance the interpersonal relationships at their schools by bridging relevant linguistic and cultural knowledge and boosting their colleagues’ confidence and capacity to engage in cross-cultural communication. For instance, William tried to bridge his Chinese colleagues’ frustration over not being able to understand the jokes of western colleagues: he used western humour when interacting with his Chinese colleagues in Mandarin and helped them understand the insider jokes. Sue used her ‘not-so-perfect’ Chinese to communicate with her Chinese colleagues, which motivated some of them to remove concerns over their imperfect English and venture out of their comfort zone to communicate with colleagues in English.

The participants reported receiving recognition for enhancing effective communication. Their western colleagues valued them for being comfortable ‘go-to’ persons when information or clarification was needed. Joe noted that his colleagues and parents always came to him for explanations of puzzling Chinese practices: ‘I’d be a bridge in some way if things came up... and they [western colleagues and parents] might feel more comfortable asking me about it instead of going straight to the Chinese teachers’. The participants also explained how their Chinese colleagues asked them to help clarify some
western pedagogical ideas, such as interpretations of a curriculum guidebook. Joe described how he helped his colleagues understand the professional development materials they found challenging, and helped them understand the main points of the principal’s speeches during school assembly: ‘They were like coming back and trying to figure out what it was all about. Part of it was the educational ideas and part of it was the English language’.

The socially imposed roles as conveyor and clarifier of information had something to do with the participants’ diversified linguistic repertoire and their understanding of the mentalities of colleagues from different cultures. Their ability to adjust messages to the recipients’ points of view allowed them to explain issues more clearly and convincingly. William found that when his western colleagues had issues with the Chinese department, they would always reach out to him rather than to other Chinese colleagues. He reasoned: ‘They [the western colleagues] figured that I might explain it clearly to them in a way that they could understand’. This point was echoed by Sue, who remarked that her credibility and persuasive power might have come not only from the linguistic and cultural edge, but also from the emotional connections:

*The westerner colleagues, particularly the western leaders, can hear me more than my Chinese colleagues... They hear what I had to say in a different way from if they hear it from a Chinese leader.*

Similarly, the participants reported that their understanding of the concerns and logic of their Chinese colleagues helped them facilitate positive change in their schools. For instance, William’s school introduced student agency as a school-wide initiative. However, the initiative was not welcomed by the Chinese team because it went against their deep-rooted belief in teacher control. William related how he felt the examples given by the senior leadership were too extreme, and that this might have sparked off resistance from the Chinese team. Thus, he worked with other coordinators within the Chinese department to determine ‘how [they] could present this in a way that is acceptable to [the Chinese colleagues]’. They ended up adopting a ‘progressive’ and ‘middle-ground’ approach to the initiative, which he found his Chinese colleagues were more receptive to.

Thus, the participants experienced an uneven pedagogy brokering process, which was fraught with issues of power hierarchies within and across the communities and the brokers’ self-positioning. In contrast, their communication brokering was less contested and was facilitated by positive social suggestions and their unique brokering capabilities.

*Cultural brokering generated changed mindset, practices and power relations*

The participants’ interview accounts revealed positive changes generated through the brokering process. They detailed introspective psychological processes that involved identification, coordination, reflection and transformation as proposed by Akkerman and Bakker (2011). William spoke about how traversing cultural communities at school made him reflect deeply on the nature of pedagogical practices in the different communities:
Western pedagogy focuses a lot on the social development of the child, and the emotional development of the child, and how to cater to those things. And in a traditional approach, especially in a Chinese environment, a lot of times that’s ignored because they’re just trying to deliver the material and help that student to be a high achiever.

This heightened awareness made him contemplate some practices anew: ‘In my opinion, in western cultures sometimes they go too far, and so all they are worrying about is “Oh how our little Johnny [is] feeling”’. This critical reflection motivated William to think about ways to bridge different practices by creating innovative and eclectic practices that selectively combined the strengths of different practices, such as turning dictation into an interactive activity. Thus, for William, his cross-cultural experience initiated the identification of different practices, keeping both sides in mind, which then encouraged further reflection and transformation. Jessie shared a story of how coordination led to reflection and transformation in her case. Jessie was an intern teacher at the school. She observed her Chinese colleagues arranging the desks in straight rows and tried that approach herself. She found it did have some benefits for behavioural management, since ‘they [students] are all looking at the front’, and felt that it ‘can work with the younger ones as they are hard to manage’. She commented on how coordination could induce professional learning:

You are forced to question. You can’t just go along with what your instinct from your culture say, you know. You are presented with different styles. And I think that’s pretty healthy actually.

Thus, boundary crossing activated varied ‘dialogical learning mechanisms’ that led to changed perceptions.

These learning mechanisms were found to generate critical and eclectic stances towards different practices and open mindsets within the brokers. A common theme arising from the interview responses was a heightened awareness of, and engagement with, critical analyses of different practices, as the following quote from Maria suggested: ‘I’m trying to see what is really great about western ideas, and what is really great about Chinese ideas’. Similarly, Sue pointed out: ‘The western approaches aren’t 100% good, and the eastern or traditional approaches aren’t 100% bad. So, we need to look at how to bring the best of both. That is, how to combine the best practices of both’. For George, constant critical awareness and analysis of the different ways to practice had made him believe strongly in the ‘middle-path’ principle: ‘[I] always try to be in the middle and take what I thought to be the good points from this side and that side’. George highlighted that this criticality did not come naturally from exposure to different practices, but rather from in-depth engagement in—and critical study of—these practices.

Cultural brokering was also found to generate hybridised pedagogical practices as boundary objects that ‘blend[ed] the traditional approaches and these new innovative approaches’, practices that maintained the core of the existing Chinese teaching practices but were packaged in a more appealing fashion. George and Maria retained the Chinese profession’s primary focus on vocabulary and grammar instruction, but introduced meaningful tasks and student choice to make the learning experience more responsive to the students’ needs and interests. Joe and Matthew created fun instructional videos and songs that aligned with the unit topic and content. The participants found that generating and sharing instructional resources was a powerful
way to bridge the existing cultural gaps. In their view, it could not only enhance the affective and social appeal of Chinese language instruction, but also implicitly reshape some Chinese colleagues’ mindsets at the same time. Joe pointed out: ‘If you are creating stuff, then you would have had a lot of influence [on the Chinese colleagues]’. Thus, as hypothesised by Akkerman and Bakker (2011), traversing different communities of practice activated introspective psychological processes within the participants. The psychological processes then fostered the development of a critical and eclectic approach to the diverse ideologies and practices, which was crucial to enhancing reciprocal learning in the international education context (Howe & Xu, 2013; Keay et al., 2014; Bovill et al., 2015).

More importantly, these boundary objects and brokering activities were found to potentially reshape the power relations in the schools. Sue’s school started a bilingual initiative which involved transitioning some Chinese and English teachers from being specialist language teachers to bilingual classroom teachers. Sue observed that working together on a common platform that allowed for, and demanded, both sides to exercise their strengths helped reset the power relations and expertise geometries, making both sides ‘more open to learning together’. Sue concluded that boundary encounters that enabled ‘the Chinese teachers to use their strengths’ were helpful to bridge cultural gaps. The shared problem spaces where teaching staff were expected to discuss problems and collaborate on innovations with no presupposed ideological expectations helped engender equal and open dialogue and empower positive cultural brokering. As Wenger (2010b) pointed out, learning across boundaries requires ‘some intersection of interest’, ‘open engagement’, ‘commitment to suspend judgement’ and ‘room for multiple voices’ (pp. 126–127), and boundary objects are the catalyst for such learning. William concurred with the power of boundary objects to give different cultural practices equal status:

> Finding those ways we can link the two cultures together and show how they support each other and neither one is better or worse or has better ideas or better methodologies, but how we can bridge them together to make it even better.

The participants also shared instances where cultural brokering helped alleviate communication hurdles caused by the power hierarchy. Joe found that ‘Chinese colleagues were less willing to speak directly to the principal [about] what they really feel like’, and ‘didn’t share and didn’t contradict with what the leader would say’. He often found himself entrusted with his Chinese colleagues’ true thoughts: ‘Several people [Chinese colleagues] say to me that somehow because I’m not Chinese, it made it easier for them to share or say what they really think’. Accordingly, he served as the spokesperson for the Chinese team when they negotiated pedagogical practices with the senior leadership in his school, and helped the Chinese team gain more power in the school. It is noteworthy that cultural brokering not only generated critical and eclectic mindsets and hybridised pedagogical practices among the boundary brokers, but also helped reshape the power hierarchies in the work context. Thus, engaging school staff in cultural brokering experiences might be a promising direction to pursue. At the same time, as the participants highlighted, the cultural brokering experience would be less powerful if it were mere provision
of information or exposure. Rather, eliciting in-depth critical examination of different practices is essential.

Conclusion

This study elicited the cultural brokering accounts of seven non-ethnic Chinese language teachers from the USA, UK and Australia who resided at the boundaries of different communities of practice in international schools. Although this study was exploratory in nature and based on the self-reporting of a small number of non-ethnic Chinese language teachers, it nevertheless shed some light on the nature of self-initiated cultural brokering in the international school context. It showed that cultural brokering experiences had the potential to generate hybridised educational practices, and critical and eclectic attitudes towards differences, and may reshape the power landscape in the school context. The findings suggest that cultural brokering, as a potential professional development tool, is a means to achieving ‘cultural pluralism without hierarchy’ (Gay, 1993, p. 103) in an education context. Boundary encounters that respect different expertise and educational practices are essential. Schools may consider encouraging staff members to develop hybridised pedagogical practices or resources that maximise and complement the affordances of different practices, and to actively analyse and test boundary objects. Such activities might help foster an equalising and empowering cultural brokering experience and bring about the desired attributes of cultural pluralism. Teacher preparation programmes may also consider creating shared, equalising problem spaces of cross-cultural collaboration that demand and respect the expertise and cultural capitals of different communities. Such initiatives may engage teachers in open discourse and enhance their understanding of, and respect for, each other’s ideologies and practices.

This study further found that cultural brokering orientations and strategies were shaped by the complex interactions between power hierarchies defined by recognised and valued expertise both within and across communities of practice, the brokers’ self-positioning and brokering capacities (e.g. the ability to view cultural and educational practices through different cultural lenses) and the social suggestions brokers perceived from the school administrators and peer teachers. The findings suggest the necessity of a systemic approach to facilitate positive cultural brokering. This approach underscores the need to reset valued skills and expertise within and across communities. Critical discussions on what constitutes the core expertise and skills of teachers in different disciplines, especially among the Chinese language teaching community, are much needed so as to elevate the appreciation of different pedagogical expertise and boost teachers’ receptivity to cultural brokering from the ‘others’. This approach also underscores the importance of creating a supportive school culture that encourages reciprocal learning, and managing the brokering mentalities and capacities. School senior leadership teams may work on developing a school ethos of reciprocal learning across cultures. Schools may also encourage brokers to actively uncover and utilise their skills to create boundary objects and, more importantly, support and value the creation of such objects. Teacher preparation programmes may want to utilise the brokering capacities of brokers by sharing the brokers’ unique
observations and viewpoints of different cultural and educational practices and borrowing the language these brokers use in explaining different practices. By adopting these culturally responsive viewpoints and language, teacher training programmes might be more likely to succeed in guiding teachers to develop a critical stance towards their accustomed practices and opening their minds to different practices.

This study was based on the investigation of a unique group of boundary brokers in international schools, who taught Chinese language in the Asian context. The socio-cultural and linguistic particularities of the working context might have biased some of the research findings on limited pedagogy brokering. The power hierarchies and their influence on cultural brokering could differ among disciplines (e.g. Chinese math teachers in international schools) and diverse socio-cultural contexts (e.g. non-ethnic Chinese language teachers in schools with dominant Chinese ideologies). The phenomenon of cultural brokering may also differ in the case of school staff who may not necessarily reside at the boundaries of the communities, but have a stronghold in their discipline and take the initiative to engage in cultural brokering (e.g. to examine a native Chinese or western teacher’s cultural brokering of other practices within their community). Moreover, this study reported cultural brokering in international schools with dominant expatriate student enrolment, a form of transnational education with intense intercultural interactions and engagement. Whether similar generative powers and shaping forces are to be found in other forms of transnational education is an open question. Thus, further research is needed to examine cultural brokering in different contexts to help shed light on the complexity of this issue in transnational educational contexts.

References


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