Exploring identities of novice mainland Chinese teachers in Hong Kong: Insights from teaching creative writing at primary schools across borders

Abstract: This study, drawing upon data triangulated from interviews, classroom research reports, and school documents, sheds light on how cross-border teachers from mainland China to Hong Kong construct and negotiate their identities when teaching English creative writing. Using identity control theory (ICT) this study examines discursive and complex identity development and reveals contextual and interpersonal factors that hinder identity construction among teachers of English creative writing. Factors include isolation from local colleagues, failure to integrate into the host community due to cultural and linguistic differences, standardized school instruction, heavy workloads, students’ distrust, and students’ low English proficiency. Cross-border teachers were found to experience negative emotions including stress, anger, and unease due to failed teacher identity verification in a new land. This study contributes to theoretical knowledge of ICT, suggesting inaction and secondary emotions as outcomes of the incongruence between the meanings of identity standard and input. Relevant theoretical and pedagogical implications are also discussed.

Keywords: creative writing, cross-border teachers, English, identity control theory, teacher identity

1 Introduction

As a result of globalization, teacher mobility across borders (i.e. teachers who move between countries or within national borders to places with linguistic backgrounds different from their own) has become increasingly common.
Cross-border teachers may face insurmountable challenges when adapting to the host community given the need to teach students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Gu 2011). Prior experiences in learning and teaching, varying perceived norms and values, and the culture and practices inherent to their home regions may influence teachers’ identity construction and pedagogical practices (Hollins 2008). Due to the frequency of international migration, research on cross-border teachers’ experiences and identities of is an international issue that warrants close consideration.

Teachers moving from mainland China to Hong Kong are a unique group deserving further attention. Recently, an increasing number of students from mainland China have begun studying at Hong Kong universities, including via the Postgraduate Diploma in Education, a program that trains primary and secondary teachers to teach in local Hong Kong schools; mainland students can seek employment in Hong Kong primary and secondary schools upon program completion. In Hong Kong, 1997 marked the end of 150 years of British colonial history. As a Special Administrative Region (SAR) empowered by the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong has retained its economic and political system, providing Hong Kong with unique linguistic and cultural circumstances. Although Hong Kong became part of China, the key condition of the SAR handover—“one country, two systems”—set a border between Hong Kong and mainland China. Although Hong Kong belongs to Chinese society, the region still possesses culturally distinct elements owing to its unique past and complex present circumstances. Teachers who were raised and educated in mainland China but later studied and taught in Hong Kong are defined as cross-border teachers in this study. Cross-border teachers from mainland China differ from local teachers in Hong Kong, despite both being ethnic Chinese, because cross-border teachers were raised in a different social and cultural environment and may possess distinct cultural identities. Based on the authors’ limited knowledge, although an increasing number of studies have been conducted to explore the identities of mainland Chinese teachers in Hong Kong (e.g. Gu 2013), identity development among English creative writing teachers who moved from mainland China to Hong Kong has not been investigated.

Creative writing has garnered growing attention from the education sector in recent decades thanks to an emphasis on developing students’ creativity, cultural awareness, and sentimental maturity. Creative writing generally encompasses written works calling for writers’ creativity, such as novels, poetry, epics, and screenplays. Creative writing lessons in Hong Kong schools are unique because each lesson is not designed as an independent subject but rather as a module in the conventional English curriculum for primary and secondary schools. English language teachers in Hong Kong have to teach language and
nurture students’ creativity through English lessons. However, an array of contextual constraints, such as students’ use of English as a second language (Tay and Leung 2011; Tung et al. 1997) and passive learning customs (Lim 2001), pose challenges for teachers and elicit complex emotions while teaching creative writing. Investigating creative writing teachers’ identities (e.g. professional, cultural, political, and individual) that they either claim or are assigned has been recognized as key in understanding English writing teaching and learning (Varghese et al. 2005). Teacher identity, which is shaped by beliefs, attitudes, experiences, and cultural norms (Beijaard et al. 2004), is fluid, contradictory, and fragmented for cross-border teachers attempting to socialize with local counterparts (Gu 2011). Thus, novice cross-border teachers’ transformation and negotiation of identities in teaching English creative writing deserves scholarly attention given its contextual and educational uniqueness.

In light of obstacles stemming from social and cultural discrepancies, novice cross-border teachers’ identity development involves a complex process, which must be conceptualized to obtain better understanding. Identity control theory (ICT) is a model that conceptualizes the identity construction process by operating as a self-regulating control system (Powers 1973). The theory considers contextual elements (e.g. interpersonal relationships, institutional regulations, and the social environment), relates self-identity to individual behaviors and emotions, and enables researchers to generate a conceptualized model to delineate individuals’ identity development. Essentially, ICT simplifies complex contextual, emotional, and behavioral elements to promote a systematic understanding of identity development. This study implements ICT as an analytical framework to break new ground in explicating the underlying elements in cross-border creative writing teachers’ dynamic and complex identity construction.

2 Literature review

2.1 Identity as discourse, practice, and activity

As noted in Beauchamp and Thomas’s (2009) review, teacher education should be framed in terms of teacher identity development rather than the acquisition of specific skills and techniques. Teacher identity, referring to what a teacher should do or become, has been described as volatile, multiple, and mediated in the teaching process (Beijaard et al. 2004; Teng 2018). Identity construction is a discursive and ongoing process, influenced by various factors such as
biography, experiences, context, culture, and individual activity (Larson 2006). Identity research has suggested that identity is realized through three predominant dimensions, namely discourse, practice, and activity (Miller 2009). First, different language characteristics are associated with different identities; people can adopt specific language and speech patterns to shape their identities (Hall et al. 2010; Teng and Bui 2018), otherwise known as identity in discourse (Lee 2013). Second, identity is enacted and operationalized through the daily tasks and practices in which people engage (Gee 2004), referring to identity in practice (Teng in press). Lastly, identity in activity involves identity formation as “a mediated activity in sociocultural terms, which sees humans using tools and cultural artifacts to mediate their relationships with the world” (Lee 2013: 332).

Informed by the notions of identity as discourse, practice, and activity, teacher identity is defined in this study based on how teachers represent themselves through language use; their practices as teachers of English creative writing; and positioning themselves in the social, political, and historical contexts of their work. Cross and Gearon (2007) argued that teacher identity construction is a process of forming one’s self in relation to a set of social practices and shared cultural experiences. During this process, teacher identity formation and development may be contested, challenged, or thwarted because such identity construction is associated with “the self-image and other-image of particular teachers” (Varghese et al. 2005: 39) and social-contextual factors, such as teacher education programs and schools (Teng 2019).

2.2 Studies on writing teachers’ identity

Teacher identity has become an increasingly popular topic in education research (Teng 2018). Farrell (2012) revealed three main clusters of English language teachers’ role identities: manager, acculturator, and professional. The manager role denotes teachers’ attempts to control actions in the classroom; the acculturator role refers to teachers’ assisting students in becoming accustomed to life outside school; and the professional role indicates teachers’ dedication to and seriousness in their work. These categories have provided general insights into the identities of English language teachers, for which identity construction should be viewed as complex, dynamic, and often irrational (Beijaard et al. 2004; Tsui 2007).

Despite the trend of exploring English teachers’ identities, studies focusing on English writing teachers remain limited. Focusing on the identity of English
writing teachers in Asian contexts, You (2017) argued that writing teachers tended to enact their identities with an emphasis on native speaker norms. These teachers provided meticulous feedback on students’ written errors and expected students to compose error-free writing. Implication from You (2017) was that English writing teachers should construct a multilingual, transnational identity and design teaching materials, writing tasks, and pedagogical strategies in a multilingual context. Considering the dynamicity of identity construction, Lee (2013) examined the development of writing teacher identities, shedding light on changes within writing teachers’ identity construction after taking a writing teacher education (WTE) course and the factors that influenced the development of teacher identity. Lee (2013) found that the WTE course as an external factor was critical to English writing teachers’ identity construction. Teachers’ capability and willingness to reflect on their practices in writing class were similarly important to identity development. Contextual factors (e.g. rules, community, and division of labor) could hinder the formation of teachers’ identities. Later, Ngo (2018) employed Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory to investigate cognitive development of a Vietnamese English writing teacher. Ngo (2018) found that cognitive shifts were complex and non-linear and discovered dialectical correlations among these changes. Four major shifts included: first, the teacher perceived writing as a process in which students should understand different genres of writing and appreciate form- and content-focused feedback; second, the teacher expanded her view of student writing, displaying greater tolerance to grammar mistakes and paying more attention to potential communicative issues; third, the teacher found textbook-based writing tasks to be irrelevant and overly demanding, so she adjusted her teaching accordingly; and fourth, the teacher saw writing as a response to an exam prompt. Although Ngo’s study (2018) was categorized as a cognitive study rather than identity research, findings offered valuable insights into how English writing teachers perceive themselves at different stages of their teaching careers. These perceptual changes can serve as reference tools when investigating the identity development of English writing teachers.

The reviewed studies shed light on English writing teachers’ identity construction. Nonetheless, the preceding literature has failed to reveal a comprehensive picture of English writing teachers’ identity construction and development. More specifically, the emotions English writing teachers experience when enacting their identities have been overlooked (Teng 2017). Studies have tended to conduct phase-to-phase comparisons (e.g. Lee 2013; Ngo 2018) to manifest changes in identity construction rather than considering identity a process wherein English writing teachers construct, negotiate, and moderate their identities.
2.3 An analytical framework: Identity control theory

This study employs ICT to reveal the identity development of cross-border teachers of English creative writing in Hong Kong. It aims to examine the process of constructing identity as an English creative writing teacher and its effects (teachers’ emotions and reactions) on English teachers. ICT has been used to investigate the identity development of groups of people who experience challenges related to self-identity in new or foreign situations. Nach and Lejeune (2010) proposed ICT as a theoretical framework to trace how information technology influenced users’ identity. The study highlighted four strategies that people used to cope with technological challenges to self-identity, including acting on the situation, adjusting the self, cathartic practices, and distancing. Nach and Lejeune (2010) further contended that these strategies may lead to four identity categories: reinforced identity, redefined identity, ambivalent identity, and anti-identity. Carter (2014) applied ICT to explicate how emotions stabilize gendered identities and perpetuate social structure, facilitating an understanding of gender differences. These studies convey the high applicability of ICT in elucidating identity development and emotions in social contexts. This model provides flexibility for researchers to either focus on specific components (e.g. a particular emotion or identity) when evaluating the correlation between emotion, identity, and situation; or employ a macro-perspective to obtain a clearer understanding of identity development within a group of people. ICT encompasses a wide range of perceptual and contextual factors that contribute to individual identity construction and conceptualizes the complex and discursive process of identity construction. This theory enables scholars to obtain a comprehensive picture of how a specific identity is shaped in a specific context while illuminating a person’s struggles, emotions, and attitudes in that situation to offer implications for possible coping strategies.

Hence, the present study employs ICT (Burke and Stets 2009) as an analytical framework to examine cross-border teachers’ identities as English creative writing teachers and their reactions to situational dimensions in their teaching. This theory proposes that an individual enters a feedback cycle once he or she activates an identity in a situation, as shown in Figure 1.

This cycle consists of four important components: identity standard, input, comparator, and output. Identity standard denotes the meaning of an identity assigned by others and hence constitutes identity meanings tied to social roles and membership in groups (Stets and Burke 2000). Input refers to identity meanings of how one perceives oneself in a situation; these meanings are often influenced by how others see the individual along with various contextual factors. The individual conceives self-meanings through reflected appraisals...
based on social values and other external factors. Comparator indicates the process through which an individual compares identity meaning from input with those from the identity standard and registers the discrepancy between them. Emotion in ICT is a product that reflects the degree of difference between input meanings and meanings in the identity standard; the congruence of input and standard meanings contributes to positive emotions, such as satisfaction and self-esteem (Cast and Burke 1999), whereas incongruence of meanings (i.e. an error generated by the comparator) elicits negative emotions such as distress, anxiety, and depression (Burke and Stets 1999). The result of this comparison is output, referring to the phenomenon in which an individual addresses incongruence and maintains congruence between input and standard meanings using various behavioral and cognitive strategies (i.e. coping responses) (Burke 1996). Strategy use aims to realign self-perceived identity meanings and meanings in the identity standard to reach a balance that elicits positive emotions (Burke and Stets 2009). Congruence between meanings encourages an individual to behave uninterrupted. Burke and Stets characterized the process of identity operation in relation to emotions as a form of identity verification in which perceived meanings about oneself in a situation correspond to the meanings in his or her identity standard.

Figure 1: Identity control theory.
ICT is appropriate for the present study because cross-border teachers who moved from mainland China to Hong Kong, a culturally and politically different region, often encounter challenges in workplaces and classrooms. Teachers educated primarily in mainland China and seldom exposed to Hong Kong’s education system and culture may not adapt to the region’s working and living environment due to unfamiliarity. They must cope with contradictions between the two cultures, communication barriers with local colleagues, and students’ numerous learning problems. More specifically, teachers may face workplace discrimination due to conflict between Hong Kong and the mainland. Due to these challenges and others, teachers’ identities may undergo complex development, which could lead to emotions and coping responses. ICT, a framework that includes contexts, identity, and emotions, helps us systematically conceptualize teachers’ identity development in this context.

2.4 Contextual background: English creative writing in Hong Kong

Creative writing have attracted greater focus from educators in recent decades given the need to nurture students’ creativity. Proponents of creative writing in language education view writing as a cognitive process (Benton et al. 1984) rather than simply an exercise in spelling, syntax, and grammar (Odell 1980). The integral connection between creativity and writing was found to be based on the presumption that writing is a manifestation of creativity (Lin 1998). Thus, writing education may be perceived as a means of fostering students’ creativity. Creativity and idea generation also comprise an effective way to teach writing skills (Cheung et al. 2003). Creativity has been regarded as an essential part of language skill development (Tse and Shum 2000), leading language teachers to serve as procedural facilitators who employed creative writing strategies to “enable students to retrieve, combine, and synthesize experiences, information and images in novel ways” (Cheung et al. 2003: 78).

In Hong Kong, English creative writing remains in a nascent stage. According to the Curriculum Development Council of the Education Bureau of Hong Kong (2017), creative writing is a form of arts education in English curricula, through which students are expected to acquire skills including narrating, imagining, characterizing, and expressing emotions. English creative writing is a module instead of an independent school subject. The education system in Hong Kong is examination-oriented and competitive (Kennedy 2002). Students and parents tend to attach importance to subjects required for examinations; thus, English creative writing has traditionally been overlooked. In
addition, the stagnancy of English creative writing is tied to contextual restraints. Tay and Leung (2011) pointed out that Hong Kong students’ linguistic repertoire represented a concern in terms of teaching and learning creative writing. One of the greatest obstacles is that English is a second language for most residents of Hong Kong; thus, students may not be interested in learning this type of writing. Regarding the practices of creative writing classes in Hong Kong, a study by Cheung et al. (2003) explored the teaching of creative writing in primary schools and indicated that most English teachers preferred assigning a topic to students. Half of teachers offered specific assistance to students, such as instructions on the theme, written structure, and relevant vocabulary. Lim (2001) observed that students in a creative writing class tended to follow an authoritative figure who identified their writing weaknesses and provided advice on corrections. In short, the teaching of creative writing remains unsophisticated in Hong Kong, and creative writing teachers may face a variety of challenges.

2.5 Gaps to be bridged and research question

The present study, drawing upon ICT, aims to bridge the gap of understanding underlying elements in cross-border English creative writing teachers’ dynamic identity construction. This study enriches our understanding of teaching English creative writing and of the complex process of constructing an identity as an English creative writing teacher who has shifted from one culture (e.g. mainland China) to another (e.g. Hong Kong). The following research question guides this study:

In what way can ICT help us understand cross-border English creative writing teachers’ identity development?

3 Research methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach with a focus on cross-border English creative writing teachers. Our research methods are described below.

3.1 Context and participants

The focus of this study was English creative writing lessons (including preparation, teaching, and grading) taught by eight cross-border English language
teachers in four primary schools in Hong Kong. The medium of instruction was Cantonese except for the subject of English. The teachers had been working in primary schools for 1 to 3 years and were defined as novice teachers in this study. Although they had some teaching experience in mainland China, they were considered novice teachers in Hong Kong based on their local work experience. Participants obtained teaching qualifications by completing a postgraduate education program from the education faculty of Hong Kong universities. Pseudonyms were used to anonymize their personal identities. All participants needed to conduct creative writing lessons, which were a required component in syllabi of English language courses. According to the participants, story writing was the prominent task in creative writing lessons. Literary writing, such as poems and prose, was also taught to seniors (Primary 4 to Primary 6) and advanced students with stronger academic performance. Table 1 lists participants’ background information.

**Table 1: Background information of the participants.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of teaching experience in Hong Kong</th>
<th>Years of teaching experience in mainland China</th>
<th>Teaching audience</th>
<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Proficient language(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Primary 2 and 6</td>
<td>Liaoning</td>
<td>Mandarin, English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandy</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Primary 5 and 6</td>
<td>Guangxi</td>
<td>Mandarin, English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Primary 2 and 3</td>
<td>Guangxi</td>
<td>Mandarin, English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camille</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Primary 3 and 5</td>
<td>Zhejiang</td>
<td>Mandarin, English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Primary 5 and 6</td>
<td>Fujian</td>
<td>Mandarin, English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruby</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Primary 1 and 3</td>
<td>Fujian</td>
<td>Mandarin, English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Primary 3 and 4</td>
<td>Fujian</td>
<td>Mandarin, English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Primary 5 and 6</td>
<td>Guangdong</td>
<td>Mandarin, Cantonese, English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2 Data collection

During this semester-long study, data were collected through three rounds of semi-structured interviews, prior to which ethical consent was obtained from participants. The first interview focused on cross-border writing teachers’ life experiences and feelings before and after they began their teaching career in Hong Kong. The second interview focused on teachers’ perceptions of their roles, feelings, and experiences of teaching English creative writing in their schools. The third interview focused on reflections on their identity development while teaching English creative writing in Hong Kong. Sample questions from each round are listed in the Appendix. Individual interviews, which lasted about 1 hour, were conducted with individual participating teachers. Participants were allowed to select their preferred language for interviews; all chose Mandarin. Each interview process was recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis. Recordings were handled by the first author, who also served as the interviewer. Recordings were transcribed by the second author, and translations were completed by the two authors. The original transcriptions and translated versions were sent to participants for member checking and necessary additional revisions to ensure accuracy of the transcripts. Other data sources included teachers’ classroom research reports collected at the end of the semester and school documents related to teaching writing.

3.3 Data analysis

During data analysis, a general understanding of the data was first obtained through iterative reading of the transcripts. A selective reading approach (Van Manen 1990) was then adopted. Data illuminating writing teachers’ identity construction were identified, marked in each transcript, and recorded as notes. Particular attention was paid to themes related to ICT components, including (1) expected roles of an English creative writing teacher; (2) factors that influenced teachers’ identity meanings; (3) teachers’ actual practices of teaching English creative writing; (4) teachers’ self-perceptions of the identity of an English creative writing teacher; and (5) the emotions teachers experienced while teaching. This content was coded according to ICT through iterative reading by the authors. Overall, the data analysis process was recursive and repetitive to reveal findings that best addressed the research question. Further, a draft of data interpretations was read and commented on by participating teachers as a
means of member checking to ensure the trustworthiness of interpretation (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Most participants agreed with the interpretations. All misinterpretations were corrected on the basis of participants’ clarifications and comments.

4 Findings

This section is divided into four subsections to present our findings according to the four core components of ICT. The first subsection describes the identity standard of being a teacher of English creative writing in Hong Kong. The second reveals input, which includes English creative writing teachers’ self-perceptions of identity meanings, situational factors, and students’ competence. The third part reflects teachers’ emotions and points out discrepancies in compared meanings of identity standard and input. The last subsection is dedicated to output, including teachers’ strategies to foster changes in their relevant situations.

4.1 Identity standard

According to ICT, identity standard refers to identity meanings that are closely related to social roles and group membership (Stets and Burke 2000). The socially expected identity meanings of English creative writing teachers in this study were revealed by asking interviewees about the roles they were expected to perform when teaching.

4.1.1 Expected collaborators in English creative writing

According to school documents, English creative writing teachers should collaborate and exchange ideas for teaching creative writing. Collaborations among teachers involved discussions about writing topics and teaching plans. An identity of ‘collaborator’ also emerged from participants’ language use:

The school advocates a need for English teachers to work together so that we can have more ideas for teaching. We discuss what activities can be included in creative writing class, share our teaching plans with colleagues, and decide themes and writing topics for teaching English creative writing. Teaching creative writing needs a teacher to be a collaborator. (Charlotte, Interview 1)
The teachers also expressed that students should serve as collaborators in the classroom. Related to this, they adopted communicative tasks (e.g. group discussions and presentations) to facilitate the exchange of ideas among students:

I require the students to form groups of four in which they discuss their idea and write some paragraphs together before individual writing. After the group discussions, I invite the group members to present their ideas in front of the class. It is essential to guide students to undergo the process from cooperative learning to collaborative writing. (Camille, classroom research report)

4.1.2 Writing teachers should be creative

Based on school documents, one of the most important qualities for teachers of English creative writing is creativity in teaching. One interviewee, Mandy, agreed with this requirement but was concerned about students’ learning habits, which emphasized memorizing rather than creativity in writing:

The school wants us to be creative in teaching writing. Yes, I totally agree with the school. But the fact is that most of the students are not willing to be creative in writing. Students only like to memorize sentences rather than create sentences. (Mandy, Interview 2)

According to school documents, creativity when teaching writing included poetry writing along with emerging internet genres, such as blogs, film reviews, and microfilm scripts. Teachers stated they needed to master traditional and modern creative writing approaches to expose students to diverse texts. An interviewee, John, felt conflicted about the contradiction between electronic texts and traditional writing:

We are embracing technology in teaching to support not only the learning of traditional essay texts but also new electronic text types. I have mixed feelings towards this trend. On one hand, this is good for teaching creative writing. Students can gain more access to resources. On the other hand, these new electronic texts challenge the traditional writing test requirement. (John, Interview 2)

4.2 Input

The component of input in ICT includes identity meanings originating from the self and external factors, such as environments and other people involved in identity construction. Writing teachers must cope with many conflicting aspects in their teaching (Pardo 2006). Contextual constraints identified in this study
were the school curriculum, limited time, and students’ capabilities. This section illustrates how contextual factors affected teachers’ self-perceptions of their identities as teachers of English creative writing.

4.2.1 Unsupportive curriculum

An English curriculum that places teachers in a passive position restricts identity construction (Teng 2018). For example, Betty noted that the school curriculum for English creative writing did not nurture students’ creativity because teachers lacked guidelines for devising creative writing lessons, yet writing exercises contained few creative elements:

In my school, we have some ‘creative writing work’ in the curriculum. First, we have ‘free writing’ which allows students to write a passage about different topics. Teachers do not mark their mistakes but must write down some comments. We have another writing exercise called ‘writing task’. It is a booklet with some grammar exercises, a mind map, and a final writing part. But we do not really have guidelines in developing a creative writing lesson. (Betty, classroom research report)

4.2.2 Time constraints and heavy workload

Participants also identified limited time as a constraint to teaching English creative writing. When introducing a new text to students, teachers are required to teach students the text structure and a certain amount of vocabulary to enrich their writing. These factors require teachers to spend extra time preparing teaching materials and to teach within a limited classroom instruction window. Charlotte stated in an interview:

There is not enough time for me to introduce the text type in depth. Students usually receive a sample text showing the language features of the text type. However, one sample is far from enough. Basically, most of the students lack life experience to compose the writing. Therefore, it is important to provide as many examples as possible. Content words are essential. Without providing sufficient content words, students can hardly express themselves accurately and specifically. I have to spend extra time in scaffolding the appropriate content words. But classroom instruction time is really limited. (Charlotte, Interview 2)

Ruby concurred that teachers did not have sufficient time for detailed grading due to the growing number of cross-border students from mainland China:
We have more and more cross-border students from mainland China. We do not have enough time to provide written feedback for each piece of writing because we have to mark eight pieces of writing from each student in each academic year. (Ruby, Interview 2)

### 4.2.3 Students’ apathy

Teachers shared that they needed to motivate students to be creative in writing, but students were still unable to write creatively due to their reluctance and boredom with English creative writing. Charlotte said in an interview:

> I have difficulty motivating students to be creative in writing because most of the students are not interested in English writing. They may have a lot of ideas for creativity, but they cannot write them down because writing is a difficult and boring activity to them. (Charlotte, Interview 2)

Unlike students from mainland China, Hong Kong students advocate for freedom and equality. Camille thought these values were utilized as excuses to escape from acknowledging students’ English low proficiency:

> In contrast to the students that I have taught in mainland China, students in Hong Kong tend to advocate sensitivity, freedom, and equality. I think they are advocating these things to hide their lack of proficiency in English writing. (Camille, Interview 2)

Students’ behavior also affected the teaching of English creative writing. Compared with students in mainland China, Stephen said that students in Hong Kong disrespected teachers and misbehaved in class:

> Teaching in the classroom is like entering the market, where different students are yelling and quarreling while the teacher is lecturing. Students in mainland China are quiet and tend to listen to the teachers well. But it is totally different in Hong Kong. The students do not know the value of showing respect to their teachers. (Stephen, Interview 2)

### 4.2.4 Students’ low English proficiency

Students’ language proficiency also affected the negotiation of teachers’ identity meanings. To a large extent, teachers’ identity construction relied on students, whose learning progress influenced how teachers shaped their identity meanings. In creative writing lessons, students’ capability to express themselves was important. Camille described her situation:
Teaching writing is never easy. When the students are writing independently in the class, basically, I am a ‘walking dictionary.’ Although useful vocabulary is listed on the blackboard and a checklist of writing is provided, they will want to know other words in their writing. In fact, students spend quite a lot of time thinking about how to start their writing and in the end, cannot finish the writing on time. (Camille, classroom research report)

Above, Camille described herself as a “walking dictionary” when students would ask for help with words not already provided. Participants also pointed out that students’ relatively low English proficiency in creative writing was revealed in their writing. Camille also cited this as an obstacle to teaching creative writing:

When marking their work, I find they have shown some creative ideas in their writing, but most of the sentences were wrong. Given the wrong grammar, I cannot say their writings are creative. (Camille, interview 3)

Simon found a discrepancy between his and his students’ perceptions of English proficiency. Whereas he thought students’ English standards were low, the students thought Simon’s English was worse than that of local teachers:

Sometimes the students did not listen to me in class. I have to say their English was really bad. But they also said that I was from the mainland and my English was worse than the local teachers’ English. So there is just a big discrepancy in perceiving language proficiency between me and the local students. (Simon, Interview 3)

4.2.5 Linguistic and cultural barriers

Language appeared to be a communicative obstacle to collaborative work between local and non-local English teachers (Gu 2011). Simon shared his struggles integrating into the English creative writing teaching team, wherein most members were local English teachers who spoke Cantonese:

It is difficult for me to collaborate with local English teachers for better teaching of creative writing. In particular, the local teachers are not so willing to have discussions with me when I speak in Putonghua. I can sense their happiness on their faces when speaking in Cantonese. But I cannot speak Cantonese and when they speak Cantonese, I am marginalized. (Simon, Interview 1)

Apart from language, cultural discrepancies and diverse teaching practices among local and non-local teachers hindered cooperation (Gu 2013). As John shared, local teachers distinguished themselves from mainland Chinese teachers:
It is challenging for me to collaborate with local teachers because there are always some hidden rules that I don’t understand. They kept stressing out because Hong Kong is different from China, including teaching practice. I stressed that Hong Kong is one part of China and I tried to be a part of the local community, but it sounds like the local teachers try to be different from me. (John, Interview 1)

4.2.6 Teachers’ self-perceptions

Participants said that unsatisfactory living and working conditions reduced their sense of belonging in Hong Kong. As Simon recalled, he perceived himself as a sojourner who might leave one day. He found teaching students English creative writing to be difficult:

Reflecting back on my years of experience in Hong Kong, I realize I am just a sojourner. I don’t belong here. I may leave one day. The living space is so small, and I just become more and more impatient. It is difficult for me to teach creative writing. I just spoon feed what the students need. (Simon, Interview 3)

Ruby also shared that students were not truly engaged in creative writing despite being excited about some classroom activities. Upon checking students’ incomplete sentences and realizing the school’s push for teaching creative writing, Ruby felt that the school did not understand what creative writing is or how to practice it:

I prepared a page of story prompts to motivate my students to write. The students were very excited in my writing class. But when I checked their writing, only a few incomplete sentences were written. I understand the need for the school to attach importance to the teaching of creative writing in primary school. The school wants something wonderful to show to the parents. But does the school really understand the true meaning of creative writing? (Ruby, Interview 2)

4.3 Comparator: Incongruence between meanings of identity standard and input

Considering the identity meanings of input and those in standard identities, teachers entered a process that compared the two identity meanings when activating the identity of English creative writing teachers; emotions were products of this comparison. Incongruence between perceptual input and the identity standard was identified, hence teachers’ negative emotions when teaching English creative writing.
4.3.1 Discomfort

Betty felt uncomfortable with the design of the writing curriculum because the curriculum focuses on students’ language structures, whereas she believed it should enable students to develop and explore more ideas in creative writing:

I feel so strange and uncomfortable. I cannot agree with the curriculum. It is not designed for students to develop ideas in creative writing but their language structures only. (Betty, interview 2)

4.3.2 Anger

Regarding the lack of time for teaching, Charlotte stated she could lose her temper easily due to some students’ unsatisfactory writing, especially when she had many assignments to grade:

Usually there is not enough time to teach and to mark, as there are so many other assignments to mark at school. I usually spend my off-hour time to mark their writing. When I find them not following what I have taught in the lessons and giving me a piece of ‘garbage’, of course I will be angry, but what I can do is to give those students really low marks. I have no time to teach them how to do better next time, let alone ask them to redo the writing. (Charlotte, Interview 2)

Charlotte needed to spend extra time teaching and grading students’ creative writing due to time constraints, and Camille experienced the same:

It’s torturous as I need to guess the meanings of their writing. I need to decide how to correct their work. I want to keep their original ideas but I need to correct their grammar at the same time. Sometimes, marking writing assignments makes me lose my temper. (Camille, interview 2)

As described above, Camille was furious that she needed to figure out the meaning of students’ writing and faced the dilemma of whether to correct language errors or retain the essays’ original ideas; this grading process evoked anger.

4.3.3 Loneliness

The identity of mainland Chinese teachers seemed unwelcomed by local and non-local students and local teachers. As Stephen illustrated, non-local students did not prefer cross-border teachers, instead wishing to learn from local
teachers. Local students did not trust mainland Chinese teachers. It was difficult for participants to develop a close relationship with local colleagues due to their unfamiliarity with Hong Kong values, culture, and practices. Given these circumstances, Stephen felt lonely while teaching creative writing, which was a relatively new course:

It is never easy to be a cross-border teacher. The mainland students in Hong Kong tend to think that it is better for them to have a Hong Kong teacher to teach them because they travel a long distance to Hong Kong for study. The local students do not trust you. The local teacher colleagues can only interact with you on a surface level because you do not understand Hong Kong values, cultures, and practices. To be a cross-border teacher means being lonely. It is particularly lonely for those of us teaching creative writing because it is a new course. (Stephen, Interview 3)

4.3.4 Stress

Mandy had similar feelings about the unbearable workload in Hong Kong and, worse still, she was discontent with the living environment; she found it crowded, stuffy, and unenjoyable:

I feel depressed about the environment in Hong Kong. I am occupied by the pile of work in school. My small house feels stuffy when I go back home. I want to enjoy some fresh air but when I go outside, people are everywhere. How can I be creative in such an environment? (Mandy, Interview 2)

John also felt highly stressed because the teachers’ workload in Hong Kong was four times that in mainland China:

I have worked in mainland China as a primary school English teacher for four years. However, the workload there for four years cannot be compared to the workload in Hong Kong for one year. I feel stressed, really stressed. (John, Interview 2)

4.4 Output: Coping with constraints

According to ICT, output is the result of incongruence between the meanings of identity standard and input. Individuals can adopt multiple strategies to cope with negative emotions by changing the situation to ensure that input meanings match standard meanings (Stets and Tsushima 2001). Surprisingly, although some participants took action to alleviate stressors, others avoided change. Betty shared her struggle with adjusting her teaching strategies:
Yes, teaching creative writing is never easy. So I need to think of something new for teaching this course. I would not do the writing task immediately. I would have more activities for my students to complete before doing the ‘writing work’—for example, group discussion, presentations, pair work and peer evaluation. After these, we would start the ‘free writing’ or ‘writing task.’ It works to some extent. However, no one teaches in this way. That scares me because other English teachers may think that we are not cooperative. (Betty, classroom research report)

As Betty explained, she attempted to follow school instructions less strictly and added communicative tasks (e.g. group discussion, presentations, and paired work) when teaching creative writing prior to allowing students to write independently. However, following this adjustment, Betty feared that the teaching team might consider her uncooperative. Dealing with a similar situation, Camille chose not to respond to this matter because she thought students’ English proficiency could not be improved in a short time and she did not have the authority to challenge the school curriculum. Accordingly, she opted to tolerate the circumstances as long as she could:

I can do nothing. The students’ English proficiency cannot be boosted in a short time. I cannot ask the principal adjust the curriculum because I am a novice teacher. I don’t know how long I can tolerate this situation. Maybe I will quit when I feel I cannot bear it anymore. (Camille, Interview 3)

In contrast with the above interviewees, John remained passionate about teaching English creative writing despite being segregated from the mainstream teacher community. On the basis of his teaching experiences, he insisted on teaching students by doing his best and innovating:

Being a creative writing teacher is different from being an English teacher. English teachers only teach the subject content. We are teaching them how to create something interesting. We need to be innovators. I am a teacher with plenty of experience. Rather than worrying about whether I can enter the mainstream teaching community in Hong Kong, I should do my best to make my teaching better. (John, Interview 3)

Ruby also attempted to maintain her belief that learning about different cultures would be advantageous when teaching English creative writing. She still held this belief after teaching in Hong Kong for 3 years:

A cross-border teacher should try to learn the cultural differences. This should not be a disadvantage. It can be an advantage in teaching English creative writing. I told myself this when I started teaching at this school. Maybe I should just stick to my motto even now that 3 years have passed. (Ruby, Interview 3)
5 Discussion

Informed by the analytical framework of ICT, this study explores identity standards, input, and output in the discursive process of constructing and negotiating the identities of English creative teachers who crossed the border from mainland China to Hong Kong. Echoing previous studies, teachers’ identity constructions “appear[ed] to be constructed through an ongoing process, involving identification and disidentification, negotiation of meanings, and interaction between the individual and the social” (Gu 2011: 149). This study sheds light on the unique features of identity construction of cross-border English creative writing teachers. Figure 2 presents a theorized construction of participants’ identities. The model reveals that the meanings of input and identity standard were incongruent, leading to errors generated by the comparator and thus evoking negative

![Figure 2: Identity of mainland Chinese teachers of English creative writing: An ICT perspective.](image-url)
emotions among cross-border teachers. Some teachers addressed this incongruence through coping responses, whereas others preferred to tolerate their situation. Individual teachers experienced secondary emotions when their coping responses were not consistent with colleagues’ practices. ICT reflects the challenges of cross-border English teachers in Hong Kong.

The meanings of identity standards of English creative writing teachers in Hong Kong involved two major roles: a workplace collaborator and a creative teacher. These roles were incongruent with the identity meaning of cross-border teachers’ self-perceptions. Simon was a typical example: he saw himself as a sojourner in Hong Kong who did not belong to the city. Ruby was another example and felt that students’ parents and the school did not understand the meaning of creative writing. Many participating teachers found being an English creative writing teacher in Hong Kong to be extremely challenging. These perceptions were shaped by a range of contextual factors, including unsupportive curriculum/instructions, heavy workloads/time constraints, uncooperative colleagues, and students’ apathy and low English proficiency. Echoing Lee (2013), rules in an institutional system may present barriers that thwart teachers’ identity construction. Some school instructions for English creative writing emphasized developing students’ English proficiency and linguistic knowledge instead of creativity. Teachers’ heavy workloads and time constraints also prevented them from acting as creative teachers. Classroom instruction time was limited, and teachers had to work extra hours to prepare teaching materials and grade assignments. Further, the relationship between mainland Chinese teachers and local teachers was not collaborative; local teachers distanced themselves from mainland Chinese teachers due to speaking different mother tongues and adopting diverse teaching practices. Gu’s study (2011) provided an explanation for this phenomenon. In her study, mainland Chinese pre-teachers constructed their identities by distinguishing themselves from their local Hong Kong counterparts and establishing relationships with mainland Chinese peers. Cross-border teachers felt like outsiders in the Hong Kong community. Students’ low levels of English proficiency, evidenced by poor vocabulary and an undeveloped grammatical foundation, was an impediment for teachers in meeting the identity standard because teachers were compelled to favor teaching grammar and vocabulary. The above contextual factors prevented mainland Chinese teachers from being collaborative and creative.

The incongruence between identity meanings of inputs and identity standards implied that errors were generated by the comparator, leading participants to experience negative emotions. Identified emotions included uneasiness, anger, loneliness, and stress. Betty was uncomfortable with the school
curriculum. According to Betty, the school curriculum did not nurture students’ creativity in writing. Charlotte and Camille were angry with students’ English creative writing pieces, which were not well-written and required a large amount of time for teachers to correct grammatical mistakes. Many cross-border teachers experienced loneliness. Simon felt lonely because the students did not trust teachers from mainland China, and local teachers were reluctant to collaborate with them. Mandy felt stressed due to her heavy workload and the crowded living environment of Hong Kong.

According to ICT, individuals cope with incongruence through a variety of behavioral or cognitive strategies, known as coping responses (Burke 1996). Cross-border teachers employed different approaches to address incongruence. For example, in response to the unsupportive school curriculum, Betty added more communicative classroom activities in English creative writing to allow students to exchange ideas. To deal with segregation from local teachers, John chose to focus on improving his teaching of English creative writing. To mitigate cultural differences between local teachers and students, Ruby believed she should keep learning about different cultures. These coping responses helped teachers modify their identity construction and decrease negative emotions.

The present study contributes to improving the theoretical drawbacks of ICT in this context, including neglect of emotions stemming from coping responses and of inaction as a coping response. First, conventional ICT does not take into account ‘secondary emotions’ evoked by coping responses. In this study, Betty attempted to employ a strategy of adding more creative elements into her teaching to alleviate incongruence between the two identity meanings; this coping response involved output and aligned closely with ICT. The situation was similar to a case examined in Lee’s study (2013) in which writing teachers feared being marginalized at their school, which hindered them from constructing an identity (Zembylas 2003). However, ICT appeared unable to explicate the feeling of marginalization in this group, as indicated by Betty’s coping method. This secondary emotion insinuated that individual teachers might not obtain positive emotions despite realigning input meanings. Teachers seemed to be at an impasse wherein mechanisms to realign identity meanings of input and that of the identity standard caused secondary negative emotions that influenced their identity.

Second, ICT did not include an individual’s inaction as a coping response to incongruence between the meanings of identity standard and inputs. Frustrated by students’ low English proficiency of the students, Camille did not take any action to change the situation because she believed it was too difficult to improve students’ capabilities in a short time, and she was not powerful enough to change
school policy. In relation to ICT, she maintained a passive attitude towards the incongruence between input meanings and standard meanings, which caused her to experience negative emotions. Despite the error generated by the comparator, Camille exhibited no coping responses to incongruence and suffered from negative emotions. This inaction supported Burke and Stets’ (2009) assertion that “meaningful behaviors are continuously output to the environment” (p. 68). The effect of inaction was also related to the emergence of secondary emotions. Teachers may need to deal with in-group and out-group identities; those in our sample who did not follow school instructions were likely to develop an out-group identity in contrast to those who complied. Taking Betty’s case as an example, she adjusted her teaching strategies of English creative writing that were not widely adopted by colleagues and was afraid of being marginalized as a result. In addition, teachers’ coping responses, action (social behavior), and inaction split into two camps: those who actively addressed the situation and those who were passive about it. This disparity could cause anxiety for individuals who deviated from most others in the group. Formation of an out-group identity sparked discussion of the interaction between mainland teachers’ identity formation and Hong Kong society.

Nevertheless, ICT, which focuses on the nature of identity development and the relationship between self-identities and individuals’ behavior within the realm of social structure, provides knowledge into cross-border teachers’ identity construction in the present study. Cross-border teachers’ identities were not simply composed of their personal decisions or empowerment in teaching but also by social constraints involved in intercultural migration. Although cross-border teachers wanted to reflect upon and develop social arrangements beneficial to their own interests and ambitions in teaching creative writing, their motivations in seeking teacher identity meaning were complicated by social structures (e.g. unfamiliar behaviors, symbols, rules, policies, beliefs, cultures, and values) in intercultural migration.

6 Conclusion and implications

Through the lens of ICT, cross-border teachers’ identity construction and operation were found to be complex, discursive, and hard to control. In moving from mainland China to Hong Kong, these teachers faced new living and working conditions to which they were urged to adapt. The teachers then needed to change their personal values and attempt to moderate undesirable situations. ICT sheds light on how people manage their identity in various contexts through moderating self-perceptions and environmental sources; however, inherent
uncontrollability has apparently been neglected. The identities of the cross-border teachers of English creative writing exemplified the hardship in managing contextual constraints. Shifting personal values to suit the community majority is psychologically stressful (Teng and Bui 2018). Moreover, teachers resisted institutional instructions and thus risked being segregated from those who complied. Cross-border teachers may then experience negative emotions throughout the identity control process.

Before discussing our implications, caution is needed in light of the limitations of this study. First, the relatively small sample means that findings cannot be generalized to all mainland teachers in Hong Kong. Second, without classroom observations, it was impossible to explore participants’ identity enactment in practice, let alone the alignment or misalignment between narrated and enacted identities. Finally, the length of the study (one semester) rendered it difficult to explore participants’ identity development and negotiation over time.

Despite these limitations, some implications can be gained from this study. First, to theorize and conceptualize teacher identity operation and construction, ICT should be extended to clarify the self-regulating process of identity construction and dilemmas teachers may encounter when enacting their identities. Based on the conceptual knowledge that identity construction is discursive and ongoing (Larson 2006), we propose that ICT could indicate the developmental phases of teacher identity across time and space. For example, cross-border teachers’ identity development included two dimensions: 1) English creative writing teacher identity is related to congruence or incongruence between meanings of the identity standard, self-perceptions, and positive or negative emotions; and 2) emotions result in modification of the inputs of identity construction. Factors included differences from the majority, incongruence between meanings of identity standard and self-perceptions, and difficulties in self-regulating and maintaining identity.

Finally, this study provides practical implications for assisting cross-border teachers in assimilating into the Hong Kong community and enhancing their teaching of English creative writing. For example, the Education Bureau should provide clear and thorough instructions regarding English creative writing for primary schools so schools can regulate their curriculum while nurturing students’ creativity and literary competence. The curriculum should be tailored to students’ learning needs, such as English enhancement, communicative classroom activities, and teacher guidance. Activities that facilitate collaboration between local and cross-border teachers should be organized to help them communicate with and understand each other.
Compliance with Ethical Standards:
Conflict of Interest: The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Appendix

Sample questions for interviews

First round of interview
1. How do you describe your life experience in mainland China?
2. How do you describe your life and work experience in Hong Kong?
   Any incidents you’d like to share with us?

Second round of interview
1. What does the school require you to do as a teacher of English creative writing?
2. How do you feel about yourself, your relationship with your colleagues and your students?
3. How do you feel about your work while teaching English creative writing?
4. What roles do you perceive yourself filling in both your personal life and career?

Third round of interview
1. How do you describe your years of experience in teaching English creative writing in Hong Kong?
2. How do you cope with the difficulties in teaching creative writing?
3. Can you share your reflections on your life and work experiences in Hong Kong with us?
4. Can you summarize your emotional development and identity development throughout your years of experience in Hong Kong?

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