

Chinese Language Teachers' Challenges in Teaching in U.S. Public Schools: A Dynamic Portrayal

Wei Liao¹  · Rui Yuan² · Hong Zhang³

Published online: 1 September 2017
© De La Salle University 2017

Abstract Teachers who teach in cross-cultural settings play a vital role in nurturing students' appreciation of cultural diversity but they tend to experience tremendous challenges in their early years of teaching. To draw a dynamic portrayal of those challenges, this study primarily collected and analyzed 521 reflective journals written by 14 Chinese language teachers throughout their first 2 years of teaching in U.S. public schools. The study found that the teachers experienced a wide range of challenges in managing classrooms, developing curricular materials, crafting instructional strategies, assessing students, catering to learner differences, and collaborating with others. The seriousness of the challenges varied across areas and transformed differently over time. Cultural difference, school context, and teacher's background and ongoing learning collectively contributed to the formation and transformation of the challenges. This paper concludes with practical implications on how to prepare and support teachers to work in cross-cultural settings.

Keywords Cross-cultural teaching · Teacher learning · Teacher development · Chinese language teachers · American schools

Introduction

With the ongoing trend of globalization, a growing number of teachers are crossing their national borders to teach (Brown and Stevick 2014). Not only can such cross-cultural practice enrich individual teachers' personal and professional experiences, but they can also help facilitate mutual understanding, appreciation, and collaboration among people from different cultures (Lai et al. 2016).

With the rise of China as a global power, Chinese is becoming an important and popular language in the world. In many countries including the U.S., an increasing number of public schools have introduced the Chinese language into their school curricula (Asia Society 2011). At present, the U.S. is facing a great shortage of well-prepared Chinese language teachers (CLTs). To address this problem, many Chinese native speakers with diverse educational backgrounds and limited teaching experience are recruited and placed into American K-12 classrooms after receiving a short period of cultural and pedagogical orientations (Chen et al. 2017; College Board 2013).

Due to the cultural differences and their insufficient understanding of local school contexts, CLTs in U.S. schools encounter a high volume of challenges that make the beginning stage of their cross-cultural teaching alarmingly difficult (Chen et al. 2017; Liu 2012). Failing to handle these challenges timely and effectively not only can impede CLTs' professional development, but it may also compromise the quality of Chinese language education (Orton 2010).

✉ Wei Liao
liaowei@msu.edu

Rui Yuan
eryuan@eduhk.hk

Hong Zhang
zhanghong630@bfsu.edu.cn

¹ College of Education, Michigan State University, East Lansing, USA

² Department of English Language Education Hong Kong, Education University of Hong Kong, Tai Po, China

³ National Research Centre for Foreign Language Education, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China

To date, while previous research has surfaced a variety of challenges facing CLTs, such as classroom management issues (Zhou and Li 2015) and difficulties in developing appropriate instructional strategies (Romig 2009), scant attention has been paid to how these challenges transform over time. Learning to teach is a gradual and situated process and teachers may encounter different challenges at different stages of their careers (Rolls and Plauborg 2009). Teachers' needs for professional development may also vary across time with the accumulation of teaching experiences (McCormack et al. 2006). To enhance our understanding of the dynamic process of learning to teach in cross-cultural settings, it is thus important to examine the challenges facing cross-cultural teachers and how such challenges transform in their daily practices. To this end, the present study investigated 14 novice CLTs' first 2 years of professional experiences in U.S. public schools. This study can shed light on novice CLTs' development trajectory and generate practical implications for teacher educators, school administrators, and mentor teachers on how to support teachers to work in cross-cultural settings.

Challenges Facing CLTs and the Contributing Factors

Previous studies have surfaced a wide range of challenges encountered by CLTs in their teaching, and how to manage classroom may be the most demanding issues for them. For instance, in Liu's (2012) qualitative case study, she found that pre-service Chinese teachers encountered great difficulties in managing their students' misbehaviors. Similar findings were reported by Xu (2012) who found that the participating CLTs were "frustrated by the unexpected large amount of disruptive behaviors" of the students in their American schools (p. 16).

How to craft appropriate instructional strategy is another challenge facing CLTs. In Romig's (2009) ethnographic study, for instance, all the four participants experienced different degrees of unease in adapting their instructional strategies to the teaching philosophy advocated by the local context (e.g., less teacher talk and more interactive activities). Romig's study resonates with several other studies on CLTs' teaching in cross-cultural contexts (e.g., Hanson 2013; Wang 2012).

CLTs would encounter several other obstacles as well, such as overcoming language barriers, maintaining communication with parents, socializing with colleagues, and accommodating students with special needs (Hanson 2013; Xu 2012). For example, in Hanson's qualitative case study of eight CLTs' cultural adaptation into U.S. public schools, she found that most teachers were concerned by their English proficiency level. Specifically, the teachers found it

difficult to use appropriate language to teach or to communicate with their students, colleagues, or parents.

Our review of the relevant existing literature suggests that beginning CLTs' these challenges could be caused by multiple factors. First, teachers' professional backgrounds (e.g., teaching experience and educational background) could influence what challenges they would face (Fantilli and McDougall 2009; Melnick and Meister 2008; Plessis et al. 2014). For instance, Melnick and Meister (2008) compared the challenges facing novice and experienced teachers. They found teachers' challenges about classroom management and parent interaction significantly diminished with the accumulation of teaching experience. Plessis et al. (2014) surveyed the experiences of teachers who were assigned to teach in the subjects or grade levels that did not match the professional preparation they received. The study results suggest that out-of-field teachers tend to encounter intensive challenges in obtaining self-esteem, establishing confidence, and building up trustworthy relationships with their colleagues. These studies together indicate the important role that professional background can play in shaping teachers' challenges.

Second, prior studies found that teaching is highly contextualized practice (e.g., Kennedy 2010), and thus several context-specific factors, such as student population, grade level, and school condition, can also mediate the challenges that teachers experience in their professional practice. For instance, in Wang's (2012) comparative study of four CLTs' socialization into the teaching profession, she found that the CLTs who received more intensive guidance from their mentors encountered less challenges in their teaching.

Third, societal level factors, such as cultural beliefs about education and socio-political stances toward controversial topics in curriculum, can shape CLTs' challenges as well (Wang 2012; Romig 2009). As Wang (2012) concluded in her study, CLTs' different linguistic and cultural backgrounds play a vital role in influencing their challenges in teaching and their socialization into the teaching profession. Zhou and Li (2015) investigated the intersection of cultural differences and CLTs' challenges in managing their classrooms. They pointed out, "the teachers experienced cultural mismatches between their Chinese cultural expectations and American students' actual classroom behavior and struggled with challenges of understanding the demands of American classroom management" (p. 17).

While the factors reviewed above mainly determine teachers' initial challenges, teachers' continuous practice and learning would drive the challenges to transform over time (Avalos 2011; Borko 2004). With the accumulation of teaching experience, CLTs would develop new knowledge about their students and the teaching contexts, and thus are

more likely to be able to overcome the challenges (Zhou and Li 2015; Romig 2009). Nevertheless, the increase of teaching experience does not voluntarily lead to teachers' professional growth. Only when teachers participate in active forms of learning, such as guided reflection, action research, and collaboration with peers, can they identify, reflect on, and finally overcome the challenges in their teaching practice (Yuan and Burns 2017; Orland-Barak and Yinon 2007).

In short, the review of the existing literature helped us establish a theoretical framework (Fig. 1) that guided our inquiries in this study. This framework posits that CLTs in cross-cultural settings tend to experience a wide range of challenges due to a set of factors at the individual, school, and societal levels, but CLTs' ongoing practice and active learning would drive the challenges to transform over time in their situated contexts.

While the previous studies have successfully identified a wide range of CLTs' challenges as well as their contributing factors, little is known about how these challenges change over time. To begin to close this research gap, the present study tracked the various challenges faced by 14 novice CLTs throughout their first 2 years of teaching in U. S. public schools, and explored the driving forces behind the changes. We asked two research questions:

- (1) What challenges did the participating teachers encounter in their teaching?
- (2) How did their challenges transform over time, and why?

Method

Participants and Setting

The research participants of this study are 14 novice CLTs from a 2-year-long, master's level Chinese Teacher Certification program (CTC, pseudonym) at a large public university in the Midwestern region of the U.S. CTC participants teach as full-time teachers in K-12 public schools while at the same time taking coursework from the program. Research ethics were sought from the first author's university before the research activities commenced.

Twenty teachers joined CTC in fall 2012, and 19 of them were initially included in this study. One teacher was excluded because she already had over 10 years of teaching experience in the U.S. During the study, five participants quit this program and thus were excluded as well. Finally, the rest 14 teachers became the participants of this study (Table 1). Among these teachers, only one teacher is male; eight of them received a bachelor's degree in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language from universities in China, while the others came from diverse educational backgrounds, such as English, history, and financial management. All of them were originally from China and had limited to no teaching experience before they joined this program. During 2012–2013 and 2013–2014 school years when the data were generated, they were all teaching in U. S. public schools. Seven teachers were teaching in urban schools, six in suburban schools, and one in a rural school; their grade levels ranged from Kindergarten to the 12th grade. Please see Table 1 for the participants' biographic information.

Fig. 1 Theoretical framework

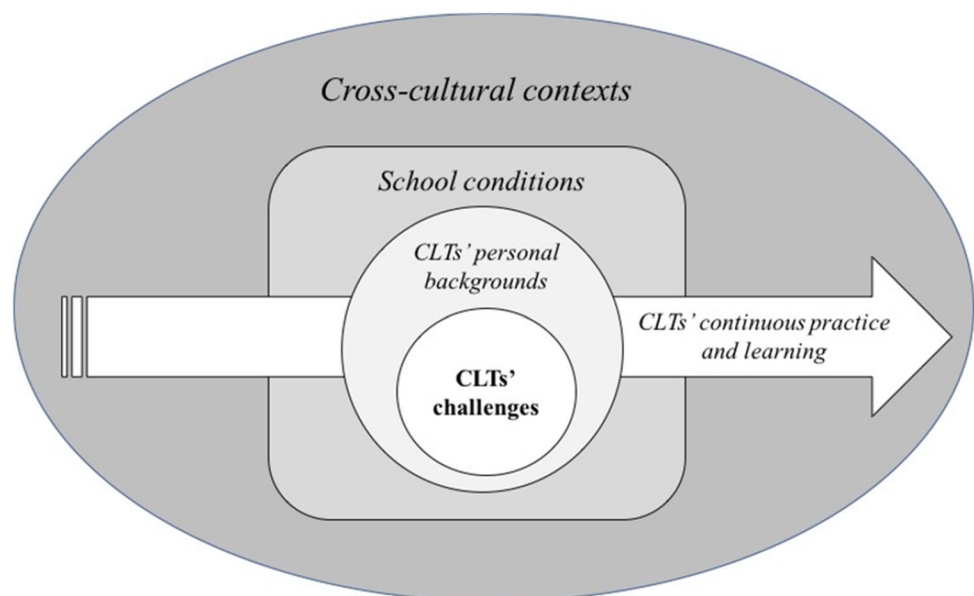


Table 1 Participant information

Pseudonym	Gender	Post-secondary educational background	Years of teaching before joining CTC	Teaching context in the U.S. (2012–2014)	
				School context ^a	Grade level
T1	F	B.A. in T.C.F.L.	<1	Suburban	6–8
T2	M	B.A. in English	<1	Urban	6–12
T3	F	B.A. in T.C.F.L.	<1	Urban	3
T4	F	B.A. in T.C.F.L.	<3	Urban	4
T5	F	B.A. in History, M.A. in Education	<2	Urban	6–12
T6	F	B.A. in T.C.F.L.	<2	Suburban	K–5
T7	F	B.A. in T.C.F.L.	<1	Suburban	9–12
T8	F	B.A. in T.C.F.L.	<1	Urban	4–6
T9	F	B.A. & M.A. in English	<2	Urban	K–5
T10	F	B.A. in T.C.F.L.	<1	Suburban	2–5
T11	F	B.A. in T.C.F.L.	<1	Rural	K–4
T12	F	B.A. in English	<1	Suburban	K–5
T13	F	B.A. in Chinese	<1	Urban	6–12
T14	F	B.A. in Financial Management	<1	Suburban	K–5

T.C.F.L. Teaching Chinese as Foreign Language

^a The school context information was derived from the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics: <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/>

Data Generation

The primary data were 521 reflective journals (a total of 130,708 words) written by the 14 teachers throughout their first 2 years of teaching in U.S. schools. In 2012–2013 and 2013–2014 school years, the teachers took an online course on teaching practicum. This practicum course aimed to promote the teachers' development through two specific forms of active learning: *guided reflection* and *collaboration with peers*. Specifically, during the first year (2012 fall and 2013 spring), the field instructors guided the teachers to develop lesson plans, video-tape their implementation of the plans, and compose reflective journals on the video-taped lessons. The teachers also had the opportunity to discuss their challenges with their fellow teachers and field instructors in the weekly course meetings.

During the second year (2013 fall and 2014 spring), this course purposefully encouraged the teachers to learn in a more collaborative approach. While the teachers were not required to submit lesson plans or teaching videos, they were required to submit the weekly reflective journals to the course community so that they could identify and share the most pressing challenges they encountered in their teaching and seek support and suggestions from their peers and mentor teachers.

While our investigation of CLTs' challenges was primarily based on the 14 teachers' reflective journals, two additional sources of data were collected to supplement the

analysis. The first set of data is the teachers' anonymous evaluative feedback to this course generated through a survey administered by the end of the 2-year course (May 2014). Three 5-point Likert scale questions (in the form of statement) and one open-ended question were asked to solicit the teachers' overall evaluation of this practicum course. Particularly, the three statements are as follows: "This course taught me how to reflect on my teaching." "This course offered me opportunities to learn from peers." "I increased my capacity to teach by engaging in this course." The open-ended question solicited the teachers' additional thoughts on how this course might have influenced their learning to teach.

Another set of supplementary data are the participating teachers' evaluation meeting notes. Each of the 14 teachers was paired with a mentor teacher at their respective schools. The mentors observed these teachers' classroom teaching on a regular basis and conducted post-observation conversations with these teachers to analyze their teaching. By the end of each semester, the field instructors, the teachers, and their school mentors held three-way evaluation meetings to discuss the teachers' progresses and remaining challenges. Meetings notes were taken by the field instructors and stored in the CTC program dossier. This study used those evaluation meeting notes as an additional source of data.

Data Analysis

The data were subject to “an iterative process combining elements of content analysis and thematic analysis” (Bowen 2009, p. 32). The first author has been working as a core field instructor for the CTC program for over 4 years. Taking advantage of his rich knowledge about the research site and the participants, the first author took the leading role in the coding process. The rest two researchers served as critical discussants throughout the coding process, to help refine the codes, surface themes, and generate assertions. For instance, when the primary coder was uncertain about which code a specific episode of the data should be assigned to, he shared the data with the other two researchers, initiated discussions with them, and finally made a collective decision.

Specifically, to answer the first research question about “what challenges,” we analyzed the data as follows. First, the first author read through all the reflective journals to conduct open coding (Saldana 2015), which led to several initial challenge-related codes, such as “classroom management,” “students with special needs,” and “fast/slow learners.” Next, the three authors together further compared, refined, and integrated the codes to generate broad themes through reiteratively reviewing the journals, conversing with each other, and consulting the relevant literature. For instance, the codes “students with special needs,” “fast/slow learners,” and “how to help newcomers” convey the similar message about the teachers’ challenges in catering to students’ diverse needs. Then, these three codes were merged into a more generic theme called “Catering to learner differences” (O’Brien and Guiney 2001). Finally, six themes emerged from the data with boundaries that set them qualitatively apart from each other. These themes are “classroom management,” “curricular material development,” “instructional strategy,” “student assessment,” “catering to learner differences,” and “collaborating with others.”

To answer the first half of the second research question about “how did the challenges transform?” we used *percentage* as a proxy. By calculating the percentages that each of the six themes of challenges took up from the total number of challenges reported in the four consecutive semesters, we identified the changes of the challenges over time. To examine the influencing factors behind these challenges, we re-plowed the teachers’ journals and the two supplementary sets of data (i.e., course evaluation results and teachers’ evaluation meeting notes) by focusing on the personal, school, and societal factors as postulated in the theoretical framework. Particularly, we bracketed the episodes of data in which the individual teachers explained why their challenges sustained or transferred, and then we compared the findings across individual teachers and

identified some shared impact that the different factors had contributed to the teachers’ challenge transformation.

Findings

What Challenges Did the CLTs Experience?

In total, the teacher reported 544 specific challenges across the four semesters studied (Appendix 1). These challenges centered on the following six themes: classroom management, curricular material development, instructional strategy, student assessment, catering to learner differences, and collaboration with others.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the total 544 challenges among these six themes. As shown in the diagram, most challenges were reported under the theme of instructional strategy ($n = 237$). Classroom management ($n = 117$) and catering to learner differences ($n = 70$) also received considerable amount of attention from the teachers. On the other hand, much fewer challenges were reported in the three other themes, which are collaboration with others ($n = 45$), material development ($n = 45$), and student assessment ($n = 30$).

How Did the Challenges Transform Over Time, and Why?

Figure 3 provides an overview of the shifts of the six themes of challenges (in percentage) over the 2-year span. As shown in the figure, in the first semester, the teachers mainly paid their attention to the challenges about instructional strategy (36%) and classroom management (31%). However, classroom management challenges drastically declined after the first semester and finally became peripheral (13%) in the fourth semester. In contrast, the percentage of the challenges about instructional strategy persistently dominated the teachers’ attention. Although it fluctuated during the second and the third semester, it finally climbed up to 51% in the last semester.

The other four themes of challenges received much less attention from the teachers, and they presented two different patterns of evolvment. While the percentages of the challenges about student assessment and catering to learner differences steadily increased from 3 to 10% and from 12 to 16%, the percentages of the challenges about curricular material development and collaboration with others fluctuated in the middle of the course and finally declined from 10 to 7% and from 8 to 3%, respectively. Below we present the qualitative evidence about what these challenges specifically refer to, and how and why they transformed in the patterns as delineated above.

Classroom Management Challenges Drastically Declined

Classroom management seriously challenged the teachers at the beginning of their teaching in U.S. classrooms. Many teachers reported their difficulties and frustration in managing students' misbehaviors and in maintaining an orderly learning environment. For instance, T6 described her first class as a "nightmare." Similarly, T5 wrote as follows:

My biggest problem is classroom management. Students were too active. They kept talking or laughing. Every time I said "安静 (Be quiet)," they could only calm down for several minutes, and then returned to chaos. (T5, fall 2012)

The teachers' backgrounds seemed to have largely explained why they experienced a great deal of challenges in managing their classrooms. All the teachers had limited to no teaching experience before, and some of them did not even have a professional background in education, which rendered them premature in working with and leading students to learn. For instance, T14 wrote,

When I reflect on my classroom management issues, I realized that the primary reason is my lack of experience. As a new teacher, it is not easy for me to keep proper boundaries with my students. (T14, fall 2012)

Starting from the second semester, classroom management gradually received less attention from the teachers. The decline of classroom management challenges was observed in most teachers' reflective journals. The teachers' accumulation of teaching experience contributed to the decline of this type of challenges. With the intensive interaction with their students, the teachers knew better about their students and thus were more able to tailor their teaching according to their students' characteristics and needs.

After a whole semester's teaching, I know each student very well. Therefore, I made some adjustments of my classroom procedures based on my first semester's experience. So far, my new procedures are working pretty well! (T1, spring 2013)

Additionally, these teachers learned many useful classroom management strategies from their peers in the practicum course and from their mentor teachers. Their learning helped many of them finally overcome the classroom management challenges. For instance, T4's school was using a smartboard app called ClassDojo to manage their classrooms. ClassDojo empowers teachers to give visualized and simultaneous feedback on students' behaviors. With the help of ClassDojo, T4 quickly learned how to help her students stay focused in her classroom. She reported 7 classroom management challenges in 2012 fall, but this number drastically dropped down to 1, 0, and 0 in the next three semesters. T4 shared her experience of using ClassDojo with her peers in the practicum course. Many other teachers then started applying this tool in their own classrooms and found it quite useful. In addition to peers, many teachers also learned how to manage classrooms from their mentor teachers. For instance, during T10's evaluation meeting in 2013 spring she said,

I struggled a lot [with classroom management] last semester. In the past year, my mentor teacher came to observe and discuss with me about my teaching several times. She also invited me to her classroom to see how she managed classroom. Eventually I was able to make my expectations for my students clearer, firmer, and more consistent. Recently, I am also implementing a "sticker" reward system that I learned from my mentor. Now I feel my classroom is much more organized than before. (T10, spring 2013)

However, classroom management remained challenging to a few teachers who worked in urban schools and/or at the secondary level (grades 6–12). For instance, both T2 and T13 were teaching in the same urban secondary school where African American students accounted for over 90% of the student population. In the fourth semester, while most of their cohort mates could focus on language teaching, they were still struggling with classroom management issues. T2 wrote that though he had tried many strategies to manage their students' misbehaviors (e.g., students playing cell phones in class), it did not work at all and he felt very frustrated. Similarly, T13's students asked her "offensive" questions such as "Do Chinese people eat

Fig. 2 Distribution of the challenges among the six themes

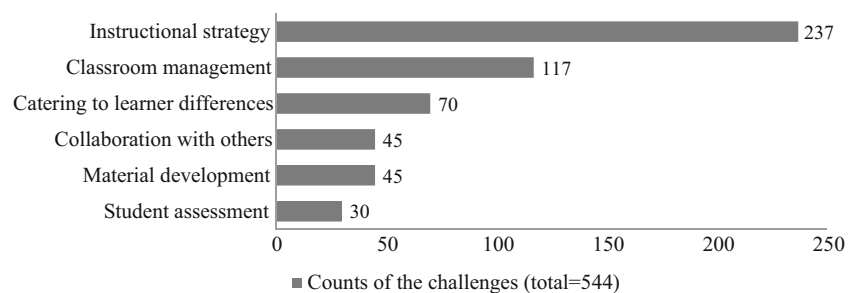
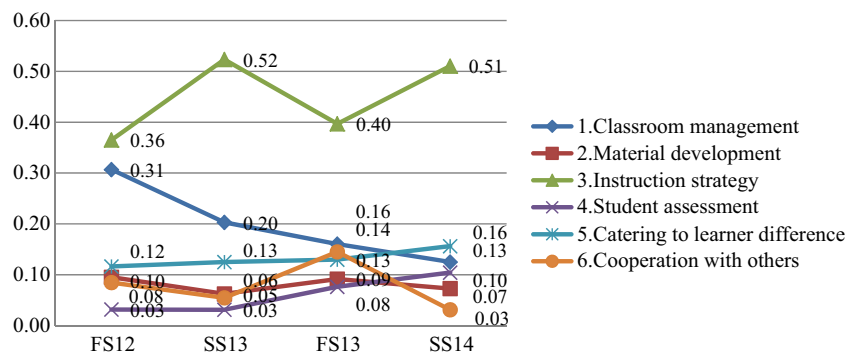


Fig. 3 Percentages of the six themes of challenges in the four semesters



cats and dogs?” and “Do Chinese people kill baby girls?” which made her feel embarrassed and insulted. Among the 9 journals T2 and T13 each submitted in spring 2014, T2 reported classroom management issues in 5 journals while T12 reported in 3 journals, which suggest that these teachers’ challenging school contexts rendered them needing more time and efforts to overcome their classroom management challenges than other teachers did.

Instructional Strategy Challenges Remained as a Primary Concern

Instructional strategy challenges predominantly occupied the teachers’ attention in the first semester. However, unlike the classroom management challenges, they remained as the teachers’ top concern over the 2 years. The instructional challenges facing these teachers included activity organization, time management, technology integration, the use of target language (Chinese), and so forth.

The cultural differences between American and Chinese schools greatly contributed to this type of challenges. Soon after the teachers started teaching in U.S. schools, almost all of them realized that there are different expectations for students and teachers in American and Chinese schools, and the differences require them to adjust their instructional approaches and strategies accordingly. As T3 elaborated,

American students are very different from Chinese students. Generally, Chinese students are disciplined and respect the authority of teachers. However, American students are more “natural,” and they need you to use personal characteristics rather than the authority of teachers to make them like you and be more interested in your class. (T3, fall 2012)

However, for these teachers, to adopt appropriate instructional strategies turned out to be more difficult than to manage their classrooms. This might be because classroom management primarily addresses students’ misbehaviors, which could be improved through the establishment of classroom rules (e.g., a reward and

consequence system). However, instructional strategies target students’ intellectual engagement and are deeply rooted in teachers’ teaching beliefs and competence (Cooper 2014), which requires their long-term practice and reflections.

Another contributing factor was the mismatch between the teachers’ backgrounds and their teaching duties. Six of the 14 teachers were asked by their schools to teach Chinese immersion programs in which they were expected to use high percentage of Chinese (often over 80%) to teach other subject content (e.g., math, social studies). Since none of these teachers had received rigorous and systemic training about content-based language education, they were struggling with crafting appropriate instructional strategies. For instance, T4 wrote,

I don’t know how to teach math, not saying using Chinese to teach math to American kids. (T4, fall 2012)

Similarly, T8’s mentor teacher also ascribed T8’s instructional challenges to her lack of professional preparation in relevant subject areas. During the evaluation meeting for T8 at the end of the first year, T8’s mentor teacher said,

She (T8) is doing a very good job in using the target language (Chinese), but she seemed to spend too much time on teaching Chinese and too little time on math. Her approaches of teaching mathematics may also need to be more connected to the students’ real lives. We know she does not have a degree in math education, and her challenges [in teaching mathematics] are sort of predictable to us. We are now planning to invite a retired math teacher of our school to come back sometime and share her experiences [about mathematics teaching] with our new Chinese immersion teachers. (T8’s mentor, spring 2013)

In short, the mismatch between these teachers’ previously cultured beliefs about education and their American schools’ expectations for them, and the mismatch between some teachers’ professional backgrounds and their teaching

job responsibilities together posed persistent instructional challenges to these teachers.

Challenges About Student Assessment and Catering to Learner Differences Gradually Increased

The challenges about student assessment and catering to learner differences both received little attention at the beginning, because the teachers seemed not able to do so then. For instance, T4 wrote,

The reality of American classrooms is quite different for what I expected. I felt overwhelmed by my students' "activeness" and had a difficult time in keeping the whole class in order, not to mention taking good care of some special education students in my class. (T4, fall 2013)

However, with the teachers' growing capacity for handling their classrooms, they could eventually focus more on the other aspects of their teaching. As a result, the teachers became increasingly aware of and concerned about student assessment and catering to learner differences.

In terms of student assessment, the teachers asked a lot of questions about how to evaluate students' language proficiency and how to monitor their learning progress during instruction. With their continuous practice and learning, the teachers gradually realized the vital role that assessment could play in both informing their practice and evaluating their teaching performance. Thus, their concerns about student assessment gradually escalated. For instance, many teachers explored how to formatively assess students' writing, how to develop alternative strategies to evaluate students' learning of the Chinese culture (e.g., developing rubrics for assessing a cultural performance), and how to prepare their students for the State's standardized tests.

As for the challenges about catering to learner differences, it is notable that it received the second most attention from the teachers in the last semester. The teachers' growing capability for organizing the class enabled them to be aware of the different learning styles, abilities, and paces of their individual students. For instance, at different points of time, T5, T8, T10, and T11 reported their awareness of a similar phenomenon in their classrooms: while "fast" learners always finished the assigned tasks in short time, many others were still working, and a few were significantly falling behind. As a result, many teachers found it difficult to meet the needs of all students at the same time.

In addition, the practice of inclusive education in American schools was another contributor to the teachers' challenges about attending to learner differences. The U.S. federal law *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*

(IDEA) requires American schools to educate students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Because of the teachers' lack of professional preparation in special education before, many of them struggled in educating the students with special needs. For instance, T11 wrote,

I have two kids with special needs. One has Asperger. He likes talking in a loud voice and is easy to get mad. The other one has anxiety disorder. She always hides her work and leaves the seat without permission. These two students always make me headache. I don't know how to accommodate their needs without compromising the learning of other students. (T11, spring 2013)

The other teachers who had students with special needs in their classrooms (e.g., T7, T8, and T9) reported similar challenges. Therefore, the practice of inclusive education in U.S. schools seemed another important factor that led the teachers to consider it challenging to cater to students' differing learning needs.

Challenges About Material Development and Collaboration with Others Decreased in General

The challenges about what to teach and how to collaborate with others occupied limited attention of the teachers in the first semester, because they seemed less urgent to the teachers compared to other challenges (e.g., classroom management). Most of the schools provided the teachers with curriculum and/or textbooks, so the teachers could rely on the existing curricular materials without worrying much about what to teach. What concerned the teachers in developing curricular materials was more about whether to teach certain content and how much to be taught. For instance, T7 and T9 hesitated to teach Pinyin to their students because they thought Pinyin was not authentic Chinese and teaching Pinyin was time consuming; T1, T10, T12, and T14 all found it difficult to select appropriate materials or tailor existing textbooks according to their students' Chinese proficiency levels. As for collaborating with other stakeholders, most teachers chose not to attend to this type of issues when they were still struggling to survive in their classrooms at the beginning of their practice.

After the first semester, the teachers' challenges about curricular material development and collaboration with others both experienced an overall decline. The teachers' continuous practice and learning might have largely explained the decreases of these two types of challenges. From the teaching practicum course, the teachers learned curriculum development theories, circulated useful teaching materials with their classmates, and developed instructional materials together for several popular topics

(e.g., Chinese New Year). All these learning activities had helped the teachers in preparing what to teach. In addition, the teachers also learned from mentor teachers by observing their practices in the field. For instance, T13 reported,

I had an opportunity to learn from my mentor teacher about communicating with parents. She commented on a student who always talked in the class as follows, "he is smart and has a sense of humor, but he seems more interested in socializing." (T13, spring 2013)

T13 continued to reflect on her own way of communicating with parents in the past and concluded that, being informed by her mentor teacher, in the future she would use more positive tone when communicating with parents about their children's performance at school.

Although in general these teachers experienced a low degree of challenges about what to teach and how to collaborate with others, some context-specific factors (e.g., school leadership, collegial culture) posed intense challenges to some participants. T5, for instance, experienced serious discomfort about the content her school mandated her to teach. She wrote,

My school asked me to teach a topic of "Connection to Taiwan" in my Chinese culture class. I really had no idea about how to teach this class because it treats China and Taiwan as two countries, which I personally disagree. I had told the school officers about my concern, but they said it was non-negotiable. (T5, fall 2013)

Although what T5 experienced was rare and atypical in the data, her experience did signal how socio-political factors could complicate and intensify the challenges that CLTs would experience in their cross-cultural teaching.

Finally, looking across the transformation of all the challenges, the practicum course seemed to have significantly helped these teachers overcome their teaching challenges. In the course evaluation survey administered to the teachers by the end of the second year, over 90% of the respondents chose either "agree (4 point)" or "strongly agree (5 point)" for all the three overall course evaluation statements, which are respectively "This course taught me how to reflect on my teaching," "This course offered me opportunities of learning from peers," and "I increased my capacity to teach by engaging in this course." According to the anonymized responses to the open-ended question in the course evaluation, many teachers shared in greater detail about the ways in which this 2-year-long practicum course had helped them. A few typical examples are as follows: "The videotaping really helps me reflect on and improve my teaching." "I learned many useful instructional strategies from this class!" "I benefited a lot from the ideas

and resources shared by my colleagues." During the class meetings throughout the 2 years, many teachers also expressed that this class provided them with a safe and supportive place where they could share their frustration and progress, seek understanding and help, and develop knowledge and capacity for teaching Chinese in a foreign context together with their fellow teachers.

In their answers to the open-ended survey question, some respondents also shared their suggestions on how to improve this course, such as "offer more learning opportunities about content-based teaching" and "have more forms of collaboration with other teachers, such as collective lesson planning and doing research together." Nevertheless, the teachers' overwhelmingly positive perceptions about this course suggest that this 2-year-long, active learning-oriented practicum course played a vital role in supporting these novice Chinese language teachers' learning to teach cross-culturally in American schools.

Discussion

This study explored the challenges encountered by 14 novice CLTs who worked in various public schools in the U.S. throughout a 2-year time span. Aligned with the existing literature (e.g., Xu 2012), the study demonstrates six types of CLTs' challenges in terms of how to manage classrooms, how to develop curricular materials, how to conduct contextually appropriate instructions, how to assess students, how to help students with diverse needs, and how to interact with colleagues and parents.

This study extends our understanding about CLTs' challenges by revealing the teachers' differential and changing distributions of their attention among these challenges. In general, the participants in this study were mostly concerned of two areas: managing classroom and adopting contextually appropriate instructional strategies. Although the teachers paid less attention to the other four challenges, it does not necessarily mean those challenges are trivial to teachers' professional work. On the contrary, some of these challenges may be just beyond the novice teachers' capacity to address (e.g., catering to learner differences) at the beginning stage of their careers, and thus they chose to first focus on the challenges that were both urgent and resolvable (e.g., classroom management).

This study also contributes a dynamic portrayal of CLTs' challenges in their cross-cultural teaching. While the current literature has found that both the classroom management challenges and instructional strategy challenges would decline with the teachers' continuous practice and development (Zhou and Li 2015; Romig 2009), this study further reveals that the former challenge seems to decline drastically within a short time while the latter one

tends to be lingering longer. Furthermore, this study portrays the changes of four other types of challenges which have received less attention in the existing literature. The findings suggest that, while the challenges about student assessment and catering to learner difference steadily increased over time, the challenges about curricular material development and collaboration with others decreased in general.

In terms of the driving forces behind the formation and transformation of CLTs' challenges, this study confirms previous studies' finding that cultural difference is a vital factor which causes, sustains, and intensifies several types of challenges facing CLTs, such as the instructional strategy challenges (e.g., Hanson 2013; Romig 2009). The different cultural beliefs between China and U.S. about what count as effective teaching and learning seemed to slow the teachers' adaptation of their instructional strategies to meet their American schools' expectations for them.

This study also reveals the critical roles that teachers' professional backgrounds and teaching contexts play in influencing the types and intensity of challenges experienced by CLTs (Melnick and Meister 2008; Plessis et al. 2014; Kennedy 2010). Similar to other novice teachers, the teachers in this study also experienced a reality shock at the beginning stage of their careers (Fantilli and McDougall 2009). In addition, the greater and longer challenges experienced by the teachers working in urban secondary school contexts and in immersion programs suggest that certain teaching contexts could amplify the challenges novice CLTs would encounter (Chen et al. 2017).

Furthermore, this study highlights the important role that teacher learning could play in helping CLTs to confront, alleviate, and overcome their teaching challenges (Avalos 2011; Borko 2004). Specifically, the 2-year-long teaching practicum course had guided these teachers to constantly reflect on their challenges, collaborate with their colleagues, and take actions to enhance their teaching capacities. These efforts together helped most of these novice CLTs survive the beginning phase of their cross-cultural teaching (Orland-Barak and Yinon 2007).

Finally, T5's challenge in teaching a topic about Taiwan surfaces the socio-political dimension of Chinese language teaching in cross-cultural contexts. Political ideologies and stances are an important part of a nation's culture (Yuen and Grossman 2009). When CLTs cross their national borders to teach language and culture, they are also exposed to different political systems and ideologies in their host contexts which would potentially challenge their personal political beliefs and stances they form in their home contexts.

Implications and Conclusion

This study has important implications on how to prepare and support CLTs to work in cross-cultural settings. First, mentor teachers, field instructors, and school administrators should work together to provide timely and tailored support to help CLTs overcome the challenges they would most struggle with at different stages (Hargreaves and Fullan 2000). Given that novice teachers are greatly challenged by issues about classroom management and instructional strategies, mentor teachers and field instructors should work closely to provide intensive support to the teachers on these two areas at the very beginning. For those who are working in challenging school contexts, such support may need to be sustained for a longer period (Tillman 2005). In addition, the 14 teachers' positive responses to the 2-year-long practicum course suggests that teacher preparation programs should create a safe and supportive space for teachers to share their frustrations, reflect on their challenges, collaborate with colleagues, and form actions to address their challenges on a regular basis.

In terms of the socio-political dimension of Chinese language teaching, field instructors and mentor teachers should work together with CLTs to appropriately address the controversial socio-political issues in their curriculum. They could learn from the pedagogical strategies that teachers in other subject areas (e.g., social studies) often adopt to teach controversial topics, such as acting as neutral chairperson during class discussion, providing students with a balanced view of an issue, and encouraging students to construct their own assertions through evidence-based reasoning (Oulton et al. 2004).

This study is limited in a few ways. First, this study investigated only a small number of CLTs from one program. Therefore, the findings about CLTs' challenges and their transformation are exploratory in nature. Second, the CLTs' challenges we portray in this study are primarily based on CLTs' written reflections. Future studies should take advantages of other forms of data, such as interview and classroom observation, to explore how CLTs engage in their professional learning in real practice.

Acknowledgements The authors are grateful to Drs. Dongbo Zhang and Wenxia Wang for their valuable support to this work. All errors in this paper are the authors' responsibility.

Funding This research received no grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Appendix 1: The Counts and Percentages of Challenges by Type and Semester

Type of challenge	Number of challenges (percentage within semester)				Total
	Fall 2012	Spring 2013	Fall 2013	Spring 2014	
1. Classroom management	58 (31%)	26 (20%)	21 (16%)	12 (13%)	117
2. Curricular material development	18 (10%)	8 (6%)	12 (9%)	7 (7%)	45
3. Instructional strategy	69 (36%)	67 (52%)	52 (40%)	49 (51%)	237
4. Student assessment	6 (3%)	4 (3%)	10 (8%)	10 (10%)	30
5. Catering to learner differences	22 (12%)	16 (13%)	17 (13%)	15 (16%)	70
6. Collaboration with others	16 (8%)	7 (6%)	19 (14%)	3 (3%)	45
Total	189 (100%)	128 (100%)	131 (100%)	96 (100%)	544

Appendix 2: The Counts of Individual Teachers' Challenges by Category and Semester

	1. Classroom management				2. Material development				3. Instructional strategy															
	FS12		SS14		FS12		SS13		FS13		SS14		FS12		SS13		FS13		SS14					
T1	8	0	4	1	2	1	1	2	2	0	0	5	6	1	2									
T2	2	2	4	5	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	6	1	0	0									
T3	3	2	1	1	4	1	1	1	1	0	0	3	5	4	5									
T4	7	1	0	0	3	0	0	2	2	0	0	6	8	6	0									
T5	5	3	2	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	6	3	3	4									
T6	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	7	7	5	0									
T7	4	2	1	1	3	3	2	2	0	0	0	6	5	7	6									
T8	1	3	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	9	6	2	2	4									
T9	4	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	1	0	0									
T10	5	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	4	7	6	8									
T11	5	2	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	5	3	5	5									
T12	5	2	2	0	0	1	1	2	2	3	2	6	6	4	4									
T13	3	3	5	3	0	0	0	0	0	1	6	1	1	4	2									
T14	4	2	0	0	2	1	1	0	0	1	3	5	5	4	5									
	4. Student assessment				5. Catering to learner differences				6. Collaboration with others				Sub-total											
	FS12		SS13		FS13		SS14		FS12		SS13		FS13		SS14		FS12		SS13		FS13		SS14	
T1	0	0	0	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	41
T2	0	1	2	0	4	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	35
T3	2	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	37
T4	0	1	0	2	1	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	42
T5	1	1	0	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	1	1	1	2	2	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	45
T6	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	30
T7	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	2	1	3	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	51
T8	0	0	1	0	2	2	4	2	2	4	3	2	2	2	1	1	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	45
T9	0	0	0	0	4	1	2	3	2	3	2	0	3	0	3	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	27
T10	0	0	1	0	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	41
T11	0	0	3	0	2	4	0	0	4	0	1	3	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	42
T12	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	35
T13	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	35
T14	2	0	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	38
Total																							544	

FS12 fall semester 2012, SS13 spring semester 2013, FS 13 fall semester 2013, SS14 spring semester 2014

References

- Asia Society. (2011). *Meeting the challenge: Preparing Chinese language teachers for American schools*. Retrieved from www.asiasociety.org/pg1.
- Avalos, B. (2011). Teacher professional development in Teaching and Teacher Education over ten years. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 27*(1), 10–20.
- Borko, H. (2004). Professional development and teacher learning: Mapping the terrain. *Educational Researcher, 33*(8), 3–15.
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal, 9*(2), 27–40.
- Brown, K. D., & Stevick, D. (2014). The globalizing labor market in education: Teachers as cultural ambassadors or agents of institutional isomorphism? *Peabody Journal of Education, 89*(1), 4–16.
- Chen, Y. L., Yang, T. A., & Chen, H. L. (2017). Challenges encountered in a Chinese immersion program in the United States. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*. doi:10.1007/s40299-017-0337-2.
- College Board. (2013). *Chinese guest teacher and trainee program*. Retrieved from <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/k-12/awards/chinese/guest>.
- Cooper, K. S. (2014). Eliciting engagement in the high school classroom: A mixed-methods examination of teaching practices. *American Educational Research Journal, 51*(2), 363–402.
- Fantilli, R. D., & McDougall, D. E. (2009). A study of novice teachers: Challenges and supports in the first years. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 25*(6), 814–825.
- Hanson, E. C. (2013). "To know the system and know the culture is difficult": Understanding the cultural adjustment process of teachers from China working in US K-12 schools. Doctoral Dissertation. Retrieved from http://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/156703/Hanson_umn_0130M_13784.pdf?sequence=1.
- Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2000). Mentoring in the new millennium. *Theory into Practice, 39*(1), 50–56.
- Kennedy, M. M. (2010). Attribution error and the quest for teacher quality. *Educational Researcher, 39*(8), 591–598.
- Lai, C., Li, Z., & Gong, Y. (2016). Teacher agency and professional learning in cross-cultural teaching contexts: Accounts of Chinese teachers from international schools in Hong Kong. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 54*, 12–21.
- Liu, X. (2012). *Becoming Laoshi in U.S. high schools: Case studies of three foreign-born Chinese language teacher candidates*. Doctoral Dissertation. Retrieved from http://drum.lib.umd.edu/bitstream/1903/13662/1/Liu_umd_0117E_13739.pdf.
- McCormack, A., Gore, J., & Thomas, K. (2006). Early career teacher professional learning. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 34*(1), 95–113.
- Melnick, S. A., & Meister, D. G. (2008). A comparison of beginning and experienced teachers' concerns. *Educational Research Quarterly, 31*(3), 39.
- O'Brien, T., & Guiney, D. (2001). *Differentiation in teaching and learning: Principles and practice*. New York: Continuum.
- Orland-Barak, L., & Yinon, H. (2007). When theory meets practice: What student teachers learn from guided reflection on their own classroom discourse. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 23*(6), 957–969.
- Orton, J. (2010). Education Chinese language teachers: Some fundamentals. In L. Tsung & K. Cruickshank (Eds.), *Teaching and learning Chinese in global contexts: CFL worldwide* (pp. 151–164). London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Oulton, C., Day, V., Dillon, J., & Grace, M. (2004). Controversial issues-teachers' attitudes and practices in the context of citizenship education. *Oxford Review of Education, 30*(4), 489–507.
- Plessis, A. E., Gillies, R. M., & Carroll, A. (2014). Out-of-field teaching and professional development: A transnational investigation across Australia and South Africa. *International Journal of Educational Research, 66*, 90–102.
- Rolls, S., & Plauborg, H. (2009). Teachers' career trajectories: An examination of research. In M. Bayer, U. Brinkkjaer, H. Plauborg, & S. Rolls (Eds.), *Teachers' career trajectories and work lives* (pp. 9–28). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Romig, N. (2009). *Acculturation of four Chinese teachers teaching in the United States: An ethnographic study*. Doctoral Dissertation. Retrieved from www.lib.msu.edu.
- Saldana, J. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Tillman, L. C. (2005). Mentoring new teachers: Implications for leadership practice in an urban school. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 41*(4), 609–629.
- Wang, W. (2012). *Chinese language teachers' socialization into the profession: A comparative study*. Doctoral Dissertation. Retrieved from <https://etd.lib.msu.edu/islandora/object/etd%3A1069>.
- Xu, H. (2012). *Challenges native Chinese teachers face in teaching Chinese as a foreign language to non-native Chinese students in U.S. classrooms*. Doctoral Dissertation. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/teachlearnstudent/20/>.
- Yuan, R., & Burns, A. (2017). Teacher identity development through action research: A Chinese experience. *Teachers and Teaching, 23*(6), 729–749.
- Yuen, C. Y., & Grossman, D. L. (2009). The intercultural sensitivity of student teachers in three cities. *Compare, 39*(3), 349–365.
- Zhou, W., & Li, G. (2015). Chinese language teachers' expectations and perceptions of American students' behavior: Exploring the nexus of cultural differences and classroom management. *System, 49*, 17–27.