

Sustaining Intercultural Teaching through Transnational Partnership: A Case Study of EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Despite curriculum reforms emphasizing intercultural competence in Korea and Taiwan, EFL teachers face persistent gaps between intercultural ideals and institutional realities, including assessment pressures, time limitations, and resource scarcity. Traditional one-shot professional development rarely addresses these tensions, leaving teachers unsupported in implementation — a gap this dyad-level case is positioned to trace in situ. This study examines one teacher dyad in a 16-week transnational university-school partnership, both of whom wanted to teach interculturally but felt limited by their institutional contexts. Drawing on third-generation Cultural Historical Activity Theory, this paper shows how the partnership functioned as a critical third space — mediating between activity systems through intellectual legitimation, responsive mediation, cross-border solidarity, and research-practice bridging — to enable strategic integration despite ongoing pressures. Both teachers demonstrated strategic integration of intercultural teaching into required curriculum, with one independently designing a follow-up lesson and the other incorporating project materials into formal assessment within two weeks of the program's conclusion. Findings suggest how partnership design can support intercultural teacher development in constrained contexts, offering a transferable model for Asia-Pacific reform implementation.

INTRODUCTION

With globalization rendering societies intertwined within a globalized infrastructure, second and foreign language education has shifted from cultural to intercultural orientation (Scarino, 2009), reflected in national standards across the globe (Garrido & Álvarez, 2006; Sardegna & Dugartsyrenova, 2021). Despite curriculum reforms emphasizing global citizenship and intercultural competence in Korea and Taiwan, teachers find it challenging to fulfill these goals. Persistent implementation gaps stem from limited understanding of culture, lack of resources, and insufficient preparation (Garrido & Álvarez, 2006; Nugent, 2020; Sercu, 2005), leading many teachers to incorporate culturalism—"grammars of cultures" based on unfounded facts and stereotypes (Dervin, 2010); this superficial approach persists despite decades of scholarship on critical intercultural competence (Dervin, 2016).

This gap is particularly pronounced in East Asian contexts where rapid curriculum reforms encounter entrenched institutional structures, assessment-focused cultures, and limited resources (Hu, 2005; Kirkpatrick, 2011). Korea exemplifies this tension acutely. Successive revisions to the national curriculum have foregrounded global citizenship and intercultural competence as central aims, yet implementation unfolds within a strongly assessment-driven system in which high-stakes testing shapes what is taught and valued. English teachers are thus positioned between a curriculum that mandates intercultural goals and an institutional reality that rewards measurable, test-oriented outcomes—a contradiction that leaves intercultural teaching perpetually at the margins of practice. Taiwan presents a revealing comparative case: a different national system that has pursued broadly parallel intercultural reforms while facing its own assessment pressures and resource constraints. Although this study does not undertake a systematic cross-national comparison—its scope is a single teacher dyad rather than a national sample—pairing a Korean and a Taiwanese teacher makes it possible to ask whether the constraints they face are nationally specific or structurally shared across East Asian assessment-driven contexts. In this sense, the Korea-Taiwan pairing functions as a form of analytic triangulation, revealing patterns that a single-national-context study could not.

Traditional professional development follows a predictable pattern: teachers attend workshops, return motivated, encounter institutional barriers, and ultimately revert to familiar practices. Systematic reviews of professional development effectiveness confirm this pattern persists (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Guskey & Yoon, 2009), with one-shot workshops failing to provide acknowledgment of constraints, ongoing implementation support, or strategic adaptation guidance. Research on university–school partnerships suggests alternative possibilities (Bloomfield & Nguyen, 2015; Clarke & Fournillier, 2012; Sakonidis & Potari, 2014; Tsui & Law, 2007), yet most examines contexts where teachers have relative autonomy, focusing on knowledge co-construction in general rather than how partnerships support teachers navigating persistent systemic constraints. Even fewer studies examine transnational partnerships where cross-border collaboration might reveal systemic patterns and provide solidarity unavailable nationally. This paper addresses these gaps, guided by the following questions:

- RQ1. How did the transnational university–school partnership enable two EFL teachers to navigate the gap between intercultural ideals and institutional constraints in their respective contexts?
- RQ2. Through what specific mechanisms did the partnership support teachers in strategically integrating intercultural teaching into their constrained practice? Here, strategic integration refers to embedding intercultural content within existing mandated curriculum and assessment structures, rather than adding intercultural teaching alongside or in competition with them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural Teacher Education: From One-shot Workshops to Sustained Support Needs

Language education has undergone a conceptual shift from essentialist approaches treating culture as static national characteristics to dynamic, critical perspectives (Byram, 1997; Dervin, 2016; Kramsch, 1993). Intercultural teaching involves developing students' attitudes of openness and curiosity, knowledge of social groups and their practices, skills of interpreting and relating, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997; Lázár et al., 2023). Yet translating these concepts into practice proves difficult, particularly in contexts with persistent institutional constraints. This “transfer problem” (Borg, 2006) intensifies in East Asian contexts where rapid curriculum reforms emphasizing intercultural competence meet entrenched institutional structures. Korea and Taiwan, for instance, introduced ambitious reforms stressing global citizenship and intercultural awareness. Implementation, however, faces well-documented barriers including assessment pressures, packed curricula, and resource limitations (Baker & Ishikawa, 2021; Hu, 2005; Kirkpatrick, 2011). Recent research confirms these patterns persist (Feryok & Oranje, 2015; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), where the fundamental contradiction lies in curricula mandating intercultural competence while institutional realities reward traditional outcomes. As such, even though teachers aspire to expose students to intercultural ideas and experiences, they often feel ill-prepared and crave more professional development (Lázár, 2011).

Traditional professional development typically takes the form of one-shot workshops where teachers attend brief sessions, learn progressive approaches, and return to schools expected to implement independently (Desimone, 2009; Guskey & Yoon, 2009). These workshops introduce conceptual frameworks and example activities but rarely address sustained support needed for implementation within constrained contexts. Such workshops lack explicit acknowledgment of institutional constraints, ongoing implementation support, external legitimation for justifying time allocation, and strategic adaptation

guidance; without which teachers are left feeling inadequate rather than supported (Avalos, 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Recognizing these limitations, it has been suggested that teachers need professional development combining conceptual learning with experiential engagement (Byram & Wagner, 2018; Gómez Parra & Huertas-Abril, 2020). For teachers in linguistically homogeneous environments such as Korea and Taiwan, digital communication technologies can create intercultural contact (Schreiber, 2015), enabling teachers to “collaborate and engage in meaningful intercultural experiences that will enhance their cultural knowledge and skills” (Spooner-Lane et al., 2013, p. 2).

Despite this potential, online approaches to intercultural professional development have not been widely implemented, with even fewer examples of collaborative research stemming from collaborative online teaching (Helm & van der Velden, 2020). Limited work explores how sustained online partnerships combining conceptual learning with experiential engagement might support teachers navigating persistent constraints in assessment-driven contexts. This study addresses this gap by examining a transnational virtual partnership specifically designed to provide both conceptual foundations and ongoing implementation support for teachers working within systemic constraints.

Mediation and Third-generation Cultural Historical Activity Theory

To make sense of how partnership unfolds within collaborative spaces, this paper draws on sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), conceptualizing learning through mediation—support bridging current capability and potential development. Applied to teacher education, university partners can mediate between research knowledge and school realities through responsive scaffolding at the point of need (Zeichner, 2010). Partnerships enable mediation differently than traditional professional development through sustained relationships that build trust for honest discussion of barriers (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), bidirectional expertise combining university research knowledge with school practice wisdom (Penuel et al., 2011), ongoing presence providing support when actually needed, and contextual understanding that shapes responsive adaptation to local realities.

In particular, this study employs Engeström’s (2001) third-generation Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT-3rd) to analyze such mediation systematically. Building on Vygotsky’s insight that human action is mediated by cultural tools, activity theory takes the activity system as its unit of analysis: a *subject* (here, each teacher) works toward an *object* (a goal or motive) using *mediating artifacts* (conceptual and material tools), within a context structured by *rules* (institutional norms, assessment requirements), a *community* (colleagues, students, partners), and a *division of labor*. Tensions among these components—what the framework terms contradictions—are not malfunctions but the engine of change, prompting the transformations that drive learning.

What distinguishes the third generation is its expansion to a minimum of two interacting activity systems, enabling analysis of dialogue and negotiation across different perspectives or traditions (Engeström, 2001). In this expanded model, the object evolves through three analytically distinct phases. Object 1 is the initial, individually held object each subject brings to the interaction, shaped by their own context and constraints. Object 2 is a collectively constructed object that participants begin to share as they work together. Object 3 is the potentially shared object that emerges from the genuine interaction of the two systems—a new, jointly constructed motive that neither party held at the outset (Engeström, 2001). As illustrated in Figure 1, this movement from individual toward shared objects functions as a conceptual tool “to understand dialogue, multiple perspectives, and networks of interacting activity systems” (Engeström, 2001, p. 136). Resolving contradictions through such interaction can produce expansive learning, in which participants do not merely acquire existing knowledge but transform the activity itself (Engeström, 2001, 2009).

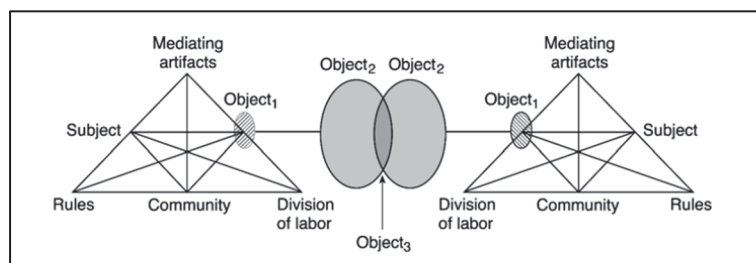


FIGURE 1

Two Interacting Activity Systems as Minimal Model for the Third Generation of Activity Theory (Engeström, 2001, p. 136)

Beyond its function within activity-system analysis, the space in which two systems interact and a shared Object 3

emerges can also be understood through Bhabha's (1994) concept of a third space—a space of negotiation in which neither party's original position is simply reproduced or dominant, but where something genuinely new becomes possible. In this study, CHAT-3rd provides the analytic apparatus for tracing how contradictions within and between the teachers' activity systems generated movement toward Object 3, while the third-space construct offers an interpretive frame for what the partnership itself constituted: not a transmission channel from university to school, but a negotiated space in which new practice could emerge.

Transnational Partnerships as Mediation Structures

CHAT-3rd has been applied across a range of teacher education partnerships. In research-practice partnerships, it has illuminated how university and school participants negotiate differing goals and knowledge systems to produce shared outcomes (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Ellis et al., 2023; Penuel et al., 2011), while studies of collaborations between academic researchers and in-service teachers have shown how joint inquiry can reposition teachers as co-producers of knowledge rather than recipients of expertise (Sakonidis & Potari, 2014; Tsui & Law, 2007). Work on pre-service teachers and university supervisors has used the framework to surface the tensions that arise when university and school activity systems meet (Bloomfield & Nguyen, 2015; Clarke & Fournillier, 2012). What unifies these studies is CHAT-3rd's central analytic move: treating contradictions not as problems to be eliminated but as “historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems” (Engeström, 2001, p. 137) that drive change. Such contradictions commonly emerge from differences between university and school systems (Bloomfield & Nguyen, 2015), yet can become productive when participants generate collective knowledge through boundary crossing (Tsui & Law, 2007), potentially leading to expansive learning (Engeström, 2001, 2009) and a shared Object 3.

This analytic emphasis on contradiction is especially visible in research on transnational and online partnerships. Examining international telecollaboration among student-teachers, Antoniadou (2011) and Basharina (2007) found that contradictions surfaced not only between activity systems but within them—arising from participants' differing expectations, tools, and institutional rules—and that these tensions, when surfaced, became occasions for learning rather than mere breakdowns. Ryder and Yamagata-Lynch (2014) similarly traced how teachers' engagement in an online professional development setting was shaped by the interplay of competing system components. More recent work has foregrounded contradictions as catalysts for transformative development: Nishio and Nakatsugawa (2020) and Priego and Liaw (2017) show how cross-cultural digital collaborations generate tensions that, mediated well, prompt participants to reconceptualize their assumptions and practices. Collectively, this body of work establishes that transnational partnerships are fertile sites for the kind of contradiction-driven learning CHAT-3rd is designed to capture.

Despite this rich body of work, two gaps remain. First, most partnership research—transnational or otherwise—examines contexts where teachers enjoy relative professional autonomy, leaving open how partnerships function for teachers working under the persistent, assessment-driven constraints that characterize East Asian schooling. Second, while existing studies richly document that contradictions arise and can be productive, far less attention has been paid to the specific partnership mechanisms through which teachers are supported in navigating those contradictions toward sustained changes in practice. This study addresses both gaps, employing CHAT-3rd as an analytical lens to illuminate how a transnational partnership mediates the contradiction between intercultural mandates and assessment-driven realities, and offering an empirically grounded exemplar relevant for Asia-Pacific contexts.

METHOD

Context & Participants

This study draws from a larger multiple-case research project in which eight English language teachers—four from South Korea and four from Taiwan—participated in a 16-week professional development program delivered in English as a *lingua franca*, conducted between July and January of the 2021–2022 academic year. Recruitment occurred through professional networks and all participants provided informed consent. The eight teachers formed two school-level groups: a high school group comprising two bi-national dyads and a middle school group comprising two bi-national dyads. Over the course of the project, one dyad was removed from analysis because one participant withdrew due to personal reasons; a second dyad was removed because both teachers had participated in a prior related research project together, which fundamentally altered the nature of their interaction relative to the other participants. The two remaining focal dyads—one high school dyad and

one middle school dyad—were therefore selected for in-depth case study analysis. This paper focuses on Kim and Kuo, both pseudonyms, who formed a bi-national partnership between South Korea and Taiwan.

Their selection from within the focal dyads followed a preliminary review of the complete high school group dataset. All available data—interviews, reflective journals, reading responses, and meeting recordings—were first reviewed across both high school dyad participants. This study is designed as an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) rather than a representative or typical case where the aim is to illuminate *how* a transnational partnership can support teachers in navigating institutional constraints toward strategic integration, not to claim this trajectory as typical or guaranteed. The Kim-Kuo dyad was selected on this basis, as their parallel trajectories most clearly illuminated the mechanisms of interest, and their markedly different national and institutional settings offered analytic leverage for examining how partnership mechanisms operated across, rather than within, a single context. The other high school dyad, by contrast, entered the partnership with a stronger pre-existing collaborative relationship prior to the program, having previously co-taught and collaborated informally. This pre-existing foundation meant that shifts in their activity systems during the partnership were harder to attribute specifically to the partnership’s mechanisms, as opposed to their prior working relationship—making that dyad less analytically suited to this study’s focus on how partnership design itself enables navigation of constraints. The Kim-Kuo dyad’s selection therefore reflects analytic fit for an instrumental case design rather than selection based on the most favorable outcome; this paper makes no claim that their trajectory represents partnerships or teacher dyads generally, and the research questions and findings are framed accordingly throughout.

At the time of study, Kim was an English teacher at a prestigious private girls’ high school in Seoul, with nine years of EFL teaching experience, in a district known for strong university placement outcomes. She worked in an academically rigorous environment where standardized assessments based on national curriculum dominated teaching and learning. Culture was often marginalized in this assessment-driven context, yet Kim was determined to integrate it to make English learning more engaging. Her limited international exposure, primarily a five-month US exchange program, meant direct intercultural contact was rare. Her partner teacher, Kuo, was teaching English at a public high school in Taiwan with three years of experience, in a government-certified substitute, non-tenured position, where she often felt undervalued compared to established peers. Although new to international collaboration, she approached the partnership enthusiastically. Having participated in various culture teaching workshops, Kuo’s participation was driven by a desire to integrate cultural learning more thoroughly into her classes.

Partnership Structure

Designed by the first author, the 16-week transnational partnership program involved two phases: conceptual foundations (10 weeks with bi-weekly meetings) and supported implementation (six weeks with weekly meetings coupled with actual classroom teaching). The detailed timeline and activities are presented in Table 1. The teachers collaboratively designed an in-class intercultural project involving personal and social identity activities, cultural mapping exercises, and critical engagement with a shared text—a simplified version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*—alongside a Washington Post article prompting discussions about the novel’s curriculum appropriateness. The project is described in full in the Findings section.

TABLE 1

The Procedure of the PD

Phase	Weeks	Activities
Conceptual foundations	1	Culture and identity: history of names; personal identity wheel
	2-3	Culture and interculturality in education: personal and social identity wheels; in-class project design
	4-5	Culture and interculturality in language education: cultural mapping; cultural artifacts; in-class project design
	6-7	Intercultural citizenship in language education: in-class project design
	8-10	Intercultural language educators: in-class project design; share project details activity
Supported implementation	11	Personal and social identity wheel activity: share activity reflection posts on padlet and write response to group peers
	12	Cultural mapping activity: share activity reflection posts on Padlet and write response to group peers
	13-14	Collaborative reading: <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> in their textbooks; Read an article from the Washington Post; Brainstorm ideas on the guiding questions and post them on the shared Google Jamboard
	15-16	Synchronous session

Researcher Positionality

The first author occupied a dual role in this study as both researcher and participant, having designed the professional development program and served as the teacher educator who facilitated the partnership meetings, functioning as the third member of the triadic researcher-teacher-teacher structure. This insider position shaped the study in ways that warrant explicit acknowledgment. Such involvement afforded sustained, close access to the partnership's development and an experiential understanding of how mediation unfolded at the point of need—access that an external observer could not have obtained. At the same time, it positioned the researcher as an interested party in the partnership's perceived success, with the potential to shape both the interactions under analysis and their interpretation. This concern is particularly salient given that one of the study's findings concerns the university partner's role as a bridge between research knowledge and classroom realities—a finding in which the researcher is directly implicated.

Addressing this, the researcher actively sought disconfirming evidence throughout analysis. The 53-entry researcher journal documented not only decisions and assumptions but also moments of frustration, uncertainty, and analytic discomfort—including instances where the partnership did not unfold as intended. The analysis also considered moments of teacher hesitation, anxiety, and resistance—such as Kuo's repeated expressions of self-doubt about her ability to carry out the project, and both teachers' initial guilt about adapting the plan away from its intended form—rather than treating the partnership trajectory as uniformly successful. The mechanism, university partner as bridge—to be introduced later in this paper—was accordingly treated with particular interpretive caution, and the peer debriefing procedure described below was specifically tasked with scrutinizing this finding for evidence of courtesy bias or researcher projection. Rather than treating the dual-role entanglement as a limitation to be neutralized, it was approached as an analytic relationship requiring disciplined reflexivity throughout the study.

Data Collection & Analysis

Data collected across the 16-week program and immediately following its conclusion included: two semi-structured interviews per teacher (an initial interview conducted before the PD began and a final interview conducted individually via Zoom within two weeks of the program's end, each approximately 60–90 minutes in length); weekly reflective journals submitted by each teacher throughout the program (totaling between two and seven individually written journals per teacher in the second phase); reading responses posted to a shared Padlet platform; 18 recorded virtual group and dyad meetings documenting partnership interactions; in-class project materials including lesson worksheets and student work; and 53 researcher journal memos documenting ongoing analytic decisions, assumptions, and responses to emerging patterns. This comprehensive corpus enabled triangulation across multiple sources and longitudinal tracking of development across three chronological phases: prior to, during, and following the PD.

To examine how the partnership enabled teachers to navigate constraints and what mechanisms were essential for integration, grounded content analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) was employed, combined with CHAT-3rd as an analytical framework. Analysis was conducted by the first author in multiple passes. In the initial open coding phase, interview transcripts were read in their entirety across multiple readings; keywords and phrases were color-coded into clusters related to teachers' understandings of culture and interculturality, their navigation of institutional constraints, instances of partnership support, and pedagogical adaptations. Analytical memos were written for each teacher's initial and final interview to build contextual understanding before coding was applied across the full dataset. In the focused coding phase, patterns in teachers' evolving pedagogical thinking were examined across the complete corpus of journals, reading responses, meeting recordings, and project materials to verify that themes identified in interview data were corroborated across sources and time points. CHAT-3rd was then applied to situate teachers' learning within their professional and institutional contexts: each teacher's pre-existing perspectives were represented as individual activity systems, and the evolution of Objects 1, 2, and 3 was traced across the dataset to examine how activity system components shaped engagement. The move from open codes to the four partnership mechanisms was grounded in this cross-source pattern analysis; each mechanism was identified only where supporting evidence appeared consistently across at least three data source types for each teacher.

To establish trustworthiness, several procedures were employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking was central: emerging interpretations were shared with Kim and Kuo, who were invited to confirm, challenge, or extend the readings of their experiences; this process both refined specific claims and helped guard against over-reading the partnership's success given the researcher's dual role. Peer debriefing with a colleague not involved in the program provided an additional external check; the debriefer reviewed the first author's interpretations and coding rationale against excerpted data, with particular attention directed toward the fourth mechanism, scrutinizing whether evidence for the university partner's role reflected

teachers' genuine experience or researcher investment in the program's success. An audit trail documented analytic decisions, coding development, and the evolution of categories across the corpus. Triangulation across all data sources allowed patterns to be corroborated rather than relying on any single account. All interviews and written reflections were conducted in English, the lingua franca of the partnership—with Korean teachers choosing to respond in Korean during interviews, which were subsequently translated by the first author—so where participants' English-language phrasing reflected additional-language use, their wording was preserved in reported quotations.

FINDINGS

This section is organized in two interrelated parts, corresponding to the study's two research questions. RQ1 traces the chronological trajectory of Kim and Kuo's professional learning across three phases: their initial marginalization of intercultural teaching; the collaborative design and enactment of a shared classroom project; and evidence of continued practice in the period immediately following the program's conclusion. Throughout, attention is paid to the specific contradictions—within each teacher's activity system and between the two interacting systems—that shaped this trajectory, including how constraints were navigated rather than resolved. RQ2 identifies four partnership mechanisms that, across the full dataset, functioned as the mediational means enabling this navigation. These two parts are analytically distinct but empirically intertwined: the mechanisms are visible precisely because the trajectory reveals where teachers struggled, adapted, and changed. Readers should note that the first section describes what changed and when, while the second section explains how the partnership enabled those changes. That being said, where overlap appears, it reflects the same data being read through two different analytic lenses—chronological development and structural mediation.

The Developmental Trajectory: From Marginalization to Continued Practice

The teachers' professional learning unfolded as a developmental movement across the partnership, traced here through three phases: their initial marginalization of intercultural teaching and the gradual emergence of shared objects; the collaborative design and enactment of the *To Kill a Mockingbird* (TKM hereafter) project; and the sustained changes in practice that followed. Analyzed as two interacting activity systems, this trajectory shows how Kim and Kuo moved from treating intercultural integration as impossible toward strategic implementation within their existing constraints.

From Marginalization to Strategic Integration: Toward Shared Objects

Both teachers initially relegated intercultural pedagogy to curriculum margins, viewing systematic integration as impossible within their institutional constraints. Kim ran extracurricular programs including embassy visits and international exchanges, but these reached only high-achieving students, creating inequality that troubled her. On the other hand, Kuo created optional electives and attempted to incorporate cultural elements opportunistically, but struggled with assessment challenges. As she noted in the final interview, “most students cared about their scores above all else,” and would disengage from any activity not tied to assessment. In short, neither had achieved systematic integration of intercultural teaching into their core teaching practice.

As summarized in Table 2, each teacher thus entered the partnership with individual Object 1 goals shaped by immediate teaching contexts and institutional constraints. The partnership's first intervention involved legitimating their struggle as systemic reality requiring strategic navigation rather than individual failure. From early on, both teachers demonstrated active engagement in virtual meetings and private communication channels, sharing concerns about culture teaching in their assessment-driven contexts. This shared motive—learning ways to incorporate interculturality into regular curriculum rather than keeping it extracurricular—began moving them toward collectively constructed Object 2. Throughout the PD, partnership activities challenged foundational assumptions about culture. While both initially understood culture through national categories using expressions such as “Korean culture is,” partnership activities enabled them to shift toward individual-focused, dynamic understandings and what it means to teach more interculturally. As Kim noted, she came to reconceptualize culture as recognizing that individuals can have very different cultures even within the same national group. Kuo similarly came to distinguish intercultural from international approaches, that while “international” keeps national identity foregrounded, “intercultural” foregrounds the individual.

As conceptual understanding evolved, both teachers developed distinct but complementary Object 2s. For Kim, this involved addressing cultural images misrepresented in national textbooks and exposing students to culture as full of

controversies. For Kuo, it included addressing marginalized cultures and creating inclusive environments for students to explore their unique identities. However, this conceptual shift initially created new anxiety. As Kuo captured in her journal, understanding intercultural teaching made implementation feel even more impossible in a test-prep classroom. The partnership's response proved critical: rather than encouraging teachers to "just do it" despite constraints, collaborative strategizing about integrating concepts within existing limitations created conditions for Object 3 to emerge.

The turning point came in Week 5 when both discovered their textbooks included the same texts, particularly TKM. Discussion about textbooks portraying only "positive" sides of cultures surfaced shared discomfort. As Kim explained, "it is easier to teach positive things, and difficult to deal with controversial issues because of fear of handling them poorly." Kuo voiced concern about institutional resistance, noting that in Taiwan, teaching children something "dark" would be met with pushback and requires courage. While on this topic, Kim shared through her reading response a Washington Post article she had recently come across about U.S. parents requesting TKM's removal from the curriculum due to racial issues. This made both teachers realize they had been teaching the text for years without awareness of the conversations surrounding it, and that it could become a vehicle for addressing both of their ongoing concerns. A new, transformed activity therefore began to emerge through sustained dialogue—the movement toward Object 3. The dyad decided to co-design their project around TKM and the Washington Post article, marking the emergence of a shared object. As Kuo reflected, she and Kim "shared the same concern and wanted to challenge the same thing." How this shared object took shape as a concrete classroom project is detailed in the following section.

TABLE 2
Evolution of Objects from Individual to Shared

Stage	Kim	Kuo	Representative Evidence
Object 1 (individual, pre-partnership)	Teaching English within an assessment-driven curriculum; running extracurricular programs to expose students to intercultural contact, but these reaching only high-achieving students	Creating optional electives and incorporating cultural elements opportunistically, constrained by students' assessment focus	Kim: extracurricular programs "reached only high-achieving students, creating inequality that troubled her." Kuo: "most students cared about their scores above all else"
Object 2 (collaboratively developing)	Addressing cultural images misrepresented in national textbooks; exposing students to culture as "full of controversies"	Addressing marginalized cultures; creating inclusive environments for students to explore unique identities	<i>Partnership Mechanisms</i> section on each teacher's Object 2 development
Object 3 (shared, emergent)	Co-designing TKM and Washington Post project built around questioning textbook authority and developing perspective-taking capacity	Same shared project; explicit recognition of shared concern	Kuo and Kim "shared the same concern and wanted to challenge the same thing"

The Intercultural Project: Reading To Kill a Mockingbird across Borders

The project that emerged from this shared concern took the form of a multi-week module of one synchronous and two asynchronous activities, with students working in pre-assigned binational groups of four to five. 25 students from Kim's class and 23 from Kuo's tenth-grade class, all female, participated. The asynchronous activities were designed as building blocks for the synchronous meeting, preparing students linguistically and culturally before the main cross-border task—a blended structure in which the central activity is positioned between classroom preparation and follow-up (Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2017).

In the first two weeks, students completed the same Personal and Social Identity Wheel and Cultural Mapping activities the teachers had themselves experienced during the partnership's conceptual phase, sharing reflections on Padlet and responding to group peers. They then revisited the abridged version of TKM in their national textbooks and read the Washington Post article questioning whether texts with troubling themes should continue to be taught. Around these materials, Kim and Kuo posed a set of guiding questions: Should the text be read at all? The modified version or the original? Should it be removed from the national curriculum? Crucially, the teachers connected these arguments back to students' own identity work, asking students to consider how their positions were shaped by their cultural identities. Students brainstormed and posted their thinking on a shared Google Jamboard, which then seeded the discussion topics for the synchronous session.

The design itself enacted the teachers' reconceptualized understanding of culture. As the planning excerpt below shows,

the dyad deliberately built the activity around questioning textbook authority rather than transmitting cultural facts:

Kim: I think we can ask students ... should the opposite article be included in the lesson ... what kind of thought-provoking questions should be included?

Kuo: I think it can give students a thinking that textbooks aren't always right ... in Taiwan, students tend to think that contents in our textbooks ... is always right and can't be rearranged, so they only accept the knowledge but they never really question ... I want them to know that there are different perspective toward a culture.

For students who, in Kuo's words, tended to treat textbook content as "always right," the aim was to make visible that even a canonical text—and the textbook framing it positively—represents one perspective among others.

Enacting the project nonetheless surfaced real implementation concerns, and partnership support proved essential as they arose. Kuo worried about her students' English proficiency for the synchronous discussion, and the dyad co-constructed scaffolding strategies including sentence starters and structured peer support. Both teachers emphasized the safe learning environment as critical to this kind of work. As Kim described it, they needed to create "a place accepting and warm enough for people to open up," which she saw as crucial for the intimacy that people-related work requires. Kuo highlighted how discovering "similarities alongside differences" enabled them to produce something coherent together despite thinking differently. The teachers also adapted to constraints beyond their control. For instance, Kim's classes alternated between online and offline formats according to COVID-19 regulations, requiring the dyad to adjust the delivery of activities accordingly. Rather than treating such adjustments as failures of fidelity, the partnership reframed them as professional judgment—as the researcher journal noted, both teachers initially expressed guilt about not implementing the plan perfectly, which required explicit reframing that strategic adaptation within real constraints is itself a form of success.

The synchronous session brought the binational groups together to share and discuss the positions they had developed asynchronously. What followed in Kuo's classroom illustrates how the project extended beyond its planned structure. In a follow-up session the week after the synchronous meeting, Kuo noticed her students forming uneven impressions of their Korean partners—some had found them talkative and engaged, others less so—and worried this might harden into generalization. Rather than letting it pass, she spontaneously redesigned a lesson on the spot. She asked students to report the similarities and differences they had noticed, wrote these on the board, and, seeing the word "personality" appear under both columns, used it to guide them toward a key insight from the partnership's own readings—that "one does not meet cultures, but individuals" (Dervin, 2010). As Kuo recounted:

I asked them ... what might be the reason that 'personality' showed in both sections, and they told me that ... even though we are in the same class we have really similar growing-up backgrounds, we still differ. And it's the same in different cultures.

Her aim, she reflected, was for students to learn that "no matter who you meet in the future, you don't judge the culture by just meeting one or two people." This unplanned lesson—designed without consulting Kim or the teacher educator—became the clearest evidence of Kuo's developing independent capacity, a point examined further below. Evidence that the project succeeded came from both teachers reporting meaningful student engagement, with Kim subsequently incorporating TKM materials into formal assessment.

From Project to Continued Practice

Teacher transformation manifested in continued practice in the period immediately following the partnership, though the available evidence covers only the weeks directly after the program's conclusion. Kuo integrated intercultural discussions into regular lessons, connecting textbook passages to broader questions of perspective. As she articulated, the shift was "from focusing on what culture to teach toward developing students' capacity to become aware of different cultures independently—the ability to learn on their own." She also reflected that whereas the work had previously seemed complicated, she came to see that "even a single sentence in an essay could open questions of perspective, identity, and culture." Kim similarly changed from presenting culture as national facts to "emphasizing partial perspectives and personal connections." As she stated, she had unknowingly presented things as representations of entire cultures, whereas now she emphasizes that any account is "only partial, that we cannot know everything." Kuo's spontaneous follow-up lesson, described above, was the most striking instance of this transformation—demonstrating an independent capacity for intercultural teaching that she had not felt she possessed at the outset. As she put it, she could finally be sure she could do it by herself too.

Through ongoing dialogue and negotiation within the triadic researcher–teacher–teacher partnership, both teachers moved

from isolated individual Object 1s through distinct but complementary Object 2s to a shared Object 3—creating space for students to develop the ability to think from different perspectives. The shift from impossible to possible occurred not through eliminating constraints but through reconceptualizing what intercultural teaching could mean within existing curricular structures.

Partnership Mechanisms: Mediation Enabling Navigation

Analysis across the dataset revealed four interrelated partnership mechanisms that functioned as mediational means enabling teachers to navigate tensions between intercultural ideals and institutional constraints. Consistent with the analytic rigor described in the Method, each mechanism below was retained only where evidence appeared consistently across at least three data source types for each teacher, so the mechanisms represent patterns corroborated across the dataset rather than isolated instances. Table 3 summarizes each teacher's activity system across its component parts, making explicit the contradictions that the following mechanisms were identified in response to.

TABLE 3

Activity System Components for Kim and Kuo

Component		Participants
Subject	Kim	Kuo
Object (1→3)		See Table 2
Mediating artifacts	TKM text, Washington Post article, Padlet, Google Jamboard, partnership readings on intercultural theory	Same shared artifacts; also drawing directly on meeting discussions (e.g., “ownership of English”) when designing lessons
Rules	National curriculum, standardized assessment demands, strong university-placement pressure	Government-certified substitute status, assessment-driven curriculum, institutional skepticism toward non-tested content
Community	Students, school colleagues/administrators, partnership triad (Kim–Kuo–teacher educator)	Students, school colleagues who “over-observed” her as an inexperienced teacher, partnership triad
Division of labor	Designing extracurricular programs independently pre-partnership; co-designing TKM project with Kuo	Designing electives independently pre-partnership; co-designing TKM project with Kim; independently redesigning a follow-up lesson without consulting Kim or the teacher educator
Contradictions	Between wanting broad intercultural exposure and only reaching high-achieving students; between valuing controversial content and fear of “handling it poorly”	Between wanting cultural integration and assessment-driven student disengagement; between new conceptual understanding and feeling implementation “even more impossible”
Transformation	Shift from national-facts framing of culture to “partial perspectives and personal connections”; incorporation of TKM materials into formal assessment	Shift toward developing students’ independent capacity for cultural awareness; spontaneous follow-up lesson designed without partnership support

As Table 3 shows, each teacher's contradictions arose at a different point in their activity system—Kim's between the scope of her extracurricular reach and her institutional rules around assessment; Kuo's between her developing conceptual understanding and her community's skepticism toward an inexperienced teacher's initiative. Read together, these contradictions were not identical, but they converged on a shared structural tension between intercultural aspiration and institutional constraint. The four mechanisms below trace how the partnership addressed that convergence.

Intellectual Legitimation

External university validation helped teachers advocate for innovation despite institutional pressures questioning time allocation to non-tested content. Kim reflected that her sense of pride and self-efficacy were genuinely supported through the partnership—she saw herself as a teacher who continuously studies and makes efforts through exchange with others. Kuo, who often felt questioned and over-observed as an inexperienced teacher in her school, found the partnership a space where she could forget that positioning entirely. As she noted, she looked forward to the meeting precisely because it was a place where she could try to do what she wanted without being over-observed. The university partnership's research basis

and international dimension provided symbolic capital that helped teachers navigate institutional resistance.

Responsive Mediation

Ongoing support during actual implementation—through weekly check-ins, real-time troubleshooting, and celebration of adaptations as professional judgment—distinguished this from traditional professional development’s fixed curriculum delivery. As Kim emphasized, meeting discussions and reflective journals were most helpful because, without the process of reflection after a lesson, nothing remains memorable and learning becomes fleeting. Kuo described drawing directly on meeting discussions when designing lessons, noting that concepts like ownership of English, which emerged as a topic of discussion during meetings, shaped how she designed subsequent classes. When shifting COVID-19 regulations forced changes to how and when activities could be delivered, immediate support helped teachers adapt strategically rather than abandon their efforts.

Cross-border Solidarity

The Korea-Taiwan pairing normalized struggles as systemic rather than individual failures, providing both emotional sustenance and strategic sharing across contexts. Kim reflected that rather than seeing Kuo through a nationality lens, she came to look into that individual’s life being lived in a truly different place—an experience she found joyful. She also described the emotional dimension of the partnership: more than to any other friend that year, she talked about her teaching, thoughts, and values with the teacher educator and her partner teacher, finding it both enjoyable and comforting. When both Korean and Taiwanese teachers faced similar constraints despite different national contexts, this appeared to help the participants interpret their difficulties as potentially reflecting broader structural patterns rather than purely individual shortcomings—a reframing that itself carried emotional and strategic value, even though a single dyad cannot establish that these barriers are structural features of East Asian education more generally.

University Partner as Bridge

While teacher-teacher collaboration was central to the partnership, the university partner’s role proved equally constitutive—not as an expert delivering knowledge from outside, but as a third participant mediating between research and classroom realities from within. This triadic structure, researcher-teacher-teacher rather than simply teacher-teacher, shaped what became possible. A distinctive feature was connecting teachers’ immediate classroom dilemmas to relevant scholarly knowledge. When teachers struggled to justify intercultural teaching to skeptical colleagues or administrators, theoretical grounding in intercultural competence, identity, and critical cultural awareness gave them language and rationale they could stand behind with confidence. As Kuo described, the readings and discussions directly shaped how she designed her classes—research knowledge was not abstract but immediately actionable. What might otherwise have felt like personal pedagogical preference became professionally defensible, evidence-backed practice. Modeling the very pedagogy both teachers were working to develop found also to be crucial. As Kim stated, the teacher educator’s receptiveness to any opinion showed her what she herself should be doing with her students—making the partnership space not merely a venue for professional development, but an enactment of the intercultural principles at its core.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how a transnational university-school partnership supported two EFL teachers in navigating the persistent gap between intercultural curriculum ideals and institutional constraints in East Asian contexts. In relation to RQ1, the developmental trajectory findings show how Kim and Kuo moved from individually held Object 1s toward a shared Object 3 over the course of the partnership. In relation to RQ2, the four mechanisms identified here—intellectual legitimation, responsive mediation, cross-border solidarity, and university partner as bridge—specify the means through which that movement was supported. The findings suggest that the partnership did so not by eliminating constraints but by providing four interrelated mechanisms that made those contradictions more navigable: intellectual legitimation, responsive mediation, cross-border solidarity, and university partner as bridge. The following sections discuss how these mechanisms worked together, consider their implications for partnership design and institutional policy, and reflect on what this case contributes theoretically—while acknowledging the interpretive caution appropriate to findings drawn from

a single teacher dyad.

How the Partnership Enabled Navigation of Systemic Contradictions

The partnership appeared to enable navigation by fundamentally reframing how teachers understood their institutional constraints from personal inadequacies to systemic realities requiring strategic navigation rather than individual resolution. This reframing, consistent with what Tsui and Law (2007) describe as generating collective knowledge through boundary crossing, opened space for collaborative problem-solving that neither teacher could have achieved independently. The critical shift was from asking “Why can’t I do this?” to asking collectively “How can we integrate interculturality strategically within our actual contexts?” which is a shift made possible by the partnership’s treatment of constraints as legitimate design considerations rather than excuses. This directly addresses what Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) and Desimone (2009) identify as a central failure of traditional professional development: the absence of support that is sustained, contextually grounded, and embedded in teachers’ actual practice.

The four mechanisms appeared to work synergistically to sustain this reframing throughout implementation. Intellectual legitimation created conditions for teachers to take risks in hierarchical institutional contexts; responsive mediation supported them through challenges as they emerged rather than front-loading support during conceptual learning alone; cross-border solidarity normalized struggles as regional patterns rather than individual failures; and the university partner as bridge ensured guidance remained grounded in both research knowledge and school realities (Zeichner, 2010). Together, these mechanisms reflect what Penuel et al. (2011) describe as the core strength of research-practice partnerships—bidirectional expertise combining university research knowledge with school practice wisdom. That said, the degree to which these mechanisms would operate similarly in other dyads, with different university partners, or in less constrained institutional contexts remains an open empirical question.

From Partnership Mechanisms to Design Principles

The four mechanisms point toward several design considerations for intercultural teacher professional development in constrained contexts—offered here as provisional directions grounded in this case rather than as prescriptive principles ready for direct transfer. First, centering contradictions from the outset may be more productive than presenting intercultural teaching as straightforwardly implementable. In this case, beginning with teachers’ own accounts of why integration felt impossible, rather than with idealized models, appeared to create the psychological safety essential for honest engagement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Treating institutional constraints as legitimate design parameters, rather than as excuses to be overcome, shifted the initial framing from deficit to strategy. Second, sustaining mediation during implementation rather than concentrating it in conceptual learning phases appears to matter. The partnership’s two-phase structure—conceptual foundations followed by supported implementation running concurrently with actual classroom teaching—meant support arrived at the point of need. When external constraints disrupted planned delivery, ongoing presence allowed strategic adaptation rather than abandonment. This aligns with Darling-Hammond et al.’s (2017) argument that embedded, practice-concurrent support distinguishes effective professional development from workshops that fail to translate. Third, working within existing curricular structures rather than alongside them may lower the implementation threshold in assessment-driven contexts. The teachers did not create intercultural content in addition to required material; they located it inside texts both were already teaching. The shared discovery that *To Kill a Mockingbird* appeared in both their national textbooks, paired with a news article debating the novel’s place in the curriculum, allowed them to add critical intercultural depth to mandated material without competing for instructional time—reconceptualizing interculturality from learning cultural facts to developing perspective-taking capacity (Byram, 1997). Fourth, pairing external validation with contextually grounded support may help teachers advocate for non-tested content in hierarchical institutional settings. University affiliation provided symbolic capital (Coburn & Penuel, 2016) that gave teachers defensible language when questioned by colleagues or administrators. Crucially, this was effective precisely because it was paired with field-grounded engagement: the teacher educator responded to each classroom’s specific realities rather than delivering generic expertise (Zeichner, 2010). Fifth, cross-context partnerships may make structural patterns more visible—and therefore more navigable—than single-context arrangements. When both a Korean and a Taiwanese teacher encountered the same contradictions between intercultural mandates and assessment-driven realities, the barriers could no longer be read as personal or locally specific. This cross-border configuration enabled both the solidarity and the strategic cross-context sharing that partnerships within a single national system cannot readily provide (Antoniadou, 2011; Ryder & Yamagata-Lynch, 2014). Whether these considerations hold across different dyadic pairings, institutional contexts, or program lengths warrants investigation in future research.

Policy and Institutional Implications

These design considerations point toward policy-level concerns that extend beyond any single partnership. The fundamental structural challenge, i.e., curricula mandating intercultural competence while assessment systems reward traditional outcomes (Feryok & Oranje, 2015; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013) cannot be addressed through individual teacher effort or well-designed professional development alone. Policy environments that reward test-oriented outcomes while mandating intercultural goals place teachers in a structural contradiction that no partnership can resolve; what partnerships can do, as this case suggests, is help teachers navigate within that contradiction more strategically. Addressing the contradiction itself requires policy movement toward sustained partnership models: funding long-term engagement rather than single-session workshops, providing institutional recognition for partnership participation, and working toward greater alignment between assessment systems and intercultural curriculum goals. For administrators, this means providing concrete structural resources such as release time, infrastructure support, and recognition of strategic curricular adaptation as professional judgment rather than treating intercultural teaching as an individual teacher's responsibility to fulfill within an unchanged institutional context.

Theoretical Contribution: Partnerships as Third Spaces

This case extends understanding of how partnerships function as mediational structures in constrained contexts. Applying CHAT-3rd as an analytical lens offered more than a descriptive account of what happened: it made visible why certain partnership features mattered in ways that a thematic analysis alone would not have captured. Consistent with Engeström's (2001, 2009) concept of expansive learning, both teachers appeared to move beyond acquiring knowledge about intercultural teaching toward reconceptualizing what intercultural work could mean within their existing institutional requirements—a qualitative shift in the object of their activity rather than an additive gain in content knowledge. This transformation appeared to occur through sustained negotiation within what Bhabha (1994) theorizes as a third space, where contradictions between the two teachers' activity systems, and between each teacher's system and their institutional context, functioned as generative rather than paralyzing forces, thereby enabling the emergence of a shared Object 3 through boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).

Analytically, CHAT-3rd's value in this study lay in its capacity to hold the macro-level structural tensions (national curriculum contradictions, institutional rules, assessment pressures) and the micro-level mediational moments (a specific meeting exchange, a teacher's journal entry, an unplanned follow-up lesson) within the same analytical frame. This dual-level visibility is what allows the study to say something about how partnership design matters, not merely that it does. Partnerships that ignore systemic constraints, or that position university knowledge as the solution to school "problems," risk replicating the very failures of one-shot professional development they seek to replace (Avalos, 2011). What this case suggests is that partnerships designed to acknowledge legitimate tensions, position both university and school knowledge as essential, and support teachers in developing contextually grounded responses may enable the kind of incremental, sustainable transformation that maintains both institutional accountability and pedagogical integrity while opening genuine space for students' intercultural learning.

CONCLUSION

This case study suggests that transnational university-school partnerships designed to acknowledge and work within systemic realities may offer a meaningful alternative to traditional one-shot professional development in constrained East Asian EFL contexts. Using CHAT-3rd as an analytical lens, this study traced how one such partnership functioned as a mediational third space through four interrelated mechanisms: intellectual legitimation, responsive mediation, cross-border solidarity, and university partner as bridge. Both teachers moved from viewing integration as impossible to demonstrating strategic implementation through what CHAT-3rd frames as expansive learning—shifting from culturalism based on stereotypes toward helping students develop the capacity to think from different perspectives. Evidence of continued practice emerged from final interviews conducted after the program's conclusion: Kuo independently designed and facilitated a follow-up intercultural lesson without prior consultation with her partner teacher or the teacher educator, and Kim incorporated project materials into formal assessment—both indicating that learning had moved from the social to the psychological plane in ways that persisted beyond the program's structured support. Whether this integration deepened or was sustained over subsequent semesters was not tracked and warrants longitudinal investigation. Yet institutional

constraints persist; this partnership did not transform systems, but appeared to help these two teachers work more effectively within them. For this dyad, strategic integration within institutional realities represented a form of realistic, contextually grounded success—though what this means at scale remains an open question. Future research should therefore examine how these mechanisms operate when scaled to multiple dyads, track teachers longitudinally to assess whether integration deepens over time, and compare national versus transnational partnerships to isolate the specific effects of cross-border collaboration.

Several limitations of this study warrant explicit acknowledgment. The findings rest on a single teacher dyad selected as an information-rich case; while analytically productive, this necessarily limits the scope of claims that can be made about transnational partnerships more broadly. The first author's dual role as both program designer and researcher—and as a central figure in one of the identified mechanisms—creates an inherent positionality that trustworthiness procedures addressed but could not fully resolve. Evidence of sustained practice derives primarily from final interviews conducted immediately following the program's conclusion, supplemented by one post-synchronous follow-up lesson observed within the program window; whether integration persisted over subsequent semesters remains unknown. These limitations notwithstanding, this study contributes an empirically grounded, theoretically analyzed account of how partnership design can support intercultural teacher development in assessment-driven contexts. For Asia-Pacific contexts navigating intercultural curriculum reform amid persistent constraints, this study suggests that partnership design may be a critical factor in whether such initiatives support meaningful and lasting teacher change.

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