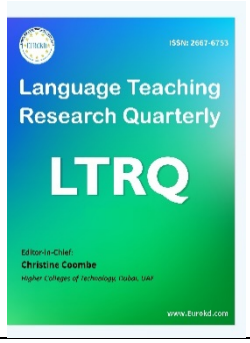

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Language Teaching in the 'Third Space': Identity Trajectories and Professional Development Needs

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Abstract

As Pennington and Richards (2016) observe, a teacher's sense of what it means to be a teacher is created interactively with the knowledge base and identity of the larger field. Technological developments and unprecedented societal change have recently, however, rendered the teaching profession more complex and diverse. This is particularly evident in higher education settings, where clear divisions between professional and academic areas are increasingly blurred. The breaking down of strict boundaries between professional domains gives rise to a "third space" (Whitchurch, 2008), which staff, including language teachers, must learn to navigate. Reconstructing their identities in highly dynamic third spaces can place language teachers in liminal states of in-between-ness and ambiguity (Beech, 2011), where negotiating stable identities becomes especially demanding. While language teacher identity in the context of higher education has been widely discussed, the implications of transitioning into 'third space' settings for language teachers' identities have received less attention. Adopting a *theorising from practice* approach (Richards, 2016), in this reflective autoethnographic article, we examine our shifting language teacher identities as we seek to successfully navigate 'third space' work environments in New Zealand and Switzerland. We use critical reflection to explore how our professional identities have evolved as we switched from relatively 'bounded' language teaching roles to more fluid and dynamic 'third space' positions. Further, we discuss the role of professional development as enablers (or inhibitors) of our evolving language teacher identities as we moved into roles that diverged from what we had initially trained for. Lastly, we relate these reflections to suggestions for professional development that could help language teachers better respond to the demands of an increasingly diversified and complex profession.

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Introduction

Teacher identity and professional development are central to language teacher education research, two areas of work to which Jack Richards has contributed significantly. Richards understands teacher identity as both individual and social in nature, relative to social context, and shaped by factors such as commitment, self-esteem, agency and self-efficacy (Richards, 2016, 2021). Teachers' construction of their professional selves is also influenced by their interactions with "the knowledge base and identity of the larger [teaching] field" (Pennington & Richards, 2016, p. 10). However, with the ongoing evolution of language teaching, the field has transformed considerably. Unprecedented global and societal changes have rendered the language teaching profession more complex and diverse, which is particularly observable in higher education.

Higher education has transformed as modern society has entered what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000) has termed a state of "liquid modernity". In liquid modernity, previous securities and continuities are replaced by highly dynamic and heterogeneous environments. This liquid state is characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (Barber, 1992) or, in Bauman's terms, by institutionalised pluralism, variety, contingency and ambivalence (Bauman, 1991). Higher education institutions are thus subjected to a 'de-institutionalising' pressure (Bauman, 2005), which manifests in the privatisation, corporatisation, and marketisation of teaching and learning (Obexer, 2022; Veles & Carter, 2016). In this liquid environment, traditional boundaries between roles and functions dissolve and professional identities, once rooted in shared values and practices, become more fragile (Obexer, 2022).

This culture of constant motion and change has led to the emergence of the 'third space' in academia. Whitchurch (2012b) defines the third space as "a space between professional and academic spheres in which lateral interactions, involving teams and networks, occur in parallel with formal institutional structures and processes, giving rise to new forms of management and leadership" (p. iv). Successfully inhabiting the third space requires continuous adaptation and the swift acquisition of new skills and knowledge, which may be developed through institutional professional development. However, when appropriate professional development is absent, a perceived sense of unpreparedness can place individuals in liminal states of in-between-ness and ambiguity (Beech, 2011), where negotiating stable professional identities can become challenging.

While previous research has examined the professional identities and professional development needs of university staff in non-academic roles (Silvey et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2021), the experiences of language teachers transitioning to the third space are still underrepresented (MacDonald, 2016). Therefore, as third space professionals ourselves, in this autoethnographic study, we examine our shifting language teacher identities as we navigate the third space in two universities in New Zealand and Switzerland. Following Pennington and Richards' (2016) invitation to teachers to theorise from their practice, in this reflective paper, we discuss our professional identity trajectories, which have shifted from relatively 'bounded' teaching and research roles to fluid third space positions, and the role of professional development in this

process. We conclude by offering suggestions for professional development that could assist language teaching professionals in responding to the demands of an increasingly complex and diversified profession.

Theoretical Background

Third Space and Language Teaching Professionals in Higher Education

The third space concept originates in hybridity theory, where social agents are understood to exploit a variety of resources to understand and interact with their environment (Bhabha, 1990). Accordingly, the third space describes an area where two cultures intersect as their epistemological frameworks clash (Fraefel, 2018), resulting in the establishment of a distinct 'third' culture (Bhabha, 1994, 2004; Smith et al., 2021). As a well-established concept in higher education, third space is a domain where binaries are rejected and previously competing discourses are reconfigured (Diamond et al., 2021; Zeichner, 2010). The rise of the third space has enabled new categories of professional identity to develop (Whitchurch, 2008; 2018). In her study on emerging forms of professional identity in higher education, Whitchurch (2008, p.384) identified four groups of third space professionals:

- Bounded professionals —who work within clear structural boundaries.
- Cross-boundary professionals—who actively use boundaries for strategic institutional purposes.
- Unbounded professionals —who focus on broadly-based projects beyond boundaries.
- Blended professionals—who traverse academic and professional domains.

The third space is primarily characterised by unbounded and blended professionals. As highly skilled individuals with academic experience and credentials (Veles & Carter, 2016; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010), blended professionals are often involved in project-based activities such as teaching and learning, research management, student services or community engagement (Smith et al., 2021; Veles & Carter, 2016). The third space challenges the constraints of institutional position descriptions, opening up fluid, flexible spaces where fostering relationships (Whitchurch, 2012a) and working collaboratively across boundaries becomes possible and necessary (Veles & Carter, 2016).

Nevertheless, an absence of boundaries and clear structures may also result in role ambiguity and the need to acquire new skills continuously. This predicament confronts blended professionals with challenges such as needing to endure positional liminality, cultivate cross-boundary relationships and exercise self-advocacy (Smith et al., 2021). Third space professionals may also grapple with legitimacy issues as they no longer 'belong' to a defined role. They may experience a loss of orientation (Stein, 2021), irresolvable tensions (Diamond et al., 2021) and competing professional identities in the fluid space between academic and professional roles (Obexer, 2022). Purposefully inquiring into language teachers' navigation of the third space is therefore important for understanding how teachers make sense of and respond to the demands of the less bounded professional roles they may perform in higher education.

Career Transitions, Liminality and Identity Work

All transitions, expected or unexpected, are characterised by multidirectional and backward and forward motion; they often disrupt stability, initially leading to feelings of loss, disconnection and uncertainty. Transitions thus require adjusting, reinterpreting and repositioning the self "until one is again situated" (Willson, 2019, p. 841). A useful concept to examine language teachers' transition into the third space is liminality. Originating in social anthropology (Van Gennep, 1960), liminality was introduced to describe the period where a person is on the threshold of entering a new phase, having left the previous one behind (e.g., boy to man). This concept was later extended by Turner (1967, 1977) to describe a 'betwixt and between' state in which the 'liminar' is neither who they used to be in the pre-liminal phase nor who they aspire to be (e.g., neither a boy nor yet a man), thereby feeling a sense of ambiguity or disorientation.

According to Van Gennep (1960), liminal rituals (or rites of passage) occur in three stages: detachment or separation from ordinary social life, transition or 'being on the threshold', and incorporation or consummation of the passage. In its original sense, liminality can be viewed as a temporary state. Nevertheless, in the absence of resolution or incorporation, liminality can also be perceived as more permanent, where the person feels continuously between their former and future self (Ybema et al., 2011). Hence, liminality can be understood "to be a temporary transition through which identity is reconstructed, and/or it can be thought of as a more longitudinal experience of ambiguity and in-between-ness within a changeful context" (Beech, 2011, p. 288).

Due to increasingly competing notions of what being an academic means (Winkler & Kristensen, 2021) and blurred boundaries between professional and academic roles, the liminal experiences of professional staff involved in academic work are likely to be more permanent. Given that being 'betwixt and between' has become the norm in contemporary academia, navigating the third space can require "threshold working at every moment" (Ybema et al., 2011, p. 24). Not surprisingly, being in a threshold state can simultaneously lead to an increased sense of freedom, as there are more opportunities for working collaboratively and shifting boundaries (Veles & Carter, 2016). As Winkler & Kristensen (2021) observe, "individuals do not only surrender to conditions of permanent liminality but actively seek to craft versions of possible future selves" (p. 335). Hence, exploring third space language teachers' identity work from the perspective of liminality could prove helpful in understanding how teachers position themselves (and are positioned by others) in higher education settings.

Liminality has been used to describe and examine the process of identity negotiation during times of transition of early career researchers (Larsen & Brandenburg, 2022) and practitioner academics or "pracademics" (Dickinson et al., 2022). It has also been used to study academics' identity trajectories as they respond to ongoing experiences of ambiguity and powerlessness (Winkler & Kristensen, 2021). However, there are limited accounts of the experiences of liminality, temporary or long-lived, of language teachers working in the third space. Understanding the defining elements that shape language teachers' experiences as they situate themselves in unfamiliar professional territories can contribute to our evolving understanding of language teacher identity.

Professional Development and Identity Work

Professional development may enable or inhibit teachers' successful transition into new positions throughout their careers. As Richards (2017) indicates, successful professional development depends on various factors, including institutional support and individuals' personal, volitional and emotional dispositions. Supporting employees through professional development is indispensable for the success of an institution, as it expresses confidence in its staff, encouragement of adaptation and innovation, and openness to new ideas. Nevertheless, available institutional professional development does not always address the needs of third space professionals or allow staff to carve their professional development path. In circumstances like these, language teachers may feel that their professional needs have not been met or that they have been stripped of their agency in shaping their professional development.

Jack Richards encourages language teachers to take control over their development and regain agency. By expanding our understanding of professional development from passively receiving information through attending courses to actively "bringing about changes in our understanding of teaching", Richards stresses the potential of engaging in critical reflection to explore issues of both teacher identity "as well as the understandings and beliefs that underlie our practice" (Richards, 2017, p. 42-43). Indeed, focusing on teacher identity within the context of professional development illustrates how teacher development can become part of the process of teacher identity renegotiation (Richards, 2022). In alignment with Jack Richards' work, we argue that critical social reflection may benefit language teaching professionals working in the third space.

Critical social reflection sheds light on how teachers shape their professional experience and how knowledge, pedagogy and identity intersect (Richards, 2017, 2022). Purposeful reflection on changes in the profession, or changes in one's practice and beliefs, can pave the way to taking charge of one's professional development and facilitate successful transitions into third spaces. Undertaking such reflections both alone (e.g., through journaling, conducting self-observation, needs analyses or action research) and in communities of practice (e.g., through observing colleagues' classes, engaging in group-based learning activities, conducting collaborative critical reading and discussion) may support the establishment of a collegial culture conducive to professional and personal development and identity renegotiation (Richards, 2017, 2022). In addition, using narrative writing to explore one's identity and practice can allow language teachers to record and reflect on notable third space stories, enabling clarification and the emergence of new understandings (Pennington & Richards, 2016; Richards, 2017, p. 83).

While research has shown that appropriate professional development can facilitate individuals' successful navigation of the liminal third space (Smith et al., 2021), the role of professional development in language teachers' third space transitioning experiences has received less attention. In response to this research gap, we sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What unique challenges and paradoxes shaped our professional identity as we transitioned into and navigated our third space roles in higher education?
2. How did we attempt to resolve our identity dilemmas, and what role did professional development play in this process?

Research Methodology

Pennington and Richards (2016) stress the importance for language teachers to not only understand key theories in the language teaching field but also develop theory themselves, thus, inviting teachers to theorise from their practice. In this reflective article, we have endeavoured to do so by examining our career trajectories and experiences as language teachers and researchers in the third space. Having worked together in the past, we embarked on an introspective journey as 'critical friends' to understand the nature of the identity conflicts and dilemmas we experienced as we attempted to find our place in the space 'betwixt and between' the professional and academic aspects of our roles. To do this, we adopted a narrative inquiry approach.

Using narratives allowed us to make sense of our individual and collective work experience and explore "our developing and changing identities in the social and material contexts in which they are negotiated and constructed" (Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2020, p. 12). Like Obexer (2022), we collected and analysed self-reflective autobiographical data to explore how we, as blended professionals, navigate the third space. The point of difference in our study is that we looked at the experiences of two language teaching professionals in two different countries and educational environments. The qualitative data that informs this article was collected over ten months and is comprised of *a)* individual professional trajectory narratives, *b)* bi-weekly or monthly online meetings where we reflected on the content of our narratives and experiences, *c)* regular email and chat correspondence between meetings to clarify or expand on ideas, and *d)* joint critique and analysis of relevant scholarly sources through creating and using reading matrices.

Upon writing our professional trajectory narratives, we analysed each other's narrative thematically, adding questions in the margins, which we explored during subsequent conversations. Once we were satisfied with this dialogical reflective process, we compared both narratives and identified instances that revealed shared and unique identity negotiation experiences. We proceeded with a rigorous literature analysis, which prompted further analysis of the written narratives. The synthesis of our narratives and the reflections we included in the reading matrices became the two primary data sources for our analysis. Analysing these data helped us identify key career transition points and moments of liminality or 'discontinuity' (Ibarra, 2007) in our third space stories. The analysis of the qualitative data we collected brought to the surface three main findings outlined in the following section, which are prefaced by a brief description of our career trajectories.

Results

Entering the Third Space

Language teachers' professional trajectories progress non-linearly and in stages, which we both experienced before transitioning to the third space. The vignettes below summarise our teacher education and professional journeys before our most recent career transition.

Jenny: I started my undergraduate education in Modern Languages in Colombia in 2000. In 2008, after having worked for four years as an English and Spanish school teacher in Colombia and the United States, I initiated my postgraduate degree in Applied Linguistics and obtained my first job in higher education. In my short professional trajectory, I simultaneously acted as a

language teacher and teacher leader. I was the Head of the ESOL Department at a high school and a team leader at a university. My interest in research and technology-mediated innovation later motivated me to travel to New Zealand to undertake my doctoral degree. On completing my doctoral studies, I started working as an online resource developer at the university where I had obtained my degree. In this role, I led the design of a self-paced resource to enhance first-year students' academic literacy skills; this position marked a gradual move away from my EFL teaching path. In 2017, after completing the project, I joined the university's student learning services team as a language learning adviser. In this role, I have worked in the academic English development domain.

Olivia: After completing my BA in English and Media Studies in Switzerland, I moved to the UK for my MA in English Literature in 2011. Upon attaining a subsequent upper secondary teaching diploma in 2013, I pursued teaching English in Switzerland and later in New Zealand. While I enjoyed teaching, I yearned to return to university and soon after started my first third space role as an English language learning adviser at a New Zealand university in 2015. This role included navigating familiar teaching activities and covering new grounds in online resource development and research. As the latter had always intrigued me, I decided to move back to Switzerland to undertake a PhD in foreign language education in 2017. I simultaneously obtained a position as a research associate and lecturer. After completing my PhD, I underwent several professional changes within only six months. Starting out as the research assistant of the Dean of Education, two unexpected job offers led me to work in a third space and academic role simultaneously: as a research assistant of the rector at a university of teacher education in the East and as an assistant professor at a university in the West of Switzerland respectively.

This diversity of professional experience has significantly shaped our multifaceted identities as third space language teaching professionals. In the following section, we discuss these elements by presenting three common themes that emerged from our data analysis. These themes, illustrated through vignettes taken from our narratives, provide the basis for the *theorising from practice* approach we adopted to answer our research questions.

Navigating the Third Space

Professional trajectories involve messy transition phases as individuals change from one role to the next (Ibarra, 2007). While all previous career transitions were messy for us, navigating the third space as blended professionals caused an especially strong initial sense of instability due to the multiplicity and novelty of the roles and tasks we faced.

Jenny: When I started my job as an online resource developer, I was unaware I was working as a learning designer. At the time, I was not familiar with the role's name nor knew what it involved. I was performing a job in an area that had only recently established its place in higher education. There were limited in-service professional development opportunities for my role when I transitioned into it. For a while, I felt I lacked the necessary skills to perform my role confidently; I remember experiencing several moments of doubt where I wondered if I was doing a good job. Knowing about project management, amongst others, would have been very helpful for me at the time. Most of my learning took place through self-study and the mentorship provided by

experienced peers. Unsurprisingly, I did not feel entirely prepared for the tasks I was expected to complete and did most of my learning on the job.

Olivia: In my first third space role, I unexpectedly adopted the position of an online resource developer. Everything was new, and instead of receiving training to complete the new array of tasks, I had to develop the necessary skills independently. While I was enthusiastic about this opportunity, I often felt like an impostor, admitted to the team out of goodwill, convenience and necessity. Amongst all the self-doubt, I also felt highly motivated because the role seemed conducive to acquiring new competencies. These feelings reappeared in my current third space role as the research assistant of the rector, as I experienced increased role ambiguity and task fluctuation. I am expected to complete a much larger variety of tasks which often require skills that I need to acquire. However, I feel like I am not 'third-space-literate' enough yet to know what skills I need and how and where I can develop them.

As skilled and qualified professionals who have experienced multiple career changes throughout our working lives – across teaching contexts, educational institutions and countries – coping with transitions, adjusting to novelty, and dealing with multifaceted roles, complex tasks and diverse relationships, was familiar to both of us. Along our career paths, all transitions were uniquely challenging. However, settling into our new third space roles as blended professionals was particularly difficult despite our academic credentials and broad teaching experience.

While we had both perceived a lack of preparedness when transitioning into new jobs and naturally experienced uncertainty, we trusted our abilities to cope with the change and adjust to new roles relatively swiftly. As language teachers, we were able to rely on the clear boundaries and expectations of the 'familiar territory' of the classroom and the larger teaching field, which allowed us to construct relatively stable identities over time. Starting out in our third space roles, however, we felt as if we had been 'thrown in at the deep end' and neither of us had access to appropriate professional development to prepare for and adjust to the new circumstances.

In the third space, we found ourselves for the first time in roles that did not entirely reflect a clear position description (Veles & Carter, 2016; Whitchurch, 2008), making it more challenging for us to stand on stable ground (Smith et al., 2021; Whitchurch, 2012a). Our professional context expanded exponentially when we started working with professionals from multiple backgrounds and engaging with tasks outside the familiar language teaching domain. These changes required us to acquire new competencies and negotiate an entirely new identity to adjust to a highly complex professional environment.

Renegotiating Our Identity in Perpetual Liminal Spaces

Each career change requires identity renegotiation (Willson, 2019). Re-interpreting and re-positioning our professional identities as we settled into our third space roles encompassed a range of new dilemmas and tensions.

Jenny: In the soft launch phase of the online resource I helped develop, as I read the feedback given by some lecturers, I experienced the challenge of implementing a project located very much in the *territory of academics*. A few emails indicated that the resource was 'too generic' or not entirely beneficial to students. Reading 'between the lines', some of these exchanges suggested that wider consultation with academic staff would have been appreciated. At the time, I faced

enormous self-doubt, despite the vast knowledge in academic literacy from project team members, the sound research that informed the resource development, and the rigorous consultation process we followed. Although the resource received positive feedback overall, this was the first time I felt I wasn't 'academic enough' in my professional career. Despite my experience as a language teacher and researcher, I found it difficult to position myself as a 'knowledgeable peer' when having difficult conversations with colleagues across the institution. More recently, this feeling of doubt has given way to a sense of invisibility, as my team's input is often not sought during the early stages of large-scale projects that affect the students we work for.

Olivia: When I was a PhD student, research associate and lecturer, I experienced a vast diversification of my professional identity. I constantly felt like an impostor and struggled for legitimacy in my professional and scholarly fields. I was neither a teacher nor a qualified researcher, nor did I have the expertise or formal qualifications as a leader of expert teams. I was not an applied linguist, a second language acquisition researcher, a pedagogue, or an educational scientist. I belonged everywhere and nowhere. These feelings exacerbated in my current third space role as the rector's research assistant. I am often mistaken as an administrative assistant; however, as a PhD graduate who executes tasks with institutional impact, I do not want to be 'reduced' to being perceived as 'merely' the assistant that takes the meeting minutes. While I am slowly growing into my new role, I still struggle for a stable sense of identity. I may (or may not) have inserted my academic credentials and my latest publications in my email signature on purpose.

Due to role ambiguity and the blurred boundaries between the professional and academic aspects of our positions, we both experienced impostor syndrome and ambivalence. We noticed a degree of invisibility and confusion about our roles across the institution. As a result, we struggled for legitimacy (Smith et al., 2021) as we did not always feel recognised by others as scholars or 'knowledgeable peers'. Simultaneously, we felt we were being gradually stripped of our past professional identities: we were no longer English teachers, team leaders, doctoral students, or researchers. This feeling of uncertainty around our professional selves and our place in the institutions (Obexer, 2022) gradually became a defining feature of our new professional identities.

The 'redefinition' of self, in which one (re)positions in a new social context or landscape, is an important aspect of the transition process (Willson, 2019). Such redefinition can, in our experience, be more challenging in the third space, especially if ongoing liminality proves to be an essential feature of the role. We have experienced a perpetual state of liminality in our positions that has required us to engage in continuous identity work. As we settled into our new roles, we realised that feeling 'in-between' was unlikely to change in the future. This realisation prompted acts of resistance (e.g., inserting credentials into email signature), as we have refused to let go of elements of our former professional identities and an inner drive to craft our roles.

Crafting and Directing Our Professional Development Pathway

The feelings of unpreparedness and doubt we experienced when we started our roles extended over time due to, among others, what we felt was a lack of appropriate professional development. As we became more familiar with our roles, however, we started carving our professional

development paths to acquire the skills we deemed necessary for successfully performing our various roles.

Jenny: Although it is not a requirement for my role, I have often received support to conduct small-scale research. Yet, finding the time and resources to engage in scholarly pursuits has been challenging. Despite these constraints, I recently decided to draw on my knowledge and skills to co-design a professional development programme for fellow learning advisers. While several professional development opportunities are available at our institution, these are not always relevant to the specific needs of my (and my colleagues') professional roles. I have found a renewed sense of purpose and confidence in helping colleagues develop professionally, but embarking on this journey has not been easy. I have had to wait a long time for the conditions to feel 'right' before being able to experiment more in my role.

Olivia: Many of the tasks in my third space role involve skills I need to acquire as the circumstances require it. Feeling like I am not 'third-space-literate' enough to know what skills I need to learn triggers uncertainty and a lost sense of self. However, since I started to view this ambiguity as an opportunity to create my own role and further develop my competencies according to my interests, my professional identity has changed significantly. Increasingly understanding the importance of collaborating across borders and perceiving boundaries as connectors rather than separators has strengthened my identity. While my third space role does not allow much space for professional development, research or publishing, my assistant professorship provides more freedom. I consciously engage in research and scholarly writing to establish myself as a scholar in my field, thereby holding on to and developing my identity as a researcher more than my identity as a language teacher.

Both of us experienced a process of transformation in the third space, especially as the lack of relevant professional development and institutional support in periods of transition intensified our cognitive dissonance and negatively perceived emotions. After the initial discomfort and uncertainty, we started to view the third space as a fertile ground for role diversification. We chose to experiment with new ways of coping with our identity conflicts and the demands of our roles; we started actively engaging with self-initiated professional development and cross-boundary collaboration initiatives.

While we still struggle with identity and legitimacy issues, we have learned through experience that identity work in the third space will be permanent and that finding our place within the changing boundaries of our roles is possible. Openly facing and dialogically reflecting on our identity conflicts has motivated us to take advantage of the hybridity of the third space for our personal and professional growth. After a relatively long period of unsettledness, we have taken active measures to craft a professional development path and a new professional identity.

Discussion

Embarking on a critical reflection journey has facilitated a deep understanding of our professional identities. While we work in third space roles in universities in New Zealand and Switzerland – two different contexts on opposite sides of the world – our analysis has revealed commonalities between our career trajectories, professional development needs and evolving professional selves.

As blended professionals, we are expected to work across boundaries and adapt to ever-changing circumstances. The present autoethnographic study has contributed significantly to the identity renegotiation process provoked by these conditions, allowing us to expand our understanding of what it means to be 'betwixt and between'. Next, we discuss what our learnings reveal more generally about third space language teacher identity by answering the research questions we posed at the beginning of the study.

1. What unique challenges and paradoxes shaped our professional identity as we transitioned into and navigated our third space roles in higher education?

In line with the idea of liquid modernity, the third space is of a transient nature, encompassing tasks and expectations that appear, disappear and reappear as circumstances change. In this fluctuating environment, it was near-impossible for us to identify with certainty what type of skills and knowledge we needed to acquire to settle into, thrive and further develop within our roles. Over time, we realised that we were experiencing a more permanent liminal state of uncertainty and instability, where a high degree of adaptability was crucial. While self-initiated collaboration and development opportunities can help create a sense of control, as was our case, a lack of 'official' support and the need for freeing up personal resources to participate in professional development may lead to further tensions – be that a lack of time or funding or access to necessary information.

Role ambiguity, which is a salient characteristic of the third space, may also lead to a conflicted sense of belonging. In the third space, the construction of one's identity as a skilled language teacher or novice researcher is likely to give way to the perceived image of an 'in-betweener', as belonging 'neither here nor there', resulting in a sense of disorientation and detachment from relatively stable past identities. Before we moved into our third space roles, developing a sense of belonging to a close-knit language teacher and researcher community was tied to our teacher and doctoral student roles. However, this has not always been the case in our current positions. We are either part of small teams or constitute our own 'one-woman team'. Therefore, we have made special efforts to continue scholarly work to develop professionally, but more importantly, to hold on to our researcher identities and maintain our connection to the language teaching research community.

Similarly, the third space can give rise to conflicting values and belief system clashes (Fraefel, 2018; Zeichner, 2010), leading to a lack of confidence, impostor syndrome and a sense of intruding upon others' 'established' grounds. As blended professionals, we have sought to bridge gaps and collaborate with different stakeholders in the hybrid spaces created between professional and academic domains. However, becoming a collaborator can be problematic if there is a perception of intrusion by either others or oneself. Hence, boundary-crossing cannot only be interpreted as conducive to connecting domains and bridging gaps but also as a transgression of established power structures, which may threaten the identity of the language professional who does the crossing or the identity of the professional whose domain is being visited.

2. How did we attempt to resolve our identity dilemmas, and what role did professional development play in this process?

We have attempted to resolve some of the challenges we have encountered in our roles by exercising agency and self-directing opportunities for personal and professional growth. Such initiatives have included, for instance, advancing our scholarly work, expanding our network within and beyond our institutions, participating in communities of practice, connecting with peers or 'critical friends', and engaging in transnational collaboration and self-reflection. It is worth noting that this self-directed and collaborative learning process has only been possible over time and under particular circumstances. The support and trust of middle management, greater knowledge about our jobs and the institutions we work at, and an increasing sense of autonomy have been crucial to growing in our roles and gaining a better understanding of our fluid professional identities.

When relevant professional development and leadership support are absent, third space professionals, including language specialists like us, can be impeded in successfully navigating their roles. The tension between keeping up to date with the latest developments in language teaching research and extending our professional and interdisciplinary competencies beyond our position descriptions was observable in our data analysis. Indeed, our third space experience has been marked by insufficient time, funding and opportunities for timely and appropriate professional development. However, although these limitations initially contributed to our sense of disorientation and doubt, being able to turn such challenges into opportunities for creativity, agency and growth has had an empowering effect on our professional identity.

Implications for Professional Development

Professional development grounds in a large body of research and is of central interest to organisational and education research. While the role of professional development for successful transitions into new roles has been widely acknowledged in the literature, a call for appropriate development initiatives for third space professionals working in academia has gained increasing attention (Dickinson et al., 2022; Larsen & Brandenburg, 2022; Winstone & Moore, 2017). Since identity work and professional development lie at the core of any career change (Richards, 2022), relevant and timely professional development is indispensable to help blended professionals manage the challenges they are likely to encounter in the third space. Professional development for third space language teaching professionals should ideally be made available at different stages of transition and encompass aligned and complementary 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' initiatives.

As Richards and others observe, 'bottom-up' interventions initiated by staff (e.g., mentoring or peer observation in communities of practice) can often be perceived as more effective than 'top-down' interventions (Richards, 2017, 2022; Whitchurch, 2018). For grassroots professional development initiatives to succeed, sufficient time and resources are essential. Allocating time and funding and involving blended professionals in decisions about workload distribution and individual and team objectives can create a conducive environment for acquiring the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in perpetually liminal spaces. Spaces for experimentation and innovation can also contribute to cultivating the competencies that will allow blended professionals to bend boundaries (Best, 2017, p. 211; Veles & Carter, 2016). By exercising their

agency, language professionals will be more likely to take control over their learning and take advantage of the 'boundless' nature of their roles for their growth.

Interventions that may foster and strengthen agency include, for instance, engaging in purposeful reflective practice (Richards, 2017, 2022). Reflective practice, alone or with peers, can help language teaching specialists examine their evolving identities and be better positioned to cope with the ambiguity and malleability of their roles. A further source of support includes participation in cross-boundary networks and communities of practice (Richards, 2017, 2022). Being part of a third space professional community might assist language teachers with understanding the fluid, complex nature of their roles and identify strategies they can adopt to perform their roles and interact with different stakeholders more effectively.

However, although enabling individual agency is crucial, Smith et al. (2021) caution that simply providing the space and resources necessary for staff to take individual action and expecting them to be self-sufficient is not enough. Indeed, support from all stakeholders, including senior leaders and academic, administrative and other third space staff, is crucial. More importantly, the third space must have a clear vision, precise purpose and transparent plan (Smith et al., 2021). By inviting third space language teaching professionals to co-create this vision and by enabling their participation in conversations with stakeholders involved in decision-making, their voice and identity could be strengthened. If language teaching professionals are invited to draw on their extensive teaching experience and knowledge to impact high-level teaching and learning policy, the third space could become an increasingly attractive career opportunity for them.

Accordingly, in agreement with Larsen et al. (2022), we contend that institutional induction programmes and continuous professional development for blended professionals should be reconceptualised. It is important to acknowledge that transitioning into third space roles may take longer than expected for some individuals, as "time is needed to pause and engage in the thinking required for identity reconstruction" (Implications, para.1). Accordingly, professional development initiatives for blended language professionals should provide sufficient time and space for introspection and peer discussion. This, from our experience, is not always achieved in conventional 'one-off' and 'one-size-fits-all' professional development.

Conclusions

Our narrative analysis revealed several challenges and opportunities that may arise when language teaching professionals transition into third space roles. While career changes are messy and always require identity work, uncertainty about the required skills, increased role ambiguity and a lack of sense of belonging made our identity renegotiation in the third space especially challenging. Indeed, navigating a perpetual state of liminality caused a strong sense of instability, ambivalence and impostor syndrome – our sense of disorientation and legitimacy struggle was exacerbated by a perceived lack of preparedness, institutional support and appropriate professional development. By exercising agency and self-directing opportunities for personal and professional growth in communities of practice and through transnational collaboration, we learnt to manage the feeling of uncertainty and slowly build new, albeit liminal, professional identities. As we continue to engage in identity work to re-adjust to the complex third space environments in which we operate,

we call for higher education institutions to support their third space staff through a range of professional development initiatives. Providing appropriate learning opportunities at different stages of the transition process can help professional staff view the third space as a fertile ground for role diversification.

While our narrative analysis has provided valuable insights into third space language professionals' identity negotiation in liminal phases, we acknowledge that the experiences of blended professionals from different backgrounds may differ significantly from ours. We thus encourage further research into blended language teaching professionals' identity development across different countries and higher education institutions. Such studies may include further empirical research into professional development programmes that seek to mitigate the challenges language professionals commonly experience as they adjust to the third space. As suggested by Dickinson et al. (2022), conducting research to build an empirical basis for recruitment strategies, induction programmes and professional development opportunities can contribute to advancing our understanding of the conditions conducive to supporting staff whose roles fall 'betwixt and between'.

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