

# A Comparative Analysis and Implications of Research on International Chinese Language Teachers' Professional Identity from a Global Perspective

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**Abstract:** Teacher professional identity is a comprehensive reflection of teachers' role perception, emotional experiences, and behavioral tendencies towards their profession. It serves as an intrinsic driving force for teachers' professional development and is also a crucial issue in teacher education research. From a global perspective, this study systematically reviews and examines relevant research on the professional identity of international Chinese language teachers (ICLTs). A comparative analysis is conducted between Chinese and foreign scholars' research in terms of theoretical foundations, research subjects, research content, and research methodologies. This comprehensive overview of the current research landscape in this field, along with a summary of existing achievements and identified problems, facilitates the transformation of fragmented research findings on ICLTs' professional identity into a systematic understanding and reveals research gaps. Building upon this foundation, the study proposes future research prospects for the professional identity of ICLTs from aspects such as the construction of a cross-cultural perspective-based teacher professional identity system, the transformation of teacher professional identity in the context of digital transformation, and case studies on ICLTs' professional identity. The aim is to promote high-quality development in both theory and practice of international Chinese language education.

**Keywords:** International Chinese language teachers; Professional identity; Research status; Research implications; Comparative analysis

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## 1. Introduction

Teachers' professional identity is a significant issue in the field of teacher education research. In the 1980s, teachers' professional identity emerged as an independent area of research <sup>[1]</sup>, spanning multiple disciplines such as pedagogy and psychology. It serves as a crucial factor influencing teachers' career choices. Currently,

the number of international Chinese language teachers (ICLTs) has reached a considerable scale. However, the employment rates in relevant fields for undergraduates and postgraduates majoring in Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL) are unsatisfactory, and the proportion of overseas employment is low. This has led to a significant loss of ICLTs<sup>[2]</sup>, and the severe shortage of teachers has become a major bottleneck restricting the development of international Chinese language education (ICLE)<sup>[3]</sup>. One of the reasons for this is that the formation of ICLTs' professional identity does not proceed smoothly during the process of learning and internships<sup>[4]</sup>.

Meanwhile, the continuous application of generative artificial intelligence tools, such as ChatGPT and DeepSeek, in the field of ICLE has not only profoundly transformed traditional teaching and learning methods but also posed new challenges to the professional identity of ICLTs. The shift in teachers' work patterns in the era of AI has brought about ambiguity in teachers' role definitions, confusion about their professional value, and concerns about being replaced by technology, resulting in a lack of teachers' professional identity<sup>[5]</sup>. Existing studies have indicated that ICLTs exhibit relatively low recognition of the effectiveness of information technology usage and lack self-adjustment awareness in modern teaching technologies. This makes them prone to self-doubt and self-negation tendencies, leading to a frequently chaotic and unstable state of ICLTs' professional identity<sup>[6]</sup>. As ICLTs are the most important agents in promoting the development of ICLE, it is necessary to emphasize and strengthen research on the professional identity of ICLTs.

Based on a global perspective, this study systematically reviews and comparatively analyzes the current research status on the professional identity of ICLTs conducted by Chinese and international scholars. It summarizes the achievements and existing problems in current research and subsequently proposes prospects for future research on the professional identity of ICLTs, with the aim of promoting high-quality development in both theory and practice of ICLE.

## **2. Theoretical framework of professional identity**

### **2.1. Definitions of “identity” and “professional identity”**

The term “identity” is one of the important terms in the fields of modern psychology and sociology. From a psychological perspective, identity is a psychological process through which individuals gradually form answers to the question “Who am I?” through self-reflection and social interaction, namely self-identity. From a sociological perspective, identity refers to an individual's sense of belonging to a specific social group or social category, known as social identity or role identity<sup>[7]</sup>. Identity is a multidimensional and complex concept, but it always emphasizes an individual's unique cognition of the self and society.

Professional identity develops from the concept of “self-identity.” Holland *et al.* argued that professional identity refers to an individual's stable and clear understanding of their interests, talents, goals, values, and other aspects related to the profession they are engaged in<sup>[8]</sup>. Therefore, professional identity is a relatively stable state. However, Beijaard viewed professional identity as a dynamically developing process that changes over time, social environment, and personal experiences<sup>[9]</sup>. Meijers also considered professional identity as a dynamic process of psychological development, where individuals connect their interests, abilities, values, and career development goals, which change with the social learning process<sup>[10]</sup>. Integrating these concepts, we believe that the essence of professional identity is diachronic development, involving an individual's past and present experiences and providing direction for future career development. It is an individual's answer to the question “Who am I?” based on the profession they are engaged in or will engage in in the future.

## 2.2. Definitions and characteristics of teachers' professional identity

Teachers' professional identity is the self-reflection and answers of teachers to questions such as "Who am I?," "What kind of teacher do I want to become?," and "How do I perceive my role as a teacher?"<sup>[11]</sup>. It constitutes the core of teachers' professional development, shaping their perspectives on "how to be," "how to act," and "how to understand" their work and social status within the professional environment<sup>[12,13]</sup>. Therefore, teachers' professional identity refers to teachers' perceptions and understandings of their own profession, emphasizing the consistency in their professional cognition, emotions, and behaviors.

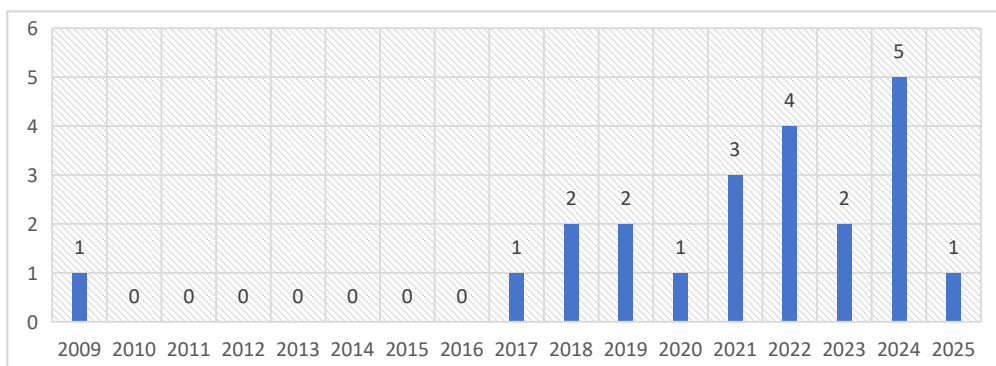
Teachers' professional identity is a continuous development process, where teachers gradually develop themselves through the accumulation of their teaching experiences and foster a sense of identification with their profession<sup>[14]</sup>. During this process, teachers' personal experiences, external environments, professional backgrounds, and teaching experiences significantly influence the formation of their professional identity<sup>[15,16]</sup>. Based on this, we argue that teachers' professional identity exhibits the following six characteristics:

- (1) **Dynamicity:** Teacher's professional identity is a diachronic process that undergoes constant changes and dynamic development.
- (2) **Complexity:** Teacher's professional identity is a multidimensional and complex structure, representing a comprehensive reflection of teachers' role cognition, emotional experiences, and behavioral tendencies towards their profession.
- (3) **Normativity:** Teacher's professional identity embodies the role norms of teachers as "professionals," manifesting in their adherence to teaching norms and professional ethics, recognition of professional values, and pursuit of professional skills.
- (4) **Individuality:** Teacher's professional identity is shaped by teachers' personal perceptions and understandings of their profession, informed by their unique experiences, and thus possesses distinct personal characteristics.
- (5) **Proactivity:** The formation of teacher's professional identity involves a balancing process among teachers' different social roles, which must be proactive and intentional.
- (6) **Contextuality:** Teachers' professional identity will change along with the changes in the social working environment. If teachers' professional identity is in line with the social environment, their career development will be better.

## 3. Current research status on the professional identity of ICLTs in China

Language teachers' professional identity is a critical factor determining the teacher-student relationship and language teaching methodologies<sup>[17]</sup>. To understand the current research status on the professional identity of ICLTs among Chinese scholars, this study selected "Chinese language teachers" and "professional identity" as key search terms to conduct a literature search in the CNKI database (up to March 2025). After screening, a total of 22 articles were finally identified, including 7 journal papers and 15 dissertations.

As shown in **Figure 1**, the earliest research on the professional identity of ICLTs in China emerged in 2009. However, over the subsequent six years, this topic did not attract the attention of Chinese scholars. It was not until 2017 that the professional identity of ICLTs once again came into the focus of Chinese scholars, and relevant papers have been published consistently since then, but the overall publication number is low.



**Figure 1.** Publication timeline of research on the professional identity of ICLTs in China

### 3.1. Theoretical foundations

The theoretical foundations for Chinese scholars' research on the professional identity of ICLTs can be categorized into three major perspectives. The first is the identity theory under the social constructivist perspective, which is also the most frequently utilized theory. This encompasses self-identity theory<sup>[18]</sup>, professional identity theory<sup>[6]</sup>, social identity theory<sup>[19]</sup>, and community of practice identity theory<sup>[20]</sup>. The second perspective is the self-efficacy theory from the cognitive standpoint<sup>[21]</sup>. The third is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory from the humanistic perspective<sup>[22]</sup>. Additionally, incentive theory<sup>[23]</sup>, motivation induction theory<sup>[22]</sup>, social role learning theory<sup>[23]</sup>, and Field Theory<sup>[3]</sup> have also been employed to study the professional identity of ICLTs. Some scholars have integrated different theories to conduct research on the professional identity of ICLTs, aiming to gain a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' professional identity. For instance, Pan<sup>[24]</sup> combined the identity theory with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory to explore the impact of social group behaviors and the fulfillment of the needs of pre-service ICLTs on their professional identity.

### 3.2. Research objects

Chinese scholars have paid attention to the professional identity of ICLTs from different identity groups, including pre-service ICLTs and full-time ICLTs, among which pre-service ICLTs have received the most attention. The pre-service stage is a critical period for the formation of professional identity and has a significant impact on future career choices<sup>[20]</sup>. Regarding research on full-time ICLTs, Chinese scholars have not only focused on domestic ICLTs but also on native ICLTs, primarily in ASEAN countries represented by Thailand<sup>[21,22]</sup>. Paying attention to the training and development of native ICLTs is a crucial guarantee for promoting the sustainable development of ICLE.

### 3.3. Research contents

The current status of ICLTs' professional identity is a key focus of Chinese scholars. They explore the development level and influencing factors of ICLTs' professional identity by constructing a structural system of it, and subsequently propose strategies to enhance it<sup>[19-29]</sup>.

ICLTs' professional identity is a multidimensional construct. These include ICLTs' understanding of the profession, their emotional investment and loyalty to the profession, and their behavioral tendencies in teaching practice. Although most scholars have found that the overall level of professional identity among ICLTs is relatively high, there are differences in the dimensions of the professional identity structure, possibly due to variations in data sources. Additionally, a few scholars have adopted a longitudinal perspective to investigate the professional identity of master's students in ICLE. They discovered that the level of professional identity varies across different stages, with

the highest level observed among first-year master's students and the lowest among third-year students, showing a declining trend<sup>[19]</sup>. The underlying reasons behind this phenomenon warrant in-depth reflection.

Scholars generally agree that ICLTs' professional identity is influenced by multiple factors, including individual factors (such as educational background, gender, and teaching ability) and external factors (such as parental attitudes, school internship arrangements, employment security systems upon returning to the home country, and social recognition). Additionally, native ICLTs are also influenced by factors such as the country where they teach, their ethnic background, and their parents' occupations. Meanwhile, Chinese language volunteers are affected by factors like their internship experiences, accommodation conditions, cultural adaptation, and career planning. Understanding the influencing factors of ICLTs' professional identity is conducive to designing career development paths that better meet their needs and expectations. Based on this, scholars have proposed strategies for cultivating and enhancing ICLTs' professional identity at the individual, school, organizational, and national levels.

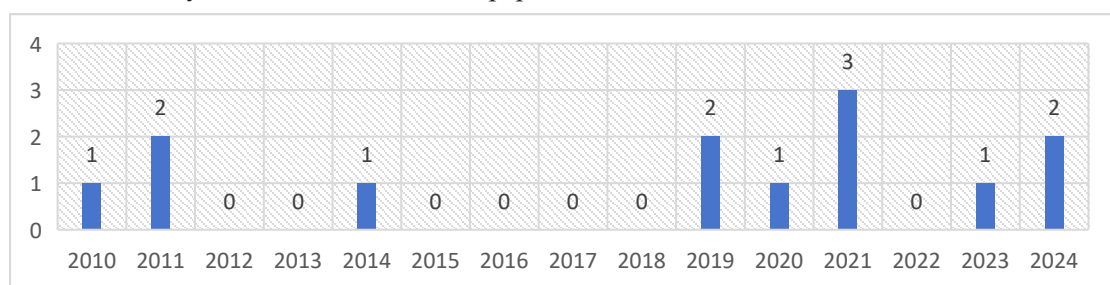
### 3.4. Research methods

Most scholars employ a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research, to conduct empirical studies on the professional identity of ICLTs. In quantitative analysis, Chinese scholars develop questionnaires based on previous research and in consideration of the occupational characteristics of ICLTs<sup>[27]</sup>. In qualitative analysis, scholars conduct structured or semi-structured interviews with a limited number of ICLTs and analyze the interview materials using grounded theory<sup>[4,22]</sup>. Some scholars also adopt interpretative phenomenological analysis to explain the conflicts and contradictions encountered during the formation process of ICLTs' professional identity<sup>[28]</sup>. Some scholars conduct a comparative analysis of the professional identity between new and retained Chinese volunteers<sup>[29]</sup>. Only a few scholars use speculative methods to analyze the existing problems in the professional identity of ICLTs<sup>[25]</sup>.

## 4. The current research status on the professional identity of ICLTs at the international level

To gain an understanding of the current research status on the professional identity of ICLTs at the international level, we conducted a search in well-known international electronic journal databases such as Web of Science, ProQuest, Scopus, and Sage Journals using "Chinese language teacher" and "professional identity" as key search terms (up to March 2025). After screening and trace-back of references, we ultimately obtained 13 papers, including 8 journal articles and 5 dissertations.

As shown in **Figure 2**, the earliest foreign research on the professional identity of ICLTs emerged in 2010, which was one year later than in China. Since then, the publication of relevant studies has shown an unstable pattern, with a relatively small overall number of papers.



**Figure 2.** Publication timeline of foreign research on the professional identity of ICLTs internationally

## 4.1. Theoretical foundations

There is a limited body of literature abroad that conducts research on the professional identity of ICLTs based on specific theories. These studies can be roughly categorized into two types. The first type involves the application of particular theories, such as the “schematic world” theory<sup>[30]</sup>, sociocultural theory<sup>[31]</sup>, the interpretivist tradition<sup>[32]</sup>, Mead’s self and other theory<sup>[33]</sup>, and positioning theory<sup>[34]</sup>. The second type employs multiple theoretical frameworks. For instance, Xiao<sup>[35]</sup> combined the framework perspective, the community of practice theory, and the three-stage model of ethnic/cultural identity development to explore the characteristics of the professional identity of ICLTs in cross-cultural contexts.

## 4.2. Research objects

Foreign scholars have also paid attention to the professional identity of ICLTs from different identity groups, with the most focus on full-time ICLTs. This group includes both those who have just arrived overseas to teach Chinese language and those who have been living overseas for an extended period. Han and Ji<sup>[33]</sup> found that the length of time spent living overseas, to some extent, influences the development of ICLTs’ professional identity. It should be noted that the vast majority of ICLTs that foreign scholars focus on are Chinese teachers engaged in Chinese language teaching overseas, while there is relatively less attention given to native ICLTs. From this difference in focus, it can be seen that in terms of the breadth of research subjects, Chinese studies present a more diverse landscape.

## 4.3. Research contents

The construction of professional identity among overseas ICLTs in cross-cultural contexts is a key focus of foreign scholars, aiming to explore the teaching practices, professional experiences, challenges faced, and growth of ICLTs within the dual-cultural context abroad. For instance, ICLTs in the United States report a lower sense of professional identity when teaching Chinese to students of Chinese heritage. They view Chinese language teaching as a voluntary act and believe that parents play a more crucial role in enhancing students’ learning motivation<sup>[36]</sup>. ICLTs in Denmark, influenced by both their domestic teaching experiences and Danish culture, undergo a transformation in their professional identity from moral exemplars, subject experts, knowledge authorities, and parental figures to learning facilitators and cultural workers<sup>[37]</sup>. For ICLTs in the United Kingdom, confronting and managing conflicts between personal goals and the requirements of the local community is an integral part of the professional identity-building process<sup>[38]</sup>. In Australia, the professional identity of ICLTs is not only influenced by their self-identity but also closely related to the degree of interaction and integration with others (such as students, colleagues, parents, etc.). Poor language communication is a significant obstacle to the construction of their professional identity<sup>[33]</sup>. Additionally, some scholars have paid attention to the role of professional identity construction and teachers’ work motivation in career choice<sup>[39]</sup>, the impact of curriculum design and teaching language in the teacher training process on future professional identity<sup>[40]</sup>, and the relationship between teachers’ emotional regulation motivation and professional identity construction<sup>[41]</sup>.

These studies have revealed the dynamic construction mechanism of ICLTs’ professional identity in cross-cultural contexts. In cross-cultural settings, the construction of ICLTs’ professional identity is a complex process driven not only by personal factors (such as self-identity and personal goals) but also by external factors (such as the community and culture), particularly local cultural factors. Therefore, ICLTs need to continuously adjust and adapt during the process of professional identity construction. This adjustment and adaptation precisely



embody the dynamic nature of teachers' professional identity.

#### **4.4. Research methods**

Foreign scholars generally adopt qualitative methods to conduct research on the professional identity of ICLTs, including narrative research and autoethnography. In terms of data collection, they often employ various approaches such as structured or semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, reflective journal analysis, lesson plans, and classroom observations. The sample sizes of these studies are often small, typically ranging from 1 to 8, with the largest sample size being 14. For example, Chen <sup>[42]</sup> conducted a case study using the autoethnographic method, taking his own overseas Chinese language teaching experience as an example to explore how key events in teaching influenced his professional identity. He revealed three stages of ICLTs' professional identity: self-focus, task-focus, and influence-focus. Liu *et al.* <sup>[43]</sup> studied 14 ICLTs from the perspective of teacher-student relationships to investigate their professional identity. Although differences in interpersonal relationships among teachers led to distinct characteristics in their professional identity, overall, overseas teaching experience contributed to enhancing ICLTs' sense of professional identity.

### **5. Comparative analysis and implications**

#### **5.1. Comparative analysis**

Based on a global perspective, this study summarizes the current status of research on the professional identity of ICLTs both in China and internationally. In the new era of building a teacher education system with Chinese characteristics, these research findings are of great significance for understanding the professional identity of ICLTs. However, in terms of the starting time, Chinese and international scholars began to pay attention to the professional identity of ICLTs at a similar time. Yet, compared with nearly four decades of accumulation in international research on teacher professional identity, the research on the professional identity of ICLTs started relatively late. This lag forms a stark contrast with the rapidly growing practical demands of ICLE.

In terms of the volume of research, there is a relatively small number of relevant studies. The research content is rather scattered, and the research foundation is weak. As a result, the understanding of this field is not in-depth enough. It is difficult to comprehensively cover the multiple dimensions and complex mechanisms of professional identity, which in turn hinders the formation of a systematic and large-scale theoretical system.

In terms of theoretical foundations, many Chinese scholars conduct research on the professional identity of ICLTs based on certain theories, including identity theory, self-efficacy theory, Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, and so on. In contrast, there are relatively few foreign scholars who conduct such research based on a specific theory. Moreover, foreign scholars are more inclined to select cultural theories to explore the characteristics of the professional identity of ICLTs in overseas cross-cultural contexts.

Regarding research subjects, foreign scholars mostly focus on ICLTs whose native language is Chinese and pay extremely little attention to native ICLTs. In contrast, Chinese scholars have recognized the research value of native ICLTs.

In terms of research content, Chinese scholars focus on the current status of the professional identity of ICLTs. By constructing a structural system of ICLTs' professional identity, they explore its development level and influencing factors and then propose strategies for cultivating and enhancing the professional identity of ICLTs. Foreign research places more emphasis on in-depth descriptions of the construction of ICLTs' professional identity in cross-cultural environments. It explores the formation and transformation of ICLTs' professional identity in cross-cultural contexts by interpreting their cognition of the subject, their perceptions

of teacher-student relationships, and their mutual influences within the local community and among colleagues. The research findings can present vivid biographies of ICLTs' professional identity or their unique overseas teaching experiences.

From the perspective of research methods, foreign scholars generally adopt qualitative analysis, which forms a sharp contrast with Chinese scholars. This also, to a certain extent, indicates that qualitative research is more recognized by the international academic community in the field of exploring teacher professional identity.

## **5.2. Implications for future research**

The relatively small number of relevant studies both in China and internationally has led to an insufficiently in-depth understanding of this field, making it difficult to comprehensively cover the multiple dimensions and complex mechanisms of professional identity. This current research status presents both challenges and opportunities. Based on this, we propose the following prospects with the aim of propelling this field from initial exploration towards systematic construction.

### **5.2.1. Research on the construction of the professional identity system of ICLTs from a cross-cultural perspective**

The academic community has not yet reached a unified understanding of the constituent elements of the professional identity of ICLTs. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen research on the construction of the professional identity system of ICLTs. Currently, in the field of teacher education, many scholars have constructed theoretical models of teacher professional identity<sup>[44-46]</sup>, providing theoretical and methodological guidance for the construction of the professional identity system of ICLTs. The construction of the professional identity system of ICLTs is conducive to forming a consensus-based professional identity framework and revealing the universal laws of ICLT education.

Analyzing the professional identity of ICLTs from a cross-cultural perspective not only helps to reveal how ICLTs reconstruct their professional cognition in a multicultural field, but also highlights the value tension of ICLTs in reconciling Chinese culture with overseas cultures and global educational concepts in their teaching practices. Therefore, in the context of globalization, the theory of the development of ICLTs in different regions and countries is the core content of the theoretical system of ICLE in different regions and countries<sup>[47]</sup>. ICLTs in different countries face unique professional ecologies and cultural backgrounds. Only by exploring the influencing factors and formation mechanisms of the professional identity of ICLTs in cross-cultural contexts from a regional and national perspective can we comprehensively, deeply, and targetedly reveal the special laws of the professional identity of ICLTs and provide theoretical support for the teacher training and professional development of ICLTs.

### **5.2.2. Research on the transformation of the professional identity of ICLTs in the context of digital transformation**

AI is the core driving force and an important engine for promoting the high-quality development of the ICLE, profoundly changing its teaching ecology. This educational transformation not only puts forward higher requirements for the teaching abilities of ICLTs but also prompts them to rethink their roles and values. Therefore, exploring the professional identity of ICLTs in the context of the times has become an important issue.

Some scholars have already paid attention to the impact of technological development on the professional



identity of language teachers and have conducted relevant research accordingly<sup>[48–50]</sup>, providing useful insights for the study of the professional identity of ICLTs in the context of digital transformation. In the future, we can conduct a comprehensive analysis of the current status of the professional identity of ICLTs under the impact of digital and intelligent technologies, explore the transformations brought about by digital and intelligent technologies to the professional identity of ICLTs, reveal the dilemmas faced by the professional identity of ICLTs, analyze the influencing factors of the reconstruction of teachers' professional identity, and then reconstruct the professional identity system of ICLTs. This will provide a scientific basis for the integration of ICLE technologies and the reform of the teacher training model of ICLTs, which is of great significance for promoting the education of ICLTs in the new era.

### **5.2.3. Case studies on the professional identity of ICLTs**

China scholars attempted to describe the universal laws of the professional identity of ICLTs based on existing theoretical frameworks, but they neglected the particularity of the development of teachers' professional identity. Although foreign scholars have conducted case studies on the professional identity of ICLTs, they lack a systematic exploration of the dynamic evolution of the professional identity of ICLTs. A pre-designed theoretical framework cannot effectively reflect the real situation of education. The fluidity and complexity of educational events are usually expressed through narrative methods<sup>[51]</sup>.

On the one hand, the professional identities are particular due to differences in ICLTs' personal experiences. Through narrative research, we can conduct a more process-oriented and life-like exploration of the formation process and development changes of the professional identity of ICLTs, revealing the dynamic development characteristics of the professional identity of ICLTs and the deep-seated psychological mechanisms behind them. On the other hand, we can carry out case-tracking studies, combining teachers' personal life histories with the practice of ICLE. From a longitudinal perspective, we can explore the changes in teachers' professional identity at different stages of their professional development, establish a life-cycle model of the professional identity of ICLTs, and provide empirical support for optimizing teachers' professional development paths.

## **6. Conclusion**

ICLE is a highly practical discipline with its own discourse and theoretical approaches. Professional identity serves as one of the fundamental pathways for ICLTs to evolve from pre-service teachers to professional educators<sup>[52]</sup> and constitutes an underlying and supportive research area for the development of the ICLE. Paying attention to the internal voices of teachers and valuing their subjectivity are important ways to understand their thoughts. The professional identity of ICLTs can effectively depict their inner landscapes and group characteristics, thereby deepening and enhancing their sense of professional identity and accomplishment, which holds significant research value.

In the tide of the intertwining forces of globalization and digitalization, this study, based on a global perspective, conducts a comparative analysis of the research conducted by Chinese scholars and foreign scholars, systematically describing the current research status. On this basis, it proposes insights for conducting research on the professional identity of ICLTs by integrating the impacts of cross-cultural contexts and digital and intelligent technologies. This is conducive to promoting the formation of a theoretical framework with disciplinary characteristics in the field of ICLE.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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