

A Reflective Account of Implementing the Problem-Centred Interview as a Method to Study Transnational Teacher Identity

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Article information	Abstract
Article history: Received: 27 Jan 2026 Last revised: 4 Apr 2026 Accepted: 19 Aug 2026 Available online: 24 Aug 2026	<i>The Problem-Centred Interview (PCI), developed by Andreas Witzel in the early 1980s, is a discursive-dialogic method that integrates narrative and semi-structured interviewing with elements of biographical approaches. Despite its growing use in German-language social research, PCI remains largely absent from TESOL scholarship and has not previously been applied to the study of transnational teacher identity. The purpose of this article is to present PCI as a suitable research method for exploring TESOL teacher identity and to reflect on its practical application in doctoral research on transnational identity formation among expatriate non-native English language teachers. Drawing on PCI principles, the study provides a step-by-step account of the method's practical implementation, detailing adaptations made to suit the specific research context. The article outlines the main principles of PCI and comments on its differences and commonalities with related approaches, including narrative interviewing, semi-structured interviewing, and biographical approaches. The article also addresses the limitations encountered during the execution of PCI and concludes with recommendations for researchers in TESOL and related fields who are considering this approach. The article demonstrates the value of PCI in investigating the complexities of transnational teacher development and argues for its wider adoption in qualitative research on language teacher identity.</i>
Keywords: Problem-centred interview PCI Transnational identity Qualitative research Interpretive methodology	

INTRODUCTION

Reflecting a commonly held view among qualitative scholars, Brown (2003, p. 1793) considers interviews “the main tool to bring alive the lived experience of people and communities”. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) assert that many forms of interviews exist, with the choice depending on the objectives of the inquiry, the nature of the desired knowledge, the focus of the interview, the competencies and approach of the interviewer, and other factors. To explore the lived experiences of expatriate language teachers becoming transnational, I found the Problem-Centred Interview (PCI) particularly suitable. Developed in the early 1980s by German scholar Andreas Witzel (1982, 1989, 1996) as a “method of reconstructing knowledge about relevant problems” (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 178), PCI is a qualitative, discursive-dialogic method utilised to collect verbal data in various social research fields.

My interest in this method was threefold. First, it underlines the researcher's prior knowledge about the issue. Being a transnational educator myself, I considered myself a "well-informed traveller" (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 50) who possessed shared knowledge with other individuals participating in my research. The second motive for using this method was PCI's inherent flexibility, evident in the non-directive structure of the interview and its openness to modifying the preliminary roadmap (Döringer, 2020). The third, and equally important, reason for my choice of PCI was in response to Gubrium's (2013) stringent criticism of the method, particularly his claim that "there is not much new" (p. 377) about it. This criticism encouraged me to employ PCI in my research to determine its novelty and usefulness.

PCI has been widely used as a data collection tool for exploring complex societal issues primarily by German researchers (for example, Döringer, 2020; Fritzsche & Bohnert, 2022; Scheibelhofer, 2011; Schmidt-Grunert, 1999). Applications of PCI include investigating topics such as migration (Caminero & McGarrigle, 2023; Klípa, 2011; Scheibelhofer, 2014), gender issues (Buchinger et al., 2002; Hara, 2018; Lenneis & Pfister, 2015), sociology (Vogl et al., 2019), health and well-being (Klingemann, 2012; Sliwa et al., 2017), among many others. Its use in researching teachers, however, remains relatively limited, with perhaps a handful of studies found in the literature (for example, Bagoly-Simó & Hartmann, 2020; Breidbach & Medina-Suárez, 2016; Höhns, 2018; Shirazian, 2012). Even fewer articles were identified where researchers (see, for example, Matkowski, 2021; Scheibelhofer, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2023) explicated the practical stages of implementing the PCI in its original or combined formats, such as Problem-centred expert interview (Döringer, 2021).

Studies on transnational teacher identity in TESOL have drawn on narrative inquiry, autoethnography, and duoethnography as their primary methods of data collection (e.g., Fairley, 2023; Guo & Sidhu, 2024; Yazan et al., 2022; Zheng & Lawrence, 2025). To date, however, PCI has not been employed in TESOL research, nor in studies of transnational teacher identity specifically. This article responds to that gap by offering a reflective account of PCI implementation in the context of transnational teacher identity research, while also situating the method among its closest methodological relatives. In the following sections, I first situate PCI within its methodological origins and related qualitative interview approaches. I then provide a step-by-step account of its practical implementation, detailing the adaptations made to suit the specific research context and addressing the limitations encountered. Finally, I offer recommendations for researchers considering this method.

Situating PCI: Methodological origins and related approaches

Problem-Centred Interview is a fusion method that integrates several interviewing approaches previously used in qualitative research: narrative and semi-structured interviewing, including elements of biographical methods. Narrative interviewing as a method, introduced by Fritz Schütze in the 1970s, has demonstrated notable efficacy in exploring the professional experiences and trajectories of teachers (see, for example, Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narratives can be understood as "stories people tell about their personal experiences" (Dolby-Stahl, 1985, as cited in Denzin, 1989, p. 186). The goal of narrative interviewing is to obtain "extempore narrative renderings" (Schütze, 1992, 2003), detailed accounts of

participants' encounters with the research phenomenon. A typical narrative interview starts with a "generative" narrative question (Riemann & Schütze, 1987, p. 353) that acts as a stimulus to initiate the main narrative. At this stage, the researcher is an active listener who should ideally refrain from interruptions or asking questions. Nevertheless, even seemingly unstructured narratives may require 'adjustment' or continually refining understanding (Mason, 2002; Rogers & Farson, 2015/1957). Hollway and Jefferson (2000), for example, suggest using a series of starter questions to guide biographical narratives, each focusing on a specific time period.

PCI follows a similar principle. The interviewer asks a general opening question (*Can you tell me about...?*), which should serve as a starting point for further elaboration (Scheibelhofer, 2008). At this stage, the interviewer's interference should be minimised. However, Witzel and Reiter (2012) caution researchers that the strict rule of not intervening or interrupting interviewees can create an artificial interaction and place excessive demands on respondents. Because of this, PCI recommends interviewers act as active listeners rather than passive non-interveners. The active listening strategies within PCI resemble those that narrative interviewers commonly agree on: probing, paraphrasing, evaluating meaning, and clarifying understanding (see, for example, Richards, 2003). These *ad hoc* questions encourage long, open-ended responses and deepen interview dialogue. In contrast to narrative interview, PCI does not have a strict separation between 'immanent' and 'exmanent' types of questions. Instead, the PCI allows flexible use of follow-up questions throughout the interview to better mirror everyday communication (Witzel & Reiter, 2012).

At later stages, the interview format changes from narrative storytelling to a question-and-answer pattern of the semi-structured interview. PCI adopts the same tactic, gradually shifting from "active listening" to "active understanding" (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 8) and becoming more dialogic. Similar to a typical semi-structured interviewing approach, in conducting PCI, the researcher relies on an interview guide consisting of preset questions or prompts that allow the researcher to clarify participants' answers (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). What differentiates it from a "conventional guided interview", as Witzel and Reiter (2012, p. 51) clarify, is that PCI uses an interview guide, but not to establish a question-answer scheme. The guide functions as a thematic roadmap that reflects the researcher's background knowledge and areas of interest and highlights specific topics or interests the researcher aims to explore. In a way, the guide acts as a backup when communication is difficult, which makes it particularly suitable for novice researchers (Witzel & Reiter, 2012). The PCI approach that combines active listening with active understanding produces a more dialogic, "less asymmetrical" (Reiter, 2019, p. 163) interaction compared to traditional narrative interviews, making it well-suited for studying young people by freeing them from having to provide a lengthy monologic account of themselves.

The interview guide in PCI relies on the researcher's prior knowledge about the issue. As Witzel and Reiter (2012, p. 25) indicate, "it is misleading to conceive of the researcher as a *tabula rasa*; therefore, the influence of their knowledge is 'unavoidable'". Drawing on Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), they use the metaphor of the interviewer as a traveller who makes a journey to distant lands and curiously engages in conversations with local people he/she

meets on the way. Realising the limits of their own understanding, the interviewer relies on the locals and their expertise in exploring the place, so listening to them refines and enriches the knowledge that they afterwards take back home. Interviewer's prior types of knowledge form a sensitising framework that guides research and are considered later in the article.

As mentioned earlier, PCI draws on biographical methods, such as life history interviewing, for example, but uses them more selectively. The biographical dimension of PCI is distinct enough from life history interviewing to warrant its own discussion. Life history interviewing, as developed within the biographical research tradition (e.g., Atkinson, 1998; Rosenthal, 1995), aims at a comprehensive reconstruction of a person's life as a whole. Thus, the researcher's task is to understand how a person makes sense of their entire trajectory, and the interview is designed to elicit as complete and chronologically rich an account as possible. In that tradition, the told life and the lived life are treated as analytically distinct objects, and the relationship between them becomes central to interpretation (Fischer-Rosenthal & Rosenthal, 1997). PCI uses biographical material differently. The ARB model traces the biographical trajectory of participants around three categories (aspiration, realisation and balancing), but as a scaffolding for exploring a specific problem rather than as an end in itself. It is worth noting that word 'problem', as the authors clarify, translates from German *Problemstellung* and refers to a specific research question(s) that correspond to "a societal problem with immediate relevance for individuals" (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 5).

Additionally, as Witzel (2000) notes, unlike approaches focused on narrative biography that rely on collections of personal letters and documents, PCI's more direct, conversational way provides an immediate method for "'luring out' of concrete examples of experiences or biographical episodes" (section 4.1, para. 2). In my study on transnational identities detailed in the following section, I was not seeking a complete reconstruction of participants' life histories. The biographical structure helped contextualise how transnational becoming was experienced, without making the biographical *gestalt* itself the object of analysis.

Doing the problem-centred interview

The empirical example presented here is derived from my doctoral study involving six self-initiated expatriate non-native English language educators (Wright, 2024). The purpose of my research was to explore how becoming transnational is experienced by such individuals. This major question, How do expatriate 'non-native' language teachers experience becoming transnational? served as *Problemstellung*. The choice of a relatively small number of participants in this research was in line with the common practice of experience-centred narrative research that places emphasis on the depth and richness of individual experiences (Squire, 2008). At the time the interviews were conducted, participants had been employed abroad and residing there for five years or more. This criterion ensured that the selected participants represented "information-rich cases" (Patton, 2015, p. 178), possessing the relevant characteristics and knowledge essential for addressing my research question. To gain access to participants' worldviews and make sense of them, the Problem-centred interview was chosen as an appropriate method for data collection. Oriented biographically, it aimed to collect the individual life stories of the participants, with a special emphasis on key events or

turning points in their processes of transnational identity formation. Originally intended for in-person interviews, I opted to conduct them via Zoom, a videoconferencing platform, given the geographical dispersion of the participants. Before elaborating on the three stages of the PCI framework, I want to return to the notion of the researcher as ‘traveller’.

Researcher as ‘traveller’

The “traveller” metaphor, introduced by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), contrasts with the “miner” metaphor. Rather than seeking specific, predetermined bits of information (as a miner does), the traveller engages in conversations, encouraging interviewees to share their stories and experiences. Throughout the journey, the traveller discovers new aspects, refines, and sometimes changes their understanding and opinions based on interactions (Witzel & Reiter, 2012). As a result, the interviewer and interviewee together create meaning through dialogue; knowledge becomes co-constructed. I took an interviewer as a traveller approach, possessing some prior knowledge but allowing myself to be ‘curious’ about what I was about to discover.

According to Witzel and Reiter (2012), this prior knowledge can be of four types: everyday, contextual, research, and sensitising. *Everyday knowledge* refers to what I already knew about the topic. As a person who has spent seven years abroad, I have experienced many aspects of transnational becoming: moving abroad, adjusting to a new culture, and so many more. *Contextual knowledge* constituted my familiarity with background information relevant to the topic prior to interviewing. Such knowledge requires doing some form of ‘homework’. In my case, it entailed finding out about participants’ educational backgrounds, locations, job situations, and other contextual information. *Research knowledge* is a form of specialised knowledge facilitated through reading literature pertinent to the interviewer’s field of study. *Sensitising knowledge* is the fourth type of knowledge (Figure 1) into which the above-mentioned three forms of the researcher’s prior knowledge should ideally convert.

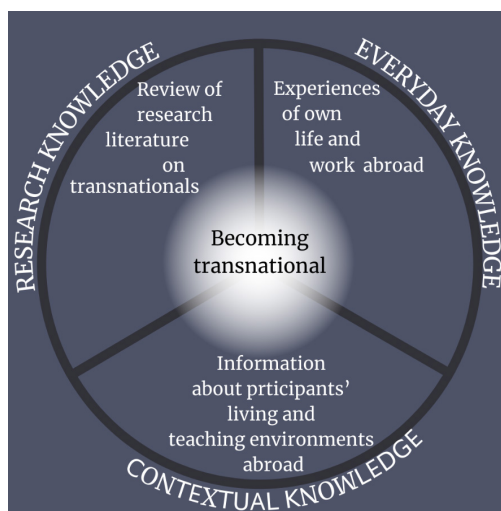


Figure 1 Sensitising prior knowledge

Such knowledge consists of ‘sensitising concepts’ that, unlike definitive ones, are not prescriptive but open to “being filled in with empirical substance regarding the issue under investigation by the respondents’ perspectives” (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 10). This knowledge is defined by a higher ‘distance’ from the issue under investigation, enabling the researcher to make new discoveries of meanings. Its purpose is to make sure that all types of prior knowledge do not interfere with our interpretation of the topic, so it encourages its continuous reevaluation, based on insights gathered from interviews with the participants.

First stage: preparation

Interview preparation began with the development of a conceptual guide called a “sensitising framework” (Witzel & Reiter, 2012), which, according to the authors, should reflect the researcher’s perception regarding the phenomenon under study, giving the interviewer ‘control’ over theoretical and conceptual knowledge.

As argued above, PCI is “oriented towards biographic life courses” (Scheibelhofer, 2005, p. 25). Hence, this method seeks to recreate and interpret particular periods of one’s biography. For this purpose, a sensitising framework should draw on the ‘ARB-model’ (aspirations–realisations–balancing), with each stage representing biographical periods of participants’ lives and containing their expectations, wishes, and decisions (Witzel, 2001, as cited in Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 128). Aspirations are personal reasons for pursuing goals that encompass their interests, expectations, and future desires. Realisations refer to career moves, for example, getting a job. The “balancing” category examines the long-term impact of personal and professional decisions and choices on one’s life story. Together, these three dimensions serve as a mechanism for revealing the relationships between various key moments of one’s life and their evolution over the course of time.

In the sensitising framework I created (Table 1), the ‘aspiration’ category explored participants’ motivations to move abroad, to stay, or to leave the country. The ‘realisation’ category helped me examine their experiences of ‘in-betweenness’: encounters with the local culture, for instance. The third one dealt with “consequences and results of action and how the individual evaluates them” (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 132). This part focused on changes in participants’ attitudes and beliefs resulting from their cross-cultural experiences.

Table 1
Sensitising framework – the ARB-Model

Aspirations	
•	Exploring professional background;
•	Questioning participants’ beliefs and perceptions about themselves as English language teachers in their home countries;
•	Understanding reasons to find employment abroad;
•	Examining expectations prior to expatriation
Realisations	
•	Understanding how the participants felt when they got to a foreign country and comparing that to what they expected;
•	Discovering the differences / similarities between life in a home country and ‘host’ country;
•	Exploring their first encounters with institutional culture and their attitudes toward it.

Balancing

addresses 'consequences and results of action and how the individual evaluates them' (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 132)

- Examining the sociocultural and work adjustments;
- Exploring change in participants' beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes to themselves as individuals and language teachers as a result of living outside their home countries for a prolonged period of time;
- Discovering what participants have learned about themselves while living 'across the borders';
- Gaining insight into participants' future plans.

To illustrate how these three categories are connected, let us consider an excerpt from an interview with Mila, one of the participants.

Mm-Hmm. Yes, I graduated from [name of the city] Pedagogical University in 2008 as an English language teacher. When I was still studying at university, I started working full-time at a private school (**realisation 1**) because I was really excited about being a teacher suddenly [laughter]. For two years, I worked at the school and then got very disappointed, um, disillusioned in the school education system (**balancing 1**). That'll be fair to say, and then I was at a loss (**balancing 2**), I was considering for maybe half a year, for a few months choosing something else that I could be doing (**aspiration 1**). Maybe, many other people who choose pedagogical degrees can feel, can find themselves in my situation and relate to that. But at that point, I started working part-time in a company that mediated and helped me to find corporate clients and teach them business English and general English and some more particular purposes (**realisation 2**). And that got me very excited (**balancing 3**). So basically, I just understood that working with adults or working in a sort of environment was suitable for me (balancing 4). So I returned to education pretty quickly (**realisation 3**).

In addition to the ARB scheme, I devised an interview guide, as Witzel and Reiter (2012) suggest, based on the research question(s) and my prior knowledge of transnational living. It does not follow a conventional question-answer format and consists of prompts and questions that are not prescriptive but open-ended (Appendix A), which helped me set up a direction and facilitate interaction. The actual interview was 'guided' by participants' responses, which demanded a certain degree of detachment from the pre-set sequence of questions and readiness to introduce additional questions when needed. This format of PCI, where narrative and dialogic forms of interviewing alternate, resembles the way people communicate in everyday life. This is the major difference between this method and a narrative interview, with a clear separation of interview phases. The "richness" (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 61) of PCI is dependent on participants and the level of their 'expertise' in the topic. To ensure the success of the interview, the authors encourage choosing participants who are likely to be 'experts' in terms of having a substantial amount of knowledge about the research issue. As mentioned before, I recruited participants who met this criterion.

Second stage: Interviewing

PCI typically starts with an 'opening question' targeted to "stipulate narration" (Scheibelhofer, 2005, p. 23). It should be formulated in an open manner to avoid explicit suggestions. I started

each interview by inviting participants to share a story about their life prior to expatriation. Here is one such invitation:

I know a little bit about you, but obviously, I don't know all of your professional history or background. Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself? What did you do prior to moving abroad?

Framed this way, the prompt provided a useful starting point and activated the interviewee's "stock of knowledge" (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 67) about the research issue. This is the stage of active listening with minimal interference from my side. With some participants (for instance, Katerina), I did not get to ask an opening question about their life before moving to another country. It was due to the fact that at the beginning of the interview, when I started explaining about the interview, she mentioned that she "*did exactly the same*" for her master's, which was quite recent. So, I decided to pick on this point and ask additional questions, hoping that she would eventually tell me about her biography. I was right: adopting a "receptive" (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 67) stance allowed me to reach the desired point.

The next stage, called 'Opening account', is "the main hub for exploring the issue" (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 74) when participants were supposed to generate longer sequences of narratives addressing different life stages. It began with inquiries into aspects of participants' biographies that have not yet been covered by them. In my case, I wanted participants to remember what motivated them to look for a job abroad, so I started with the following prompt: "*Could you tell me how this idea to relocate to a different country came to your mind?*" This is a stage where my role was restricted to that of an active listener, similar to the introductory stage, so my interference was minimised. An "opening account", as Witzel (2001) suggests, should create a possibility for follow-up questions that should be delayed until a later stage; therefore, I was not worried when the descriptions participants provided were incomplete, as I had an opportunity to revisit them in the next stage. The same concerns the lengths of opening accounts, which were hard to predict. Although ideally, these narrations should be long, their length, according to the authors, does not necessarily correlate with the depth and extent to which participants could discuss their experiences, and depends on many variables. For example, short responses could be explained by the lack of rapport between the researcher and the researched. Other reasons might be the absence of recollection on the part of the interviewees, or, in some extreme cases, their inability to articulate the issue (Witzel & Reiter, 2012).

After the interviewees finished, the questioning stage began when I started "general" and "specific explorations", followed by *ad-hoc* questions. "General" questions are specifically directed towards the interviewees' personal experiences and perspectives, aiming to gather additional insights (Döringer, 2021, p. 268). Schütze (1977, as cited in Scheibelhofer, 2005, p. 23) calls them "immanent" in the sense that they refer to events that participants mentioned in their stories. In my case, examples of such questions were, "*And then where did you go?*" "*What kind of conference?*" On the other hand, the "specific" or "exmanent" (Scheibelhofer, 2005, p. 24) questions that were introduced next, pertained to the research question(s) and were based on the interview guide. Structured in a way that aims to "unlock" (Witzel &

Reiter, 2012, p. 151) participants' meaningful insights that may not be immediately apparent to the interviewer, these questions were meant to elicit details. This is a stage of "active understanding", which required my involvement in conversations by asking *how? what? why?* questions (Matkowski, 2021, p. 293) during which interactive and dialogical reconstruction of interpretative knowledge occurs. This part of PCI is not strictly defined; participants do not have to produce "extensive narratives" (Matkowski, 2021, p. 300); thus, it is more flexible. As a result, the interviews acquire a natural flow giving participants the feeling of the researcher's genuine curiosity about the subject.

To achieve this, a variety of communication strategies can be used at this stage, such as memory stimulation, mirroring, comprehension questions, confrontation, and others. The purpose of such questions was to revisit or clarify previous statements expressed by interviewees and facilitate a deeper understanding. The complete list of communication strategies I applied can be found in Table 2, but some of them are worth mentioning, particularly mirroring. It is a conversation technique for "achieving communicative validation of ideas and hypotheses about possible improvements of formulations that emerge during the conversation" (Buschle et al., 2022, p. 829). It includes repeating, summarising, and rephrasing participants' statements by the researcher, during which he/she acknowledges their interpretations and confirms their own understanding of them. The following excerpts exemplify my point:

Paraphrasing

Interviewer: So you said first you went to Japan for six months, sort of try it out. Did you go for work or you just took off and you just went?

Summarising

Interviewer: So you never depended on the sponsorship visa.

Repeating

Zoe: [laughter] Oh, well, my husband, had had enough. Yeah, he had enough. I wasn't happy. I was so not happy. No, no. No, I wanted to stay.

Interviewer: You wanted to stay?

Table 2
Examples of PCI communication strategies

General exploration		
Strategies	Generating material (narratives)	Example
Beginning of conversation, narration-generating opening question	Open invitation to explicate the respondent's view, focusing on problem	<i>"Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself? What did you do prior to moving abroad?"</i>
Detailing questions	Specification of themes, problems, background; stimulation of memory	<i>"How did you become an English teacher or ESL/EAL teacher?"</i>
Examples from experience	Stimulation of memory, reconstruction of context and establishing links to structural environment	<i>"So you mentioned the job ethics that was an issue. Could you tell me more about it?"</i>

General exploration		
Strategies	Generating material (narratives)	Example
Ad-hoc questions	Completion of information, gaining comparability	<i>"The first years of teaching in Russia, let's say, or in your early career and compare it to now. How is it different?"</i>
Repeated thematic comparison	Conceptual clarification, thematic differentiation	<i>"So how is it different to what you're doing now in the classroom or in terms of your teaching approach? What do you do differently?"</i>
Specific exploration		
Strategies	Generating comprehension	Example
Mirroring	Cognitive structuring for interviewer and respondent, communicative validation	Summarising, rephrasing, provoking denials, asking for comments– <i>"You said you don't know what's next, what's going to happen, where are you going to go".</i>
Comprehension questions	Clarifying common-sense structures, lacking or unclear terms and facts	<i>"So you said you had a couple of students that had issues with your foreignness. What did you mean by that?"</i>
Confrontations	Clarifying or inviting further specification of contradictory statements	<i>"But eventually you did leave it for another country".</i>

Questions of general and specific character can be complemented by *ad-hoc* questions that explore "knowledge and meanings indirectly" (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 76). They are destined "to secure [their] comparability" (Witzel, 2000, para. 14) or completeness and are usually asked at the end of the interview. Below are some of the phrases I used in my interviews:

So, what are your plans for the future in terms of moving on, moving away, moving out or staying?

So how have these international experiences changed you as a person and as an English teacher?

Yeah. So how is it different to what you're doing now in the classroom or in terms of your teaching approach? What do you do differently?

To conclude an interview, the authors of the PCI method propose designing a short questionnaire made of standardised questions as an optional strategy for gathering supplementary data or addressing any inconsistencies. However, in line with the qualitative framework of my research, I chose not to implement this step as it is more appropriate for mixed-method studies. Instead, I used a projective technique called 'vignette' as a resource to encourage participants to reflect, process, and discuss issues that are difficult to access through direct questioning. In contrast to surveys, vignettes could potentially excite "respondent curiosity because they are different, unusual and intriguing" (Catterall & Ibbotson, 2000, p. 248). The next section describes their adaptation for my research.

Vignettes

Vignettes are research instruments that can be employed in diverse research contexts to delve into complex issues. Different scholars provide varying definitions for vignettes. Finch (1987) defines them as “short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances” (p. 105) used as stimuli to initiate dialogues. Others consider them ‘life situations’ (Herskovits, 1950) and ‘fictional scenarios’ (Jenkins et al., 2010). Vignettes play a significant role in qualitative research, especially when participants may be hesitant to discuss sensitive issues, such as health or gender issues (Barter & Renold, 1999). I used vignettes in the form of two narrative scenarios that depicted the experiences of the transnational life and work of two fictitious characters, Ahmed and Jelena (Appendix B). According to Neff (1979), vignettes are most effective when the situations portrayed are realistic and plausible to the participants, despite their fictional nature. The vignettes I developed bore a resemblance to my own experiences, adding a personal touch to their creation. In constructing them, I also derived my understanding from people’s experiences (both positive and negative) illuminated in the literature on transnationalism.

To explore participants’ “own subjective belief systems” (Hazel, as cited in Barter & Renold, 1999, p. 308), I asked them to read the two scenarios and respond to them drawing on their own experiences. I was well aware that the use of this method could not guarantee the answer to my research question; however, as Finch (1987, p. 107) notes, the value of vignettes should not be overlooked, especially when exploring sensitive topics. In the context of my study, discrimination and various biases linked to the ‘non-native’ status of interviewees needed to be approached with sensitivity, so vignettes held significant worth in enabling me to elucidate different meanings and interpretations, which might not be possible to do through other approaches. My participants had the opportunity to read vignettes prior to the interview, which facilitated their recollections. It also allowed them to engage in a more meaningful and reflective discussion during the interview, providing deeper insights and perspectives. For convenience, I shared vignettes on my computer screen so that participants could recall specific details and experiences related to the scenarios. Below is a range of responses to the vignettes showing participants’ engagement with them.

Extract 1

Interviewer: Where would you place yourself?

Mila: [thinking] I'm definitely not [pause]... In some elements, I'm here and there and again...I'm just now reading, what caught my eye was Ahmed's comment on 'I have no plans to return home just yet. I no longer belong there'. I definitely feel this way.

With some participants, there was no need for me to introduce the vignettes: the participants themselves spontaneously brought them up, as evidenced by the following excerpt.

Extract 2

Antoni: So it's great, I really like it, and uh, I remember reading your attachment, you know.

Interviewer: Vignettes? That's my next question. Where would you place yourself?

Antoni: Always in every country is the guy from Egypt who left Spain and he never had any problems in terms of the culture or the job, blah blah blah. He loved everything, all the aspects of the whole experience. I'm the same.

The above extracts convey only a small portion of the various ways in which participants related to the vignettes by comparing and contrasting their own understandings, perceptions, and beliefs with those depicted in the scenarios. Through this process, I had the opportunity to revisit their previous responses to some of my questions, further strengthening the credibility of my findings obtained in the course of the iterative and interpretative process of analysing transcripts, to which I turn next.

Third stage: 'Processing' the data

As a general framework for analysing data Witzel and Reiter (2012) recommend using Corbin and Strauss's (1990) Grounded Theory (GT). Instead, I chose Braun and Clarke's (2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), which also aims to construct "patterns of meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, p. 331) but does it differently. For example, GT adheres to the principle of line-by-line coding, whereas in RTA, it is not essential to assign a code for each individual line of data. Furthermore, my objective was not theory generation that GT is concerned with, but theoretically informed interpretation of data. Being a novice qualitative researcher, RTA appealed to me for its straightforwardness and less complex set of procedures compared to GT. Ultimately, I felt "familiar and comfortable" (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, p. 38) with RTA. Having previously implemented this method of data analysis in my Trial Study, I gained a certain level of ease and confidence with its application.

Thematic analysis can be described as an in-depth interpretive and iterative process of data coding with the purpose of developing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022b, p. 4). TA is often referred to as "a family of methods" (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p. 1) due to its inherent flexibility and the diverse spectrum of approaches it encompasses. RTA involved six stages, namely: (1) Becoming familiar with the data; (2) Coding; (3) Generating initial themes; (4) Developing and reviewing themes; (5) Refining, defining and naming themes; (6) Writing up.

Phase 1: Becoming familiar with the data

The familiarisation stage involved transcribing and engaging with text data using NVivo for better transcription quality compared to Zoom. Manual editing was required to correct errors. A selective transcription approach excluded certain verbal and non-verbal elements, such as 'inbreaths and outbreaths' and repetitive words like "like" or "right" when requested by participants (Davidson, 2009; Lapadat, 2010). Punctuation was added to reflect pauses, intonation, and emphasis, while retaining involuntary vocalisations (e.g., laughter, "Hm", "Ok") and grammatical errors for authenticity (Gardner, 2002). As an interpretivist researcher, I balanced naturalised and denaturalised transcription methods, creating semi-verbatim transcripts to capture communicative flow and participants' expressions (Bloom, 1993). However, transcription cannot fully capture spoken language attributes, as noted by scholars like Mero-Jaffe (2011) and Poland (1995).

Phase 2: Coding data

Coding, described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) as “the bedrock” of analysis, involved identifying significant information related to the phenomenon. Codes represent analytically intriguing ideas or meanings tied to data segments, refined during the process (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). NVivo was used for its efficiency, enabling faster data processing, memo creation, as illustrated in Figure 2, and visualising code connections. However, software cannot replace the researcher’s role in interpreting data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Codes were categorised as theory-driven (deductive, latent) or data-driven (inductive, semantic). Semantic codes, like “moving to country 1” or “difficulty settling in”, were identified quickly, while latent codes, such as “feeling othered” or “dual identity”, required deeper interpretation. I opted for “complete coding”, addressing all data relevant to becoming a transnational language educator, resulting in 221 codes to ensure no detail was overlooked (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

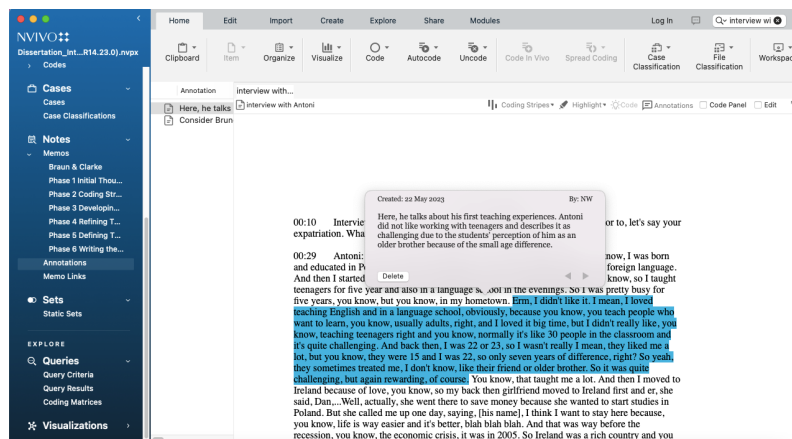


Figure 2 Example of annotation

Phase 3: Generating initial themes

The next phase was to generate potential themes. Themes, according to Braun and Clarke (2022a), are “patterns of meaning anchored by a shared idea or concept” (p. 7). The process of generating initial themes necessitated multiple rounds of re-coding the data and/or re-naming the codes. I continued reviewing all the codes until I finally decided that they could be clustered around a shared idea. For example, the data extracts are related to the same theme, feeling ‘foreign’ in the host country, were first assembled into the initial theme, ‘A foreign thing’. Later, I realised that it could be further divided into two sub-themes: ‘Othering oneself’ when the participants consciously distanced themselves from the local culture, and ‘Being othered’ each time they perceived themselves as alienated by the local people.

Phase 4: Developing and reviewing themes

This phase extended theme generation, involving fine-tuning at two levels. Level one ensured theme coherence and appropriateness, using a checklist based on Braun and Clarke’s (2022b) guidelines to evaluate relevance, richness, and meaningfulness (Table 3).

Table 3
Theme checklist

Evaluation criteria	Yes	No
Does theme accurately represent the data set?		
Is there variety and richness in theme interpretations?		
Are important understandings overlooked?		
Does theme capture a unique core point?		
Is theme relevant to the research question?		

Some themes failed this check, leading to collapsing candidate themes into higher-level themes or splitting them into sub-themes. For instance, “A foreign thing” was consolidated into “Cultural environment and adaptation”. Level two involved checking how themes fit within the entire dataset and addressing inconsistencies. Initial themes often required reworking, prompting a return to Phases 2 or 3 to re-code data, discard weak codes, and identify new patterns. This process, likened to decorating a room (Abbot, 2004, cited in Saldaña, 2021), involved reviewing and adjusting until an initial thematic map was devised (Figure 3).

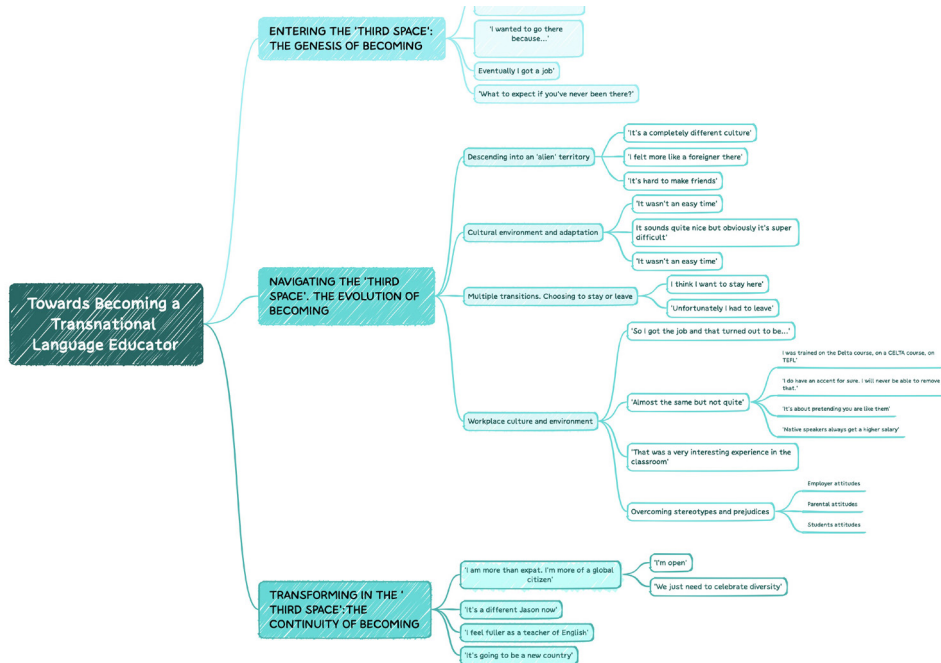


Figure 3 Initial thematic map

Phase 5: Refining, defining and naming themes

This phase refined themes to integrate into the broader narrative of the research question. The initial thematic map was overly dense with sub-themes, risking fragmented analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021c). For example, codes like “I think I want to stay here” and “Unfortunately, I had to leave” were combined into the sub-theme “Multiple transitions” to preserve meaning. Theme names were crafted to be informative, concise, and catchy, using -ing verb forms to reflect actions (Saldaña, 2021). Sub-themes used participant quotes,

such as “Almost the same but not quite”, to capture challenges faced by non-native language teachers. Definitions for themes and sub-themes were refined, and the final thematic map (Figure 4) featured three main themes with three to four sub-theme levels.

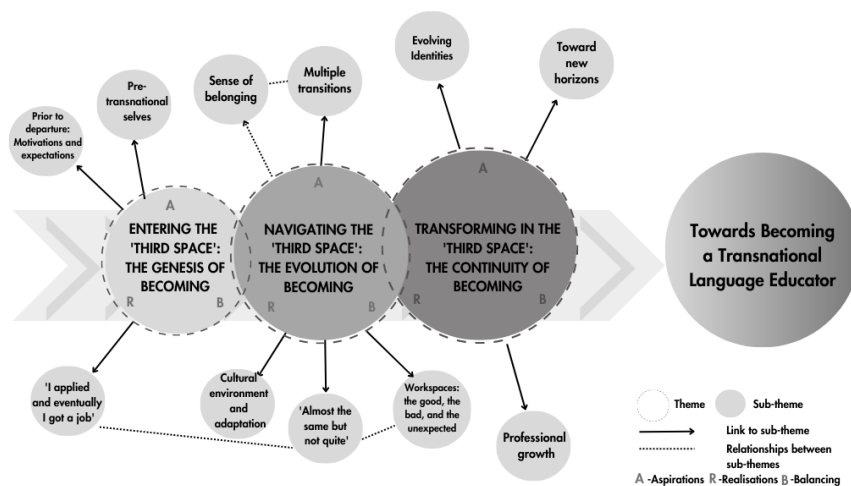


Figure 4 Final thematic map

Phase 6: Writing up

The final phase involved weaving the analysis into a coherent narrative. Data extracts were selected for their vividness and ability to support analytical claims (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). Extracts were used illustratively (conveying the theme’s story) or analytically (essential to the interpretive account). Since this article is mainly concerned with the ‘how-tos’ of the PCI rather than presenting the results, the final write-up has been intentionally omitted here. It can be found in the Findings section of the dissertation (Wright, 2024).

PCI: Summary of benefits

In this article, I have offered a detailed methodological adaptation of PCI to investigate the experiences of expatriate non-native English teachers transitioning into transnational professionals. The study has revealed numerous benefits of this qualitative method compared to other commonly employed approaches, such as semi-structured interviewing. Beyond those previously touched upon, additional factors position PCI as a viable tool for investigating complex ‘problems’ similar to teacher identity development.

First, agreeing with Scheibelhofer’s (2005) argument, I found PCI flexible in terms of allowing the interviewer to adjust the level of its structure, reminiscent of a “free-flowing conversation” (Pilch, 2018, as cited in Matkowski, 2021, p. 304). The dialogic nature of such interviewing makes the interviewer and interviewee knowledge co-constructors in a way that they both participate in generating valuable insights and new meanings. What I found particularly appealing is the combination of an open narrative approach with more structured thematic inquiries (Scheibelhofer, 2008) within the PCI, which allows for the development of incidental

issues and provides a more comprehensive overview (Matkowski, 2021). The method reconstructs individual perspectives through specific questioning techniques, capturing implicit dimensions of knowledge (Döringer, 2020) and stimulating participants to reflect upon processes and include personal relevancies in their accounts (Döringer, 2020). This approach facilitates a systematised comparison of the collected data (Döringer, 2020) and relieves interviewees from the burden of comprehensive monologic self-presentation (Reiter, 2018) and builds rapport and trust necessary for addressing sensitive issues (Reiter, 2018).

Another notable strength of PCI lies in its capacity for integration with complementary research methods/techniques. Existing studies successfully integrated PCIs and observations (Jaeger-Erben, 2013), graphic drawings (Scheibelhofer, 2011), case studies (Forstner & Nedbal, 2017), and questionnaires (Efimov et al., 2024). I adopted vignettes as an additional technique to elicit responses from participants that they would normally find difficult to verbalise due to the potentially sensitive and socially undesirable nature of the issues in question (non-nativeness).

Moreover, the selection of analysis methods offers flexibility. As Witzel and Reiter (2012) suggest, adherence to specific rules is unnecessary; rather, the chosen methods should be contingent upon the research design and interests. The analytical technique should be carefully chosen to ensure it corresponds with the research questions and overall design. Numerous studies support a variety of interpretation methods used by scholars, ranging from Grounded Theory (Döringer, 2021; Jaeger-Erben, 2013), content analysis (Breibach & Medina-Suárez, 2016; Shirazian, 2012), to thematic analysis (Vogler, 2024). A thematic approach was also used to analyse the data derived from PCI in my doctoral dissertation study.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite its advantages, PCI has some limitations that I acknowledge here. First, despite its initial appeal as “easy-to-use”, the method places considerable demands on researchers, which are frequently underestimated (Scheibelhofer, 2005). The first challenge concerns the interviewer’s expertise. Interviewers are expected to skillfully integrate three different interviewing styles—open narrative, thematic inquiry, and socio-statistical data collection—within a single session (Scheibelhofer, 2005). Effectively transitioning between these styles requires extensive training and experience (Matkowski, 2021). Lack of preparation may result in an imbalance in the interview, with either premature termination of the narrative or protracted adherence to it (Matkowski, 2021). In my case, conducting a trial study proved to be helpful in foreseeing potential challenges and improving my interviewing skills.

Another challenge, as Döringer (2020) notes, can arise when participants offer wide-ranging explications in the narrative phase but have limited time available for follow-up questions. The interviewer is then faced with a dilemma of prioritising either the narrative accounts or bringing the explications to a close and switching to the more structured part of the interview. During my study, I dealt with this situation by inviting participants to a follow-up interview in case they had more to add to their original narrations. The risk of interviewer

bias represents another potential limitation. Researchers must be aware of their own prior knowledge and potential biases (Matkowski, 2021). As mentioned before, I adopted the role of a 'well-informed traveller' (Witzel & Reiter, 2012), entering research with my 'baggage' of preconceived beliefs and attitudes toward the research problem. Sharing common characteristics with my participants made me a 'member' (Merton, 1972) of their group, or in other words, an insider, which is not always seen as advantageous (Collins & McNulty, 2020). I felt that, because of the shared expatriate status as Holmes (2020) suggests, I was in a position to better understand them. I also thought, quite naively, that because of our shared biographies, participants entrusted me with sensitive information about themselves. Later, I found out that this fact does not guarantee openness and, in fact, often has the reverse effect, as people tend to reveal more of themselves to an outsider whom they will never see again (Mercer, 2007). Upon reflection, my insiderness came with a few caveats. There were moments during interviews where I sensed that the participants assumed that I knew what they were talking about. It was especially evident through the repeated use of such phrases as *"you know"*, confirmation questions like *"right?"* and other *"deferring responses"* (Chavez, 2008, p. 485). In such cases, I employed elaboration tactics by offering additional prompts or questions, such as *"Could you tell me more about it?"*

Another realisation was that I could not easily detach myself from the preconceived assumptions about expatriation or marginalisation of non-native teachers. This prevented me from staying fully unbiased. Additionally, I wrongly assumed that all non-native teachers have experienced discrimination to some extent in their lives, so it was tempting to look for a *"common anchorage"* (Cousin, 2013, p. 16) and ask questions that would provide me with answers revealing instances of injustice. I overcame influencing the participants' answers by carefully wording the questions/prompts during the interview. For example, to find out people's perceptions of them as non-native teachers, I invited them to share a story in the following way: *"Tell me about the attitudes toward you as a non-native English teacher from the native-speaking colleagues, students, and university authorities"*. And when participants' answers differed from the ones I anticipated, I was conscious of Holmes's (2020) reminder not to expect participants' worldviews to replicate my own.

To minimise potential biases, I recommend that researchers practice reflexivity throughout the entire research process. According to Crapanzano (2010), researcher reflexivity means *"the need to be critically conscious of what one is doing as one does it"* (p. 56). For me, it meant being explicit about what I was researching, why, and how. For this purpose, I kept a reflexive journal as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) in which I recorded such information as personal assumptions, decisions about methods of data collection and analysis, and rationales behind them.

The final challenge was selecting a data analysis tool. I mentioned above the application of various analytical instruments for data analysis and interpretation of data generated by PCI. That does not mean, however, that these methods do not require a high degree of rigour, systematisation, and special expertise on the part of the researcher. For me, a significant challenge lay in the time-intensive nature of transcribing and coding interview data, often compounded by the need for multiple readings of transcripts to identify overarching themes.

To mitigate this burden, researchers are advised to allocate sufficient time and resources for transcription and data analysis while also exploring computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software to streamline the coding process and facilitate thematic analysis. On the other hand, no software or artificial intelligence tool can replace the researcher who must engage with the data with intellectual curiosity, sensitivity, and critical sensibility.

Overall, I consider the Problem-Centred Interview as an exceptionally useful method for addressing complex social phenomena. This brings me back to the ‘nothing new’ arguments expressed by Gubrium (2013). His observation regarding the perceived lack of innovation in Problem-Centred Interviewing is notable; however, his viewpoint overlooks the method’s distinct value as a synthesis of established techniques specifically tailored to address particular research objectives. Essentially, the novelty of PCI resides in its unique configuration of pre-existing methodologies, optimised to reconstruct interviewees’ knowledge of a relevant problem. As such, I believe that despite its limitations, PCI, when rigorously implemented and thoughtfully adapted, presents promising potential for consideration among qualitative methodologies, particularly for researchers new to this method.

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Appendix A

Sensitising Framework – the ARB-Model

Aspirations

- Exploring professional background;
- Questioning participants' beliefs and perceptions about themselves as English language teachers in their home countries;
- Understanding reasons to find employment abroad;
- Examining expectations prior to expatriation

Realisations

- Understanding how the participants felt when they got to a foreign country and comparing that to what they expected;
- Discovering the differences / similarities between life in a home country and 'host' country;
- Exploring their first encounters with institutional culture and their attitudes toward it.

Balancing

addresses 'consequences and results of action and how the individual evaluates them' (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 132)

- Examining the sociocultural and work adjustments;
- Exploring change in participants' beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes to themselves as individuals and language teachers as a result of living outside their home countries for a prolonged period of time;
- Discovering what participants have learned about themselves while living 'across the borders';
- Gaining insight into participants' future plans.

Appendix B

Interview guide

1. Opening Question

- Tell me about your professional background, how long have you been an English teacher?

2. Prior to Expatriation Situation

2.1 Occupational choices

- Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself? What did you do prior to moving abroad?

2.2 Search for a Job Abroad

- Tell me about your decision to move abroad.
- Why did you apply for a job in this particular country?
- What expectations did you have of the country, work, and people prior to leaving your home country?
- Was it easy to get a job?
- Did the company provide a work visa for you?

3. Moving Abroad

3.1 Initial perceptions

- Tell me about your first thoughts on arriving in a foreign country.
- What was the socio-cultural environment like?
- How did the local people perceive you?
- What were your perceptions of locals and their culture?

3.2 Workplace

- Was the job what you expected?
- How do you get along with your colleagues?
- What's the proportion of "native" and "non-native" teachers?
- Tell me about the attitudes toward you as a "non-native" English teacher from the native-speaking colleagues, students, and university authorities.
- Did you reveal your "non-native" identity to students?
- Describe in what way (if at all) teaching English in.....(country) is different from your home country.
- What variety of English were you supposed to teach?



3.3 Sociocultural and work adjustments

- Tell me how you adapted to a new environment.
- Can you tell me if and in what way expatriate life has changed you.
- How satisfied are you with your social life in.....?
- What do you miss while being away from home?
- Tell me what you have learned about yourself as an English teacher as a result of working abroad.
- Do you think it is important for you to maintain connections with your native community?
- What affected your decision to leave the university and move to another country?

4. Future Plans

- What are your plans for the future?
- Do you have plans to return home?
- If you do not return home, what will you do in terms of a job?

Appendix C

Examples of PCI communication strategies (based on Witzel & Reiter, 2012, pp. 75–76)

General exploration		
Strategies	Generating material (narratives)	Example
Beginning of conversation, narration-generating opening question	Open invitation to explicate the respondent's view, focusing on problem	<i>"Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself? What did you do prior to moving abroad?"</i>
Detailing questions	Specification of themes, problems, background; stimulation of memory	<i>"How did you become an English teacher or ESL/EAL teacher?"</i>
Examples from experience	Stimulation of memory, reconstruction of context and establishing links to structural environment	<i>"So you mentioned the job ethics that was an issue. Could you tell me more about it?"</i>
Ad-hoc questions	Completion of information, gaining comparability	<i>"The first years of teaching in Russia, let's say, or in your early career and compare it to now. How is it different?"</i>
Repeated thematic comparison	Conceptual clarification, thematic differentiation	<i>"So how is it different to what you're doing now in the classroom or in terms of your teaching approach? What do you do differently?"</i>
Specific exploration		
Strategies	Generating comprehension	Example
Mirroring	Cognitive structuring for interviewer and respondent, communicative validation	Summarising, rephrasing, provoking denials, asking for comments— <i>"You said you don't know what's next, what's going to happen, where are you going to go".</i>
Comprehension questions	Clarifying common-sense structures, lacking or unclear terms and facts	<i>"So you said you had a couple of students that had issues with your foreignness. What did you mean by that?"</i>
Confrontations	Clarifying or inviting further specification of contradictory statements	<i>"But eventually you did leave it for another country"</i>

Appendix D

Vignettes

Vignette 1. Ahmed

Spain has been my home for the past five years. At first, I was scared about moving abroad. I worried that I might have trouble communicating with my colleagues and students or that I would feel out of place in a new culture. Upon arriving in Spain, however, I quickly realised that my worries were unwarranted. My school welcomed me and supported me. My coworkers went out of their way to make me feel welcome, and I bonded instantly with them. They would often invite me to their homes for dinner, and I would reciprocate with traditional Egyptian meals. One colleague taught me Spanish. My pupils are great. I love teaching them English, and they are eager to learn. Beyond the school, I also had the opportunity to explore Spain and experience the other side of the Mediterranean culture. Spain is the right blend of Eastern and Western cultures, which I like. I enjoy learning about Spanish customs and traditions and celebrating festivals and holidays with the locals.

As a non-native English teacher, one of the most positive experiences I have had while working in Spain is the opportunity to work alongside native English-speaking colleagues. They are welcoming, supportive, and help me improve my own language skills. I feel no bias towards me as a non-native English speaker. But meeting other teachers with accents from different countries boosted my confidence. Living and working in Spain has been, without a doubt, one of the highlights of my life. Knowing my contract will eventually end is hard to accept. I enjoy the nation, culture, and people. I have made many friendships, both with colleagues and students, that I will treasure for the rest of my life. I have no plans to return home just yet. I no longer belong there. The experiences and connections I have made during my time in Spain have made me realise that I want to continue exploring and living in different cultures.

Vignette 2. Jelena

I couldn't believe my luck when I got the job offer to teach English in a school in Beijing. I had always dreamed of living and working in China and immersing myself in their culture. Once I got there, though, I saw that things weren't going to go as smoothly as I'd planned. One of the biggest challenges I faced was the language barrier. Many people did not speak English, and I didn't know Chinese. Plus, there are many cultural differences between Serbia and China, which made it challenging for me to adjust to my new surroundings.

The university where I work has a high turnover rate of foreign teachers, and the working conditions were not up to the standard that I was used to back in Serbia. The Chinese coworkers I had were not particularly friendly and were often difficult to approach. As a result, I often experienced alienation, loneliness, and a longing for home. I missed my family and friends in Serbia. As a non-native English teacher, I felt inferior to my native-speaking colleagues. They have always been held up as an example of proper pronunciation and fluency in language classes. I thought that was unfair because I am proficient in English and know grammar better



than them. I also discovered that non-native teachers are paid less than native speakers. It was a real shock to me! Despite these difficulties, my passion for teaching and learning about different cultures has not died. I am looking for new opportunities where my non-native status will be a benefit, not a disadvantage. Sometimes, the idea of going back to my home country crosses my mind, but I have become transnational, which means that I don't fully belong anywhere, and I am at home everywhere.