



Exploring the Experiences of Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers in TESOL: A Narrative Inquiry

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji pengalaman profesional, negosiasi identitas, serta tantangan pedagogis yang dialami oleh guru bahasa Inggris nonpenutur asli (non-native English-speaking teachers/NNESTs) dalam bidang TESOL. Penelitian ini membahas persoalan berkelanjutan terkait berkurangnya legitimasi dan keterbatasan otoritas profesional yang dihadapi NNESTs dibandingkan dengan guru penutur asli, meskipun kontribusi mereka terhadap pendidikan bahasa Inggris sangat signifikan. Menanggapi kesenjangan dalam penelitian sebelumnya, studi ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman hidup NNESTs dalam berbagai konteks sosiokultural serta menelaah bagaimana mereka membangun agensi dalam menghadapi bias penutur asli. Pendekatan narrative inquiry digunakan untuk mendokumentasikan kisah personal para guru. Penelitian ini dilaksanakan selama periode enam bulan, dengan pengumpulan data melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur yang didukung oleh analisis dokumen. Partisipan penelitian terdiri atas dua NNESTs yang mengajar di Indonesia dan Tiongkok. Untuk menjamin validitas data, dilakukan triangulasi metodologis dengan membandingkan data wawancara dan dokumen institusional, serta member checking melalui pengembalian transkrip wawancara kepada partisipan untuk verifikasi. Data dianalisis secara tematik guna mengidentifikasi pola-pola yang berkaitan dengan konstruksi identitas, legitimasi linguistik, strategi pengajaran, dan pengembangan profesional. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya tantangan yang berkelanjutan terkait persepsi sosial terhadap kemahiran bahasa Inggris, preferensi siswa terhadap guru penutur asli, serta keterbatasan dukungan institusional. Pada saat yang sama, para partisipan memanfaatkan latar belakang multibahasa dan pengalaman pribadi mereka dalam mempelajari bahasa untuk mengembangkan strategi pengajaran yang kreatif dan responsif secara kultural. Secara keseluruhan, penelitian ini menyoroti bagaimana NNESTs mentransformasikan tantangan struktural menjadi peluang untuk pertumbuhan profesional serta menegaskan perlunya kebijakan institusional yang lebih inklusif dan pengembangan profesional yang lebih mudah diakses dalam bidang TESOL.

Kata Kunci: Pengajaran Bahasa Inggris, NNEST, TESOL.

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the professional experiences, identity negotiations, and pedagogical challenges encountered by non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) in the field of TESOL. It addressed the persistent issue of reduced legitimacy and limited professional authority faced by NNESTs compared to native English-speaking teachers, despite their significant contributions to English language education. Responding to gaps in previous research, the study explored NNESTs' lived experiences across different sociocultural contexts and examined how they constructed agency in navigating native-speaker bias. A narrative inquiry approach was employed to document teachers' personal accounts. The study was conducted over a six-month period, with data collected through semi-structured interviews supported by document analysis. The participants consisted of two NNESTs teaching in Indonesia and China. To ensure data validity, methodological triangulation was applied by comparing interview data with institutional documents, and member checking was conducted by returning interview transcripts to participants for verification. The data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to identity construction, linguistic legitimacy, teaching strategies, and professional development.



The findings revealed persistent challenges related to societal perceptions of English proficiency, student preferences for native speakers, and limited institutional support. At the same time, the participants leveraged their multilingual backgrounds and personal language-learning experiences to develop creative and culturally responsive teaching strategies. Overall, the study highlights how NNESTs transform structural challenges into opportunities for professional growth and underscores the need for more inclusive institutional policies and accessible professional development within the TESOL field.

Keywords: English Teaching , NNEST, TESOL

INTRODUCTION

The field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) has long been influenced by native-speakerism, an ideology that positions native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) as inherently superior language models. Early critiques of this ideology highlighted the structural inequalities faced by non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), including limited professional recognition and discriminatory hiring practices. Contemporary scholarship continues to interrogate these hierarchies, demonstrating that the native/non-native dichotomy remains deeply embedded in global TESOL structures (Selvi et al., 2023; Vong, 2025). Despite constituting the majority of English teachers worldwide, NNESTs frequently negotiate issues of legitimacy, authority, and identity in institutional contexts shaped by lingering native-speaker norms.

Recent empirical studies confirm that perceptions of teacher quality are still influenced by linguistic background, even when pedagogical competence is comparable (Deng et al., 2023). However, research increasingly emphasizes that NNESTs possess distinctive pedagogical strengths, including heightened metalinguistic awareness, empathy derived from personal language-learning experiences, and the ability to mediate between languages and cultures (Tseptsura & Ruecker, 2024; Selvi et al., 2023). Rather than viewing NNESTs through a deficit lens, current scholarship reframes linguistic diversity as pedagogical capital.

To examine these issues, this study draws on three complementary theoretical frameworks: sociocultural theory, identity theory, and critical pedagogy. From a sociocultural perspective, teaching and professional identity are socially mediated processes shaped by institutional norms, cultural histories, and interactional contexts. Contemporary developments in cultural-historical activity theory further emphasize that professional practice is embedded in broader social systems (Stetsenko & Engeström, 2024). Within this lens, NNESTs' classroom practices are understood as relational and contextually situated.



Identity theory further illuminates how teachers construct and negotiate professional identities through interaction with power structures (Varghese et al., 2005a). Building on this foundation, Norton's investment framework conceptualizes identity as dynamic and shaped by access to symbolic and material resources (Darvin & Norton, 2023). NNESTs' legitimacy is therefore not fixed but continuously negotiated in response to institutional discourses and classroom interactions.

Critical pedagogy extends this analysis by situating identity negotiations within broader structures of inequality and decolonial struggle. Contemporary decolonial perspectives in language teacher education challenge the persistence of Western-centric norms and advocate for epistemic pluralism in TESOL (P. Ehlers-Zavala et al., 2025a). From this standpoint, NNESTs are not passive recipients of marginalization but active agents capable of resisting native-speakerism through pedagogical practice and professional positioning.

Although a growing body of research addresses NNEST identity, gaps remain in understanding how agency is enacted across different sociocultural contexts. Studies in Indonesia have shown ongoing tensions between policy reforms and persistent societal preferences for native speakers (Putra et al., 2021). Meanwhile, broader international reviews highlight the continued need to examine NNEST experiences within specific institutional ecologies (Selvi et al., 2023). By focusing on NNESTs teaching in Indonesia and China, this study contributes a comparative narrative perspective grounded in lived experience.

Using narrative inquiry (Barkhuizen, 2016), this study foregrounds teachers' lived stories to explore how NNESTs construct professional identity and exercise agency within structurally unequal TESOL environments. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

1. How do NNESTs in Indonesia and China construct and make sense of their professional identities?
2. How do they negotiate agency in the midst of native-speaker bias?

In China, English education has been strongly influenced by national policies aimed at internationalization and global engagement. While recent policy trends increasingly emphasize localized curricula, bilingual education, and reduced reliance on foreign teachers, native-speaker norms remain influential in private language institutions and parental



expectations. NNESTs in China thus operate within a complex environment where state-led efforts to professionalize local teachers coexist with market-driven preferences for native speakers. Examining these two contexts comparatively allows for a nuanced understanding of how NNESTs negotiate identity and agency under different but intersecting policy, institutional, and cultural conditions.

The novelty of the present study lies in its integrative and narrative-based examination of NNESTs' professional agency across these two sociocultural contexts. By foregrounding the lived experiences of NNESTs teaching in Indonesia and China, the study moves beyond abstract theorization to demonstrate how resistance to native-speakerism is enacted through everyday pedagogical practices, identity negotiations, and classroom decision-making.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a narrative inquiry design, which was appropriate for exploring how non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) made sense of their professional experiences. Narrative inquiry enabled the researcher to gather detailed personal stories, allowing the participants to describe how they navigated issues of identity, linguistic legitimacy, and professional recognition.

The design followed the framework of Clandinin (2022), who emphasized that narrative inquiry helps researchers understand lived experience through the interpretation of personal stories. This approach has been widely used in NNEST research (Barkhuizen, 2016; Golombek & Johnson, 2017), because it provides rich insights into teachers' evolving identities within TESOL contexts.

Data were collected through semi-structured narrative interviews, which allowed the participants to express their experiences freely while still addressing the research questions. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide flexibility and depth without imposing rigid guidelines (Muylaert et al., 2014). Two interview sessions were conducted with each participant via Zoom. Participants also provided written responses to clarify and extend their answers when needed. The interviews focused on professional identity as NNESTs, experiences and challenges in TESOL, teaching strategies, perceptions of linguistic legitimacy, and professional development experiences.



Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, all participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the interview procedures, and their rights as participants. Informed consent was obtained, and participation was entirely voluntary, with participants given the option to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used, and any identifying information related to participants or their institutions was removed from the transcripts. All interview recordings, transcripts, and documents were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher.

In addition to interviews, document analysis was conducted using promotional brochures obtained from each participant's institution to support and triangulate the interview findings. The research instrument consisted of a set of semi-structured interview questions organized into six thematic categories: background and professional identity; experiences and challenges; teaching strategies and multilingual practices; professional development and institutional support; linguistic and cultural identity; and future aspirations and reflections. The questions were designed to elicit detailed narratives regarding participants' teaching experiences, identity construction, and perceptions of their roles as NNESTs.

The primary data source was the interview transcripts generated from the semi-structured interviews, while secondary data were drawn from official institutional documents (two promotional brochures) to support and validate the interview findings through triangulation. The interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes across participants' narratives. Coding focused on issues related to identity negotiation, linguistic legitimacy, and professional development. Narrative analysis was then applied to interpret how participants constructed meaning from their lived experiences as NNESTs. Triangulation was achieved by comparing interview narratives with institutional documents to enhance data credibility and strengthen the interpretation of the findings.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Result

The result and discussion of this study is divided into four sections, the first is the background and professional identity, the second, the participants tell about their experiences

and challenges in TESOL, the third is the teaching strategies and practices which are implemented by the participants as the TESOL teachers. And lastly, the participants share about their professional development and future directions.

Table 1

Summary of Participants' Experiences, Challenges, and Professional Practices in TESOL

| Aspect | Participant 1 | Participant 2 |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| Background and Entry into TESOL | Began teaching English in 2012 at a private institution without a formal English-related educational background. Completed a 120-hour TESOL certification to meet institutional requirements. Motivated by the opportunity to teach while learning and to make English more accessible for learners. Views her role as a bridge between learners and the English language, drawing from personal learning experiences. | Transitioned into TESOL after an eight-year career in telecommunications, feeling that her English skills were underutilized. Pursued a master's degree in TESOL at AIIAS. Motivated by a desire to engage more deeply with English as both a skill and a profession. |
| Experiences and Challenges | Experienced formative moments teaching large groups of pre-A1 learners and developing teaching materials independently. Faced challenges in accessing quality materials due to limited institutional support, which she addressed by investing in paid resources. Encountered student preference for native speakers but countered this bias through engaging lesson design and continuous self-improvement. | Faced challenges related to perceptions of language proficiency as a non-native speaker, striving to minimize errors and valuing feedback. Encountered difficulties in promoting communicative English in a context dominated by grammar-focused instruction. Also faced challenges in providing students with sufficient practice opportunities outside the classroom. |
| Teaching Strategies and Practices | Develops customized materials for struggling learners and integrates personal language-learning stories to motivate students. | Employs teamwork, pair work, and integrated reading and writing activities to create a practical language-learning environment. |



| | | |
|--|---|---|
| | Leverages her multilingual background to explain linguistic nuances and strategically balances the use of the native language and English. Emphasizes creativity, clarity, and learner-specific lesson design. | Reduces reliance on the native language while building students' confidence. Utilizes digital resources such as YouTube and Google and adapts lessons using her multilingual background, particularly for young learners. |
| Professional Development and Future Directions | Benefited from TESOL and phonics training but lacks access to mentorship within her teaching community. Views her non-native status as an asset, noting that some institutions prefer non-native teachers. Advocates for institutional recognition of NNESTs and greater inclusivity. Envisions future teaching shaped by AI advancements and increased global collaboration. | Experiences limited access to professional development due to high costs and impractical workshops. Seeks improvement through online resources and aspires to create low-cost teacher workshops locally. Encourages NNESTs to adopt interactive, task-based teaching and to speak English confidently. Hopes for a more inclusive TESOL field with accessible professional development opportunities. |

Discussion

The findings reveal that NNESTs' professional identities are constructed through continuous negotiation between institutional expectations and personal agency. Consistent with sociocultural theory, participants' practices were shaped by the cultural and institutional environments in which they worked (Stetsenko, 2023). Their experiences demonstrate that teacher identity is not an internal attribute but a socially mediated process enacted through classroom interaction and professional engagement.

The participants' accounts align with identity theory perspectives that conceptualize professional identity as dynamic and relational (Varghese et al., 2005). Their efforts to counter student preferences for native speakers illustrate identity negotiation in action. Drawing on (Darvin & Norton, 2023) framework of investment, the teachers invested in professional development, pedagogical innovation, and multilingual resources to enhance their legitimacy and symbolic capital. Their agency was therefore enacted not only discursively but also pedagogically.



The findings also resonate with recent literature challenging deficit narratives about NNESTs. Selvi et al. (2024) emphasize that contemporary research increasingly positions NNESTs as multilingual professionals with unique pedagogical assets. Similarly, Tseptsura & Ruecker (2024) argue that language difference can function as an asset rather than a limitation. The participants in this study exemplified this perspective by strategically drawing on their multilingual backgrounds to scaffold instruction and enhance learner comprehension.

At the structural level, the persistence of student preference for native speakers reflects ongoing native-speakerism, as documented in global research (Vong, 2025; Deng et al., 2023). However, rather than internalizing these hierarchies, the participants actively resisted them through reflective practice and instructional creativity. Their actions embody critical pedagogy in practice—challenging dominant ideologies not through overt confrontation but through everyday classroom excellence and professional competence (P. Ehlers-Zavala et al., 2025)

Professional development emerged as a significant site of both empowerment and limitation. While access to certification and online resources supported growth, institutional barriers restricted mentorship opportunities. This finding echoes broader concerns about unequal access to professional capital within TESOL (Selvi et al., 2024). The participants' aspiration to create affordable local workshops demonstrates grassroots agency that aligns with decolonial calls for localized teacher development (P. Ehlers-Zavala et al., 2025). Overall, the findings illustrate that NNESTs transform structural constraints into pedagogical and professional opportunities. Their agency is enacted through reflective teaching, multilingual mediation, digital innovation, and ongoing identity negotiation.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the diverse experiences, strategies, and aspirations of non-native TESOL teachers, shedding light on their unique challenges and contributions to the field. Both participants demonstrated resilience and adaptability in navigating the complex landscape of TESOL, including institutional constraints, student preferences for native speakers, and limited access to teaching resources. Their ability to respond to these challenges through engaging, learner-centered pedagogical practices underscores the professional value of NNESTs and challenges deficit-oriented perceptions commonly associated with non-native



teachers. From a theoretical perspective, the findings reinforce and extend Norton's Identity Negotiation theory by illustrating how NNESTs' professional identities are not fixed but are continuously constructed and reconstructed through classroom practices, institutional interactions, and reflective teaching. The participants actively negotiated their identities as legitimate English teachers by drawing on their multilingual repertoires, personal language-learning histories, and pedagogical expertise. This study extends Norton's framework by demonstrating how identity negotiation occurs not only at the individual level but also through pedagogical choices that position NNESTs as credible and effective professionals within specific sociocultural contexts.

In addition, the findings extend Canagarajah's Critical Pedagogy framework by providing empirical evidence of how NNESTs exercise agency in resisting native-speakerism in everyday teaching practices. Rather than passively accepting dominant linguistic ideologies, the participants transformed structural constraints—such as limited institutional support and prevailing biases—into opportunities for professional growth through reflective practice, self-directed professional development, and strategic use of multilingualism as pedagogical capital. These practices exemplify critical pedagogy in action, operating at both the classroom and identity levels. Professional development emerged as a crucial area for both growth and advocacy. While the participants benefited from TESOL certification and self-initiated learning, their experiences highlight the need for more accessible mentorship and institutional support. Collectively, these findings emphasize the importance of creating inclusive TESOL environments that recognize NNESTs as reflective practitioners who play a pivotal role in bridging linguistic and cultural differences. Ultimately, this study contributes to ongoing theoretical and practical discussions in TESOL by affirming the indispensable role of NNESTs and calling for policies and professional development models that value diversity, equity, and agency in global English language education.

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