



## Still I Teach: A Critical Autoethnography of Intersectional Identity in English Language Education

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### Abstract:

This critical autoethnography examines how intersecting identities—race, gender expression, linguistic background, and migration—shape professional legitimacy in English language education. Drawing on counter-storytelling within a Critical Race Theory and intersectionality framework, the study centers the lived experience of a Filipino-Canadian non-native English-speaking teacher (NNEST) and language assessor. Narratives trace early gendered exclusion, the internalization and critique of native-speakerism, and a shift toward intelligibility-focused assessment and translanguaging-informed pedagogy. The analysis demonstrates how legitimacy is negotiated across individual encounters and institutional structures, and how reflective practice transforms deficit framings into asset-based, identity-affirming instruction. Findings highlight three implications: (1) redefining legitimacy beyond “nativeness” to emphasize pedagogical competence and lived expertise; (2) positioning identity negotiation and resilience as central to educator development; and (3) using counter-storytelling to challenge dominant ideologies and inform inclusive assessment. Recommendations address teacher education, mentorship, anti-bias admissions and hiring, and policies that value multilingualism and protect gender identity and expression.

Keywords: Critical Autoethnography, Critical Race Theory, Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs), Intersectionality, Native Speakerism

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## Introduction

*“Oh, you’re a boy—I thought you were a girl. You should either be a woman or a man to enter the teaching profession. Otherwise, your students will be confused about whether to call you ‘sir’ or ‘ma’am.’ You’ll become a laughingstock, and they won’t respect you.”*

This admission interview remark encapsulates the gendered and linguistic biases that have shaped my journey as an English language educator. It reflects not only a personal moment of exclusion but also a broader systemic issue: the marginalization of educators whose identities fall outside dominant norms of gender, race, and language. More importantly, it underscores the challenges faced by those of us who embody gradient or layered identities—identities that do not conform to either/or or uniform categories but instead exist at the intersections of multiple, shifting social dimensions.

Within English as a Second Language (ESL) education, questions of legitimacy, identity, and power continue to shape the experiences of both learners and educators. Yet, the lived realities of teachers whose first language is not English—especially within ESL instructional contexts—remain underrepresented. To maintain continuity with longstanding scholarship, this article retains the term non-native English-speaking teacher (NNEST) (e.g., Medgyes, 1992; Mahboob, 2010), while also acknowledging emerging frameworks such as trans-speakerism that move beyond native/non-native binaries and expand understandings of multilingual teacher identity (Hiratsuka et al., 2023). Despite advances in research on linguistic competence and teacher identity, context-specific accounts remain comparatively limited, even as scholarship shows how native-speakerism and intersectional identities shape legitimacy and opportunity (Kubota & Lin, 2009; Guo & Shan, 2013; Selvi et al., 2024; Safatian, 2024). This study responds by centering the narrative of a Filipino-Canadian NNEST within broader discussions of identity, legitimacy, and power in ESL education.

To situate this narrative, a brief note on assessment is useful. In Canada’s settlement system, the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) provide the national standard for assessing adult English proficiency and placing newcomers—immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers—into appropriate language training and supports. The CLB describes communicative ability across listening, speaking, reading, and writing on a 12-level continuum and is used extensively in federally funded programs, such as LINC, to align instruction with settlement and employment goals (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012). Certified CLB assessors administer standardized assessments, determine placement based on benchmark performance, and refer newcomers to appropriate instructional levels and services. Importantly, nativeness is not a requirement for CLB assessors; training, qualifications, and judgments of intelligibility and comprehensibility are paramount (Derwing & Munro, 2005). This assessment ecology helps explain how NNEST professionals legitimately contribute as both instructors and assessors, setting the stage for an analysis of legitimacy, identity, and equity within a standardized, policy-linked system.

Building on this policy and assessment context, a demographic and sociopolitical frame further underscores the study’s urgency. In Canada, the Philippines remains a long-standing and sizable immigrant source community, ranking third in the 2021 Census and contributing nearly one million Canadians of Filipino origin (Statistics Canada, 2023; Laquian, 2024). Despite this presence, Filipino educators are insufficiently examined in research on teacher identity, legitimacy, and professional recognition in ESL—even as accent bias, credential recognition, and

native-speaker norms continue to shape professional experiences. At the same time, the renewed politicization of debates on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has intensified scrutiny of legitimacy and belonging for racialized, immigrant, and gender-diverse educators. Although gender expression is protected under federal and provincial human-rights legislation—including the 2017 amendment to the Canadian Human Rights Act, which added “gender identity and gender expression” as protected grounds—public perceptions of gender presentation still vary across cultural communities. For immigrant and multilingual educators, these perceptions may intersect with race, language background, and migration histories in ways that shape how professional identities are constructed and understood. In response to these dynamics, this study foregrounds the narrative of a Filipino-Canadian NNEST to examine how race, gender expression, and linguistic background influence access, recognition, and professional affirmation in ESL education.

Methodologically, the study employs critical autoethnography and counter-storytelling to center marginalized voices and disrupt deficit-based narratives that often exclude NNESTs and educators whose gender expression does not align with traditional norms (Ellis et al., 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Analytically, it draws on Critical Race Theory to examine how racism operates within educational structures (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and on intersectionality to trace how racism, sexism, and linguistic discrimination interact (Crenshaw, 1997; Collins, 2022). This expanded intersectional lens is particularly relevant to my experience as a racialized, gender-nonconforming NNEST and language assessor. It enables a layered understanding of how power operates not only through individual acts of discrimination but also through broader structural and ideological forces that shape educational legitimacy and professional identity. In addition, gender schema theory illuminates how internalized gender norms influence perceptions of legitimacy (Bem, 1981), while native speakerism—the ideology that privileges perceived “native speakers” of English and marginalizes those labeled “non-native” (Holliday, 2006)—helps analyze how speakerhood assumptions affect credibility and professional competence. These perspectives are further complemented by narrative and sociocultural approaches to teacher identity, intercultural teacher development and leadership, and scholarship on autonomy, agency, and identity in language education (Barkhuizen, 2016; Teng, 2019; von Elbwart & Keatinge, 2023).

This policy and theoretical framing supports my study’s central contribution: articulating how identity, power, and pedagogy intersect in Canadian ESL contexts. By situating my experience within this landscape, I affirm experiential knowledge as a source of insight and advocacy, and I advance conversations about inclusive pedagogy, professional legitimacy, and identity negotiation—especially for Filipino-Canadian and other racialized multilingual educators working within standardized assessment and instructional systems.

Drawing on an intersectional lens, I examine my experiences as a racialized, gender-nonconforming NNEST and language assessor to show how power operates not only in individual acts of discrimination but also through structural and ideological forces that shape professional identity and legitimacy. Through reflective storytelling and critical analysis, I trace how intersecting forms of marginalization have shaped my educational and professional trajectory and how these experiences inform my values-based commitment to inclusive pedagogy. Ultimately, this study contributes to broader conversations about equity, representation, and the redefinition of legitimacy in language education. I hope it offers meaningful insights to TESOL educators, teacher educators, applied linguistics researchers, and scholars of language and equity by centering the narrative of a Filipino-Canadian NNEST and

underscoring the need for more inclusive pedagogical practices and expanded understandings of professional legitimacy in ESL contexts.

To guide this inquiry, this study poses the following questions:

1. How do intersecting identities—such as race, gender expression, linguistic background, and migration status—shape the professional experiences and legitimacy of a Filipino-Canadian educator working as a non-native English-speaking teacher and language assessor in ESL contexts?
2. In what ways can critical autoethnography and counter-storytelling challenge dominant narratives about who is considered legitimate in English language teaching?
3. How can personal narratives from NNESTs contribute to more inclusive understandings of identity, pedagogy, and equity in TESOL and teacher education?

### Literature Review

Research on non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) has increasingly challenged native-speaker norms in English language teaching. Foundational scholarship (Canagarajah, 1999; Mahboob, 2010; and Medgyes, 1992) established that NNESTs bring unique pedagogical strengths, including multilingual awareness, empathy, and shared learning experiences with students. More recent reviews reaffirm these insights, documenting how native speakerism intersects with race, gender, professional background, and immigration status to shape inequities in legitimacy, hiring, and career advancement (Selvi et al., 2024). Current studies also call for reframing teacher identity beyond native-speaker categories, proposing new stances such as trans-speakerism, which recognizes the linguistic repertoires and professional competence of all English teachers—regardless of their first language (Hiratsuka et al., 2023). Related studies likewise foreground identity negotiation, positioning, and agency as mechanisms through which teachers resist speakerist and other structural constraints, showing how targeted teacher-education interventions and reflective methodologies can support movement away from deficit framings (Yang & Forbes, 2025; Weng et al., 2024).

Adopting an intersectional lens, scholars argue that language-teacher identity is co-constructed across categories such as race, gender expression, migration history, and professional background—dimensions salient for immigrant educators navigating credentialing systems and institutional norms (Selvi et al., 2024; Weng et al., 2024). Extending this perspective, research shows that migration status compounds these identities, particularly for immigrant educators who must negotiate racialized, gendered, and linguistic expectations (Kubota & Lin, 2009; Barkhuizen, 2016). Recent scholarship applying intersectionality to TESOL highlights how race, gender identity, and professional background intersect to shape teachers' experiences, perceptions of legitimacy, and access to opportunities (Safatian, 2024). At the same time, studies on immigrant educators in Canada indicate that credentialing systems can marginalize internationally trained teachers (Guo & Shan, 2013), while emphasizing the need to capture heterogeneous experiences. This aligns with calls for counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) to illuminate varied trajectories and challenge deficit-oriented narratives.

To examine how racism operates within educational structures, Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been widely applied in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), yet its use in TESOL remains limited. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) introduce counter-storytelling as a CRT strategy that foregrounds marginalized voices. While counter-storytelling has gained traction in

broader educational research, it remains underutilized in NNEST studies, especially in autoethnographic work.

The enduring ideology of native-speakerism also shapes perceptions of legitimacy in ESL education, privileging perceived “native” English speakers while marginalizing NNESTs—often irrespective of pedagogical competence, cultural responsiveness, or lived experience (Holliday, 2006; Mahboob, 2010; Medgyes, 1992; Silva, Hauber-Özer, & Chan, 2025; Selvi, Yazan, & Mahboob, 2023; Hiratsuka, Selvi, & Yazan, 2023; Maganaka, 2023). Such biases permeate hiring practices, classroom authority, and institutional policies, reinforcing linguistic hierarchies that exclude qualified educators from racialized and multilingual backgrounds. Responding to these concerns, recent scholarship advocates a shift toward trans-speakerism and equity-based frameworks that recognize diverse Englishes and the unique strengths NNESTs bring to language education (Hiratsuka et al., 2023; Silva et al., 2025).

Theoretical frameworks such as Norton’s (1995, 2013) identity and investment theory offer insight into how educators negotiate professional identities in response to social validation or exclusion. Originally developed for language learners, this framework has been extended to teacher identity, highlighting how investment is shaped by recognition, belonging, and power dynamics. Teng (2019) examines autonomy and agency in language education, while von Elbwart & Keatinge (2023) explore intercultural teacher development and leadership, offering perspectives on how educators navigate complex identity landscapes.

Complementing these perspectives, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) research highlights the persistence of systemic bias in education. The 2022 analysis on gender stereotypes (Brussino & McBrien, 2022) underscores the need for inclusive pedagogical frameworks. Kutuk (2023) builds on this by applying social-cognitive theory to examine how gender-based divisions are perpetuated in language-learning environments, reinforcing the need for structural change.

In Canadian educational discourse, the metaphor of the “mosaic” is often used to describe multiculturalism, in contrast to the American “melting pot.” While the mosaic suggests cultural preservation, scholars such as Clarke (2002) caution that it can obscure systemic racism and reinforce tokenism. Aylward (1999) similarly critiques the limits of multicultural policy in addressing structural inequities. These perspectives align with CRT’s emphasis on challenging dominant ideologies and affirm the need to foreground racialized and intersectional experiences within Canadian ESL contexts.

In sum, the literature converges on four strands: (a) NNEST strengths and critiques of native-speakerism, including calls toward trans-speakerism (Selvi, Yazan, & Mahboob, 2024; Hiratsuka, Nall, & Castellano, 2023); (b) intersectional, identity-focused research on how race, gender expression, and migration shape teacher legitimacy (Weng et al., 2024); (c) policy and credential-recognition analyses shaping opportunities for internationally educated teachers (Guo & Shan, 2013; Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2022); and (d) CRT with counter-storytelling as an equity-driven analytic and methodological approach (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These strands frame subsequent analyses of legitimacy, identity, and pedagogy in ESL and support ongoing efforts to integrate foundational theories with contemporary research to advance equity.

### **Methodological Framework**

This study adopts a critical autoethnographic methodology to examine the lived experiences of a Filipino-Canadian non-native English-speaking educator and language assessor in Canada. Autoethnography, as a qualitative method, situates personal narrative within broader cultural and institutional contexts (Ellis et al., 2010). It is particularly suited for inquiries into how intersecting systems of power—such as race, gender, and migration—inform professional resilience and recognition, dimensions not easily captured through quantitative approaches (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Positioning the self as both researcher and participant reflects a commitment to reflexivity and standpoint epistemology. This aligns with the “reflexive turn” in applied linguistics, which recognizes the researcher’s personal experience as a valid and critical site of inquiry (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023; Zhang-Wu & Goodman, 2025). Grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT), the study employs counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) to challenge dominant narratives in ESL education and amplify voices marginalized by race, gender expression, and linguistic background. While CRT informs the analytical lens, autoethnography remains the central methodological approach, allowing for a nuanced exploration of identity and legitimacy.

This methodological orientation is further supported by the study’s philosophical grounding in constructivism and postmodernism. Constructivism views knowledge as socially constructed and context-dependent (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), while postmodernism embraces multiplicity, hybridity, and fluidity in identity formation (Holman Jones et al., 2021). These paradigms support the use of autoethnography as a tool for deconstructing essentialist notions of teacher identity and for illuminating the complex intersections of race, gender, language, and migration.

Critical autoethnography functions not only as a method of inquiry but also as a form of resistance. It enables the researcher to reclaim narrative authority, critique exclusionary practices, and advocate for more inclusive, equity-driven approaches in ESL education (Gonzalez Suero, 2024; Yazan, 2022). In this study, both autoethnography and counter-storytelling are deliberate acts of resistance that challenge native speaker norms, binary gender expectations, and Western-centric pedagogical models. These approaches affirm experiential insight as a legitimate source of knowledge and a powerful tool for social critique and pedagogical transformation.

To deepen the analysis, the study also incorporates the Psycho-Social Ethnography of the Commonplace (P-SEC) (Gouliquer & Poulin, 2005). As a feminist qualitative methodology, P-SEC complements autoethnography by emphasizing the personal, situated, and embodied dimensions of lived experience. It is particularly effective in examining how institutional structures shape everyday experiences of exclusion and resilience—core themes in this inquiry. By integrating P-SEC, the study gains additional depth in understanding how systemic forces operate in the mundane yet meaningful aspects of professional life.

### **Data Sources and Reflective Practices**

The data for this study consists of personal narratives constructed through several qualitative techniques that illuminate my lived experiences. The techniques include: reflective writing, memory work, professional documentation, close reading of personal texts and artifacts, and critical self-reflection. Reflective writing is used to revisit and articulate significant personal and professional experiences through structured and thematic reflection. Memory work involves

the intentional recall of emotionally charged or transformative moments, guided by sensory, spatial, and relational cues. Professional documentation such as teaching records, assessment experiences, certification milestones, and institutional correspondence, provides additional contextual detail. Close readings of personal texts and artifacts help identify recurring themes, tensions, and patterns. Finally, critical self-reflection is applied to both past and present experiences in the Philippines and Canada to interrogate assumptions, positionality, and responses to systemic structures.

Central to the corpus is the migration journey from the Philippines to Canada, which provides the contextual foundation for analysis. Rather than serving as a method of inquiry, this journey is treated as a significant life experience that informs the data. Through this transnational lens, my experiences of exclusion, affirmation, and transformation are explored. These experiences are critically analyzed using autoethnographic methods, linking personal stories to broader sociopolitical structures and theoretical frameworks such as Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, and native speakerism.

My recollections—supported by memory work and professional documentation—span personal, academic, and professional contexts across both countries. This journey, from early aspirations in the Philippines to professional practice in Canada, serves as both the subject of inquiry and the lens through which educational legitimacy and identity are examined.

Constructed through reflective storytelling, these accounts are critically analyzed in relation to literature on non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). While the term NNEST has been critiqued for reinforcing deficit connotations, I retain it here in alignment with longstanding scholarship and with awareness of Taylor et al.'s (2025) argument that some educators may choose this identifier strategically to foreground their lived experiences within specific historical and professional contexts. In this sense, the term can illuminate how native-speakerism operates, rather than obscure it. This analysis also draws on research related to gender identity in education, Critical Race Theory, and language ideologies. Given the deeply personal nature of autoethnographic research, ethical considerations were addressed through self-reflexivity, transparency, and care in representing sensitive experiences. I acknowledge the limitations of memory-based data and present recollections as interpretive rather than objective truths.

### **Analytical Process**

Although this study is rooted in personal narrative, its findings emerged through a systematic and iterative process of qualitative analysis. I developed autoethnographic vignettes through recursive cycles of writing, revisiting, and thematizing key moments of exclusion, affirmation, and transformation. These vignettes formed the foundation for multiple rounds of close reading and manual coding, allowing me to identify recurring patterns, tensions, and significant turning points. Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, I coded inductively from personal narratives and professional artifacts. I then narrated artifacts (e.g., timelines, documents) as anchors for memory work and thematic development, which helped situate lived experience within institutional and sociopolitical contexts.

I refined initial codes through repeated cycles of writing and reflection and organized them into themes such as gendered exclusion, professional legitimacy, identity negotiation, and inclusive pedagogy. Consistent with critical autoethnography, I adopted a manual, interpretive approach to map connections between experiences and theory. Finally, I interpreted each theme

through the lenses established in the methodological framework (CRT, intersectionality, gender schema theory, and native-speakerism), applying those lenses to explain how identity and systemic structures shape professional development and legitimacy in ESL education.

## Findings

### The Autoethnographic Vignettes: Lived Experience and Thematic Reflections

This section orients the reader to the identities and experiences that frame the analysis. I approach this work as a Filipino-Canadian educator, immigrant, language learner, and language assessor whose cultural background, migration history, spiritual commitments, and professional trajectory shape how I interpret my experiences. As a Born-Again Christian, I believe I was created by God as male (Genesis 1:27). While my gender identity is male, my gender expression has at times been perceived as nonconforming in contexts governed by rigid norms of masculinity, and these perceptions have influenced my sense of belonging and contributed to moments of exclusion and bias within educational and professional spaces in both the Philippines and Canada.

Across roles—as a former language instructor (communication, ESL, and LINC), a Canadian Language Benchmarks assessor, and a doctoral researcher—I have navigated questions of equity, representation, and legitimacy. Experiences with native-speakerism in both outer- and inner-circle contexts have further sharpened my awareness of linguistic hierarchies and speakerhood assumptions that shape the recognition of educators, particularly Filipino professionals in Canadian ESL settings. What follows draws from these lived realities to examine how identity, legitimacy, and agency are negotiated across moments of exclusion, affirmation, resilience, and transformation. Specifically, the Findings develop five interrelated themes: (1) Gendered exclusion and early challenges; (2) Professional legitimacy and career development; (3) Entering and reframing ESL teaching; (4) Inclusive and multilingual pedagogical practices; and (5) Systemic gender bias and identity formation. In keeping with the interpretive nature of autoethnography, I present memory-based accounts as situated, reflective narratives rather than objective truths, acknowledging the selectivity of memory and the role of time and emotion in shaping recollection.

#### *Theme 1: Gendered Exclusion and Early Challenges*

From a young age, I recognized that I had a gift for teaching. I completed my elementary, secondary, and tertiary education in the Philippines, where my passion for education began to take root. In elementary grades, I would often pretend to be a teacher during playtime. My ever-supportive father provided me with a blackboard, chalk, and eraser, encouraging me to teach my younger siblings and neighborhood children. These early experiences nurtured my dream of becoming an educator. However, my journey was not without challenges. During my time at an all-boys secondary school, I experienced bullying directed at my gender expression—particularly an “effeminate” manner of speaking and acting. Such incidents reflected rigid expectations of masculinity and positioned me as deviating from normative gender roles. Viewed through gender schema theory (Bem, 1981), these reactions reveal how cultural assumptions about masculinity shape judgments of worth and capability. One male teacher even told me I would never make it to college, suggesting instead that I would end up in “PMA”—a derogatory reference to

pedicuring, manicuring, and haircutting. Although intended as a joke, the remark dampened my spirit; it was painful to hear such a degrading comment from someone in a position of authority.

Self-motivation and ambition played a central role in overcoming these experiences. Paradoxically, the teacher's remark became fuel for perseverance: it strengthened a personal promise to attain the highest level of education—now realized in doctoral candidacy—and to prove that such judgments were unfounded. These experiences now guide an intentional use of language in the classroom that affirms students' dignity and potential, especially those who may be navigating misrecognition or exclusion. As I later entered the teaching profession, I came to realize how powerful a teacher's words can be. A single comment can either uplift or diminish a student—something I understand deeply because of my own experience.

When I applied for admission to the College of Education to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Education, majoring in English language teaching, my application was rejected solely on the basis of the discretionary interview, which—together with academic records—formed the program's stated requirements. The dean did not review my transcripts or discuss the criteria; instead, her decision was based entirely on how she perceived my gender expression. During the interview, which was part of the admission requirement, the dean remarked, "Oh, you're a boy—I thought you were a girl. You should either be a woman or a man to enter the teaching profession. Otherwise, your students will be confused about whether to call you 'sir' or 'ma'am.' You'll become a laughingstock, and they won't respect you." Rather than assessing academic readiness or potential, she made an immediate judgment rooted in gendered assumptions, effectively gatekeeping the program through bias. No written feedback about academic criteria was provided. Although deeply inappropriate and hurtful, this moment became a pivotal part of the adversity that shaped resilience and strengthened a commitment to becoming an educator despite exclusionary barriers.

These early experiences of exclusion—specifically, my non-admission to the teacher-education program following an interview decision based solely on the dean's perception of my gender expression, with no academic rationale or written feedback provided—what Crenshaw (2017) conceptualizes through intersectionality: overlapping identities (gender expression, socioeconomic status, and linguistic background) converging to produce compounded barriers to opportunity. Despite such gatekeeping, my sustained commitment to becoming an educator reflects Norton's (1995) notion of investment, wherein individuals persist in language-related pursuits when their identities and aspirations are at stake. My resilience was therefore not merely personal; it functioned as resistance to dominant narratives that sought to delegitimize my presence in the teaching profession. As Norton (2013) further argues, learners may choose not to invest in classroom practices if the environment is racist, homophobic, or otherwise exclusionary. Ideologies embedded in educational spaces can position learners before they even speak, shaping their sense of belonging and agency. In this light, my persistence represents a refusal to disengage from a profession that, despite its gatekeeping, remains central to my identity and purpose.

### ***Theme 2: Professional Legitimacy and Career Development***

Following the rejection of my initial college application, I redirected my path and pursued a Bachelor of Science in Development Communication, with a double major in Educational Communication and Community Journalism. Determined to stay connected to my

passion for teaching, I also completed five supplementary education courses (15 units), which qualified me to take and pass the Philippine Licensure Board Examinations for Teachers.

Throughout my undergraduate years, I remained actively involved in extracurricular activities. I served as the associate editor of our student publication and participated in numerous workshops and conferences to further develop my skills and broaden my knowledge. Due to these substantial commitments—both academic and extracurricular—it took me five years to complete the four-year program. To support myself financially, I worked as a student entrepreneur, owning and operating a beauty salon—a profession often gendered in Philippine society and associated with “women’s work” or with men perceived as “effeminate.” These experiences exposed me to vocational stereotyping, rigid masculinity norms, and biased readings of gender expression, dynamics that often shaped how others perceived my credibility and future potential. At times, casual remarks and microaggressions—from peers, customers, and even educators—echoed these norms, signaling that certain kinds of work and expression were seen as less legitimate.

Earning my degree was more than an academic achievement—it was a personal triumph. It became my way of proving to myself and others that I was capable, worthy, and educated, despite the societal biases I faced. Even during this period of growth, I encountered moments of discouragement, discouraging moment arose: one faculty member told my classmates I would likely struggle to find employment because of my gender expression, dismissively labeling me as “effeminate.” That comment planted doubt and fear about my future, casting a shadow over my aspirations. Still, I pressed on—determined not to let prejudice define my path. In time, that resilience led me to become a vocational teacher, a high school educator, a college instructor, and eventually, a university professor.

### ***Theme 3: Entering and Reframing ESL Teaching***

When I immigrated to Canada in 2010, I entered the ESL profession unexpectedly. When my career counselor at a government-sponsored nonprofit organization suggested I teach English in Canada, I was initially incredulous. “Are you kidding me? I am from the Philippines. How can I teach English in an English-speaking country like Canada? Am I capable of teaching English even if I am not a native speaker?” These questions reflected my initial doubts and insecurities about my capabilities. Eventually, I followed my counselor’s advice and volunteered in a nonprofit organization as an ESL instructor. After 3 months, the school offered me a paid part-time job as an ESL instructor.

While pursuing my master’s degree at the University of British Columbia, I encountered the concept of native speakerism. It was a revelation to learn about frameworks such as World Englishes, English as a Global Language, Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers, and linguistic imperialism. These concepts opened my eyes to the legitimacy and richness of diverse Englishes around the world. I came to understand that I could be an excellent English teacher in an English-speaking country like Canada—even as a NNEST. Moreover, I feel incredibly blessed to have been certified by TESL Canada at Professional Standard Level 3—an achievement that further validates my qualifications and commitment to the profession.

My initial self-doubt as a non-native English speaker reflects the internalized impact of native speakerism—an ideology that privileges native English speakers as the ideal language models (Holliday, 2006). This internalized bias led me to question my legitimacy as an ESL teacher in an English-speaking country. However, my eventual confidence and professional

growth affirm Mahboob's (2010) assertion that NNESTs possess distinct pedagogical strengths, particularly in their ability to empathize with learners and draw from shared language learning experiences. This transformation also aligns with Norton's (2013) conceptualization of identity as fluid, socially constructed, and continually negotiated through interaction and context.

#### ***Theme 4: Inclusive and Multilingual Pedagogical Practices***

At the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) school—a federally funded program designed to support newcomers in settling and integrating into Canadian society, where I previously taught as a LINC instructor—approximately 90% of the instructors were native English-speaking teachers (NESTs). Despite this, I experienced a highly collaborative and respectful environment. NESTs and NNESTs worked together harmoniously, sharing expertise and learning from one another. I never encountered discrimination; instead, I felt valued for the unique insights and experiences I brought to the classroom. In my teaching, I prioritize asset-based, identity-affirming, and linguistically responsive practices that recognize learners' plural experiences without reducing them to static categories. For example, I invite students to bring idioms, expressions, and community practices that matter to them and to explain how and when these resources are used in their lives. Framed this way, classroom talk becomes both inclusive and evidence-based—it centers students' own meanings rather than making generalized claims about any group. This approach enriches discussion, strengthens belonging, and aligns with contemporary guidance on responsive pedagogy (e.g., Gay, 2018).

Another key approach I employed is the application of translanguaging principles, which encourage students to draw on their entire linguistic repertoire as a resource for learning (García & Wei, 2014). In my classroom, translanguaging occurred both organically and intentionally. Students were encouraged to use their first languages—such as Amharic, Tigrinya, Arabic, Mandarin, Spanish, French, among others—to explain concepts, clarify instructions, and engage in peer discussions. For example, during vocabulary-building activities, learners translated new English terms into their home languages and shared culturally relevant examples. These practices enhanced comprehension, promoted engagement, and affirmed learners' identities as multilingual individuals. I also incorporated multilingual glossaries in PowerPoint presentations and collaborative translation tasks using tools like Google Translate or support from higher-level students and colleagues at the immigration and settlement agency where I work as a language assessor. Translation served not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a form of translanguaging, allowing learners to mobilize their full linguistic repertoire to make meaning, negotiate identity, and participate more fully in classroom discourse (García, et al., 2017). This approach aligns with Cummins' (1979) theory of linguistic interdependence, which posits that knowledge and skills acquired in one language can support learning in another.

Learner responses were overwhelmingly positive; many expressed appreciation for being able to connect English learning with their lived experiences and linguistic backgrounds. I could often sense their agreement and satisfaction through their facial expressions and body language. These practices fostered a sense of belonging and empowerment, affirming that their languages were assets rather than barriers. As García and Wei (2014) assert, translanguaging is not merely a pedagogical strategy but a stance that recognizes the legitimacy of multilingual identities in educational spaces.

The positive reinforcement I received from both my supervisors and students—through oral feedback, written evaluations, and formal assessments—was instrumental in motivating me

to grow and refine my teaching practice. One memorable moment occurred when the academic coordinator observed my class and described my teaching as “effortless,” noting how naturally I engaged learners and fostered a welcoming environment. I was also consistently evaluated as “excellent” by students in written evaluations, which highlighted the inclusive and responsive nature of my teaching. These affirmations, while humbling, reinforced my commitment to identity-affirming pedagogy and strengthened my resolve to create equitable learning spaces that honor the diverse backgrounds of learners. I attribute this to several factors: my own experience of learning English as a second language, which enables me to empathize deeply with my students and understand the challenges they face; my long-standing teaching experience, which has helped me recognize and respond to the learning needs of students from diverse racial and linguistic backgrounds; and perhaps most importantly, the fact that teaching is my first love. It is a vocation that brings me joy, purpose, and a profound sense of connection, as I follow the example of Jesus Christ—my Lord and Savior—as a model teacher. These affirmations have strengthened my belief in the value of inclusive, identity-affirming pedagogy and reinforced my commitment to fostering equitable learning spaces.

### *Theme 5: Systematic Gender Bias and Identity Formation*

Research consistently highlights the persistence of gender-based biases in educational systems. As previously discussed in the literature review, the OECD (2022) reports that gender stereotypes continue to shape institutional structures and societal expectations, reinforcing disparities and limiting opportunities for those who do not conform to traditional gender norms (Brussino & McBrien, 2022). Kutuk (2023) further emphasizes that both students and educators are influenced by the behaviors, attitudes, and expectations of their communities, perpetuating gender-based divisions in educational settings.

My identity as someone whose gender expression was perceived as nonconforming significantly shaped both my career aspirations and social interactions while living in the Philippines. The societal expectations and rigid gender norms I encountered influenced how I was perceived and treated, particularly within academic environments. These experiences not only affected my self-perception but also played a critical role in my professional development, underscoring the challenges faced by individuals who deviate from normative gender roles.

These experiences align with what CRT scholars describe as the persistence of deficit thinking and intersectional marginalization in education (Crenshaw, 1997; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). My rejection from a teacher education program and the comments about my gender expression were not isolated incidents, but rather manifestations of a broader system that privileges certain identities—such as native speakers and gender-conforming individuals—while marginalizing others. By sharing my story, I engage in counter-storytelling, a core tenet of CRT, to challenge dominant narratives about who belongs in the classroom and whose knowledge is valued.

The discrimination I experienced due to my gender expression directly influenced my investment in becoming an ESL teacher. Societal biases and rigid expectations created barriers that impacted both my professional aspirations and my interpersonal relationships. While these obstacles delayed my journey toward self-actualization as an educator, they also became catalysts for resilience and identity reclamation.

Sandra Bem’s Gender Schema Theory (1981) offers a valuable lens through which to understand these experiences. Bem argues, individuals internalize culturally constructed gender

norms into cognitive schemas that shape how they perceive themselves and others. The dean's comment about my gender expression illustrates how such schemas operate within institutional settings, reinforcing binary expectations of who is deemed "appropriate" for the teaching profession. My initial self-doubt can also be understood as a product of these internalized schemas—schemas I later resisted by embracing a more fluid and inclusive understanding of identity. In this way, Bem's theory complements CRT by adding a cognitive-developmental dimension to the analysis of systemic exclusion and identity formation. By articulating these experiences through counter-storytelling, I assert the legitimacy of diverse educator identities and resist the systemic erasure of voices like mine within the field of language education.

### **Discussions**

This study contributes to the field by demonstrating how autoethnography and counter-storytelling serve as transformative tools for advancing equity in English-language instruction. By centering lived experience, the research challenges dominant ideologies such as native speakerism and gender normativity, foregrounding the voices of educators whose identities are often marginalized. These methods illuminate systemic barriers while offering pathways toward inclusive pedagogy, affirming the legitimacy of diverse educator identities and practices.

Through reflective storytelling and critical analysis, this autoethnographic study has illuminated the complex intersections of language, identity, gender, and professional legitimacy in the lived experience of a non-native English-speaking teacher in Canada. Several key themes emerge that contribute to the broader discourse on equity and inclusion in language education:

#### **Reframing Legitimacy in ESL Teaching**

My journey as an educator began with the deeply personal experience of learning English as a second language. As a non-native English-speaking teacher, I have faced moments where my gender expression and linguistic identity were questioned—experiences that shaped my understanding of identity, power, and belonging in educational spaces. This aligns with Norton's (2010) work on identity in language learning, which emphasizes the dynamic and multifaceted nature of identity. Norton introduces the concept of investment, referring to the degree of commitment language learners have, shaped by their desires, social identities, and the power relations they navigate. She argues that learners' identities, including race, gender, and sexuality, are not fixed but are continuously negotiated through interactions across social contexts. These early challenges mirror the dynamics described in Norton's (1995, 2013) theory of identity and investment, which argues that language learners are less likely to invest in learning when they encounter exclusionary, racist, or homophobic environments. I have come to see that this principle applies equally to educators: when teachers feel marginalized or invalidated, their sense of professional agency and belonging is similarly compromised.

This narrative challenges the dominant ideology of native speakerism, which often privileges native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) as the ideal language models. As Mahboob (2010) and Medgyes (1992) argue, NNESTs bring unique pedagogical strengths, including empathy, cross-linguistic awareness, and firsthand experience with language learning. These qualities have been in my ability to connect with learners, implement culturally responsive teaching, and apply translanguaging strategies that honored students' multilingual identities. My

journey affirms that professional legitimacy in ESL teaching should not be based on nativeness, but on pedagogical competence, cultural sensitivity, and a commitment to learner success.

### **Identity Negotiation and Resilience**

Over time, these experiences have deepened my understanding of how power relations and identity negotiation affect not only learner engagement but also the emotional and professional well-being of educators. Crenshaw's (2017) theory of intersectionality provides a critical lens through which to understand the layered nature of my experiences as a non-native, gender-nonconforming, racialized educator. Rather than viewing these aspects of identity in isolation, intersectionality reveals how they interact to shape both the challenges I faced and the resilience I developed. My story illustrates how systems of power can marginalize individuals at multiple levels, but also how those same intersections can become sources of insight, empathy, and strength in the classroom.

These experiences of gender-based discrimination in the Philippines reveal how societal norms and institutional biases can shape, constrain, and delay professional aspirations. These experiences align with Norton's (2010) concept of identity as dynamic and socially constructed, and with the notion of "investment" in language learning and teaching. Despite facing exclusion and marginalization, I demonstrated resilience by redefining my identity and reclaiming my place in the profession. This process of identity negotiation underscores the importance of creating educational spaces where diverse gender expressions and cultural backgrounds are not only accepted but celebrated.

### **Counter-Storytelling as Resistance**

The concept of native speakerism (Holliday, 2006) further informs this study by critiquing the privilege of native English speakers in language education. This ideology often marginalizes NNESTs, despite their pedagogical strengths and lived experience as language learners. My narrative challenges this bias by demonstrating how non-native educators can offer culturally responsive, empathetic, and effective instruction.

Early in my career, the "non-native" label narrowed my sense of professional possibility; I once doubted whether I could teach English—let alone evaluate it—in an English-dominant context. Graduate study shifted this outlook: exposure to World Englishes and related scholarly conversations reframed "legitimacy" around intelligibility, communicative effectiveness, and pedagogical competence rather than birth status. That intellectual shift translated into practice. In my current work as an assessor, I foreground comprehensibility and intelligibility, and I adopt a translanguaging stance that treats learners' full repertoires as resources during instruction and preparation (e.g., allowing strategic first-language scaffolds while still rating performance against clear task criteria). The move from internalized doubt to principled assessment has been both professional and personal—a reorientation from gatekeeping assumptions to equity-focused judgment anchored in evidence of what learners can do.

At the same time, Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers a framework for naming and challenging broader inequities, while counter-storytelling makes space for narratives—like this one—that complicate deficit-based assumptions. Importantly, my Canadian context has been welcoming and inclusive, enabling growth, contribution, and professional affirmation. Colleagues and institutions have valued the distinct insights I bring, aligning with Dei's (1996)

call for anti-racism education that not only challenges structural barriers but also affirms the identities and contributions of marginalized educators. My experience offers a hopeful counter-narrative: inclusive practices are not only imaginable but already present in some ESL settings, and they can be strengthened through reflective assessment and pedagogy.

### **Implications for Practice and Policy**

The findings suggest several potential implications for ESL education in multicultural contexts such as Canada, where classrooms are shaped by immigration, racial diversity, and evolving notions of teacher legitimacy. In these settings, one possible pathway emerging from this study is to move beyond purely technical training toward critical, identity-affirming pedagogy that can reflect the lived realities of learners and educators. In particular, translanguaging, inclusive assessment, and counter-storytelling appear to transform classroom dynamics and invite challenges to dominant ideologies; drawing on experience as a LINC instructor and CLB assessor, these approaches may underscore the value of asset-based teaching and recognizing multilingual identities as resources.

From a programmatic perspective, teacher-education communities might consider integrating critical pedagogy and identity work across curricula where resonant, enabling pre-service teachers to examine how race, gender, language, and migration shape practice. Programs could also explore structured mentorship for NNESTs and gender-diverse educators to build confidence, networks, and leadership pathways; invite counter-narratives and lived experiences of diverse educators into readings and seminars to question native-speakerism and deficit thinking; and pilot anti-bias, inclusive assessment development so that admissions, placement, and hiring can emphasize intelligibility, qualifications, and pedagogical competence rather than accent or presumed “nativeness.”

Finally, language use in professional practice warrants attention: words can uplift, inspire, and empower—or wound, discourage, and diminish. Because learners are profoundly shaped by the messages they receive, educators may find it valuable to speak with care, empathy, and intention—remembering that, as James notes, “The tongue is a small part of the body... [yet] a great forest is set on fire by a small spark” (James 3:5).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study explores how language, identity, gender, and power intersect in the lived experience of a non-native English-speaking educator. Using critical autoethnography, informed by Critical Race Theory and insights from critical ethnographic thinking, the inquiry suggests that intersecting forces—native-speakerism, gendered expectations, and racialized assumptions—can shape professional legitimacy in English language teaching. Three patterns emerge that may invite reflection:

1. Legitimacy re-framed: In many ESL settings, legitimacy may be fruitfully understood beyond native-speaker norms—toward pedagogical competence, cultural responsiveness, and lived experience.
2. Identity work and resilience: Negotiating multiple axes of difference can be central to growth for educators who encounter misrecognition.
3. Counter-storytelling as practice: Narrative approaches appear to help unsettle deficit framings and may open space for more inclusive learning environments.

Balancing roles as educator and assessor seems to offer vantage points on classroom practice and assessment ecologies, deepening pedagogical judgment and professional confidence. These vantage points may situate personal moments within broader language ideologies, gender norms, and institutional routines—clarifying how power operates across levels. Possible pathways, where resonant with local priorities and capacities, include:

- Re-centering pedagogy: Communities might explore moving beyond strictly technical training toward identity-affirming, asset-based approaches that reflect learners' and educators' lived realities.
- Translanguaging and inclusive assessment: Drawing on learners' full repertoires and emphasizing intelligibility and clearly articulated criteria can help counter accent-based judgments and support equitable participation.
- Curriculum and culture work: Teacher-education programs may consider (a) integrating critical pedagogy and guided identity reflection; (b) piloting structured mentorship for NNESTs and gender-diverse educators; (c) inviting counter-narratives and lived experiences into readings, seminars, and practicum debriefs to question native-speakerism and deficit thinking.
- Hiring and evaluation practices: Departments could examine admissions, placement, observation, and hiring processes to see where intelligibility, qualifications, and pedagogical competence might be foregrounded over accent or presumed "nativeness."
- Policy and climate: Institutions may review existing protections related to language background, gender identity, and expression, and identify context-appropriate ways to recognize multilingualism and lived experience as assets.

Finally, professional language warrants attention. Words can uplift or discourage; in many classrooms, a single remark may influence participation and self-belief. Educators and leaders might find it helpful to cultivate habits of care, empathy, and intention in everyday talk—adapting these suggestions as they see fit. The study offers one situated counter-story that others can take up, adapt, or disregard. Its value, if any, may lie in the possibilities it opens—for rethinking legitimacy, for aligning assessment with inclusion, and for using story as a method of professional learning and change.

### **Personal Reflection**

Centering my story took courage. By narrating past experiences, I offer points of connection for others who may recognize aspects of their own journeys. These experiences of marginalization and affirmation have shaped my resilience and the educator I am becoming. As educators, we are called not only to teach but to uplift—to create spaces where every learner and teacher is seen, valued, and empowered to thrive. Grounded in compassion, humility, and service, I now embrace my identity not as a limitation but as a source of strength, insight, and connection. I also write from a place of healing: the discrimination I once faced no longer defines me. A profound spiritual transformation grounds this confidence and hope, rooted in my identity in Christ: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17).

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