"I am NNEST and I am proud": Narrative Exploration of ESL Teacher Identity Construction

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Abstract: The present narrative exploration investigates the factors affecting the language teacher identity negotiation of an international student working as an ESL teacher in an English language program in a research-integrated university. This study uses the qualitative method by drawing on the data from three stages of semi-structured interviews and researchers' field notes and analyzing it through the perspective of BINF (Bilingual Identity Negotiation Framework). The result reveals the factors influencing the identity negotiation in her trajectory are language competence, educational background, and affirmative discourse at work. These factors led to her investment and participation in the community of practice, where she engaged and included herself in. Overall, this study presents how the ESL teacher identity is linked with the notions of individual agency and public discourse in the community of practice.

INTRODUCTION

Reflecting on the extensive global use of English as an international language, there is a higher number of non-native speakers of English than native speakers. As a result, there is an increased presence of non-native English-speaking teachers (NNEST) compared to native-English-speaking teachers (NEST) (Canagarajah, 1999, as cited in Fathelbab, 2011). However, a misconception called the "native speaker myth" or "native speaker fallacy" persists, suggesting that competent English teachers require native speaker status or near-native language skills. Additionally, Beauchamp & Thomas (2009) argue that the concept of a teacher's identity is not fixed but rather undergoes changes over time due to various internal factors. This finding implies that when discussing the identity of an English language teacher, it is a complex and multifaceted topic that necessitates careful examination of numerous factors.

Several previous studies have been conducted with different themes with the settings takes place in English-speaking countries with several topics including; NNEST negotiations

(Ilieva, 2010), NNEST and professional legitimacy (Reis, 2011), learning & teaching journey of NNEST (Noni-Austria, 2011), NNEST identity transformation (Park, 2012), the reconstruction of teachers' identity (Liu, 2014), teacher's identity expansion (Solano-Campos, 2014), teachers' imagined identities (Barkhuizen, 2016), NNEST/NEST ideology (Nguyen & Dao, 2019), NNEST identity negotiation (Fan & de Jong, 2019), and NNEST's emotions Wolff & De Costa (2017). It can be argued that negotiations seem to be a recurring theme found within the previous studies. This might suggest that a teacher with NNEST as the identity needs extra effort to navigate their identity, and negotiations can be one of them. Hence, the primary objective of this research is to address the existing research gap by examining a non-native English-speaking teacher (NNEST) with a diverse background, specifically from a Southeast Asian nation. This individual not only serves as an English teacher but also pursues studies as a student and, notably, has gained all her teaching experiences in the United States. This distinctive profile contributes to the complexity of identity formation in the context of the study compared to the previous studies that focused on the participants' transition from teaching in their home countries to teaching in the US.

The purpose of undertaking this research is to contribute to the existing body of knowledge regarding bilingualism and the identity of non-native English-speaking teachers (NNEST). By focusing on NNEST, the study aims to enhance scholarly discussions in this area. Additionally, the research endeavors to explore the intricate experiences encountered by NNEST, who work not only in a second language (L2) environment but also in the United States, an English-speaking country. The anticipated outcome is to provide valuable insights and further understanding of these domains. It is also important to highlight the uniqueness of the participant of this study as an international student. Navigating the whole process will likely add more nuance to this research topic discussion. Additionally, the present study is conducted to answer the research question: what are the factors contributing to the participant's identity negotiation following the BINF framework?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bilingual Identity Negotiation Framework

Ruth Fielding (2016) investigated teachers in a unique bilingual program where one class, including two teachers, taught their native languages of French and English. The study created a framework for the research by incorporating several selected sources, such as

Bourdieu (1977), Joseph (2006), Norton (2000), & Tajfel (1978), as cited in Fielding (2016). The framework includes three focuses: socio-cultural connection, interaction, and investment.

Social-cultural connection element enables the exploration of how the learner or the teacher builds their connection with the language and culture they are currently being exposed to in the classroom. Moreover, the interaction element allows the investigation of how the learner or the teacher interacts with the language to determine what types of experiences are created from such interaction. Furthermore, the investment element can facilitate the examination of how the community around the learner or teacher can have something to do with the language learning experience.
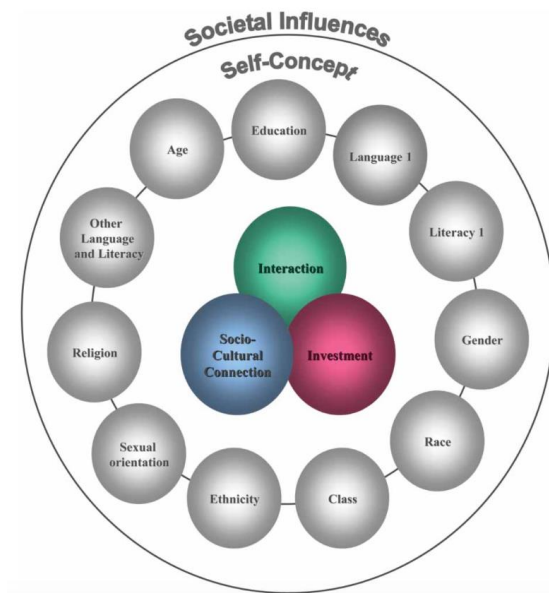
Figure 1. Bilingual Identity Negotiation Framework within the surrounding impacting influences.
(Bourdieu 1977; Joseph 2006; Norton 2000; & Tajfel 1978) as cited in Fielding (2016)

Identity Negotiation

Experiences of professionally working as a NNEST or academically learning how to be a NNEST in non-English-speaking countries differ from US-based education and working environment. These differences might cause individuals with NNEST identities to renegotiate their previously assumed identity. This is because they see themselves as NNEST in their country, which might not be the same as what they perceive when studying or teaching in countries using English as their first language. Ting-Toomey (2005) indicates that identity negotiation is about how "identity is viewed as a reflective self-image constructed, experienced, and communicated by the individuals within a culture and in a particular

interaction situation" (p. 217). Therefore, identity negotiation is how someone negotiates identity during a certain amount of time or situation being involved in another setting that requires reconstructing, re-experiencing and re-communicating identity.

Ilieva (2010) examined the portfolios of 20 international student teachers from China at a Canadian university. The study focused on the portfolios as the medium to see the development of how the students perceive the theories and practices throughout their education as well as how they will see themselves as NNEST after graduating. The result indicates that one of the major findings from the study clearly shows the NNEST identity negotiations taking place. For instance, from previous understandings of teaching English with objectives of "achieving native-like language proficiency" into self-realization, the Chinese NNEST should see themselves as "multicompetent language users" instead (p. 357). In other words, the portfolios contain negotiations throughout the whole learning process.

Fan & de Jong (2019) explored a case study using a narrative study for an international student from China who is currently pursuing graduate studies at that time in the TESOL program and who is also at the same time teaching the Chinese language in the United States. Using the narrative method and inquiry enables the researchers to highlight the participant's "complex professional identities" (p. 14) as NNEST. One of the major findings through the participant's story is how she changed the perception of being "a legitimate English teacher" (p.12) in China compared to an "unqualified English teacher" (p.12) in the US because she constantly compared herself to her other fellow native English-speaking teachers.

Legitimacy & Ideology

Individuals with NNEST as an identity who study or teach while spending time in an English-speaking country will also likely have a direct or indirect correlation with how they perceive their legitimacy and ideology as teachers of English in their country. There seems to be a common pattern that can be found where the NNEST teachers in speaking countries behave differently and perceive themselves differently as teachers. It is also important to note that legitimacy is an important factor, especially for teachers who see themselves as teachers.

Reis (2011) investigated one Ph.D. student in one of the US universities who is also teaching an English course at the same university to find out about his development of professional legitimacy. The study was conducted using observation in the classroom, interviews, and dialogic journals. The study found that the native-speaker (NS) myth plays a big role in the participant's perception, leading him to have mixed attitudes towards the NS

myth regarding professional expertise and confidence. Moreover, the collected data keeps showing how the NS myth affects the participant to see himself as not a qualified NNEST because he will constantly question his legitimacy, credibility, and qualification.

Nguyen & Dao (2019) studied five NNEST currently studying at an Australian university using three-dimensional space narrative inquiry. They incorporated multiple one-hour-long storytellings about their identity development during their study in the TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) program. One of the most recurring topics being addressed is ideology, in which teaching ideologies of each participant before pursuing their study in Australia is admitted to being "submission to the native speaker ideologies" (p. 7), meaning that they feel the need to talk as clearly as what native English speakers would sound like. However, these perceptions shifted after being exposed to ideologies existing in TESOL during their time of the study, which led to their new way of seeing English teaching has been discussed within the TESOL program, especially how they no longer need to set such a high standard of being able to be identified as near native-English speaker.

Transformation & Reconstruction

Identity is dynamic and fluid that it can transform and reconstruct depending on the situation and environment where someone practicing their identity, in this case, is the identity belongs to NNEST (Non-Native English-Speaking Teacher) or (English language learner (ELL) during their experience in their home country compared to when they live abroad to pursue their higher education to be a teacher by taking Teaching English to Speaker of Other Language (TESOL) program that located in English-speaking country.

Park (2012) conducted a study by looking at five East Asian female TESOL students and focusing the analysis on one of the participants about the existing gap between her experiences before the TESOL program, during the TESOL program, and the mentored student teaching. The study uses qualitative methods by applying autobiographical narratives, electronic journal entries, and individual interviews. The study reveals the existence of a participant's identity transformation from a confident English language learner (ELL) constantly getting good grades in China to a less confident ELL caused by comparing herself to NEST classmates in terms of linguistic fluency. Then she finally reached a new understanding during mentoring that her identity as bilingual NNEST was important to better address students in the classroom. This new realization and identity transformation finally made her gain her confidence back. Therefore, she gained a new understanding.

Liu (2014) conducted an autobiographical narrative inquiry highlighting three dimensions of temporality, sociality, and space about his experience learning English throughout his journey of completing three degrees from bachelor's, master's, and doctoral, as well as when he went to Canada for a postdoctoral position. The study discusses his admiration of interpreters as a job when he was a kid. In addition, how English was spoken in China when he taught college students, where American and British accents were accepted and valued by the students while other accents gained less recognition, was also addressed and respected. Therefore, he thought that he needed to speak like a native speaker. Then, his experience in consuming news about China in Canada continued to how he came to a new understanding of the concepts of Linguistic Imperialism, Native-Speakerism (Holliday, 2006), and World Englishes (Cryztal, 2007) to finally reach his conclusion that "foreign language identity is not stable" (p. 275) and "the identity construction in a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural context should be a central aspect of foreign language education" (p. 276) so that studying language takes more than language.

Imagined Identities and Identity Expansion

Solano-Campos (2014) conducted a study using autoethnography and narrative inquiry that incorporated linguistic imperialism and world English; she explored her own experiences of being NNEST in the United States. One of the findings shows that she acknowledges that based on her observation at school, "preconceived deficit notions of NNESTs" (p. 427) have been circulated within the NES teachers. Another major finding reveals that she maintains her first language by having good communication with her relatives in her home country Costa Rica by using the help of various modes of communication technology such as email or Skype to communicate with the family.

Barkhuizen (2016) did a teacher analysis using a short story analytical approach by drawing the data from conversations, interviews, written narratives, and multimodal digital stories. The study's finding suggests that short stories are useful for reflecting on teaching practices and imagined teacher identities. For example, in one of the short stories called *People on My Street,* the participant clearly shows that she is deeply invested in her teaching identity to help her community that identified as adult immigrants.

METHODS

Setting and Participant

This study aimed to investigate the experiences of a non-native English-speaking teacher (NNEST) in Global Launch, an English language program at Arizona State University. Global Launch serves as a pathway or English preparation program for students prior to entering college or university. The participant selection criteria required the participant to have worked in their community of practice for at least one semester and remain enrolled as a university student. A single NNEST from Southeast Asia met these criteria. Jessica, a native speaker of Vietnamese, possesses excellent English skills as her second language. She willingly participated in this study to share her personal narrative and perspectives on working as a NNEST in an English-speaking country.

During the spring semester of 2023, the researchers reached out to multiple international students employed as non-native English-speaking teachers (NNEST) at Global Launch via email. Two NNESTs responded to the invitation. However, per the initial criteria outlined for the study, the second participant was excluded as she had already graduated from the university. Consequently, Jessica, who willingly volunteered, was chosen to participate in the study. She expressed her willingness to share her unique narrative and experiences.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study was gathered through a series of three semi-structured interviews with the participant, along with field notes taken by the researchers during the interview process. A narrative analysis approach was employed to analyze the data. The researchers chose this method because they believe it has the potential for transformative outcomes, as it positions the participant as an equal contributor to the study. This approach aligns with Barkuizhen's perspective, as mentioned in Paltridge & Phakiti (2015), where narrative inquiry is seen as a means to comprehend the specific and contextualized knowledge of individuals closely involved in teaching and learning. In other words, it helps to uncover the meaning they derive from their practices within the specific contexts in which they live their lives.

The interviews were carried out online using Zoom, and the participant's preferences determined whether they were recorded in audio or audio-video format. The interview sessions were divided into three stages: (1) gathering background information about Jessica, including her name, age, occupation, country of origin, major, and languages spoken; (2) exploring Jessica's experiences working as a NNEST in her specific community of practice; and (3)

discussing the challenges she faced and the strategies or efforts she employed in her teaching practice. Additionally, throughout the interview process, the researchers observed the participant's use of semiotic resources and took notes, which served as supplementary data for the study.

Subsequently, the researchers manually transcribed the interviews, with the participant's assistance, to ensure accuracy and minimize misunderstandings. The transcribed data was then thematically organized, following the approach outlined by Merriam & Tisdell (2016). It involved identifying recurring themes, patterns, and important topics that emerged from the interviews. The transcriptions were analyzed using the Bilingual Identity Negotiation Framework (BINF) as the theoretical basis. The BINF encompasses self-concept aspects such as socio-cultural connections, interactions, investments, and societal influences. Furthermore, the researchers utilized the field notes taken during the interviews to support Jessica's narratives, specifically focusing on her reactions to certain questions, such as pauses and eye gaze.

FINDINGS

According to the series of conducted interviews, the factors affecting Jessica's identity construction as an English teacher that had been analyzed based on the Bilingual Identity Negotiation Framework (BINF) can be elaborated as follow:

Socio-cultural Connection: The Community of Practice

As NNEST, the working environment or the community of practice greatly influences the construction of a teacher's identity. The choice to study in the United States was a huge life-changing decision. Jessica finds herself enjoying the United States, and her adaptation to the culture is progressive. She reveals that being in a challenging environment, such as living abroad and far from home, shapes her identity, becoming a global citizen as she understands more about life beyond her own culture.

> "As soon as I graduated from high school, I knew I wanted to be an English teacher. My parents and I compromised each other to get a college degree in the US because of the diversity and I personally want to understand the US language and educational system." (2nd interview)

The process of transition from Vietnam to the US was considered uneasy for her. Jessica claims that she was going through many silent periods. However, that did not stop her from being a motivated student and ESL teacher. Jessica has been passionate about becoming a professional English teacher since she was in high school because becoming an English teacher provides her an opportunity to share her knowledge and experiences of learning English.

> "I really like teaching. I think it is the purest job that a human being can do. It takes courage to step up in front of the classroom and have meaningful conversations with the students because being a teacher is more than just telling them to do something, but it opens a new window to a new world full of hopes and dreams." (2nd interview)

Jessica's identity as NNEST was considered strong during her time doing her internship. She claims that her NNEST identity is strongly and significantly built by her experiences studying in the US and working as an English teacher in Global Launch. She narrates that the working environment and the campus climate encourage her to be more inclusive and professional.

> "My co-workers are very helpful and kind, especially my boss. She provides me with many opportunities that allow me to upgrade my skills." (2nd interview)

As a Non-native English teacher, she promotes confidence in where she works and her responsibilities to maintain her legitimate identity as an L2 user teaching English to multilingual students. While she is not the only NNEST, she finds herself adapting to the working environment positively, and she is mostly motivated by her boss, who comes from Ukraine being supportive of her perspectives on classroom teaching.

> "I have two common challenges. First is how the students view me. When they found out I was from Vietnam, they were shocked. Because the majority of teachers who teach English skills are native speakers, but in communication class, they thought that it is strange to see Non-native speakers teach this class. Some of them feel uncomfortable and worried that I cannot teach them any skills." (2nd interview)

Interaction: Challenges

Before pursuing the Master's program, Jessica had an opportunity to intern at one of Arizona's secondary high schools. However, she encountered many challenges during her internship. In some circumstances, she experiences some disagreement about her teaching

approaches or methods. She recalls that this phase of her experiences was the hardest part, and she used to rethink her decision multiple times about whether she should be an English teacher in the US. The fact that many English teachers, mostly Native speakers, question her cultural and professional identity. As for Jessica, this situation makes her feel unconfident about her ability. However, she agrees that her internship gave her a bigger opportunity to grow into a better English teacher, even if the environment was not supportive.

> "I remembered some teachers said that, oh, you are non-native speakers; of course, teaching literature will be difficult for you. Also, the way the students viewed me was like, "Oh, she is a foreigner; how are we gonna trust her? And they did have doubts about me being their teacher." (3rd interview)

Interestingly, Jessica does not feel any pressure of being NNEST, specifically because the working environment and the campus climate empower her to accept who she is to the point that she would also be able to empower her NNES students as L2 users. For example, in regard to her first day in class, she made connections with her students by having them embrace their L1.

> "I ask my students to introduce themselves in their first language in the first meeting because teaching multilingual students also means learning their cultures. However, there is also a moment when a Vietnamese student talks to me in Vietnamese; I would directly tell her that we can only communicate in English." (3rd interview)

Investment: Strategies

Apart from being supported by co-workers and her boss, Jessica still feels big pressure when it comes to teaching in the classroom. Mostly because the representation of her as NNEST in front of her students promotes a significant awareness for them to have low conviction over Jessica's skills in teaching. Another major challenge she encountered was how Jessica interacted with the students and should include a visual representation such as hand gestures or word stress. She claims that some students do not understand what she is saying when she speaks. To cope with that, she tries different approaches, such as providing more hand gestures, writing the sentences on the board, and clarifying her sentences by repetition.

> "I work hard to motivate my students in learning English. One of my teaching philosophies is to help students feel proud and confident of their identity as non-

> native speakers and avoid the feelings that language barrier is something that would disassociate them from where they belong" (3rd interview)

Jessica acknowledges the importance of her surroundings, but she firmly believes that it is inaccurate to assume that proficiency in English automatically makes one a good English teacher. Her identity as a non-native English-speaking teacher inspired her to create an engaging, participatory, and stimulating learning atmosphere.

> "I took my time to reflect on any of my experiences and learn from them. I know I am not a perfect ESL teacher, but I will never stop being an understanding human being for my students and co-workers. I keep myself open to suggestions that can help me to always be better." (3rd interview)

DISCUSSION

Jessica's Narratives

Framed with the Bilingual Identity Negotiation Framework (BINF), Jessica's narratives present us with how NNEST's professional identity is widely constructed by the positions of the teacher herself and the positions of others, such as students, institutions, and public discourse in reference to her belief and the relation to the context where she works and lives. The socio-cultural connection in which she engages herself in the community of practice initially influences her identity negotiation as an ESL teacher in a way that she feels connected to the languages and cultures she receives in her workplace (Duff 2002, 2003, 2007, as cited in Fielding, 2016). The data considered that the complexity of building up the ESL teacher identity might come from the notion that Jessica can manage the tension to enact her identity as an international student and an ESL teacher. However, this brings a positive impact on her pedagogical practice and motivates her students; as Varghese et al. (2005), as cited in Fielding (2016) point out, seeing others consider you bilingual is an important step towards seeing yourself as bilingual.

Jessica's aim is to become a competent English teacher without people questioning her racial status and accent. In her narrative, she mentioned how some of the workplaces in the US, especially English teachers, will give a bigger chance of teaching careers to native speakers than non-native speakers. Thus, being in the L2 community insisted her to have a responsibility to speak grammatically correct or standard English as expected to become a good teacher. This pressure to speak perfect English comes from an internal factor of how Jessica perceives herself

as well as how she imagines other people around her perceive her based on her identity as a teacher and NNEST.

Similar to the study conducted by Reis (2011), Jessica's experience as an English teacher at Global Launch and collaborating with other non-native English-speaking teachers (NNEST) have influenced her belief that the most significant source of inspiration for her does not necessarily come from native English speakers. The prior work of Huang (1995), as cited in Fielding (2016) posits that self-perceived proficiency as a bilingual is more important than their actual language ability, as confidence has developed through their interactions with language. She recognizes that no matter how much effort she puts into improving her speaking skills, she can never be a native speaker. Instead, she finds inspiration in other NNEST, including her boss. However, as a legitimate NNEST, Jessica faces pressures and inconsistencies related to her professional identity. She acknowledges that students might expect a native speaker in front of the classroom, which can be challenging, and she feels the weight of students' expectations regarding her knowledge and ability.

Moreover, Jessica's confidence in being a NNEST, her relationship with the language, and her pedagogical practices are key roles in her identity construction. The notion that Jessica started every teaching experience in the US was viewed as the foundation for her professional career. Jessica gained validation for the role of a qualified English teacher by viewing herself as a full participant in the English teaching professional community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) as cited in Fan & de Jong (2019). Despite the reconceptualization of her linguistic competence as an L2 user, she was very aware of racial ideology within her work environment. As an Asian International student teaching English to multilingual identity students, she implies her involvement in Global Launch because of her status as a non-native English speaker. Aligning with Barkhuizen (2016), Jessica is also highly invested in helping people who share a similar identity as non-native speakers as her. For instance, she views her students as fellow non-natives to be inspired by what she does. She is able to encourage her students to be more positive during the learning process because she can be a role model of a successful and confident non-native speaker for her students.

The NNEST label or the impact of being a bilingual user of English among fluent native English speakers may reinforce native speaker ideology and paradigms. Jessica's identity is shaped in discourse by the climate surrounding her, which critically reflects her professional development to become a proficient English teacher. Such discourse is the public opinion on her English language toward her teaching ability which influences her saliency. Nevertheless,

Solano-Campos (2014), in his autoethnography, illustrates how she maintains her L1 by communicating with her family through mobile applications such as Skype. This is similar to Jessica's story. As a member of a language minority group in her Campus and her community of practice, Jessica implies limiting interaction with the Vietnamese community. This is due to the fact that as an international student and English teacher, she finds it difficult to spare her time to meet with Vietnamese community members. Moreover, this particular community group is not as big as the others.

Researchers' Reflexivity and Field Notes

The participant's identity construction has been a dynamic, intricate, and multifaceted process in which they assumed fresh duties and responsibilities and contemplated and made choices for their future accordingly. The researchers are aware of our preconceptions regarding the factors that might shape our participant's teacher identity construction. During the interviews, the researchers acknowledged several important semiotic resources from Jessica. When asked about her experiences being seen as NNEST during her internship, she portrayed her emotional self and took quite a long pause while providing her answer. Furthermore, she consistently provided a serious eye gaze while telling her stories of how her previous community of practices she engaged in offered her a hard time adjusting to the new environment as a NNEST and ESL teacher.

However, there were certain times she felt it was easy to describe her feelings and experiences working as NNEST at Global Launch due to the good working environment. Thus, as Non-native English Speakers, the participant and the researchers shared similar experiences adapting and negotiating our identities. Additionally, both researchers participated in analyzing the data to identify any inconsistencies in their coding and interpretation of the findings. The objective was to prevent any preconceived notions or biases from influencing the results, minimize researchers' bias, and enhance the study's reliability and credibility.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, this study underscores Jessica's extraordinary experiences as an international student and becoming a NNEST are shaped by the factors that led her to her potential investment and strategies of ESL identity construction. These factors contributed are Jessica's educational background, her language competence, and the affirmative community of practice. Drawing the analysis from the Bilingual Identity Negotiation Framework (BINF),

Jessica's contribution to the community of practice during her internship and at Global Launch showed how she positions herself within the socio-cultural connection and her interactions with her students and co-workers. Furthermore, she was also aware of how her surroundings or the external may influence her identity growth. This was seen from her emotional changes during interviews while narrating several negative public discourses from her workplace, whether it was her students or co-workers or her expectations of viewing herself also impacting her emotion.

Furthermore, Jessica put forth her investment and strategies to cope with her challenges. This study showed that her pedagogical practices and teaching philosophy were her ultimate investment in negotiating ESL teacher identity, background study, and English language competence. This study has explored how Jessica, as the participant, views herself as NNEST and how the effects revolve around the issue of NNEST teaching not only in the L2 environment but also in the United States.

In addition, Jessica's narratives also have a specific contribution to the role of imagined identity and the reality in which Jessica participates in the community. As discussed by Vygotsky (1978), as cited in Golombek & Klager (2015), the imagination of a certain community may enable language teachers to recontextualize and broaden the experiences that should be explored more deeply in relation to imagined identity and reality perceived by language teachers.

LIMITATIONS AND STUDY FORWARD

This study contributes to the literature, specifically within the discussion and research related to Bilingualism and Identity with NNEST as the participant. However, it is important to note that this study cannot be used to generalize the phenomenon. Moreover, this study is limited to a single-subject study participant. Therefore, other researchers interested in similar topics can expand the study by having more participants with more diverse backgrounds.

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