Exploring *Non-Native* English Teacher Identity Development and Identity in Practice at a Multilingual International School in Thailand

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Abstract

This study explores *non-native* English teacher identity development, and identity in practice in a multilingual international school in Thailand. Guided by the teacher's personal interpretative framework (Kelchtermans, 1993) and identity-in-practice theory (Varghese et al., 2005), the study employed a narrative inquiry design using life story interviews, classroom observations, and shadowing technique for the data collection. The three *non-native* English teacher participants were purposefully selected. The data were analyzed by using the inductive coding method (Saldaña, 2009), consisting of three analysis steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The data revealed that teacher identity development was characterized by solid confidence in their *non-native* status and their teaching abilities as English teachers due to professional qualifications, proficiency in English, and teaching experiences. However, it was revealed that their *non-native* status were affected by external factors (parents and colleagues), weakening their self-esteem and job motivation. This study emphasizes the importance of English proficiency level and qualifications in building confidence among non-native English teachers. Additionally, a supportive socio-cultural environment inside the school is key to support their positive identity and maintain their confidence.

Keywords: non-native English teacher, teacher identity, teacher identity development, identity in practice

Introduction

It is commonly understood that *native* English speaking teachers (NESTs) are deemed ideal employment in most international schools (Kurniawati & Rizki, 2018). We italicize the words *native* and *non-native* to acknowledge the problematic nature of these terms as discussed by several scholars (e.g., Boonsuk et al., 2023; Dewaele, 2018; Kiczkowiak, 2020). In Thailand, where the study was conducted, many international schools also prioritized hiring NESTs over *non-native* English speaking teachers (NNESTs). However, in recent years, an increasing number of international schools have challenged this preference by hiring NNESTs when the schools recognize that NNESTs can contribute

a variety of valuable abilities and perspectives to the classroom, such as strong English proficiency, pedagogical expertise, and intercultural competence. Despite the growing acceptance of NNESTs, it is significant to recognize the prejudices that NNESTs frequently confront in their profession such as prejudiced attitudes and stereotypes which may limit their opportunities in getting employment and gaining career growth (Yuan, 2019). Nevertheless, as the growth of English globally increases, Seidlhofer (2004) indicated that approximately 80% of English used worldwide is not entirely associated with *native* speakers. Tosuncuoglu (2017) commented that there is a growing trend within the international community to acknowledge NNESTs as an alternative to NESTs. Therefore, many schools in Thailand, both public and private schools, have offered opportunities for NNESTs to teach English (Hickey, 2014). Although NESTs are still ideally employed in Thailand, many schools welcome NNESTs from countries like Cameroon, Indonesia, Kenya, and the Philippines.

The shift in hiring practice in considering NNESTs has driven our interest to focus on NNESTs within international schools. To delve into the depth of their experiences, we used language teacher identity as an analytic lens to understand their professional development. During the past decade, there has been increasing popularity in research on teacher identity in teacher education in many contexts (e.g., Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Lee, 2013; Trent, 2010; Tsui, 2007; Yuan & Lee, 2015). However, the consideration of examining teacher identity in Thailand is scarce (Prabjandee, 2019). In addition, previous studies have not explicitly shown how teacher identity is developed for NNESTs in Thailand, particularly in a multilingual international school context that is a hub of a diverse population, and how their everyday practices contribute to the development of teacher identity is also limited. Moreover, research on NNEST identity development has yielded inconsistent results. Some research pointed out that NNESTs struggled to adopt their *non-native* status (e.g., Lee & Kim, 2020), while other research found that NNESTs could embrace their *non-native* status confidently (e.g., Park, 2012; Widodo et al., 2020). Therefore, to expand the present knowledge in the literature, this study aims to better understand NNEST identity development in a multilingual international school in Thailand. We hope to raise awareness that it is urgent to study NNEST identity when facing potential prejudice and discrimination.

Literature Review

NNEST Identity Development

The literature on NNEST identity is situated in language teacher identity research. It is commonly understood that a language teacher identity is socially constructed, developmental, and negotiated, which is essential to teacher professional development (Varghese et al., 2005). In his systematic review of empirical studies on NNEST identity from 2008 to 2017, Yuan (2019) stated that NNEST identity has received interest among scholars in the past decades since the majority of English teachers are NNESTs. Yuan (2019) observed that being a NNEST is affected by extant *native*

speakerism ideology entrenched in dominant cultures (Holliday, 2006), which perceived NESTs as superior role models for language learning and teaching. The *native* speakerism ideological discourse was found to affect NNEST professional legitimacy and identities in several ways (Park, 2012; Pavlenko, 2003; Trent, 2016). Extensive literature reviews suggested inconsistent results among previous studies. Some research pointed out that NNESTs struggled to adopt their *non-native* identity (e.g., Lee & Kim, 2020; Savski & Comprendio, 2022), while other studies found that NNESTs could embrace their *non-native* status with confidence (e.g., Cheung, 2015; Methanonpphakhun & Deocampo, 2016; Park, 2012; Pavlenko, 2003; Ulla, 2019; Widodo et al., 2020).

With the *native* speakerism ideology, NNESTs often encounter bias, prejudices, and hiring discrimination more than NEST peers (Boonsuk et al., 2023). Previous studies have pointed out that NNESTs struggled to adopt their NNEST identities and experienced identity tensions (e.g., Lee & Kim, 2020; Savski & Comprendio, 2022). For example, Lee and Kim (2020) investigated the identity of seven Korean English teachers with transnational experiences in the United States from a very young age. Those participants currently serve as qualified English language teachers in public schools in South Korea. Through an in-depth interview, the findings revealed that although the participants had English proficiency levels as high as *native* English speakers, they undervalued their skills and perceived themselves as having a lower status than *native* English speakers. Holding transnational experiences did not help them overcome their *non-native* status. In addition, they emphasized the American accent as *the standard* for English. They were unchangeable *non-native* English speakers who never crossed over to be close to *native-like*, resulting from their innateness of nationality and race. Having a strong preference for the American accent and the *native* speakership of those Korean teachers resulted in an influence of socio-cultural beliefs and values that are deeply embedded in the South Korean system.

However, not all NNESTs felt powerless about their *non-native* status. Previous studies have pointed out that NNESTs perceived themselves as legitimate and competent users of English (e.g., Cheung, 2015; Methanonpphakhun & Deocampo, 2016; Park, 2012; Pavlenko, 2003; Ulla, 2019; Widodo et al., 2020). For example, Ulla (2019) explored the experiences of 56 Filipino English teachers in Bangkok, Thailand. Through questionnaires and follow-up interviews, the findings revealed that the participants positively perceived themselves as qualified English teachers in the EFL teaching position and did not place a dichotomy between their *non-native* status and *native* status. They were satisfied with their earned salary and asserted it was enough to support their family financially. Still, they mentioned the higher salary paid for NESTs, which may strengthen an existing belief that NESTs are better English teachers. Moreover, the participants did not feel discriminated from their socio-cultural context, whether school or students, against their *non-native* status. They reported living in a supportive environment, gaining respect from their students even though they still favored the *native* English speakers' accents.

Theoretical Frameworks

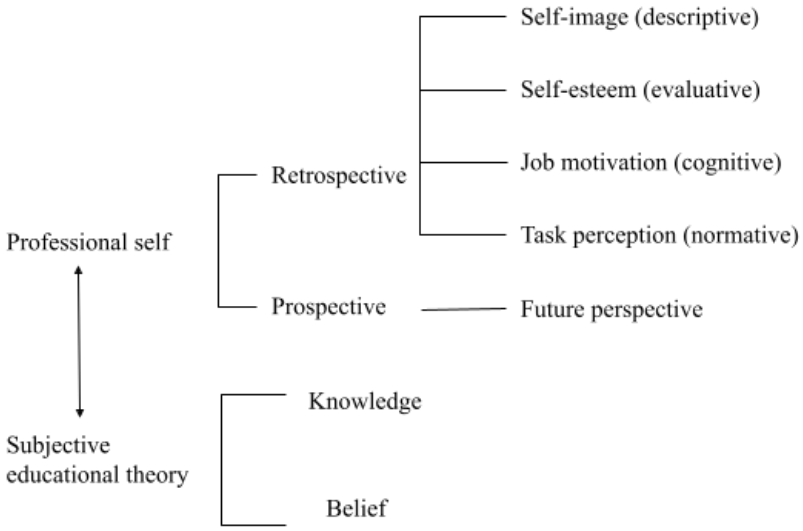
Since teacher identity is very broad, it is important to situate this study in a particular framework (Prabjandee, 2019). To explore NNEST identity development, this study was guided by the theoretical frameworks of *teacher's personal interpretative framework* (Kelchtermans, 1993) and *identity-in-practice* (Varghese et al., 2005). Together, these frameworks provide a more broadened perspective that reveals the relationship between NNESTs' autobiographical stories and their practical expressions in the teaching setting, thus resulting in a comprehensive understanding of NNESTs' identity.

Teacher's Personal Interpretive Framework

This theory describes teacher identity as autobiographical stories narrated in a social context (Kelchtermans, 1993). The stories are both a form and a process human made as a product to represent a collective storytelling of individuals (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Investigating the teacher identity from this framework reflects the interpretive importance of individuals' experiences in a particular social context. In the process of understanding teacher identity development, Kelchtermans (1993) articulated the interrelated aspects: 1) *professional self* and 2) *subjective educational theory*. As both are intertwined, they should work together to make sense of teacher identity development. Figure 1 illustrates the teacher's personal interpretative framework.

Figure 1

Dimensions of the personal interpretive framework (Kelchtermans, 1993)



Professional Self

The professional self is a personal conception of oneself as a teacher, defining it as a self-concept, a personal narrative narrated in a social context that encompasses cultural, interpersonal, and physical aspects of individuals' surroundings, consisting of five components: self-image, self-esteem,

job motivation, task perception, and future perspective (Kelchtermans, 1993). The first four components form the retrospective dimension, which reflects on the teachers' professional self from present to past. Meanwhile, the fifth component, future perspective, captures the prospective dimension reflecting on the expectations and feelings of teachers regarding the future path of their profession (Kelchtermans, 1993).

The interwovenness of these components provides an in-depth understanding of teacher identity development. Self-image is how individuals see themselves, how others see them, and how they imagine themselves. It is one's description of a global characteristic constructed in the general principles to regulate one's behavior (Kelchtermans, 1993). Self-esteem is closely connected to self-image, referring to one's perceived teaching ability and the legitimacy of being an English teacher. Job motivation is the motive one selects to stay or to leave the teaching profession. Task perception is how teachers define their job. Future perspective is the expectation of professional development and the feeling of teachers' professional situation (Kelchtermans, 1993).

Subjective Education Theory

The subjective educational theory is a personal system of knowledge and beliefs teachers use during their job performance relating to education and teaching (Kelchtermans, 1993). The theory stems from the teacher's experiences and how they integrate themselves into their job situations. Kelchtermans (1993) stated that this theory is for a teacher to understand the meaning of education and teaching.

The interplay between subjective educational theory and the personal self is useful for exploring teacher identity development since it theorizes teacher identity as multidimensional and developmental (Kelchtermans, 1993). Extensive literature reviews suggest that the framework has been used in several contexts (e.g., Fransson et al., 2019; Prabjandee, 2020). For example, Prabjandee (2020) used this theory to explore pre-service teacher identity development in teacher education in Thailand and pointed out that each aspect of teacher identity was developed at different points during their experiences in teacher education. Even though the teacher's personal interpretive framework is useful, it does not take into account how teachers' practices (e.g., classroom pedagogy) contributed to their identity development. As a result, the identity-in-practice theory was used to complement how practices contributed to identity development (Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Varghese et al., 2005).

Identity-in-Practice

Another theoretical framework to complement the teacher's personal interpretative framework is identity-in-practice brought forward by Varghese et al. (2005). From this perspective, an identity is not something one puts into one's life but is already well-formed through practicing oneself (Lave, 1996; Wenger, 1998). Kanno and Stuart (2011) emphasized the interwovenness of identity and practice, resulting in the concept of identity-in-practice when practice shapes identity; on the other hand, identity

affects practice in return, like one cannot change without affecting the other. As Lave (1996) observed, "Who you are becoming, shapes crucially and fundamentally what you 'know.' 'What you know' may be better thought of as doing rather than having something" (p. 157).

Guided by the teacher's personal interpretive framework (Kelchtermans, 1993) and identity-in-practice theory (Varghese et al., 2005), this study attempted to answer the following question: *How does non-native English teacher identity develop within teaching experiences in a multilingual international school context?*

The Present Study

Research Design

In this study, narrative inquiry was used to explore NNEST identity development. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated that narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience through "collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus" (p. 20). Narrative inquiry allows one to see an aspect of a person's identity as Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) stated that stories are not just a tool for expressing identity but also for identity-making. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) responded to teacher identity regarding "stories to live by" (p. 4), which means that stories provide a narrative framework that teachers build upon to explore and interpret their experiences. Teachers interact in theoretical narrative through storytelling; consequently, they can explore and shape their identity in new or different stories (Beijaard et al., 2004).

Context and Participants

This study was conducted at a multilingual international school in eastern Thailand with a diverse population of students and teachers from various countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, India, the Philippines, Singapore, Russia, Japan, South Korea, China, and the host country, Thailand. The school prioritizes English as the primary medium of instruction while also supporting students' abilities in other languages, such as Spanish, Japanese, Korean, and Thai. This strategy shows the school's dedication to establishing a multilingual environment. Notably, this research site was selected for its unique characteristic of providing opportunities for NNESTs to work as English teachers. The diverse populations within the school play a significant role in shaping the identity development of the participating teachers as they navigate their multifaceted selves while teaching at the school.

Guided by the narrative inquiry design, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) support using a small number of participants in a narrative inquiry, enabling an in-depth examination of a teacher's life experience. Also, Creswell (2007) recommended selecting one or more individuals who can share their experiences or life stories. The three participants, hereafter referred to by pseudonyms as Ann, Sohyoung, and Karina, were purposefully selected because they were full-time NNESTs with at least

five years of experience in ELT. They held relevant bachelor's or master's degrees in education. They met the qualifications required to teach at the multilingual international school: educational background, subject expertise, experience in international settings, and strong English proficiency. The participants were Ann, a pre-kindergarten teacher from the Philippines, where English is the primary language in schools, so she developed her proficiency in English from an early age. Sohyoung, a high school English teacher from South Korea, was raised in Thailand and has a unique multilingual background as she is fluent in Korean, English, and Thai. Karina, an elementary EAL (English as an Additional Language) teacher from Russia, learned English from her home country and continued to improve it in an English-speaking setting while pursuing a master's degree in the United States.

Researchers' Stance

Since the narrative inquiry is the co-construction between the participants and the researcher (Creswell, 2007), it is important to be transparent about our researchers' backgrounds to facilitate readers with "better informed decisions" when reading this study (Prabjandee, 2014, p. 3). The first author, Benjamaporn, has been a staff member at the multilingual international school for five years. Her position gave her an *emic perspective* to understand the complexity of the academic environment in this school and allowed her to draw on a wealth of first-hand experiences of observing and working with the participants. Notably, she has witnessed a challenge to traditional recruiting practices when the school actively hires NNESTs. This unique perspective enabled her to focus on exploring the identity and professional practice of NNESTs within the shifting context of the multilingual international school. The second and the third authors, Denchai and Punwalai, are Benjamaporn's advisors. Their *etic perspectives* complement Benjamaporn's emic perspective to minimize subjectivities in analyzing and representing the data.

Data Collection

Guided by the narrative inquiry traditions, the data in this study were elicited from qualitative techniques: life story interview, classroom observation, and shadowing observation. Out of these data collection methods, the life story interview is considered the main data, whereas classroom observations and shadowing observations are supplementary for triangulation purposes. First, the life story interview, which followed Seidman's interview framework (2006), was conducted in three rounds to achieve data saturation. The interview questions were designed based on the theoretical framework of the teacher's personal interpretative framework by Kelchtermans (1993) (see Appendix A). After being granted site permission and individual consent, the participants were engaged in a series of three interviews conducted in a one-to-one format. The interviews were held in a quiet room to minimize external disturbances and foster in-depth conversations. Each interview session was audio-recorded with the participant's consent. Following each interview, the first author transcribed and analyzed the data before proceeding to the next interview. The second interview asked the teachers to elaborate on the first

interview. Examples of questions in the second interview include: Can you tell us more about this story? Can you give some examples of this story? The last interview asked the participants to describe their salient experiences of working in the multilingual international school. Examples of questions in the last interview were: Given you have talked about your teaching at this school, how would you describe your experience? What have been your experiences like teaching here? This three-round interview approach allowed for the collection of valuable data to address the research question effectively.

Following the three-round interviews (Seidman, 2006), the first author conducted non-participant classroom observations to triangulate with the interview data. Positioned at the back of the classroom, the first author quietly observed the participants' teaching while taking uninterrupted observation notes. After each observation, the first author asked the participants questions about their teaching performance and feelings to gain insight into their perspectives. These observation field notes, informed by Emerson et al. (1995), shed light on how participants' socio-cultural experiences shape their teacher identity development in the classroom. Shadowing observations were conducted alongside classroom observations to explore the teachers' identity-in-practice. Instead of being set up as formal observations, shadowing sessions were included in Benjamaporn's daily routine as a co-worker and an insider who has worked at the multilingual international school for five years. As she was not seen as a stranger during the observation process, it allowed her to use her pre-existing relationships with the participants, therefore reducing the impact of the Hawthorne Effect. These observations continued until data saturation was achieved, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Thus, data saturation was achieved after collecting the data for eight months from October 2021 to June 2022, and transferability within the phenomenon context was possible (Stake, 1995).

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Before starting the data analysis process, the quality of the datasets was enhanced by focusing on transcription quality (Poland, 1995). The data was transcribed and checked by the first author with strict conformity to the spoken words in the audio recordings. The interview data were analyzed vertically and horizontally using the coding method (Saldaña, 2009). Open coding involves assigning codes to the data based on emerging meaning. Axial coding identified relationships and created categories, and selective coding merged categories into overarching themes. The same analysis process was applied to the classroom and shadowing observation data from field notes. Horizontal analysis involved comparing data across different participants, enabling the identification of similarities and differences. Combining vertical and horizontal analysis methods provided comprehensive insights into teacher identity development. Finally, to enrich the trustworthiness of the data analysis, we employed triangulation and member check techniques. Triangulation was achieved using multiple data collection methods (life story interviews, classroom observation, and shadowing techniques). The first author also maintained reflective notes to question her subjectivity during data analysis. For the member check, the first author shared transcripts and the finding drafts with participants, allowing them to verify and

provide feedback on the findings. Their inputs were crucial in enhancing the credibility of the study's narratives. By implementing these strategies, we aimed to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the research findings (Tracy, 2010).

Findings

In a narrative inquiry design, individual stories are commonly represented. However, we decided to take a collective approach to represent the participants' stories (Ann, Sohyoung, and Karina) with attempts to draw out significant insights as we learned about their NNEST identity development and identity-in-practice at the multilingual international school.

Self-Image: A Qualified NNEST

Self-image is how you see yourself, how others see you, and how you want to see yourself in the future. The retrospective aspect of the findings revealed that all three NNESTs (Ann, Sohyoung, and Karina) confidently perceived themselves as English teachers despite certain factors that might challenge traditional expectations of *international school English teachers.* They were not only aware of their *non-native* status, but also fully embraced it. While their status is contrary to social expectations within multilingual international schools favoring NESTs, it did not impact their self-image as English teachers. As qualified teachers with degrees in Education, established teaching experience, and high English proficiency, these are the key factors behind their unwavering confidence as English teachers.

> *Definitely! I am a teacher and I've spoken and used English ever since I was born, so it's definite I consider myself as an English teacher. (Ann, Interview)*

> *I'm aesthetically Asian, and I'm not from a native English-speaking country, but English is my first language. So in order to make sure that I'm fully qualified, I made sure to get a minor in education in my bachelor's degree and make sure to get my master's in education at Korea University, but I also took the state exam for the USA for Teacher Certification with the District of Columbia as well, all in English, and I have various certifications for also IB English. (Sohyoung, Interview)*

> *This position came up as a need of the school. As I said, I have a degree in special education, so originally, the vision for my role in school was to provide learning support to the kids who need it. However, a greater need came up for English language learners along with learning support, and somehow, over time, this role took over my other responsibilities, and I found myself being an English teacher. I actually think that I am a qualified teacher, not only because I have a special education background. To give you an in-depth understanding of child development in general and with some abnormalities or special needs in particular and*

> *teaching English in the general category. Why? Because it's still language development. It doesn't matter whether a child has or doesn't have special needs. All children follow the same general flow of development. So yes! I am qualified to be an English teacher. (Karina, Interview)*

The findings highlighted the significant roles of their exceptional English proficiency, a facet that became even more apparent when viewing through a retrospective lens. Despite being aware of their status, Ann and Sohyoung have both valued English as highly as their mother tongues (Filipino and Korean). Early and constant exposure to the English language has proven to be beneficial in their fluency and comfort in the language. Ann, who is from the Philippines, a country where English is used as an official language, and Sohyoung, who grew up abroad with an international education, benefitted significantly from their early exposure to English in terms of shaping the language expertise and comfortable feelings.

In contrast, Karina did not acquire English as her first language during childhood. Instead, she embarked on a retrospective language learning journey, actively and seriously learning English when she resided in an English-speaking country during adulthood. This elaboration provides additional context beyond the quotation above, explaining how despite this later exposure and different language learning journey, it did not hinder her from diligently strengthening her English language skill as her commitment to learning and mastering English to be qualified in an English language teaching position. Alongside their remarkable qualifications, the participating teachers' English proficiency allowed them to confidently embrace their roles as competent and qualified English teachers in the multilingual international school.

Moreover, the three NNESTs' self-image as English teachers in the multilingual international school was evident in their actions during classroom and shadowing observations, reflecting their identity in practice. They exuded a sense of security and confidence in their teaching performance, earning the respect and admiration of their students. Notably, all three NNESTs proudly embraced their *non-native* status and had never hidden their accents when speaking English. Based on the compelling retrospective evidence presented, it is crystal clear that the three NNESTs' self-images as English teachers remained unaffected by their *non-native* status.

Self-Esteem: A Comfortable NNEST

Self-esteem is an evaluation of oneself as a teacher, belief in one's teaching ability, and the legitimacy of an English teacher. The findings revealed that the three NNESTs were confident in teaching English in the multilingual international school. Like self-image, this confidence stemmed from their high English proficiency, natural comfort in language use, and valuable teaching experience, reflected from their retrospective professional journey. They were proficient English users and had a

deep understanding of the language due to their educational background, enabling them to teach it effectively.

> *It's a natural part, especially teaching in an International School for 15 years. It's like I don't use any other language teaching my students so yeah definitely [being confident]. (Ann, Interview)*

> *I'm very confident in teaching English, and I worked really hard to do that. (Sohyoung, Interview)*

> *As a non-native English speaker, I think I'm pretty confident that my language skills do not limit me. (Karina, Interview)*

Additionally, reflecting on their retrospective lens, being accepted by the surrounding society, whether by the school or parents, was another vital booster for building their confidence. When some people initially doubted their abilities as English teachers regarding their *non-native* status, the three NNESTs found reassurance that the school's hiring process ensured only those meeting the school's standards were selected. This respect and recognition further contributed to their teaching confidence as NNESTs in the school setting.

> *It puts me on my toes even though I've been doing this for 20 years, and I've been here for 15 years at this school. It's almost like you have to prove that you're more than being a non-native English speaker. (Ann, Interview)*

> *Even here, I'm the only Asian teacher that teaches English, so I think I'm confident enough in myself and my teaching abilities to never worry or doubt it. (Sohyoung, Interview)*

> *Well, I have my own anxieties. I am a perfectionist. When I know that there is something that I don't know, and there's many of such, I am like oh my God! I have to learn this and this and this, and there are so many books that I still haven't read. So, I am confident in teaching, but I feel like I could definitely get better. (Karina, Interview)*

However, the findings also revealed that even though Ann, Sohyoung, and Karina are confident in their teaching abilities, their *non-native* status unconsciously influenced their confidence levels. This influence prompted them to perform well and work hard, as well as be ready to prove themselves worthy of the position as an English teacher, even if they are not a *native* English speaker. The constant awareness of being closely monitored due to their *non-native* status impacted their self-esteem, leading

them to strive to demonstrate their competence in the field. Sohyoung, for example, faced offensive questions about her English comprehension, and upon retrospective consideration, it became evident that these questions deeply impacted on her sense of worth. Still, instead of letting it deter her, she channeled it into a determination to excel in her role and ensure that such questions would not arise.

Although self-esteem is an internal state that may not always be immediately observable, the classroom and shadowing observations clearly revealed their confidence in teaching ability and a sense of belonging. For example, during one classroom observation, Ann stated her willingness to invite parents to participate and observe her teaching. This openness to having someone else observe her performance indicated her strong belief in her teaching ability. Similarly, Sohyoung and Karina also demonstrated their self-esteem in their teaching role during classroom observation as they ran the class flow quickly and confidently, skillfully explaining and answering questions that arose during the classroom session. These findings were consistent with the information gathered from the interviews, as the three NNESTs' teaching practices showcased a strong belief in their skills, comfort in their roles, and further reinforced their confidence.

Job Motivation: Driven by *Non-Native* and Teacher Status

Job motivation is the motive to choose, stay, or leave the teaching profession. The findings showed that Ann and Sohyoung had a strong passion for being a teacher from the beginning, very different from Karina, who had never thought of becoming a teacher. However, as an English language teacher in the multilingual international school, all three of them shared a common feeling: a love for teaching and being surrounded by students. When their professional journey was analyzed in retrospect, it became evident that their initial motivations have developed and deepened over time.

The data showed that the motivating factors of performing well in their profession were associated with their *non-native* status and their roles as English teachers. To elaborate, Ann experienced a situation where her *non-native* status as an English teacher was highlighted. Despite being recognized as proficient in English due to her Filipino nationality, Ann was closely monitored by others in her teaching position. This monitoring motivated her to consistently exhibit outstanding performances and prove her worth as an English teacher. Similarly, Sohyoung worked hard and made sure she was fully qualified. However, she faced a disrespectful question from a colleague asking if she understood English idioms, which was a first-time experience for her. She became even more determined to prevent such incidents in the future. This incident motivated Sohyoung to work harder and prove her capabilities as a NNEST.

> *You have to prove that you can do the job and you can do a good job even if you are not a native English speaker. It's not just about being a native English speaker but about being a good one. (Ann, interview)*

> *I think as a non-native English speaker, I have to work twice as hard to make sure they don't say things like that [offensive comment]. I think that is the only feeling that I get. (Sohyoung, Interview)*

Moreover, in their retrospective lens, the presence of their *non-native* English status in the field where *native* English speakers are often preferred served as a powerful motivator in their job as they acted as role models for students. In the diverse multilingual international school community, it would be ironic to limit the number of teachers to only *native* English speakers, especially when many *non-native* English speakers demonstrated proficiency equal to *native*. As NNESTs, they used their self-identity as *non-native* speakers to become powerful role models, showing students that fluency in English is achievable regardless of one's country of origin.

By being *non-native* English speakers in English teaching positions, they proved to their students that English is not exclusive to those from *native*-speaking countries. This aspect became a source of inspiration for their students, motivating them to believe in their own potential to excel in English. Their commitment to using English proficiency and pursuing a career as English language teachers set a powerful example for students who may have questioned their own abilities due to their *non-native* background.

> *I think I have a bit of an advantage of being a non-native English speaking teacher to encourage them that you don't have to be white, and you don't have to come from an English Speaking country to be an English teacher. So, I think I model that by my identity. (Sohyoung, Interview)*

> *I think I'm even better in some regards because I am not a native speaker, and I can be a specific example for students that not being born in an English-speaking country. You can still become something only if you're working hard and if you are seeing your goal and moving in that direction. (Karina, Interview)*

When work aligned with a sense of oneself, a deep passion for teaching, and the motivation stemming from their *non-native* status, the classroom observation findings showed an inspiring display of how the three NNEST identity influenced their teaching practices. They were deeply committed to their profession, genuinely caring about their students' education and growth. Their love for teaching was evident throughout the classroom sessions, encouraging students to enjoy learning. Motivated by being *non-native* English speakers, they continuously strove to become excellent language role models for their students. The findings showed how their job motivation and identity created an enriching and transformative learning experience.

Task Perception: A Professional NNEST

Task perception is how teachers define their job. The findings showed a diverse and retrospective perspective of the teachers' task perception, in which each perspective brings valuable insights into what it takes to be a dedicated and impactful teacher. These different retrospective perspectives contribute to the richness and complexity of the teaching profession, highlighting the significance of passion, critical thinking, and pedagogical expertise in providing a nurturing and impactful learning environment for students.

The findings revealed that Ann firmly believed the most important part of her responsibilities as a teacher, whether as a pre-kindergarten teacher or an English language teacher, was her genuine love for teaching. She is convinced that this love for teaching is essential, effectively fulfilling her responsibilities as a teacher. Ann further reasoned that if teachers, in general, lack this essential for teaching, it could hinder the teachers' abilities to provide students with the knowledge and learning environment that their students deserve.

> *I think it doesn't matter if it's an English teacher or just a teacher. I guess it's still the same; that number one is like you really need to have passion for teaching. If not, you can't be here because it's not fair for yourself, it's not fair for your students if you don't have passion for teaching. (Ann, Interview)*

As for Sohyoung, she perceived that her responsibility as an English language teacher is to foster the development of critical thinking skills in her students over solely focusing on achieving a *native-like* being. This emphasis on critical thinking stemmed from her recognizing the power of language and its influence on shaping thoughts and interaction. Thus, every language user should be aware of critical thinking skills in both expressing themselves and comprehending information.

> *I think my understanding of being an English teacher is to make sure that students learn to embrace how to express themselves eloquently and to use their knowledge to express their opinions and voices on anything. So building their confidence, so that they're not afraid to understand the power of language, I think it's my understanding of being an English teacher. (Sohyoung, Interview)*

Karina's task perception as an English language teacher-centered on the importance of professional subject expertise and effective teaching abilities over *native* speaker status. She believed that true proficiency in teaching a language involves more than just being a *native* speaker. Karina's identity, as a NNEST from a non-English-speaking country, did not deter her from seeing herself qualified to teach English at the school. She believed that teachers should be valued for their in-depth

expertise and professionalism, which comes from honing their teaching skills to create meaningful learning experiences.

> *If you're a professional, not only like I'm a native speaker so I can teach because I'm a native Russian speaker, but I can't teach Russian. Professional Russian language teachers, the way they explain things, the way they teach this information to you, it makes more sense. It's the same thing in English. When you're teaching English you can become such a professional in teaching your methods. You will outwit any native speakers because you know the ways, you know how to teach, not how to speak. Native speakers do not necessarily know how to teach. (Karina, Interview)*

Based on the data, it was evident that the three NNESTs: Ann, Sohyoung, and Karina, highlighted a significant shift in the perception of English teaching, where being a *native* speaker is no longer considered the most crucial factor for effectiveness in the classroom, as seen in their retrospective narratives. Instead, passion for teaching, the promotion of critical thinking skills, and professionalism are at the forefront of their task perceptions. These three NNESTs demonstrated a deep understanding of their roles within the school context. They skillfully leveraged their *non-native* status to positively influence their students' language learning experiences. They embraced their unique perspectives, serving as English language role models and creating immersive learning environments, as they viewed their *non-native* status as an advantage rather than a weakness. These dedicated teachers exemplify the power of task perception in shaping effective language teaching.

Future Perspective: Professional Growth

Future perspective is the expectation of professional development. The finding showed that Ann and Sohyoung clearly committed to their teaching position with a strong prospective focus. They saw themselves continuing in this role for the foreseeable future, dedicated to helping their students develop practical learning skills. Ann's commitment to professional development is evident in her determination to continuously join the Professional Development (PD) Program. Despite her 20 years of teaching experience, she recognized that there is always more room to grow and new strategies to explore. Meanwhile, Sohyoung's desire to pursue higher education in fields like Psychology is reflected in her dedication to supporting her students. In contrast, Karina had different career aspirations. While she acknowledged the impact of being a classroom teacher, she aimed to move beyond the classroom and pursue the leadership team position. She believed that it would grant her more power to establish a significant positive impact on students' lives and challenge misconceptions about *non-native* speakers.

> *What do I see myself improving on? Just to not stop learning and not stop wanting to grow because I've been doing this for 20 years. (Ann, Interview)*

> *I'm definitely going to stay in the classroom. I don't know where, but I do see myself being a classroom teacher for a very long time. I do want to try getting a degree in Psychology like school counseling is something that I'm interested in the near future, but for now, I think in the classroom as an English teacher. (Sohyoung, Interview)*

> *My personal career goals are outside of the classroom. Like I said, it's great to make a difference in one student's life, but I'm striving to make a greater difference in meaning to more students' lives. So I am hoping for a leadership position where I can bring my international perspective in a room of leaders, and I can change somebody's mind about not being a native speaker is a disadvantage. You know then maybe I can make a greater good, greater difference for many more people around. (Karina, Interview)*

Despite their differing career aspirations, these NNESTs agreed on a fundamental principle: being a teacher goes hand in hand with being a lifelong learner. Recognizing each student learns differently, they acknowledged the importance of constantly developing their own knowledge and teaching method. This dedication to continuous improvement ensures that they can adapt to the evolving needs of their students and provide the best possible education.

Moreover, the findings further supported the notion that being NNESTs had no negative effect on their future expectations or professional growth. Instead of viewing their *non-native* status as a weakness, these NNESTs embraced it as a valuable asset that enriched their teaching approach with diverse perspectives and experiences, showcasing a positive prospective outlook. Their collective commitment to lifelong learning and positive impact served as an inspiration to students, encouraging them to embrace their own learning journey and develop into knowledgeable and compassionate individuals.

Subjective Educational Theory: Knowledge and Professionalism

Subjective educational theory is a personal system of knowledge and beliefs that teachers use during their job performance relating to education and teaching. The findings showed that the three NNESTs' perception of themselves as English language teachers had significantly impacted on their beliefs and value regarding knowledge and teaching methods. Besides possessing subject matter expertise, teachers needed to be self-aware of themselves as teachers in order to function effectively as professionals. Being a teacher and working professionally required a strong dedication to education and a true passion for assisting students in learning and growing, which would enable the teachers to clearly understand the organization's objective to help students in meeting requirements.

Somebody can be very good in speaking and using English, but can't teach, then you cannot be an English teacher. You have no right, even if you are a native English teacher, but if you can't teach, then you can't be an English teacher. (Ann, Interview)

I think English teachers should definitely be qualified to teach English by having basic knowledge of different genres, different literature, knowing grammar rules, knowing how to teach writing, knowing how to differentiate in the classroom, knowing that teaching English is not about students' comprehension of English level, but it's about teaching language. (Sohyoung, Interview)

Basic knowledge of English definitely would help! Other than that, like I said before, I do stand strongly on this ground that if a person is capable of learning and appreciates the differences and is humble and is willing to learn for the rest of their life and has energy to do so, I think you're all set to be a teacher whether it's an English teacher or any other kind of teacher. (Karina, Interview)

The findings indicated that the three NNESTs believed that proficiency in spoken English alone did not qualify someone to be an English teacher. Teaching skills were equally crucial. Even if a person was a *native* English speaker, they would not be fit in the role if they lacked the ability to teach effectively. Moreover, they believed that teaching English was not solely about assessing students' comprehension levels but rather about effectively imparting language knowledge. While a basic knowledge of English is essential, being a successful teacher goes beyond subject expertise. It required qualities such as openness to learning, humility, and a lifelong commitment to personal development. These qualities are essential for any teacher, whether English teachers or other subjects.

As observed, the findings in this aspect aligned with the teachers' perception of their abilities, which was twofold: firstly, to transmit language knowledge effectively and secondly, to serve as a role model of successful English language users to help students build up their positive attitude and confidence in the English language learning process. Subjective educational theory played a significant role in shaping the teachers' belief, values, and approach to education. Beyond linguistic expertise, a deep commitment to learning and inspiring students was deemed vital for effective teaching, particularly in the context of English language teacher education. Notably, the findings revealed that whether a teacher is *native* or *non-native* in the English language is not a determining factor for their effectiveness.

Discussion and Implications

This research explores NNESTs identity development in a multilingual international school by using the teacher's personal interpretive framework (Kelchtermans, 1993) and identity-in-practice

theory (Varghese et al., 2005). The findings have highlighted critical insights into NNESTs identity development in the multilingual international school. Based on the data, it is worth noting that these three NNESTs are exceptional in embracing their *non-native* status. While many NNESTs struggle with feelings of inadequacy and inferiority compared with NESTs (e.g., Lee & Kim, 2020), these three NNESTs in this study stand out differently. The ability to embrace *non-native* status is a critical strength as English teachers. This embracement has served as a reminder that language diversity is an advantage, not a weakness to worry about.

Firstly, the present study found that the participants' qualifications and excellent English language proficiency provided them considerable confidence in their status as NNESTs in this multilingual international school. They did not perceive their *non-native* status as a disadvantage, placing value on qualifications, teaching experience, and high English proficiency over *nativeness.* This finding is consistent with Methanonpphakhun and Deocampo (2016), who emphasize experience and practice as significant qualifications for language teachers. In contrast to Lee and Kim (2020), whose *non-native* participants with extensive English exposure could not overcome their *non-nativeness*, Ann and Sohyoung, who acquired English at a young age, developed natural language skills, and with Karina's adult exposure to English speaking country did not hinder her English development. Their English proficiency and qualifications made their *non-native* status inconsequential in their teaching role. The contrasting outcomes may be attributed to the cultural setting and educational institutions involved. Public schools and multilingual international schools often have different expectations in English language proficiency. The value system in each setting plays an important role in shaping the perception and development of NNESTs.

Secondly, several studies have shown that the background life experience of language teachers significantly influences identity formation (Cheung, 2015). Long-standing positive experiences as NNESTs of the participants contributed to a positive attitude and a lack of alienation. Ann, a Filipino, learned English at a very young age and integrated it into a part of herself. Sohyoung, a Korean, grew up in Thailand, considering herself multilingual and feeling more comfortable in English due to her English-speaking environment in adolescence and adulthood. Karina, a *native* Russian, developed her English skills during a scholarship in the United States, which helped her feel accepted despite being a *non-native* English speaker. These long-standing positive experiences shaped the participants' strong sense of positive identity and helped transition from marginalization as a *non-native* English speaker to acceptance of their *non-native* status (Park, 2012; Pavlenko, 2003).

Additionally, the findings revealed that the three participants did not feel a dichotomy between NESTs and NNESTs, which is consistent with the findings of Ulla (2019), who discovered that Filipino teachers teaching in Thai schools did not feel the difference between others' *native* status and their *non-native* status, even though there were some studies (e.g., Lee & Kim, 2020; Savski & Comprendio, 2022) pointing out the existence of these problematic issues. The present study's unique findings imply that the lack of such a dichotomy could be related to the distinctive multilingual environment of the

international school setting. The multilingual international school's emphasis on diversity and inclusion could result in a more inclusive perspective of language proficiency by challenging traditional differences. The present study found that high English proficiency and qualifications were crucial for the participants to have a strong sense of confidence, but having support from their professional context also played an essential role in shaping and reshaping their teacher identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). In international schools, a diverse population contributes to acceptance and appreciation for differences. While the belief that *native* English teachers are more effective resulting in discriminatory employment practices (Alseweed, 2012; Li-Yi, 2011; Selvi, 2011), this study presents a different perspective. The multilingual international school fosters acceptance by exposing students and staff to various cultures, languages and perspectives. The findings indicated that the three NNESTs did not experience discrimination in their professional context, suggesting a positive and non-discriminatory environment in the school.

However, being *non-native* existing in a position where many people believed it was only reserved for NESTs was not entirely smooth. The study revealed that the participants (Ann and Sohyoung) faced challenges related to their self-esteem and job motivation as they felt monitored and had to prove they were qualified to be in the position. The data analysis found that all aspects of their professional self, including self-image, task perception, and future perspective, were interconnected, but it was contrary to previous research on pre-service English teachers in Thailand (Prabjandee, 2020), that only two aspects: self-esteem and job motivation were significantly affected by their *non-native* status.

Although this study only examined the limited number of NNESTs in a multilingual international school in Thailand, it became clear that having advanced English language proficiency and a well-rounded set of qualifications were significant in building the confidence of these participants. Interestingly, their *non-native* status had no negative impact on how they perceived themselves as English teachers. Creating a supportive sociocultural context in the school was key in helping them maintain their positive identity and enhance their confidence. Notably, the participants did not only see themselves as legitimate English teachers but were seen by colleagues, parents, and students as well. This recognition helped reinforce their positive identity and develop their sense of self as *non-native* speakers constructively.

A limitation of this study is the subjective nature of narrative inquiry, in which we rely on the participants to tell us the truth based on their memories. Thus, the knowledge in this study should not be treated as a mirror of what happened, rather, it should be viewed as the co-construction between the participants and the researchers, which is in line with the narrative inquiry traditions (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Additionally, it is important to note that this present study focused on three female NNESTs in a multilingual international school to gain an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon. This focus may limit the transferability of findings to a broader context. Future research could involve more participants and also make sure that diversity of genders is included.

Conclusion

This study explored teacher identity development and identity in practice of three NNESTs working full-time at a multilingual international school in Thailand. It was revealed that the three NNESTs hold a strong sense of confidence in their position as an English language teacher and their teaching ability, deriving it from embracing their *non-native* status and believing in their qualifications that allowed them legitimacy of being an English teacher. Even though two aspects were found to be affected by their *non-native* status, they managed themselves effectively to overcome the two aspects with excellent results. Since NNESTs play a critical role in English language education, we argue that it is crucial to study their identity to understand how they establish themselves professionally and promote inclusivity and diversity. Acknowledging NNESTs challenges the bias that NESTs are better, when effective teaching ability is based on practice and knowledge, not a *native* status. Moreover, empowering and encouraging NNESTs to be proud of their status can help build their confidence and utilize their unique perspectives and cultural experiences to support students in learning English. As NNESTs gain positive feelings about their professional roles, this positivity can also lead to job satisfaction and retention. Understanding their identity allows us to provide support where needed and develop their strengths.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions Designed from Five Aspects of the Teacher's Personal Interpretative Framework

Self-image

1. Do you see yourself as an English teacher? Why?
2. In your opinion, do other people think that you are qualified to teach English? Why?
3. In your opinion, what makes someone an English teacher?

Self-esteem

4. Are you confident in teaching English?
5. What is your expertise in teaching English? What skills do you teach best? Can you give specific examples?
6. Do you feel you are a legitimate English teacher? Why?
7. Why do you think you are hired at this international school?
8. What is it like being a NNEST in the multilingual international school? What is it like to teach there?

Job motivation

9. Why did you decide to become an English teacher?
10. How did you decide to teach at the international school?
11. What makes you stay in the teaching profession?

Task perception

12. In your opinion, what are an English teacher's responsibilities?
13. Are you aware of the global spread of English? Can you give some examples of what it means to you?
14. Does the global spread of English impact your English classes?
15. How can you prepare your students for the globalization world?

Future perspective

16. What do you want to improve yourself in the future?
17. What do you want to learn more about English language teaching (ELT)?

Subjective educational theory

18. What is your understanding of being an English teacher?
19. What kind of knowledge and potential should an English teacher have?

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