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A Study of Professional Identities of Foreign Non-Native English Speaking Teachers

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This qualitative study explores how foreign non-native English speaking teachers (FNNESTs) perceive themselves as English educators and how they exert agency to be better perceived as professionals. Given the close relationship between teacher identity and its implications for educational outcomes, this study is based on Norton's (2008) perspective on identity, which posits identity as dynamic, contradictory, and constantly changing across time and place. The data collection process included four semi-structured interviews with two FNNESTs and four interactions on social networking sites. According to the results, the identities of FNNESTs were shaped through their initial language learning experiences, exposure to critically oriented scholarship in graduate school, their future anticipations, and mostly through their agency in the immediate professional context in which they currently teach. That is, four unique identities and one common identity were identified among the participants. In summary, FFNESTs do not perceive themselves as lacking but rather value their diverse language skills and past experiences as language learners.

Key words: language teacher identity, foreign non-native teachers, teacher agency

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1. INTRODUCTION

Researchers realized identity serves as an important analytical lens for understanding humans, their behaviors, education, and experiences (Norton, 2014). In light of the importance of researching identity, Norton (1997) defined it as "how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future" (p. 410). This perspective contrasts with the liberal-humanist stance, which presupposes identity as unique, fixed, and coherent (Weedon, 1987). Conversely, by adopting a poststructuralist theory instead, researchers posit identity as "dynamic, contradictory, and constantly changing across time and place" (Norton, 2008, p. 3).

Within the framework of post-structural theory, language teacher identity has also gained much attention from researchers (Ko & Kim, 2021; Norton & Toohey, 2002; Norton, 2010). The wealth of literature on language teacher identity can be motivated by its wide-ranging implications for educational outcomes (Donato, 2016) and teaching practices (Tsui, 2007; Zacharias, 2010). As Lee and Kim (2021) highlighted, "language teachers' professional identity is considered a critical component in language teaching and learning as it strongly affects how language teaching is played out" (p. 86). In that vein, as Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005) mentioned, "it is apparent that in order to understand language teaching and learning, we need to understand teachers; and in order to understand teachers, we need to have a clearer sense of who they are: the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim, or which are assigned to them" (p. 22).

A plethora of studies that explored the identities of language teachers have been centered on the dichotomy between native and non-native English teachers. However, there exists another subset of non-native English teachers who come from foreign countries (Lee, 2022). Foreign non-native English teachers (FNNESTs) can be defined as individuals who have non-English language backgrounds and whose first language is not English. FNNESTs can further be defined as individuals who do not share the same first language with the students and are not native to the country they are teaching in. For instance, these lists can include individuals from countries like Singapore, Malaysia, and Philippines, and so on. Unlike local non-native English teachers (LNNESTs), FNNESTs "have the additional concept of foreign, which leads people to think that these teachers may neither show authentic proficiency of English nor understand the native language of the country" (Lee, 2022, p.20). Consequently, FNNESTs are often considered much less suitable to teach non-native students than their local counterparts (Lee, 2022). In other words, in addition to stigmatization as 'non-native speakers', FNNESTs have an additional negative view as being 'foreign' which leads people to perceive them inferior to both native and local teachers (Lee, 2022). Given this position, FNNESTs professional identity might result in the marginalization (Kudaibergenov & Lee,

2022) and the derogatory naming of FNNESTs as second-class citizens in their profession.

In the light of these complexities and potential challenges, there is still a paucity of studies investigating the professional identities of FNNESTs (Lee, 2022). To address this gap, the aim of this paper is to explore how FNNESTs perceive themselves as English teachers and how they exert their agency to be better perceived as professionals. To achieve this objective, this study includes semi-structured interviews based on Davey's (2013) framework of a teacher's professional identity, which consists of five dimensions (i.e., becoming, doing, knowing, being, and belonging).

Thus, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1) How do FNNESTs perceive themselves as English teachers?

2) How do FNNESTs exert their agency to be better perceived as professionals?

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. Language Teacher Identity and Agency

Teacher identity in relation to language learning and teaching has received much attention from researchers (Ko & Kim, 2021; Norton & Toohey, 2002; Norton, 2010). Language teacher identity (LTI) can be referred to "the way language teachers see themselves and understand who they are in relation to the work they do, as well as the way others, including their colleagues and students and institutions, see them" (Barkhuizen, 2021, p. 549). In this paper, we define LTI as "the sense which a person has of the self as an individual, including the person's self-image and self-awareness" (Pennington & Richards, 2016, p. 3). In regard to non-native teachers, researching their identity is critically important, as their sense of self is continuously reshaping in response to their students' attitudes towards them and their roles in employment situations (Chen & Cheng, 2012). The established definition of LTI serves as a fundamental basis for our analysis, allowing us to explain how FNNESTs perceive themselves as English teachers as well as how they exert their agency to better be perceived as professionals.

The above definition closely aligns with post-structural perspectives on identity (Weedon, 1996), wherein identity is fluid, diverse, dynamic, shifting, co-constructed, and continually reconstructed through language and discourse (Norton, 2014). Several scholars have also noted the usefulness of applying a poststructuralist lens when investigating teacher identity (Kocabaş-Gedik & Hart, 2020), as this perspective challenges the traditional idea of an individual having a single fixed identity. Instead, it sees identity as a non-unitary trait (Smith, 2016). In addition, instead of viewing identity as a set of identifying characteristics, it can be regarded as a "type of performance, an enacting and positioning of the self within specific

contexts and within society" (Davies & Harre, 1990, as cited in Cheung, Said, & Park, 2014, p. 17).

Next, Norton (2000) states that the concept of identity is "a site of struggle" (p. 127). That is, viewing identity as multiple means that individuals can embody various aspects of themselves that can contradict due to diverse roles or values. Then, from a poststructuralist view, identity is both multiple and contradictory implying that individuals navigate through various identities as they negotiate and construct their sense of self. In essence, identity is not a given or innate feature; rather, individuals themselves must construct who they are, and they themselves should make a choice on how they want to be recognized in a certain context (Kouhpaeenejad & Gholaminejad, 2014). In line with this perspective, teachers' identity also cannot be separated from the context in which it is enacted (Lee & Kim, 2021). Simply put, our identity is context-bound. Consequently, humans relocating from one place to another will face a significant amount of change in their identity, both positive and negative (Weedon, 1996).

Olsen (2008) summarizes teacher identity as "the collection of influences and effects from immediate contexts, prior constructs of self, social positioning, and meaning systems (each itself a fluid influence and all together an ever-changing construct) that become intertwined inside the flow of activity as a teacher simultaneously reacts to and negotiates given contexts and human relationships at given moments" (p. 15). Given the collection of such influences on teacher identity, it is impossible not to go through any identity transformation (Olsen, 2008; Weedon, 1987).

The concept of teacher agency, as described by White (2018), should be viewed in connection with other important concepts like teacher identity, autonomy, and emotion. White (2018) defines teacher agency as "teachers' efforts to make choices within various contexts: in establishing and maintaining relationships with learners and colleagues, in engaging with new curricular requirements and assessment practices, in innovative learning, in participating in ongoing professional development opportunities and teacher workplace learning initiatives, in adapting themselves to the diverse requirements of their working contexts, and so on" (p. 196). In line with that, Duff (2012) describes agency as the capacity to make choices, take control, self-regulate, and thereby pursue individual goals, potentially leading to personal or social transformation. In the study of Kayi-Aydar (2015), which draw on post-structural theories and employed narrative inquiry to explore the identity negotiations of a foreign language teacher candidate, the researcher demonstrated the dynamic nature of agency. According to Kayi-Aydar (2015), teacher agency fluctuated and was shaped not only in different settings but also by interactions with others in those settings. Additionally, the study illustrated how the participant's status as a non-native Spanish speaker and her ethnic and racial identity as a white American influenced her agency. Ultimately, the participant decided to withdraw from her profession as a Spanish language

teacher and instead became an ESOL teacher (Kayi-Aydar, 2015).

2.2. Native/Non-native Dichotomy

The transformation of English from being a language of a few countries to the 'lingua franca' or international language has brought many changes in the language teaching profession (Llurda, 2004). One substantive change has occurred in the movement to go beyond the traditional idea of an ideal representative of the target language — native speakers. However, despite the extensive efforts to move towards welcoming more diverse variants of English, 'native speakerism' is still predominant (Kubota & Fujimoto, 2013; Shin, 2007).

In attempting to define a native speaker, Lee (2005) has outlined six defining features based on the existing literature. Firstly, a native speaker is someone who acquired the language in early childhood (Davies, 1991) and maintains its use (Kubota, 2004). Next, according to Davies (1991), the individual has intuitive knowledge of the language. Consequently, the third defining characteristic of a native speaker is that the individual can produce fluent, spontaneous discourse and Medgyes (1992). Thirdly, the individual is also able to communicate within different social settings. The last two defining features include the identification with or by a language community (Davies, 1991) as well as the individual speaking free from foreign accent (Medgyes, 1992).

According to Lee and Kim (2021), a non-native speaker may be capable of having all of the above characteristics of native speakers except for the one on early childhood acquisition. In that regard, native/non-native dichotomy is a linguistic colonial construct — simply put, a concept that divides language users according to the power relations of a colonial world (Kachru, 1986). It is assumed that it has a wide-ranging implication for how non-native teachers perceive themselves as professionals and how they are perceived by others. For instance, "the ramifications of the existence of the native speaker construct both in the TESOL profession and in popular use become particularly prominent when the construct finds its way into shaping the perceptions of language learners" (Brutt‐Griffler & Samimy, 1999, p. 417). Next, the pervasive ideology of native speakers is also seen in how the English teaching industry puts much emphasis on the advantageous nature of native speakers, especially in hiring practices. Accordingly, due to the prevailing native-speakerism, there continues to be a strong inclination towards native English teachers in the global field of English language teaching (Holliday, 2005); meanwhile, non-native teachers of English still might often encounter varying degrees of discrimination, particularly in employment opportunities (Lee & Kim, 2021), which in turn may weaken their professional legitimacy and identities (Pavlenko, 2003). For instance, Ruecker and Ives (2014) analyzed 57 online teacher recruitment spaces (websites) in countries like Japan, South Korea, and China.

According to their results, recruitment websites portrayed the ideal English Language Teacher candidate as “a young, White, native English speaker” from approved Western countries, regardless of qualifications. Moreover, a vast majority of the advertisements rejected non‐native counterparts by stating categorically that others need not apply (Selvi, 2010, p. 173).

2.3. Previous Studies on FNNESTs

Most of the researchers have been interested in the identity of English teachers in the dichotomy of native versus non-native teachers. However, research on the identity of FNNESTs is scarce (Lee, 2022). A couple of noticeable studies particularly relevant to the current study include research done by Lee (2022) and Kudaibergenov and Lee (2022).

Lee (2022), in his study about the professional identities of FNNESTs in Japan and South Korea, concluded that “in both countries, South Korea and Japan, NESTs were perceived as the ideal model, and FNNESTs were unfairly and/or discriminatively treated in both countries, a situation that could damage their identity as teachers” (p. 21).

The next study done by Kudaibergenov and Lee (2022) focused on the professional identity tension of three international preservice teachers from a graduate TESOL program in South Korea. According to the results of a collective case study, researchers found that international students in TESOL experience unique identity tensions associated with institutional, discursive, and regulatory forces residing in the host country (Kudaibergenov & Lee). That is, identity tension is derived from the constant rejection by the host community and local beliefs of the superiority of native speakers. In the light of these complexities and potential challenges, there is still a paucity of studies investigating the professional identities of FNNESTs (Lee, 2022).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants and Setting

To answer the proposed research questions, this study involved two participants recruited by snowball sampling (Merriam, 1998). During the initial recruitment phase, the researcher used existing personal contacts to help disseminate the recruitment notice to a wider population. Recruitment criteria included: a) foreign nationals who are not native English-speaking teachers; b) currently teaching in South Korea; c) willing to take part in the study. Throughout the recruitment process, participants and Professor A assisted the researcher by making initial contact and introducing the researcher to other participants with similar

experiences. Only after obtaining permission to contact the referred participants did the researcher send an invitation email and a consent form. However, of the four people referred to the study, only two signed a consent agreement and were successfully recruited for the study. The names of the participants have been changed to protect their privacy and confidentiality. The first participant Andrea, from the Philippines, is currently employed as a professor at one of the universities in Seoul and has experience teaching English for more than 10 years. Her initial career as an English teacher started in hagwon.

The second participant Maya, born and raised in Kazakhstan, despite graduating from a Chinese university with a degree in business, chose to pursue her ambition of teaching English at the international level. She initially got her TESOL certification in Europe. Her first experience teaching English roots back to her undergraduate degree, when she volunteered to teach Chinese children. After that experience, she realized that she is truly a born teacher, and she loves working with kids. Currently, she is working as a kindergarten teacher in Seoul.

Both Andrea and Maya made a conscious decision and took the initiative to relocate to South Korea. That is, they carefully considered their choices, leading them to apply to University A, attracted by its English-only medium of instruction in MA TESOL.

3.2. Data Collection

Within a qualitative research design, researchers mostly rely on interviews as the main source of data rather than on numbers and statistical data (Polkinghorne, 2005). Thus, the data collection tools of this study included semi-structured interviews with two participants. The sample of the interview questions can be found in Appendix. The first interview was conducted in March 2023, and the second in February 2024. During the initial interview, the researcher could gain valuable insights into the subject matter from the participants, but it became evident that follow-up interviews were necessary. Recognizing the importance of allowing participants time for reflection to elicit more detailed answers, the researcher decided to postpone the next interviews. Finally, a one-year gap between the interviews allowed the researcher to observe any changes in the participants' perspectives.

Both interviews lasted an hour each and were conducted online and recorded. During the semi-structured interviews, Kvale (1996) suggested "being empathic, using active listening and being sensitive to how something is said, and the non-verbal communication involved" (as cited in Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 165). Thus, the researcher used simple language that was understandable by all participants and created a welcoming atmosphere. In addition to semi structured interviews, the researcher inquired about the explanation of participants' responses and additional questions that arose after the data analysis through the KakaoTalk application (see Table 1).

TABLE 1

Details of the Interview

Participant	Type	Format	Date	Language of the interview	Length
Andrea	Semi structured interview	Online	2023.03.29	English	1 hour
Andrea	Written answer	SNS	2023.03.30	English	
Maya	Semi structured interview	Online	2023.04.04	English & Russian	1 hour 20 minutes
Maya	Semi structured interview	Online	2024.02.08	English & Russian	53 minutes
Andrea	Semi structured interview	Online	2024.02.13	English	47 minutes
Maya	Semi structured interview	Face to face	2024.02.19	Russian	2 hours
Maya	Written answer	SNS	2024.02.21	English	
Andrea	Audio answer	SNS	2024.02.22	English	2 minutes

3.3. Data Analysis

The entire process of data collection, analysis and interpretation was not linear. That is, after the first data collection through the semi-structured interviews, initial analysis occurred, which helped identify potential areas of interest. In the light of new insights, the interview questions were modified to gather more detailed information on themes that became apparent during the preliminary analysis.

After the researcher collected enough data, all recorded interviews with the participants and handwritten notes were transcribed manually using a transcription template. This template included sections for the participant's name, timestamps, and space for the transcribed audio text. Additionally, interviews conducted in Russian were translated into English by the researcher. Once transcribed, the researcher reviewed all the collected data multiple times to 1) identify recurring or salient identities peculiar to participants and 2) search for instances where they exerted their agency to be better perceived as professionals. During the initial coding of the data, the researcher identified six categories representing the identities of FNNESTs; however, during the final data analysis, the last two categories were merged due to their similarity. The researcher also highlighted the quotes that are believed to be a representation of FNNESTs identities and labeled them accordingly. Participants' own quotes served as a label to their identified identities.

Through revisiting the earlier stages, the researcher also sought feedback from an advisor, which led to further adjustments and improvements to the current study. Throughout the whole cycle, the researcher constantly kept in contact with participants through SNS to clarify, ask for additional information, and fill in the missing points. Finally, according to Merriam (1998), member checking ensures the study's results are credible. In other words,

interpreted data was returned to the participants for validation.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Before the initial data collection process, participants were informed about their rights, and consent was obtained. The researcher guaranteed that ethical principles were maintained from the beginning until the end of the research process and followed the norms of ethical research. This research fell into the category of no more than minimal risk and did not involve at-risk groups. Moreover, the study did not involve any physical, legal, or economic harm. Any information that could cause an issue with confidentiality has been minimized.

4. RESULTS

This section illustrates Andrea and Maya's similar as well as differing identities that were shaped through their initial language learning experiences, exposure to critically oriented scholarship in graduate school, their future anticipations, and mostly through their agency in the immediate professional context in which they currently teach. As the final stage of analysis, four unique themes have been identified that could characterize the identities of FNNESTs as well as how they exert their agency to better be perceived as professionals.

4.1. Andrea

4.1.1. A resilient professional

Throughout the whole interview process, it has become apparent that Andrea's journey to her current position as a language instructor at the university was an arduous path. Especially, Andrea shared that navigating through the stereotypes about FNNESTs made her more resilient. Regarding this, she mentioned:

> During this winter vacation, my colleagues shared a job opening at University A where professors were needed to teach at a language camp. I quickly prepared my documents, but my excitement was short (smiles), because during the document checking process, despite my qualifications and position as a professor, they returned my application. All my native colleagues successfully applied and were chosen. Did it make me sad? A bit, (laughs), but it means I will just need to look for other opportunities, right? (smiles). (Feb. 13, 2024; online interview)

Despite her qualifications and position, she faced a setback during the application process; however, it is clear that Andrea remained determined and continued to look for other opportunities. She shared:

> Initially, when I came to South Korea, I started working at hagwon. One day, when a native teacher fell ill, the director requested that I cover a native teacher's class for just one occasion. Unfortunately, on that day, a parent noticed their child being instructed by me – a Filipino teacher via CCTV, leading to a complaint and an immediate request by the director to leave the classroom. (Mar. 29, 2023; online interview)

There is no doubt that a lack of recognition of a teacher's credibility and professionalism can lead to a fragmented professional identity; however, this is not the case with Andrea. Despite the early negative experience with her credibility, it did not stop Andrea from continuing her professional development, as she completed her master's degree and later became an instructor at the university level. Andrea made a comment on that:

> When I got hired to university, I needed to compete alongside those who are from native countries, so I believe that getting a job was not a mere luck but my professionalism and experience. It gives me hope and confidence in continuing what I love. I am passionate about teaching. (Feb. 13, 2024; online interview)

She is a clarifying example of how the teacher's positive outlook might position herself for success and contribute to the creation of a resilient rather than fragmented professional identity. She also believes that by actively collaborating with other colleagues and showcasing her abilities at work creates the way for more opportunities.

According to Andrea, that is her coping mechanism and a way not to give up. It again highlights her identity as a resilient and strong teacher, positioning herself for commitment to overcome professional challenges.

4.1.2. An error positive teacher

When facing students' reluctance to speak and participate, Andrea was quick to take a rather friendly approach to her teaching, where students felt welcomed. In her statements, she contrasted herself from the teachers that prepared students for exclusively passing tests and positioned herself as an error-positive teacher and a lifelong learner. By identifying herself as an error positive teacher, she believed that her responsibility was not only in

teaching English but also in creating a safe environment where students could express themselves without being judged or devalued. According to Andrea:

> When I first started to teach at university, I felt like students held a distance and looked at me as an authoritative figure. They were hesitant to answer questions or avoid speaking at all, but after some time things started to change. They became more active, they started to speak out. Students say that I smile a lot, maybe, they realized that I am not a threat to them but rather a willing person to help and make their learning more enjoyable. (Feb. 13, 2024; online interview)

In exploring her identity as an error positive teacher, the researcher was also interested in how her cultural background might have shaped her teaching philosophy. In regard to that, Andrea highlighted the importance of her Filipino culture values, such as 'pagkalinga' which can be translated as caring nature. She sees 'pagkalinga' to be highly valued in the Korean context too. She embodies the concept of 'pagkalinga' in her teaching approach by showing genuine interest in the progress of her students, their concerns, and their well-being. Andrea's efforts to be an error positive teacher were also observed in her statements below:

> ...when addressing the mistakes of my students I shift their focus from perfection to progress emphasizing their learning potential. I reinforce the idea that learning is a continuous journey, and I am a lifelong learner too. (Feb. 13, 2024; online interview)

Furthermore, Andrea made the following comment:

> My students know that in my classes, I put much effort into making them understand that the more attention is given towards the intelligibility of their pronunciation rather than mimicking native like pronunciation, unlike what they are usually taught, that is to follow the American model in the classroom. (Feb. 13, 2024; online interview)

Andrea's perception of herself as an error positive teacher made her differentiate herself from other teachers who focus mostly on drilling and excelling in test scores. In that regard, as Denis-Constant Martin (1995) argues, "identity implies both uniqueness and sameness, one cannot be defined in isolation: the only way to circumscribe an identity is by contrasting it with other identities" (p. 5).

Another aspect of being an error positive teacher identity of Andrea can be seen in how

she fosters a collaborative learning environment by making students work together and learn from each other unlike when they used to study English just on their own while preparing for the exams. Furthermore, by portraying this identity, she views errors to be a valuable learning opportunity.

In the eyes of Andrea, her hard work and dedication is paying off as the students who have taken her course once register for her courses in the next semesters too. The above examples, drawing from the theories of positive psychology by Fredrickson (2001), reflect how positivity in the classroom constructed by both teachers and students can contribute to learners at multiple levels: emotionally, behaviorally, motivationally, and cognitively (Diert-Boté, 2023).

4.2. Maya

4.2.1. A non-verbal communicator

It was interesting to discover how Maya has internalized the role of a non-verbal communicator due to the low proficiency of English among her students, as well the restriction on using the Korean language. According to her, when she began the class, the children did not understand her instructions. They were unaware of when the class started, making her realize the necessity of relying extensively on her non-verbal communication skills and visual aids. Moreover, Maya mentioned:

> "It is not only that I have improved my non-verbal communication, but also that observing students' facial expressions and gestures has made me more successful in recognizing what they are thinking, especially when they are confused or distracted." (Feb. 8, 2024; online interview)

Through non-verbal communication, children make connections between the gestures she showed and their meanings, rather than requiring her to repeat a word multiple time. For example, she claps her hands to convey that the class has started, and the children immediately understand that they need to focus their attention on the teacher.

She highlights that many children have low exposure to English at home, as their parents do not speak the target language themselves. In that regard, children use English only at kindergarten and may face challenges in understanding their teachers. Since Maya does not have full proficiency in the Korean language, she has found a way to rely extensively on her facial expressions, body language, and gestures to communicate words that students do not understand. According to her, it takes a lot of energy and improvisation to explain one simple term "truck" for example, rather than simply giving a direct translation of it. By

incorporating non-verbal expressions, she is supporting children's word learning in the classroom and her dedication seems to pay off. Her scaffolding by non-verbal communication is an important layer of her teaching methodology.

Moreover, her colleagues have noticed this shift in her communication style after several occasions. They observed that she had developed a tendency to use hand gestures in daily conversations too. Moreover, through non-verbal communication, she became more aware of the cultural differences between local and her heritage culture. Maya mentioned that there were cases when she might have interpreted non-verbal messages from colleagues wrongly. According to her, there were instances when she did not understand why colleagues were taking pauses to answer, as prolonged silence in Kazakh culture might indicate that a person is feeling uncomfortable talking. However, after the misinterpretation of the message, she learned from her colleagues that a prolonged answer in Korean culture does not necessarily indicate an uncomfortable feeling but rather a time for reflection.

4.2.2. A character builder

Maya shared that choosing a teaching path has been one of the most significant decisions of her life. That is, she believes that her role as a teacher in kindergarten is not only to teach kids English but also to be responsible for their holistic development to become a member of society. She commented:

> Teaching kids that are all precious daughters and sons of their parents requires huge emotional labor daily. Kids might have tantrums or start to fight with each other, you know, and I felt like I first needed to learn how to make these precious kids just to sit still and listen to me. (Feb. 8, 2024; online interview)

In the above comment, Maya refers to her students as 'precious daughters and sons of their parents', indicating how she values each child. In that sense, extending beyond the traditional role of an English teacher, she believes that small interactions can have a significant effect on the character of the child. Her identity as a character builder is also portrayed in how she designs her lesson materials and activities. According to Maya:

> At the beginning of my work in the kindergarten I always asked my colleagues and sometimes the head to check whether the materials that I am including are appropriate. Not because I was worried about the quality, but the relevance. As a foreigner, I felt that there might be some cultural differences. Until now, I actively seek help from my colleagues when needed.

> Although moral themes might seem universal, I am conscious of not causing any issues. (Feb. 8, 2024; online interview)

Through the interviews with Maya, it became clear that her identity as a character builder was shaped by several factors. Firstly, when I asked Maya how she developed her role as a character builder, she connected her philosophy of teaching to her experiences with teachers who had a lasting impact on her own character. She commented:

> I remember that whenever we had a story to read, the teacher emphasized being kind, honest and empathetic. I believe by including those virtues in my practice, it is rather a plus, than a minus. And my superiors seem to like my teaching too. (Feb. 8, 2024; online interview)

Next, there is no doubt that Maya actively seeks input from her colleagues and superiors to ensure the appropriateness of teaching materials. She also mentioned that superiors recognize her efforts and value her teaching style. In that regard, positive feedback from other teachers and colleagues might have reinforced her identity as a character builder, encouraging her to continue emphasizing character building activities in her practice.

Due to her identity as a character builder, she seems to keep updated about all trends in cartoons, music, or the local preferences of children. According to her, it is not only about teaching them English, but also about connecting with them on a personal level during break time. For example, she shared that she knows beloved Korean cartoons such as Pinkfong, Pororo, Paw Patrol, and so on to familiarize herself because she wants to know what her students are interested in.

4.3. Andrea and Maya: We Are All Building the Same House

The general sentiment of both participants was that, despite not claiming the title of the perfect model of English speakers, participants believe that they are not lacking when it comes to teaching due to their previous L2 learning experience. In other words, both see their proficiency in other languages as a strength rather than a weakness. Maya made the following comment:

> As a language learner myself, I faced unique challenges when I first started to learn English. It included from simply being overwhelmed by vocabulary to being frustrated to speak. As a teacher I feel like I am equipped with theoretical knowledge that is needed to help my students during my studies, but on top of that as a previous language learner myself I feel empathetic to

> the difficulties that my students encounter and can truly relate to them. This awareness is highly appreciated by students and creates a connection as I share my own story. (Apr. 4, 2023; online interview)

Andrea shared that:

> I am more than happy if my students choose to attend classes with native speakers. It is also good if they choose classes with local English teachers. If they decide to join my class, I will do my best. I believe that comparing teachers based on who is better is not right, as each teacher has unique experiences and knowledge. Local Korean teachers are versatile; they share the same culture and language with students, giving them certain advantages. We cannot fulfill the same responsibilities as they do. While there are benefits from native speakers, I am also aware that my teaching has its benefits. My background as a language learner is an asset. (Mar. 29, 2023; online interview)

The above statements clearly indicate that participants have a positive image of both L2 learners and L2 users as they recognize their uniqueness. This echoes the argument made by Cook (1999), as people should not feel compelled to fit into the norms of a group they do not belong to, whether it is defined by race, class, sex, or any other feature. That is, speaking differently from a certain group does not mean speaking better or worse; moreover, comparing those groups highlights differences, not deficits. As Maya put it in a metaphorical way:

> I feel like we are all conductors like in the orchestra, you know, because the bottom line is that we all have our unique teaching methods just like melodies, two people cannot play the same way as well as not everyone would like only one music, the taste will differ, the aim is to touch the hearts of students. (Feb. 8, 2024; online interview)

The FNNESTs in this study used their multi-language competence as an indicator of their strength to position themselves as language professionals who are not exclusively better yet not necessarily worse than their colleagues. According to both participants, it appears that they might have felt less confident and compared themselves to native speakers, but they have undergone a change in their beliefs about the importance of their roles during their master's degree program. For example, Maya has highlighted the big impact of the introduction of concepts such as World Englishes, cognitive benefits of multilingualism, and

valued the impact of the courses that she has taken on her confidence in teaching English. This echoes the argument made by Belamghari (2020) as "identity is a process of becoming rather than being" (p. 1).

According to Hutchinson and Torres (1994), a source of implicit views about the native speaker might come from the course book, which provides a structure for many classes. That is, the description of English underlying course books seems implicitly native based, reflecting the teaching tradition's idealized normative view of English rather than actual description (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994). In that regard, both participants agreed that their positive view of their own language background is directly reflected in their teaching practices by going beyond the measurement of L2 learners against the native speaker's language use and meticulously choosing materials that are not heavily influenced by idealized normative views.

In sum, teachers recognize themselves as "multicompetent language users rather than as deficient native speakers" (Cook, 1999, p.185). As language learners themselves, both participants believe that besides their professional qualifications as certified TESOL professionals, their unique language learning experience itself has equipped them with valuable insights on language learning, which in turn makes them more adept at teaching English to others.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This qualitative study has explored how FNNESTs perceive themselves as English teachers in a South Korean context and how they exert agency to be better perceived as professionals. The results of this study are consistent with previous research done by Cheng (2021). That is, teacher identity development is influenced by several factors, which might include pedagogical beliefs, their expectations, perceptions, and environmental factors. In that sense, the identities of FNNESTs were shaped through their initial language learning experiences, exposure to critically oriented scholarship in graduate school, their future anticipations, and mostly through their agency in the immediate professional context in which they currently teach.

In contrast to previous research that found prevailing negative self-image among NNESTs (Jenkins, 2005), the findings of this study suggest that although both participants knew that they were in an undesirable position regarding their status as FNNESTs in South Korea, they both had profound interest in challenging those assumptions and legitimizing their roles as multi-competent teachers of English. According to Butler (2007), feelings of insecurity or lack of confidence in teaching can be attributed to teachers' strong belief in the native teacher's fallacy. Unlike in other studies, both participants in this research did not accept that

English is most effectively taught only by native teachers. That could be a potential explanation for their rather positive than fragmented outlook towards their professional identities. Next, "individuals are constantly in search of new social and linguistic resources which allow them to resist identities that position them in undesirable ways" (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004, p. 27). In that regard, both participants concluded that positioning themselves through native/non-native dichotomy is unfavorable as then their teaching philosophy implies that their students have no chance to become successful language learners too. Instead, identifying themselves as multi-competent language users, they have built a sense of confidence in themselves as well as strong belief in the potential of their students, which is reflected in their teaching practices. This is in line with the statement made by James-Wilson (2001), as teachers' professional identities are influenced by not only how they feel about themselves but also how they feel about their students. That is, this professional identity enables teachers to position themselves in relation to their students and to make appropriate adjustments in their practice and their beliefs and engagement with students (as cited in Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006).

In light of this, teaching in a South Korean educational setting, participants had a chance to look through a fresh lens on their own language learning experiences. This intricate relationship between the personal and professional selves of teachers has been well documented by Duff and Uchida (1997). In line with their results, where the participant "saw herself as a bilingual role model" for her students, our participants' professional identity had a close link to their personal experiences of being a language learner too (Duff & Uchida, 1997, p. 468). Thus, by identifying themselves as previous language learners, they created a connection to their students' struggles and position themselves in a more favorable way. For example, Andrea, who positioned herself as an error positive teacher, observed the unique educational environment in Korea where English achievement is highly valued and understood that it might be pressuring her students (Ryu & Lee, 2024). In that sense, as a FNNEST, Andrea created a supportive learning environment, embracing her error-positive identity and challenging the prevailing norms of perfectionism. In that sense, Maya's identity as a character builder highlights her previous experiences being a language learner and the profound impact of her own teachers. In that regard, her agentive decisions in building appropriate curriculum for her students can be informed by her past experiences. According to Haneda and Sherman (2016), "the past includes both teachers' past experiences and the skills and values acquired through them" (p. 747). Although Maya could have just used the materials provided by the kindergarten, she was invested in creating her new materials under her colleagues' supervision. As Wenger (1998) argued "there is a profound connection between identity and practice" (p. 149). In that sense, Maya's professional identity as a character builder aligns with the statement of Kiely (2018) where teachers are mediators of curriculum rather than mere deliverers, emphasizing the active role Maya plays in shaping

the educational experiences of her students.

Next, it is undeniable that another significant source of positive professional identity formation among language teachers is the recognition of their professional qualities and dispositions by the community of practice (Wenger, 1998). According to Wenger (1998), a community of practice is a group of people who share a common interest, engage in joint activities, and develop shared practices and understandings over time. That is, both participants were open to collaboration with colleagues, seeking advice when needed and asking for help, which illustrates their willingness to learn more about the peculiarities of teaching practice in the Korean context. The participant reiterated several times how important it is for teachers to learn about the culture of their local community unless the teacher might feel alienated. Among the five trajectories proposed by Wenger (1998), both participants seem to fall into 'inbound trajectories' where newcomers enter a community's practices and become invested in them. In other words, members engage in the community's activities with an eye towards their future involvement and anticipate full membership. In that sense, this process of engagement and anticipation of full membership contributes to the formation of their professional identities by "adopting the larger societal image of a teacher" (Chong, 2011, p. 222). By rejecting the potential ascription of identity as "a teacher who neither demonstrates authentic proficiency nor understands the native language of the country", both participants were able to find their ways to view and position themselves in a more positive light (Lee, 2022, p. 20). That clearly illustrates that teachers made conscious decisions to exert their agency to be better perceived as professionals. According to Richards and Schmidt (2013), agency can be defined as "the capacity for human beings to make choices and take responsibility for their decisions and actions" (p. 18). Despite facing constraints, their active participation and awareness of local culture helped them to achieve their current position. As Benson (2017) argued, the participants' professional identities were heavily influenced by the exercise of their agency in response to the surrounding context.

In summary, this study tried to shed light on the professional identities of FNNESTs, a subgroup that has received little attention in research within the broader category of non-native English teachers. There is no doubt that the experiences of Andrea and Maya cannot be representative of all FNNESTs; nonetheless, this study provides a valuable glimpse into their lived experiences.

Next, the significance of the study lies not only in its findings, but also in the implications they hold for many FNNESTs around the world. First, the findings of this study suggest that the positive professional identity of FNNESTs that they have achieved can be attributed to their exposure to critically oriented scholarship in graduate school. In that sense, FNNESTs should be encouraged to embrace a multi-competent identity rather than position themselves in relation to native/non-native dichotomy by providing them with training, seminars, and

workshops on the above notion. This shift in perspective of teachers might help to create more effective language teaching practices as teachers' confidence in themselves is heavily reflected in their roles and practices as language teachers. In addition, the personal histories of FNNESTs should be acknowledged; and thus, institutions should provide more opportunities for FNNESTs to reflect on their past experiences and incorporate them into their practices.

Finally, there are some suggestions for future researchers who are interested in exploring the identities of FNNESTs. Firstly, future researchers can gain more valuable insights by collecting multiple data such as classroom observations, journal entries and teaching materials. In that regard, investigating FNNESTs daily practices as well as classroom interactions will reveal a clearer picture of their professional identities and factors affecting it. Next, future researchers can also look at teacher identity through change and adapt longitudinal methodologies. In turn, researchers will be able to track changes in the identity construction and transformation process over a prolonged time. Finally, future researchers can also adapt other theoretical approaches, such as using the lenses of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), and examine how various intersecting identities, including but not limited to gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and linguistic identity, interact, and influence the professional identity formation of FNNESTs.

Applicable levels: Tertiary

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APPENDIX

Sample Interview Questions

I. Demographic and Professional Background

1. Where were you born?
2. What is your primary language spoken? What other languages do you speak?
3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
4. Are you currently employed?

II. Based on methodological framework for investigating professional identity

1. Can you describe the journey or experiences that led you to become an English teacher in a foreign country?
2. In your opinion, what are the key responsibilities and roles of an English teacher, especially as a non-native teacher in a foreign context?
3. How does your cultural background influence your identity as an English teacher?
4. In what ways do you navigate or negotiate your identity as a foreign non-native English teacher within the educational context?
5. Can you talk about your sense of belonging within the professional community of English teachers in the foreign country where you teach?
6. What steps or initiatives have you taken to enhance your professional development as an English teacher?
7. Have you encountered any resistance or challenges in asserting your agency as a non-native English teacher, and how did you overcome them?
8. Can you discuss instances where you've intentionally shaped or presented your professional identity to challenge stereotypes or misconceptions?