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Towards Becoming a Transnational Language Educator

NATALIA WRIGHT

College of Engineering and Technology, American University of the Middle East, Kuwait

Abstract

The issues surrounding the personal and professional lives of TESOL educators in transnational landscapes have gained increased attention in the past decade. Existing research on transnationalism underscores the significance of expatriates' experiences, particularly those who originate from 'non-center' and whose careers lead them to work in 'periphery' countries, setting their experiences apart from those of (im)migrants. This study examines the experiences of 'non-native' English-speaking (NNEST) teachers working in transnational contexts, their motivations for relocation, and the challenges they face in adapting to new societies. Guided by the concept of 'becoming', the research investigates the key turning points and types of becomings encountered by these expatriate teachers in their journeys towards a transnational identity. Drawing on theories of the 'Third Space', the article attempts to understand the ideological transformations that occur within transnational spaces. The findings offer insights into the complex and evolving process of becoming transnational for expatriate 'non-native' language educators. By understanding their journeys of self-transformation, this study contributes to the literature on transnationalism and offers valuable perspectives for policymakers and educational bodies. The outcomes of this study endeavor to enhance support for NNESTs by recognizing their transnational experiences as pedagogical resources.

Keywords: transnationalism, Third Space, TESOL, non-native teacher, becoming

Introduction

The phenomenon of transnationalism has long been of interest in migration studies, while TESOL scholarship has only recently started focusing on this area. This change is attributed to the increased international mobility of English language teaching professionals, facilitated by the widespread adoption of English as a global *lingua franca*. Ever since Johnston's (1999) investigation into teachers working abroad, there have been several efforts to better understand the lives and work of those who have chosen to work outside their countries of origin (see, for example, Barnawi & Ahmed, 2020). However, I believe that a specific category of language

teachers, known as 'non-native'[1] or second language (L2) educators, has been insufficiently represented in transnational literature despite making up 80% of all TESOL teachers globally (Freeman et al., 2015). The current study aims to fill this gap by examining the experiences of 'non-native' teachers working in transnational contexts, their motivations for relocation, and the challenges they encounter in adapting to new societies.

This study is guided by the concept of 'becoming', which views an individual's life as an ongoing process of growth and transformation, metaphorically akin to the metamorphosis of a butterfly. Similarly, I argue that becoming transnational involves a series of critical moments or turning points, each bringing the individual closer to a fully realized transnational identity that is constantly evolving. This metamorphosis takes place in the 'Third Space(s)' (Bhabha, 1994), which appears physically nested between cultures defined by borders and imagined, representing sites of ideological transformations. Driven by my own experiences of expatriation, I questioned whether everyone who crosses a border becomes transnational or if some never reach this stage. Additionally, I wondered at what point individuals came to know that they had become transnational and after how many years of living in cultures outside their own. Thus, the purpose of this research is to gain a more comprehensive picture of how expatriate 'non-native' teachers go through the process of becoming transnational while traversing various borders. Based on this objective, I have formulated two research questions:

(1) What are the key turning points in becoming transnational for expatriate 'non-native' English teachers?
(2) What types of becomings do expatriate teachers encounter throughout their transnational journeys?

To investigate the complex dimensions of becoming transnational, I begin by revisiting transnationalism within the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Language (TESOL) domain. Subsequently, I review the existing literature on expatriate language educators. Following this, I conceptualize the Third Space theory that guided this research. This is succeeded by a discussion of the methodology and data analysis, the results of which are presented in the findings. Finally, in the discussion section, I offer interpretations of these findings and conclude the article by suggesting potential avenues for further research.

Literature Review

Transnationalism in TESOL

The TESOL field has conceptualized transnationalism by drawing insights from Vertovec's (2009) theorization of the phenomenon as ongoing connections, exchanges, and practices that transcend national boundaries. From a linguistic standpoint, the prefix 'trans-' offers valuable insights. Translated from Latin as 'across', 'through', and 'beyond' (OED, 2017), it characterizes the phenomenon of transnationalism as a dynamic and ever-changing model with fluid and evolving properties. According to Yazan et al. (2020), 'trans-' is more than just a prefix, but rather:

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[1] Although I recognise the reductive nature of the 'native' and 'non-native' labels, I have nonetheless used them in this study, as they encapsulate the discriminatory experiences of non-native English-speaking educators who are the focus of my research. While these labels are overly simplistic, they serve to illuminate the persistent inequities and biases confronting this population. non-native English-speaking educators who are the focus of my research.

> a conceptual challenge, perhaps a rupture, to the 'neatly' delineated physical and ideological borders that insidiously underlay and undergird our practices and identities as a field. (p. 10)

Given the global prominence of English, the work of English teachers is no longer limited to national borders. With the rise of globalization, the growing worldwide demand for English language teaching experts has led to a significant increase in occupational mobility over the past two decades (Blommaert, 2010; Canagarajah, 2017; McKay, 2018). Johnston (1999) was one of the pioneering researchers who investigated the nomadic nature of expatriate teachers' lives. The global nomad theme is echoed in Neilsen's (2009) longitudinal study on 'native' expatriate teachers and the complexity of their work in countries outside their homes. Pursuing similar aspirations, Barnawi and Ahmed (2020) present a diverse range of studies that explore the dynamic relationship between TESOL teacher education and transnationalism. These studies delve into the multifaceted ways in which the professional knowledge of English language teachers evolves as a result of their border-crossing activities. In a similar vein, Poole's (2021) work examined a group of 'native' English-speaking expatriate teachers working in international schools in China to depict their constant navigation between challenges and achievements. More recent research (for example, Cho et al., 2022; Jain et al., 2021; Yazan et al., 2023) devoted much attention to the complex identity formation processes experienced by transnationals. Jain et al. (2021), for example, draw attention to transnational 'pracademics'—individuals who are simultaneously involved in language teaching and research across various global settings. As they reflect on their personal experiences, their stories reveal the remarkable ways their career paths shifted from the 'periphery'[2] (non-Western contexts) to the 'center' (Western academia) and back again.

As previously mentioned, the perspectives of 'non-native' English teachers working abroad are not extensively represented in the scholarly discourse on transnationalism. Bookman and Olivera (2021) tried to address this gap by focusing on the integration of a foreign-born faculty member into the social and academic community in the US. Her transnational identity became evident as she traveled through cultural, ideological, and linguistic challenges. Given that my research focuses on the experiences of 'non-native' language teachers, their work holds particular significance for my study, which examines the experiences of English language teaching (ELT) professionals who came from the 'periphery' to work in other 'outer circle'[3] countries.

Self-Initiated Expatriate Language Teachers

Most works cited in this article thus far dwell on individuals who immigrated to Anglophone nations to pursue doctoral studies and subsequently obtained permanent residency. For this reason, they could be considered immigrants and have been, therefore, excluded from this study. Less is known about those who initiate their move to another land for work purposes and where they hold the status of non-permanent residents or "sojourners" (Duff, 2015, p. 58). This category of overseas hires typically must leave host countries when their contracts expire.

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[2] 'Periphery' corresponds to the territories where English is not a native language but has significant influence due to historical, economic, and political factors, often resulting in linguistic and cultural dependency on English-speaking nations (Phillipson, 1992).

[3] Kachru (1985) defines the three circles of English as follows: the 'Inner Circle', also understood as the Centre consists of countries where English is the native language (e.g., USA, UK); the 'Outer Circle' includes countries where English serves as a second language due to historical colonisation (e.g., India, Nigeria); and the 'Expanding Circle' covers countries where English is learned as a foreign language (e.g., China, Japan).

To differentiate this group of expatriate language teachers from migrants and others known as 'organizational expatriates' (OEs) or 'assigned expatriates' (AEs) (Selmer & Lauring, 2013), I use Cerdin and Selmer's (2014) categorization as 'self-initiated expatriates' (SIEs). The authors list four traits that define individuals as SIEs. They are (1) self-initiated relocation to another country, (2) a desire for consistent employment, (3) an intention for a temporary stay, and (4) possession of professional qualifications.
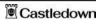
I distinguish two subcategories within the broader pool of English language teaching expatriates. The first group comprises 'native' English language-teaching expatriates (NELTEs) whose primary language is English. The second group consists of 'non-native' English language-teaching expatriates (NNELTEs) who have learned English as an additional/foreign language. Both NELTEs and NNELTEs fall into three categories: 1) NELTEs from 'inner-circle' countries who work in 'outer 'or 'expanding circles', 2) NNELTEs from 'periphery' countries who work in the 'center', and 3) NNELTEs who have left their home countries and teach in other non-central territories. While the experiences of the first and second groups of teachers have been extensively discussed in the literature, the third group has received less attention from scholars. Such research is largely confined to a handful of dissertations (see Khan, 2011 and Desai, 2019, for example) and a relatively small number of published articles (Comprendio & Savski, 2020; Lemana II, 2022; Lin & Shi, 2021). All of them center around the lived realities of 'non-native' SIEs working abroad with one common theme that makes research into this group particularly valuable: discrimination based on their 'non-native' status. This is not to suggest, however, that expatriate 'native' English speakers (NES) are not subject to unfair treatment in recruitment. As evidenced by Kiss and Medgyes (2019), they endure similar hardships to their 'non-native' counterparts.

The recent review of publications on both groups of ELT professionals (Selvi et al., 2023) indicates that systemic biases against 'non-native' teachers are still a frequent occurrence. This fact puts the cohort at a greater disadvantage compared to native-born teachers. Furthermore, research on native-speaking expatriate teachers suggests that this group often perceives their experiences abroad as heroic or adventurous journeys (Johnston, 1999; Osland, 1995). In contrast, 'non-native' teachers tend to see their transnational experiences as a struggle for equality and professional recognition, often feeling like "lonely fighter[s]" (Yuan & Burns, 2017, p. 729). So, it would be inaccurate to homogenize the experience of 'native' and 'non-native' expatriate teachers because they are not the same. Although much has been done by the TESOL organization (TESOL, 1992, 2006) to put an end to various prejudices in the recruitment spaces, a brief look at the job advertisements available online points to the fact that the contemporary ELT market is still ruled by the 'Must be a native speaker' requirement. Therefore, transnational lives for those who were not born into the nativity are complicated by various factors, including not having the 'right' nationality and passport, visa regulations, and lack of Western qualifications. This is frequently reflected in the lower salary or the so-called 'perks' available to them compared to their 'native' colleagues. This further underscores the need to research non-native expatriate teachers, as their unique challenges and experiences are often overlooked and underrepresented in transnational discourse.

Theoretical Frameworks

The Ontology of Becoming

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the concept of 'becoming' is crucial in understanding the transformative nature of the lives of transnational non-native English language professionals. By way of illustration, I imagine becoming transnational as a butterfly metamorphosis.

Before an egg becomes a butterfly, it undergoes profound transitions: egg, larva, pupa, and adult. Each stage of development signifies a transition from a state of 'being' to a state of 'changing to', eventually leading to self-transformation. Much like a butterfly's life phases, expatriate teachers undergo multiple 'becomings' in their transnational journeys, such as leaving their home countries, adjusting to new cultures, struggling for belonging, and adapting to new work environments. From this point, metamorphosis involves a series of critical moments culminating in an individual "*becom[ing] other than what he was* [emphasis in original]" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 115).
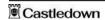
Canagarajah (2020) applied the concept of becoming in relation to transnational writers who occupy liminal positioning between cultures and languages. These in-between spaces become opportunities for cultivating identities that open new ways of being in the world (Morson, 2004). Since identity is never static but continuously being transformed, 'becoming' can be seen as a continuous process of self-development rather than the final endpoint. Similar ideas can be found in the works of many other scholars who, despite some terminological differences, view 'becoming' a perpetual quest for transformation leading to the "emerg[ence] as the others of our selves" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 57).

Third Space

Transnational becoming occurs in a 'Third Space', an "interruptive", "interrogative", and "enunciative" space (Bhabha, 1994, p. 341) that emerges when people live between their traditional cultures and new, imposed ones, continuously reinterpreting their identities. Soja (2008) resonates with Bhabha's reasoning, describing Thirdspace as a "contradictory and ambiguous" (p. 56) area of resistance and struggle. If for Bhabha this space is non-material, for Soja, Thirdspace is both physical and mental, real and imagined (Figure 1). This 'Thirdspace' is embedded within a 'trialectics of spatiality-historicality-sociality', where 'historicality' corresponds to the tangible, objective 'Firstspace', while 'sociality' represents the subjective, 'imagined' 'Secondspace'. The 'Thirdspace' is a transcendent synthesis that encompasses these various spatial dimensions.

Figure 1 The trialectics of being.
Adapted from Soja (1996, p. 71).

Similarly, Anzaldúa (1987) calls this space *Nepantla*, "the space between two worlds" (p. 276), viewing it as a transformative stage of continuous transition.

This study adopts a combination of 'Third Space' perspectives, seeing it as both physical and imaginary. Physically, it manifests as geographical spaces inhabited by people of different nationalities who do not speak English as their first language (Anzaldúa, 1987). Phillipson (1992) refers to these regions as the 'Periphery,' influenced by imperialist pressures from the 'Centre'—the Anglophone countries of Kachru's (1985) model of concentric circles. Despite criticisms of Kachru's model for not fully accounting for the dynamic role of English in the 'Outer Circle' nations, it still functions as a useful framework to represent ideological connections between different types of English and their associated identities.

'Third spaces' act as 'interstitial spaces' Bhabha (1994), challenging the idea that linguistic identity is determined solely by nationality. It is these spaces that encompass "a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings" (Soja, 1996, p. 2). 'Third Space(s)' is where contrasting cultural attitudes interlace, enabling other positions to emerge. They are sites of becoming transnational through revaluing colonial identities and moving beyond 'center–periphery' boundaries towards the recognition of the legitimacy of diverse language professionals.

Methodology

This article reports on one part of a larger qualitative study (Author, 2024) into the lived experiences of expatriate second language teachers, in which I was also a participant of the study. For this article, I focused solely on the interviews conducted with the participants, ensuring that their voices and perspectives are foregrounded in the analysis.

Researcher Positionality

Pendlebury and Enslin (2001) contend that in articulating positionality, it is necessary to consider how one's personal history and background inform, converge, or collide with the research context. Being a 'non-native' English teacher living and working in one of the 'expanding circle' countries made me an insider, a 'member' (Merton, 1972) of their group due to our shared linguistic backgrounds and expatriate status. Having these commonalities allowed me to establish a closer connection with the participants. Scholars (see, for example, Collins & McNulty, 2020) have noted that this insider position can offer advantages, such as facilitating better rapport, granting greater access to their perspectives, and enabling more detailed and nuanced data collection.

On the other hand, my researcher role and unfamiliarity with the contexts in which the participants were situated positioned me as an outsider in certain ways. My outsider status gave me some distance and allowed me to learn more about my participants' experiences. However, it did not help me remain 'neutral' and achieve objectivity. But neutrality and objectivity were not my aims. Consistent with the interpretive approach I adopted for my study, the detachment was neither feasible nor desirable. Furthermore, Ormston et al. (2014) argue that achieving complete objectivity is impossible regardless of how much we reflect, so I tried to minimize subjectivity by avoiding potential biases throughout the data collection and analysis processes.

The dual insider-outsider positioning afforded me the opportunity to be "the native speaker" and "an attentive listener" (Pendlebury & Enslin, 2001, p. 362) to learn not only about the ways my participants and I were similar but also how we differed from each other. According to Dwyer and Buckle (2018), researchers rarely occupy a singular position; rather, they exist in the space between the two, dwelling in a fluid, liminal state.

Participants

The participants for this study were selected based on specific criteria. They were English language teachers with expertise in teaching the language as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL). They had relocated to a foreign country for employment purposes, where English was not the dominant language. At the time of the interviews, the participants had been residing abroad for a minimum of five years. Drawing on the researcher's personal experience as an expatriate, the longer one resides in a foreign country, the more likely they are to undergo multiple "transnational epiphan[ies]" (Ku, 2020, p. 91), which are moments when individuals realize they have become transnationals. This purposeful selection approach allowed me to identify participants with "information-rich cases" (Patton, 2015, p. 178), meaning they had characteristics and knowledge suitable for informing the research question. The decision to involve a limited number of participants in this study aligns with the typical approach of experience-centered narrative research, which prioritizes the depth and detail of individual experiences (Squire, 2008). The characteristics of each participant are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Participant information.

Pseudonym	Gender	Country of origin	Professional Qualifications	Countries previously worked (other than home)	No of years spent abroad	Current Country
Zoe	Female	Hungary	BA, MA in English language teaching, CELTA[4], B2-C1[5] oral examiner	UK, Kuwait, China	7	Hungary
Katerina	Female	Russia	B.ED (Honors), MA in English teaching, CELTA, DELTA[6], TEFL[7]	Turkey, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Thailand	15	Thailand
Jason	Non-binary	Philippines	BA in English language teaching, IELTS trainer, CELTA	Sudan, Vietnam	6	Vietnam
Mila	Female	Russia	BA in English language teaching, CELTA	Japan, Vietnam	8.5	Vietnam
Antoni	Male	Poland	BA in teaching English as a foreign language	Ireland, Brazil, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia	20	Vietnam
Bart	Male	Holland (The Netherlands)	BA in History, BA in Early Childhood Education	Australia, Japan	30	Japan

[4] Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.
[5] Participants' English language proficiency levels are referenced to describe their linguistic capabilities.
[6] Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.
[7] A Teaching English as a Foreign Language certification is an internationally recognised professional qualification that is typically required for individuals to provide instruction in English to non-native speakers of the language.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study employed interviewing as "the main tool to bring alive the lived experience of people and communities" (Brown, 2003, p. 1793). The interviews were conducted over Zoom, a videoconferencing platform. Participants were interviewed once, with each interview lasting about 60 minutes. Since the study relied on data provided by human participants, I obtained approval from the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the University of Glasgow. To explore participants' experiences, I developed an interview guide (see Appendix A) based on the research questions containing open-ended prompts such as *"Can you tell me…"*. These prompts aimed to tap into the interviewees' "stock[s] of knowledge" (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 67) about the research topic without leading them to specific responses, resulting in rich and detailed narratives.

   I utilized Braun and Clarke's (2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to process and analyze the data. It involves six stages: (1) Becoming familiar with the data; (2) Coding; (3) Generating initial themes; (4) Developing and reviewing themes; (5) Refining, defining, and naming themes; (6) Writing up. During the familiarization stage, I transcribed the data and carefully read and re-read the texts, taking notes to become acquainted with the content. After transcribing the interviews, I removed any potentially identifiable information from the transcripts to protect the participants' identities. In the coding phase, I identified two code groupings: 'theory-driven' and 'data-driven' (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The former includes deductively found latent codes, while the latter contains inductively constructed semantic codes. A total of 221 codes were created, which were later collapsed into shared themes in phase three. By fine-tuning the initial themes in phases four and five, they were consolidated into four large themes with subthemes, representing different stages of the becoming cycle: The Beginning (Egg), Learning to be a Caterpillar (Larva), Metamorphosis (Pupa), and Fly, Fly, Butterfly (Adulthood). In stage six, I wrote the final report, presenting the findings with both illustrative and analytical data extracts. Finally, I interpreted the findings, drawing connections to the relevant theoretical framework and literature. Below, I present the key themes that have emerged from the data analysis.

Findings

This section contains the main discoveries from the interviews with the participants. These findings aim to offer insights into the overall research question: How do expatriate 'non-native' language teachers experience becoming transnational? The findings indicate that the process of becoming transnational for such teachers was marked by crucial turning points — from the initial decisions to seek international employment to the challenges of settling in and surviving in foreign lands. I examine their transformative journeys by focusing on each of the four themes.

Theme 1. The Beginning (Egg)

The initial theme explores the participants' reflections on the early phases of their international professional transitions and the reasons underlying their choices to accept teaching roles abroad. This theme serves as an entry point to participants' border crossings, signifying the preliminary stages in their process of becoming transnational. Within this theme, three sub-themes were developed to offer deeper insights: Pre-Transnational Selves, The Decision to Move, and 'I Applied and Eventually I Got a Job'.

Pre-Transnational Selves

Antoni worked as an English teacher in both public and language schools in his hometown in Poland for five years before moving to Ireland. Reflecting on his teaching experience, he found teaching teenagers challenging due to their close age gap, saying, "They sometimes treated

me like their friend or older brother". Bart, originally from Holland, moved to Australia at 19 and pursued a Bachelor of Arts in English despite initial language difficulties. He humorously described his degree as a "glorified ESL course" and later pursued a postgraduate degree in business without a clear direction. He could be identified as an 'accidental teacher' (Poole, 2021) who did not initially plan to go into teaching but, by circumstance, found himself in the profession.

Zoe, born in Romania but identifying as Hungarian, completed her English degrees and a CELTA course in Hungary before teaching there for seven years. Her move to China marked her first experience as an expatriate. Jason, originally from the Philippines, began his career in English language teaching after earning a bachelor's degree in secondary education. He held various roles, including IELTS trainer and customer service representative, before moving to Vietnam in 2016. Such difficulty finding a language teaching job could be attributed to the oversupply of language teacher development programs that outpaces available job openings in some countries (Zein & Butler, 2023). Mila, from Russia, started teaching English enthusiastically but briefly considered leaving due to frustrations with the school system. She returned to teaching and focused on business and general English to corporate clients before relocating to Japan. Katerina, also from Russia, pursued additional qualifications, including a master's degree and TEFL certification, driven by the need for international recognition of her credentials. She elaborated:

> The only reason why I did it is because again, speaking of native, non-native differences, you know, especially those degrees are not always recognised as masters, right?

The Decision to Move

Overall, the participants' motivations for moving abroad varied widely, including seeking new experiences, professional growth, relationship considerations, and economic opportunities. Bart's interest in Japan stemmed from curiosity sparked by images in his mother's encyclopedia and the economic opportunities of the late 1980s. He recalled his initial experience with a mix of nostalgia and excitement, highlighting the allure of the booming economy and the demand for English teachers at the time:

> And you know, you'd get paid $100 just to talk to some businessmen, and people take you out drinking and eating and just to talk English to you. So, uh, yeah, I just went because everyone else was going because it was such a fun and easy job for six months on a working holiday.

Mila's decision to leave Russia was motivated by dissatisfaction with her workplace environment and a desire for professional development opportunities. Reflecting on her experience, she noted:

> I liked teaching at the university there in Moscow [name] University, but I knew that I couldn't imagine working in that place all my life for a long time.

Her move to Japan marked a significant shift, where she developed a strong affinity for Asia.

Jason, feeling stagnant in his career in the Philippines, sought new challenges abroad. He remarked on the need to grow professionally and personally, saying, "I wanted to grow more. I thought that I achieved already what I wanted to achieve back home". His decision to move was also driven by a thirst for adventure, which intensified as he approached his thirties.

Antoni's move to Ireland and later Saudi Arabia was influenced by personal relationships, financial considerations, and a longing for new experiences. He explained, "Back then I still had a loan in the bank, and I wanted to pay it off as soon as possible". Katerina's international career was shaped by her relationship and the desire to be with her partner, leading her to choose teaching abroad as a logical step. She reflected, "We had to make a decision about how we are going to continue our lives together". Her movement to Turkey was influenced by her husband's previous experience and positive impressions of the country.

Zoe's relocation to China was driven by a fascination with its culture and policies. She emphasized the role of family in her decisions and having to deal with challenges such as visa issues to maintain family unity.

'I Applied and Eventually I Got a Job'

The name of this sub-theme, drawn from Katerina's direct statement, speaks of the persistence, effort, and potential challenges participants encountered during their pursuit of international employment, intensified by their 'non-native' origin. In Kazakhstan, for example, where she first sought employment, her credentials were thoroughly examined by government authorities. Contrasting this, her experience in Malaysia was surprisingly smooth, with her and her husband securing jobs after completing their TEFL course. Their outstanding language abilities and cultural adaptability were significant assets that made them stand out among other applicants. Katerina acknowledged the role of appearing "Slavic-looking, blond-looking" as advantageous in some contexts, aligning with cultural perceptions of a "good fit" for teaching roles.

Mila found the job application process in Japan bureaucratic and challenging due to residency requirements and language barriers. However, her established connections helped her secure a position, showcasing the importance of networking in competitive job markets. In Vietnam, she appreciated the flexibility and spontaneity of the hiring process, where her willingness to travel and engage directly with employers proved beneficial. Jason's experience highlighted the systemic challenges faced by 'non-native' speakers. Despite holding Western qualifications like CELTA and DELTA, he faced repeated rejections, and unequal job offers compared to 'native' English teachers:

> So right after that [getting CELTA], I applied to many schools, language centers you know and I couldn't get, I couldn't get even an interview. You know, I was not even shortlisted for the same reason: I was not a native English speaker.

His eventual success in Vietnam reminds us of the importance of finding institutions that prioritize qualifications over nationality.

Zoe, Antoni, and Bart shared relatively positive experiences in their job searches, citing ease in finding opportunities in places like Saudi Arabia, Japan, and other locations. Bart's candid admission about benefiting from his passport reflected the privilege associated with nationality in certain hiring contexts despite not being a native speaker. Antoni's possession of the Irish passport provided initial advantages but did not prevent challenges in obtaining work visas for some countries. For example, when he applied for a job in South Korea, his application was rejected because he "was not educated in an English-speaking country".

Theme 2. Learning to be a Caterpillar (Larva)

This theme illustrates participants' navigation through and adaptation to the host country's unique cultural milieu. It is divided into three sub-themes: Cultural Environment and Adaptation, Workspaces: The Good, the Bad, and the Unexpected, and Sense of Belonging. Together, these subthemes offer detailed insights into the complex process of becoming in the diverse realm of transnational living and teaching.

Cultural Environment and Adaptation

Bart's initial encounters with locals in Japan were overwhelmingly positive, marked by a warm reception and hospitality that initially impressed him. He described how Japanese people treated foreigners like esteemed guests, expressing excitement over simple interactions and gestures. However, this positive reception shifted during Japan's economic downturn in the late 80s, revealing underlying tensions and resentments among some locals towards foreigners. Bart recounted instances of hostility and discrimination, highlighting the complexities of cultural adaptation and the unease it can provoke:

> I had people throw rocks at me in the street, you know, or they would refuse to sit next to me on the train and they would say, 'Oh, that's a foreigner, I don't want to sit next to them'.

Jason's adaptation in Vietnam reflected a deliberate effort to integrate into the local culture while maintaining connections with fellow expatriates. He stressed the importance of balancing expat social circles with meaningful interactions with Vietnamese friends despite the initial language barriers and cultural differences he faced. Jason's commitment to living in a local area and engaging with Vietnamese culture underscored his ongoing negotiation of identity and belonging.

Katerina's experiences in Turkey spanned contrasting environments, from progressive Western cities to more conservative regions. She recalled instances where cultural norms and perceptions of gender roles posed challenges, illustrating her discomfort with certain local practices. In Thailand, Katerina's candid acknowledgement of cultural differences and her perception of Thai culture as indirect suggested a barrier to deeper cultural integration. Mila found comfort in Japan's orderly environment and the kindness of its people despite language barriers. Her positive experiences highlighted the support she received and the ease with which she adapted to daily life, facilitated by Japanese hospitality and organization. Zoe's approach in Kuwait reflected a pragmatic attitude towards cultural adaptation, focusing on physical activities and exploring local events rather than actively seeking out expatriate or local communities. Her encounter in the desert with locals demonstrated mutual hospitality and non-verbal communication, portraying a sense of openness despite cultural differences:

> They [locals] were very open even when we went to the desert, they didn't speak Hungarian, we didn't speak their language, and they were just like, "Oh, come into the tent"'. They took the boys into one tent. They came and they got the women. They got us, and we moved to the other tent and, body language and laughing, and they fed us.

Antoni's adaptation varied across different countries, driven by practical concerns and cultural constraints. His efforts to learn Vietnamese in Vietnam demonstrated respect for local

customs, while his adjustment in Saudi Arabia was tempered by restrictions on expression and entertainment, influencing his choice not to learn Arabic:

> [...] with Arabic, I was like, No, no, I can't be bothered, you know, because I'll be gone, you know, in a few months' time.

In Brazil, Antoni found comfort in the cultural diversity and freedom to express himself, which sharply contrasted with his experiences in more restrictive environments.

Workspaces: The Good, the Bad, and the Unexpected

Participants' narratives illustrated the complex mix of identity, perception, and institutional biases in shaping their professional journeys in international settings.

Bart initially approached his transnational career as a "working holiday", attracted by the abundance of teaching opportunities and the promise of lucrative earnings despite lacking a teaching degree. His early experiences in Japan highlighted a commercially driven English school chain where informal practices and social interactions were prioritized over structured educational programs. Over time, Bart transitioned to kindergarten teaching, initially encountering challenges due to his lack of experience but eventually developing a passion for teaching children, leading to the establishment of his own language school. He appreciated the politeness and friendliness of his Japanese colleagues, reflecting cultural norms of respect and courtesy towards foreigners. Despite these positive aspects, Bart confronted dilemmas related to his 'non-native' identity. He often had to conceal his true origin, adopting an Australian identity to appease people's expectations:

> I had a lot of situations where people would ask me in front of students, 'You're Australian, oh, where in Australia are you from?' And I'd say I'm from Perth, Western Australia, and they go, 'You don't sound like an Aussie'. And I'm like, 'Well, you know, I've been here a long time, so my accent has changed a little bit' and sort of think, Oh shit [laughter].

This deception, while uncomfortable for him, was necessary within the context of his employment, although it never caused serious repercussions.

Mila, on the other hand, considered herself fortunate not to have to pretend to be 'native'. She recounted stories of other 'non-native' speakers forced to assume false identities from English-speaking countries to secure job positions. Mila herself experienced institutional oversight where incorrect information about her degree was publicized on her school's website in Vietnamese, despite her not having such qualifications:

> And somewhere on page three, there is my face [laughter], my picture, and it says something in Vietnamese ... It says a degree in economics or master's in economics or something, which is what I don't have, right?

Jason's experiences revealed significant challenges due to perceptions of his nationality and accent. In Vietnam, he encountered discrimination from a student's parents who judged his accent before hearing him speak, fearing their children would not learn English properly due to his Filipino background. Despite this bias, Jason found his students generally accepting of him,

although disparities in pay and benefits between 'native' and 'non-native' educators persisted in certain schools. His experiences in Sudan contrasted sharply, where he was unexpectedly perceived as a 'native' English speaker, illustrating inconsistencies in how 'non-native' teachers are perceived across different contexts:

> I was treated differently. I was so surprised with that kind of notion, you know, because obviously, I'm Asian. But for them, I'm a native English speaker already, so whatever I would say they would, they would definitely trust that.

Katerina also had struggles related to her nationality and professional identity. In Kazakhstan, she had to assert her qualifications and international status against perceptions that relegated her to being "just another Russian teacher". Zoe's experience in Kuwait offered a unique perspective, where she initially expected a faculty dominated by 'native' English speakers but found a diverse, inclusive environment. She appreciated the different viewpoints brought by colleagues from various non-Anglophone backgrounds and minimized challenges arising from cultural differences.

Antoni took pride in his 'non-native' heritage and asserted his Polish identity despite being identified as Irish due to his passport. His positive experience in Saudi Arabia highlighted acceptance among students and colleagues, although he acknowledged biases against 'non-native' speakers from specific countries like the Philippines and Syria.

Sense of Belonging

Participants in this study often experienced a sense of 'double liminality'—a feeling of not fully belonging to either their home or host societies (Aguilar, 1999). Some developed a connection with new places, while others remained torn between the urge to relocate and the desire for stability. For Bart, who lived in Japan for three decades, integration remained elusive despite his extended stay. He recalled instances of being treated as a perpetual foreigner, dealing with surprise and occasional hostility from locals. Reflecting on his outsider status, Bart found empowerment in navigating cultural differences yet acknowledged the barriers to full acceptance. His complex relationship with Japan was evident in his statement, "I'll probably die in Japan", suggesting resignation rather than a complete sense of belonging.

In contrast, Jason viewed Vietnam as a steppingstone rather than a final destination, citing concerns as an LGBTQ+ individual and a desire for greater acceptance in Western Europe. His reluctance to return to the Philippines pointed out a disconnect from his homeland, where he felt he had exhausted opportunities and achieved his goals. Similarly, Katerina adamantly rejected the idea of returning to Russia, describing a profound sense of alienation and identifying more with a global community shaped by shared experiences and lifestyles across borders. Mila echoed these sentiments, expressing a preference for the status of a foreigner and finding personal growth in reconciling with her outsider identity. She could not accept the idea of returning to her homeland, affiliating herself with a broader, more cosmopolitan worldview. Antoni, while maintaining ties with Poland, expressed discomfort with Eastern European mentalities and a preference for life in Vietnam, where he found stability and contentment:

> I miss my family, I love them, and I do my best to see them quite often. But I just don't belong there. I can't imagine living in Poland all my life.

Zoe's experience accentuated the complexities and discomfort of readjusting to her home country, Hungary, after years abroad, illustrating a struggle with reintegration and a sense of displacement:

> It took me a very long time to adjust to my own country's expectations and lifestyle and everything... It took me a long time to like, OK, this is it. So I wasn't happy to come back.

In summary, our discussions with participants showed that many struggle with balancing their desires for experiences abroad with their obligations back home. Some felt more connected to the world at large than to their home countries.

Theme 3. Metamorphosis (Pupa)

This theme presents participants' reflections on the continuous process of 'becoming', encompassing their perceptions of constant change and transformation as they adopt their identity as transnational individuals and educators.

'I Am More than Expat': Evolving Identities

Participants reported to have undergone significant personal growth originating from their borderline existence. Antoni, whose extensive travel he considers one of life's best teachers, confessed that these experiences made him "more courageous as well and more knowledgeable" and expanded his worldview. Zoe's and Mila's revelations echoed a transformation towards greater self-assurance and resilience nurtured by their transnational journeys. Zoe, for instance, spoke of newfound assertiveness and a willingness to challenge norms, attributing this to her exposure to diverse cultures and perspectives. Mila emphasized her personal growth and refusal to "limit" herself to familiar surroundings, embracing the challenges and opportunities of living abroad.

Katerina's journey demonstrated flexibility and self-awareness in how she engages with different cultures while maintaining a strong sense of personal identity. Bart treaded through his transnational life with resilience, maintaining his core values while embracing the complexities of his fluid identity, shaped by interactions across different cultural contexts:
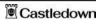
> So I'm making this very, very conscious decision about whether I'm going to fit in or whether I want to fit in or whether I will be fine not fitting in and just, you know, having my own sort of place in this country without having to integrate myself a lot.

Jason's experience in Vietnam catalyzed a profound metamorphosis in his self-conception, fostering adaptability and a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity. His evolving identity reflects a maturation and integration of varied cultural influences into his sense of self.

'I Feel Fuller as a Teacher of English'

When commenting on their professional growth, participants expressed profound satisfaction in acquiring knowledge shaped by their diverse transnational experiences. Antoni, for instance, learned that teaching students from various cultural backgrounds enriched his pedagogical skills and broadened his perspective on language learning:

> I think I'm a better educator because of all this travelling and the fact that they've taught so many nationalities.

His journey has enabled him to appreciate the unique challenges and strengths of learners from different nationalities, enhancing his effectiveness as an educator.

Similarly, Katerina's evolution in teaching marked a shift towards greater flexibility and acceptance of diverse student preferences and learning styles. Her experience taught her the importance of adapting teaching methods to accommodate individual differences, a departure from her earlier rigid approach. Mila's accumulated professional baggage also reflected adaptation and responsiveness to cultural diversity, foregrounding her growth in navigating varied student backgrounds and experiences. Like Antoni and Katerina, she was conscious of the transformative impact of teaching in different cultural contexts, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic teaching philosophy.

Bart's enduring passion for teaching English in Japan after three decades reinforced his profound connection to his profession and the fulfilment derived from integrating cultural elements into his teaching methods. His innovative approach, which includes music and tailored materials, speaks to his commitment to engaging students on a deeper level, transcending conventional classroom boundaries. Zoe's words revealed a determined commitment to her teaching principles, particularly in promoting English Medium Instruction (EMI) and maintaining a language-rich environment in her classroom:

> [...] after teaching in Kuwait without translating, going back to your native language, so you just teach the grammar, teach everything in English so you expect them to understand it in that target language.

Jason's considerations added a contrasting view, advocating for the integration of students' native languages (L1) in language learning:

> I try to incorporate the culture of the country, and at the same time, I apply translanguaging. I'd say in my class because it's very important, especially for EAL[8] contexts, to make for them to see that their L1 is really important in learning a language.

His approach accounts for linguistic diversity and challenges the dominance of British or American English accents, promoting a more inclusive pedagogical environment. It seems that his experience abroad has broadened his appreciation for diverse accents and cultural influences in language teaching.

Theme 4. Fly, Fly, Butterfly (Adulthood)

At the culmination of our discussions, I posed the question of plans to my participants, trying to find out what lives they envisioned for themselves in the future. Bart, at 62, exhibited contentment in his current role while remaining open to teaching opportunities in Portugal or Spain. Jason visualized a future marked by diversity and inclusivity, expressing a desire to explore new global locales beyond Vietnam, seeking enriched cultural experiences and personal growth. His decision displayed a pursuit of broader horizons and a quest for diverse encounters:

> Vietnam is not going to be the last place, I'd say. It's not a place where I'd like to stay longer.

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[8] English as an Additional Language

Katerina's plans were tempered by geopolitical uncertainties ("I can't make any plans any-more because of the war"*).* Yet, she maintained an openness to exploring job opportunities in South America, indicating a pragmatic yet adventurous spirit in pursuing new experiences despite current challenges. Mila's trajectory revealed a steadfast ambition for growth, charac-terized by a readiness to plunge into unknown challenges and settings. Her eagerness to move to new countries reflects a continuous quest for professional renewal and cultural exploration:

> I'm going to start my adventure. […] the next I think it's going to be a new country because I need it.

Antoni's outlook suggested a desire for stability in Vietnam after years of frequent relocations driven by personal and economic factors. At this stage, his focus on financial security and a settled lifestyle contrasts with earlier pursuits of novelty and variety:

> So I'm here in Vietnam I don't think I would be able to find a better job mon-ey-wise, even though you can't even compare to the salaries in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, it's much less, obviously.

Zoe's contemplations wavered between familial obligations and a persistent wanderlust, hint-ing at a longing for new beginnings despite current constraints. ("I still look at different job offers and like, hmm, how about going here or there"). Her fantasy of teaching abroad created a tension between duty and personal aspirations. Overall, the story of each participant projected a combination of drive, practicality, and perseverance as they continued their professional and personal paths in the face of changing circumstances.

Discussion

The central focus of this article was to explore the experiences of expatriate 'non-native' English teachers in their pathways towards becoming transnational educators. This metamorphosis unfolded through a series of transformative turning points, namely (1) Decision to teach abroad, (2) Applying for a job, (3) Relocating to a new country and cultural adaptation, and (4) Trans-formation. Participants in this study exhibited diverse motivations for pursuing transnational teaching careers, recorded in the literature on expatriates. Bart matched the 'adventure seeker' profile identified in migration scholarship (Habti & Elo, 2018), while Mila and Jason resembled the 'global careerist' archetype, seeking enhanced professional opportunities abroad (Näsholm, 2012). Antoni's moves matched the financial considerations Richardson and McKenna (2002) described. Katerina's and Zoe's relocations were influenced by familial considerations, empha-sizing the role of partner support in dual-career expatriate contexts (Richardson, 2006).

The study's findings communicated the persistence of discriminatory practices based on accent, appearance, or passport, influencing employment outcomes despite qualifications and experience. These biases, including disparities in salary and career advancement opportunities, mirror the broader issues 'non-native' teachers face in the global job market (see, for example, Mahboob & Golden, 2013; Medgyes, 2017). The requirement for certifications like CELTA or DELTA further exacerbated these challenges, betraying a preference for 'native' speaker norms in hiring practices (Canagarajah, 1999). Despite critiques of these certifications as Western-centric and potentially exclusionary (Mackenzie, 2019), they remain prevalent in job advertisements globally. This standardization perpetuates the 'native' speaker fallacy and necessitates adaptive behaviors among 'non-native' teachers, such as accent modification or changing one's name

to Western-sounding as a deliberate 'selling out' strategy (Baratta, 2016). Similar to animals' mimicry, "pretending you are like them" (Katerina) was used by some participants as a survival strategy, aligning with institutional expectations to enhance employability (Yazan, 2018).

Relocating to a new country is akin to "entering the realm of the unknown" (Osland, 2000, p. 230). This phase was accompanied by a mix of emotions, from excitement to uncertainty and disorientation. Findings confirm that moving towards integration, where expatriates begin to reconcile with their host cultures, was not easy (Oberg, 1960) and, for some participants, was not possible due to personal reservations or cultural disconnection. Belonging emerged as a critical theme, with the participants oscillating between 'ways of being' and 'ways of belonging' (Levitt & Schiller, 2004) to their home and host societies. Experiencing this 'double liminality (Aguilar, 1999) meant they always felt neither fully at home in their receiving countries nor in their countries of origin.

Experiencing diverse cultures and environments has enabled participants to better understand and appreciate different cultural values and traditions. This has led to them becoming more open-minded and accepting of diversity and, consequently, unafraid of overcoming various linguistic and cultural obstacles that may arise. Central to becoming transnational is the process of 'unbecoming'—shedding established roles and identities to espouse a fluid, evolving sense of self (Minow, 1996). Just like a caterpillar's dissolution in the cocoon is necessary to become a butterfly, the dismantling of prior identities was a crucial step for participants to emerge as transnational beings. Empirical studies, such as those by Cho et al. (2022) and Yazan et al. (2023), are a confirmation of how transnational experiences reshape attitudes and identities. Bart in this study exemplified this through their evolution into a cultural 'hybrid', integrating diverse cultural influences while retaining core values (Neilsen, 2009). This transformation extends to professional identities, as seen in educators like Jason and Katerina, who have adopted 'transcultural dispositions' and implemented translanguaging in teaching practices (Lee & Canagarajah, 2019). All the above makes participants a part of a transnational community that belongs to a 'third culture' as a mode of living created by individuals from different societies who share a common lifestyle (Pollock et al., 2010).

Conclusion

This article attempted to uncover the various levels of becomings expatriate teachers encountered throughout their transnational journeys. I recognize that the very notion of 'becoming' has multiple dimensions, so it was impossible to detail all of them here. Three of them are of core importance, though: personal becoming, professional becoming, and ideological becoming. Personal becoming encompasses the transformation of aspirations and the realization of these aspirations in a transnational context. We saw earlier that participants' motivations varied, from seeking adventure to addressing financial or family needs, yet all converged on the pursuit of fulfilment (McLaughlin, 2010, as cited in Natanasabapathy & Maathuis-Smith, 2019). This journey involves adapting to new cultural norms, redefining identities, and adopting cosmopolitan ways of living (Tedeschi et al., 2020).

Professional becoming unfolds as an iterative process of developing a professional self shaped by formal education, practical experience, and international exposure. Teachers refine their pedagogical approaches to accommodate diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, acquiring 'Third space pedagogies' (Dyrness & Hurtig, 2016) that reflect their innovative blend of global and local educational practices.

Ideological becoming critically examines the educators' emerging perspectives on language ideologies and their roles as 'non-native' English teachers. Confronting 'native speakerism' biases, educators tackle identity challenges, choosing between conforming to 'native speaker'

norms or challenging these constructs to redefine their professional identities (Sherman, 2023). This process involves questioning the hegemony of 'Standard English' and (re)invention of localized linguistic practices that reflect the dynamic nature of English as a global language (Pennycook, 2006).

To conclude, the becomings experienced by expatriate teachers are multifaceted journeys of personal growth, professional adaptation, and ideological transformation. These experiences not only redefine individual identities but also contribute to broader dialogues on global citizenship, linguistic diversity, and the evolving contours of transnationalism in an increasingly interconnected yet fractured world. More longitudinal studies following educators across different stages of their overseas careers are needed to trace the ongoing 'becoming' of transnational educators, elucidating how various personal, cultural, and professional experiences shape their transformation over time.

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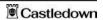
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