

EDITORIAL

Belonging, Being, and Becoming: Negotiating Identity as an Expatriate Language Teacher Abroad

The experience of teaching a foreign or second language beyond one's home country inevitably entails a certain amount of tension or instability in teachers' lives. This psychological and social disruption is a result of what Ingersoll *et al.* (2019) refer to as *encounters with difference*, the "contrasting nature of the experience" (p. 42). Bateson (1972) refers to instability in life in general, saying that people are self-corrective systems. By this he means that people adjust to instability or disruptions in order to achieve equilibrium. In other words, when people experience 'disequilibrium' in their lives, they strive to self-correct in order to once again achieve stability. This theme of disruption, or encounters with difference, or disequilibrium, is a major one running through all the articles in this special issue (SI). We use disruption here less by its negative connotations and more to refer to change or difference. Dealing with disruption, working towards equilibrium or overcoming challenges involves not only cognitive effort, but also emotion work and identity work. Block (2014) explains how moving abroad may threaten one's sense of identity because crossing geographical and social borders unsettles the stable self and leads one into "a period of struggle to reach a balance" (p. 24). And Donato (2017) says, when crossing "major life boundaries" (p. 25), such as moving and living abroad to teach language, identities are disrupted, sometimes contested, and certainly changed in the process.

Expatriate language teachers navigate complex terrains of cultural adaptation and unfamiliar pedagogical and institutional conditions as they establish themselves in new educational workplaces and geopolitical spaces. This SI seeks to illuminate these multifaceted experiences by examining how transnational language teachers negotiate, articulate, and reconstruct their professional identities in international contexts. Drawing on the Australian early years learning framework of *Belonging, Being, and Becoming* (Council of Australian Governments, 2009), originally conceived to understand children's identity formation and social engagement, the contributions extend this conceptual lens to explore how adult educators make sense of their professional lives, relationships, and evolving sense of self as language teaching professionals working across borders. The framework places emphasis on identity formation, relationship-building, engaging with challenges and complexities in life, and enhancing cognitive, socio-emotional, and knowledge capacities for positive wellbeing, growth and social engagement (Guo, 2024). The primary focus of the SI is to explore the lives and careers of expatriate language teachers and how they make meaning from their experiences, how they develop their identity as a language teacher in an international context, and how their identity transforms as a result of experience, perceptual change, and professional development.

The framework of *Belonging, Being, and Becoming* offers a particularly meaningful lens through which to examine expatriate educators' experiences. *Belonging* encompasses the ways teachers establish connections with colleagues, learners, and broader educational communities in their host countries, often while managing feelings of displacement or outsider status. *Being* addresses the present realities of pedagogical practices, the navigation of cultural differences in classroom and institutional dynamics, and the ongoing negotiation of professional roles and expectations. *Becoming* captures the transformative dimension of these experiences: how time abroad, professional development opportunities, cross-cultural encounters, and accumulated experience contribute to

EDITORIAL

shifts in teachers' identities and professional development trajectories. Block (2017) contends that language teacher identity "is an ongoing, narrated process, which brings together experiences in the past and present, as well as those anticipated in the future" (p. 34). The articles in this SI narrate these identity processes over time, revealing the challenges, accomplishments, and desires for the future of the language teacher participants who live and work abroad.

In the first article, Keles examines how cultural and professional dynamics impact the teaching practices of three expatriate teachers of different nationalities employed at a private language school in Turkey. The study uses a narrative inquiry approach to understand the workplaces challenges they encountered with particular attention to exclusion, discrimination, and lack of support, and highlights the need for inclusive environments and cultural sensitivity for expatriate educators, exemplifying how such factors may hinder or enhance adaptation, motivation, and professional growth. In the article that follows, Epps and Moodie likewise highlight critical issues of discrimination and marginalization by exploring the lived experiences of expatriate language teachers living and working in different countries across Asia. Examining the intersections of race, gender, and physical appearance, the study focuses on how demographic and physical aspects relate to feelings of exclusion, inequality, and wellbeing as they work to build their professional identity as language teachers. The study echoes the recommendations of Keles, calling for greater inclusion policies and practices in the ELT workplace and greater attention to intersectionality in language teaching more generally. Another equally prevalent form of discrimination captured in the research of Delogu and Zha is the enduring and pervasive presence of *native-speakerism* in ELT. Through narrative interviews, their study investigates two "native" speaking English teachers that were educated on the concept of native-speakerism during their postgraduate studies and how awareness and conscious navigation of this entrenched ideology impacted their identity construction.

The next study by Hiratsuka explores the perspectives of former expatriate teachers who worked in the Japanese Exchange Teaching (JET), a long-running initiative that employs expatriates from "native-speaking" countries to work as assistant language teachers (ALTs) of English in public schools. Using a framework he developed for ALT identity in previous research that identifies teachers as possessing two primary identities, Foreigner and Dabbler, Hiratsuka advances the emergence of a third identity, the Japan Enthusiast, a dimension that encompasses cultural motivations for joining JET, which are applicable to expatriate teachers seeking a rewarding professional and cultural experience wherever they may teach. In the first of three, autoethnographic studies in this SI, the article by Herrera, Becker, and Uysal examines the impact of institutional culture on the development of a professional identity amongst expatriate language educators/scholars. Their findings, derived from personal encounters, highlight the role of the institution in facilitating a sense of belonging through multiple factors such as the languages used, professional recognition, collegial relationships, and job security, recommending that institutions initiate proactive measures to enhance a feeling of inclusion and address the unique needs of expatriate educators. Another ethnographic exploration follows in Ranjbaran's narrative reflections as a female Iranian expatriate working in the higher education system in Oman. Again, the institutional contest comes to the forefront as the article examines the influence of institutional power structures and sociopolitical dynamics of Omanization, a government initiative that seeks to replace expatriate workers with Omani citizens in various private sectors. Her narrative examines the role of foreign language educators within the larger discourse of globalization, educational mobility, intercultural pedagogy, and labor migration, articulating being, becoming, and belonging as an act of resistance, resilience, and "deep intellectual renewal."

Returning to a narrative inquiry framework through a poststructuralist lens, the next article by Mora-Pablo examines the professional identity trajectory of transnational educators in Mexico. The participants in the study are referred to as "transnational" rather than expatriate, because all have Mexican origins but have traversed different paths in returning, some being born in the US to Mexican parents, another who migrated at an early age, and others who lived and taught abroad

for several years before returning to study in a language teacher education program at the Mexican university where the study takes place. The primary focus is on how the participants' transnational experiences in education influence their perspectives on pedagogy and how they negotiate a sense of legitimacy and recognition through a greater understanding of local teaching realities that in turn nurtures a greater sense of belonging in their (re)migration into the Mexican language teaching sector. In the study that follows, Xodabande and Karimpour also employ narrative inquiry through the framework of activity theory to explore the experiences of expatriate Iranian teachers working as English language educators in Turkey. Similar to the study by Keles, the investigation emphasizes feelings of cultural dissonance and identity reconstruction and challenges in regard to equality, autonomy, institutional expectations, and identity development as language teaching professionals. Findings affirm that resilience is not a fixed trait but is contingent on social and contextual interactions in relation to identity construction.

In the final autoethnographic study, Ulla and Kohnke trace the professional identity (re)construction of a Filipino English language teacher (Ulla) working in Thailand. Exploring a breadth of socially mediated emotions, from marginalization to transformation, the duo arrive on three pervading themes in the expatriate educator's experience, (1) linguistic gatekeeping and racialization, (2) identity repair through research and reflective practice, and (3) pedagogical activism as resistance. This article has particular relevance to Global South educators living the realities of raciolinguistic marginalization and delegitimization in the ELT context and profound consequences for the field as it works away from racialized ideologies and toward a more inclusive embodiment of who language teachers are. In the next article, Cavor and Greenier explore the experiences of three L1 English language teachers in South Korea through narrative interviews and photo novellas. Although the participants' demographic profiles might be categorized as the stereotypical "native-speaking" expatriate language teacher (despite having complex multiethnic and multilingual identities), sentiments of marginalization, discrimination, delegitimization, and lack of agency and belonging are also realized. In their narratives, they share feelings of being unseen and unheard by their Korean colleagues and administrators. The study demonstrates the importance of pursuing one's imagined future as a language educator and articulates the impact of life-wide learning in transcultural and professional identity development. In the final article of the SI, Hoang uses a mixed-method approach to investigate the adaptive identity construction of expatriate language teachers in Vietnam. Findings show that professional identity development is strongly affected by teaching experience and institutional setting. Further, the study highlights the critical relationship between cultural empathy and identity development, indicating that teachers form hybrid identities over time. In agreement with a common theme across this SI, the study calls attention to the need for culturally focused training and institution-specific and differentiated support in expatriate teacher preparation programs and for a more robust directive in cultivating the professional identity of language teachers in the context of international education.

The articles in this SI evidence the complex and multidimensional challenges that expatriate language teachers navigate in constructing their professional and transcultural identity. Negotiating othering, (de)legitimization, racialization, and other forms of discrimination to assert recognition and validation creates a range of personal and professional tensions. As many of the papers in this SI propose, institutional onboarding programs and proactive, multidimensional support measures are essential because, for many teachers, feelings of professional uncertainty, cultural disruption, and disequilibrium begin before they even step foot in the classroom. In her book, Liz England (2020) reflects on the beginning of her life as a language teacher, recounting,

EDITORIAL

I was terrified. [...] How could a woman from one country with no experience living and working anywhere else go to another country and expect to be seen as legitimate. [...] How could I live in a completely foreign environment and be successful at my new job (p. 11).

Trepidation, uncertainty, ambivalence, and acclimation to a new country and culture are common sentiments throughout this SI. The articles that follow capture these struggles, but also illuminate the achievements, triumphs, and transformation of expatriate language teachers, exemplifying that language teacher identity is rooted not only in self-perception and motivation, but deeply entangled with the complexities of context, culture, community, and coping. It is the aim of this Special Issue to initiate and intensify discussions about the lived experiences and identity construction of those dedicating their lives as language teaching professionals all around the world.

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