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"Korea Can be Fun Depending on What you Look Like": Investigating Marginalization among Expatriate Female English Teachers in East Asia

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines how the intersecting dimensions of gender, race, and physical appearance exacerbate marginalization among expatriate female English teachers in East Asia. Drawing on in-depth interviews with seven women across Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Mongolia, it employs an intersectional framework to explore how overlapping identity constructs shape their professional and everyday experiences in their host countries. Findings reveal systemic exclusion tied to gendered workplace norms, racial discrimination, and aesthetic expectations related to body size, dress, and hair texture. These overlapping inequalities influenced participants' classroom authority, emotional wellbeing, and occupational commitment. The study contributes to language teaching research by centering the voices of women in transnational contexts and illuminating how patriarchal institutional cultures, White normativity, and local beauty standards operate in conjunction with native-speakerism to produce compounded inequities. It calls for greater attention to equity in hiring, teacher support systems, and inclusive policy and training in ELT workspaces. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of intersectionality in understanding and addressing discriminatory power dynamics in global ELT.

Keywords: intersectionality; Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs); gender; race; appearance; language teacher identity

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Introduction

In recent decades, East Asian countries including China, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Mongolia, and South Korea (hereafter Korea) have recruited L1 English-speaking teachers from Western English-speaking countries to teach English (Copland et al., 2016, 2020; Hiratsuka, 2022; Jeon, 2020; Wang & Lin, 2013). This change was a response to globalization and the central role the English language plays within it, being the lingua franca for business, science, and diplomacy. The rationale for hiring so-called native English-speaking teachers (NESTs)[1] stemmed from efforts to address acknowledged limitations in traditional English education, which generally followed grammar-translation methods in classes conducted through local languages. By recruiting NESTs, governments aimed to enhance communicative competence and improve language teaching methods, ostensibly improving the efficacy of English instruction for local students (Copland et al., 2016, 2020; Jeon, 2020; Lowe, 2020; Stanley, 2013).

NESTs in East Asia have been the focus of many language teaching research studies, particularly regarding their experiences in co-teaching programs (e.g., Copland et al., 2020; Hiratsuka, 2022; Moodie & Kim, 2025; Yim & Ahn, 2018). One common theme in this strand of research is the marginalization of NESTs within Asian education systems. NESTs often find themselves on the periphery, not being treated as serious professionals. However, beyond native-speaker status, few studies have adapted an intersectionality framework to consider how gender, race, appearance, and other social identities contribute to or exacerbate marginalization. Moreover, existing research in this area tends to be limited by focusing on a small number of participants within a single country (e.g., Appleby, 2014; Charles, 2019; Choe & Seo, 2021; Jackson, 2016; Maddamsetti & Hinton, 2024).

Yet, becoming and being an expatriate English teacher involves navigating a social world of privilege and marginalization, where social categories are highly relevant—whether overtly through policy, such as regulating who qualifies as a teacher (EPIK, 2025; JET Programme, 2025), or latently through culture, such as navigating patriarchal norms or the White normativity embedded within native-speakerism (Jenks, 2017). Thus, this underexplored area warrants greater empirical attention, particularly through research that accounts of the experiences of women, and women of color in particular, across diverse national and institutional contexts.

By adopting an intersectional framework (Collins & Bilge, 2020), this study seeks to illuminate how interrelated dimensions of identity—namely, gender, race, and appearance—contribute to the marginalization of female expatriate NESTs in East Asia. Such an approach not only deepens understanding of their experiences but also contributes to broader conversations around privilege, equity, representation, and inclusion in the field of English language teaching (ELT) (Appleby, 2016; Kubota & Lin, 2009; Lawrence & Nagashima, 2020; Jenks, 2017; Motha, 2020; Von Esch et al., 2020), especially for transnational language teachers in overseas teaching contexts.

Literature Review

Language-in-Education Policy: NESTs in East Asia

As indicated above, NEST recruitment to East Asia stemmed from globalization and English's place within it, being a primary language of business, trade, research, and diplomacy (Copland et al., 2016, 2020; Jeon, 2020; Wang & Lin, 2013). Currently, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Korea have co-teaching schemes including NESTs as co-teachers in public schools, and these countries, as well

as China and Mongolia, have broader visa programs for NEST positions in private institutions, public schools, and universities.

A problematic aspect of NEST policies in East Asia, however, is their foundation on the native-speaker fallacy, or *native-speakerism* (Jeon, 2020; Motha, 2014; Ruecker & Ives, 2015), the misguided belief that native speakers provide an ideal model of language and have sufficient pedagogical knowledge for teaching it (Holliday, 2005). Native-speakerism is problematic in many respects. First, it relies on an idealistic view of language competence, seeing native speakers as ideal models of language use. As Kramsch (1997) and Davies (2003) argued, such a view of native speakers is fictitious. Moreover, native-speakerism promotes a native/non-native teacher dichotomy, implying that it is better to be a native speaker than not, challenging the legitimacy for local English teachers (LETs) as users of English (Llurda, 2025; Yang & Forbes, 2025). Additionally, native-speakerism de-emphasizes pedagogical content knowledge and teaching expertise, prioritizing native-speaker status above other criteria. Thus, it excludes candidates from the Expanding and Outer Circles (i.e., countries outside the core English-speaking world), regardless of their expertise and credentials. The research in this area bears out the problematic aspects of native-speakerism.

NEST Identity Research

A strand of language teacher identity (LTI) research (Barkhuizen, 2017) has examined NEST identity in East Asia, especially among those involved in co-teaching programs. Notably, although NESTs benefit from low barriers to enter the field, much research bears out their struggle for professional legitimacy (e.g., Copland et al., 2020; Yim & Ahn, 2018; Yim & Hwang, 2019). As Kim and Moodie (2023) explained,

> *LETs generally see themselves as professional educators, that is, core members of the community of practice, whereas the NESTs find themselves on the periphery, often excluded from core aspects of teachers' professional lives, such as with meetings, planning, and social events. (p. 4)*

The siloing of NESTs is a common theme in research, and recent studies have re-iterated the problematic breakdown in co-teaching and lack of collaboration involved in co-teaching programs (Kim & Moodie, 2023; Moodie & Kim, 2025). Despite over 30 years of formal co-teaching programs in East Asia, NESTs are widely marginalized. Some NESTs lack the professional knowledge and experience for efficacious teaching, and so they struggle to gain respect from their LET colleagues (Jeon, 2009; Leung & Yip, 2020; Stanley, 2013). For these and other reasons, NESTs tend to have lower levels of occupational commitment, self-efficacy in teaching, and occupational wellbeing than their LET colleagues (Moodie & Kim, 2024) and higher turnover intentions (Moodie, 2024, 2025).

However, Copland et al. (2020) argued against the anti-NEST sentiment common in the literature, demonstrating that there are profession-minded NESTs with long-term commitments to their schools and host countries. Yet, there are structural power imbalances between LETs and NESTs, making authentic collaboration and inclusion unlikely (Moodie & Kim, 2025).

Despite these issues, native-speakerism remains entrenched in policy and practice in East Asia, reinforcing a paradox in how NESTs are positioned. On the one hand, they are idealized as model users of the English language, valued by students and parents, and are privileged over ELT professionals from outside the anglosphere. On the other hand, they are marginalized from the inner workings of schools and institutions, excluded from decision-making processes and curricular development (Kim & Moodie, 2023).

Research, however, indicates that the marginalization of NESTs is not monolithic. As we explore below, many female NESTs and NESTs of color report additional layers of marginalization within the NEST community, reflecting broader social hierarchies within the ELT community in East Asia in need of recognition and redress.

Racial Discrimination among Expatriate NESTs in Asia

A troubling aspect of native-speakerism, beyond its marginalization of ELT professionals outside the anglosphere, is that it entails *markedness*. Whiteness is the default category implied by native-speakerism, whereas people of color are marked (Jenks, 2017; Kubota, 2002; Motha, 2020; Pennycook, 2001). This means that people of color tend to be seen as more visible, noteworthy, and deviant from the norm, which may be indicated with clarifying adjectives highlighting their ethnicity (e.g., an Asian-American NEST). Such markedness entails social hierarchies, marginalizing those whose identities do not fit the 'ideal' type (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

Jenks (2017) termed this phenomenon *White normativity*. This essentialist view of native English speakers being White arises, at least in part, from the legacy of British colonialism and American hegemony, that is, "the political power of White people" (Motha, 2006, p. 496). It is also likely an extension of the ethno-linguistic nationalism prevalent in East Asia, meaning that ethnicity and language are intertwined aspects of national identity, and this perception is mapped on to English speakers (Park, 2009). Whatever its source, White normativity is problematic, associated with deeply ingrained institutional policies and hiring practices, significantly shaping access to job opportunities, workplace experiences, and professional privileges within TESOL programs across East Asia.

For instance, research investigating job postings and recruitment spaces indicate marginalization of people of color (Jenks, 2017; Maganaka, 2023; Ruecker & Ives, 2015). Moreover, qualitative research examining the experiences of non-White teachers express the emotional harm such racism causes. For instance, Kim (2017) highlighted the harm caused when a Black teacher, who had passed a phone interview, was rejected at the in-person interview for being Black because the managers "could not imagine what the parents of students would say if a Black teacher was teaching their kids" (p. 90).

As with Kim (2017), a few other studies have qualitatively examined the experiences of Black teachers in Korea. Dos Santos (2020), for example, described numerous, harrowing accounts of racism among 18 participants, experiencing emotional distress and psychological harm. For instance, a Black woman teaching at a Christian school was removed from leading bible studies with students because of her race, causing stress and thoughts of suicide. Another example included a school supervisor calling a participant "a Black Monkey in front of a group of parents" (p. 8). There were also many public displays of racism experienced, including being called "Black shit" (p. 9) and "gorilla" (pp. 10-11) or being refused entry to stores and restaurants.

Dos Santos (2020) also noted accounts of microaggressions and othering, which have been examined in a number of studies in Korea (Charles, 2019; Jackson, 2016; Maddamsetti & Hinton, 2024; Seo & Kubota, 2023). Such instances include participants being asked when they will go back to Africa (Dos Santos, 2020), or in Jackson's (2016) case, repeatedly being called Lebron James or being asked how he felt about Obama being elected.

Jackson's (2016) autoethnography dealt with the question of what it means "to teach while Black and male in South Korea" (p. 424). In it, he documented how as "a Black male body in a Korean city caused a tense cognitive dissonance onset by feelings of anger, rage, and hope" (p. 434). On the one hand, being hypervisible as a Black American male, anger arose from bouts of racism and

continuously bumping into Black stereotypes, but hope arose from how he could adapt his experience to influence change.

This critical inquiry aspect informs much of the research with Black teachers in Korea. Charles (2019) and Maddamsetti and Hinton (2024), for example, found that their participants were simultaneously hypervisible as racialized bodies yet rendered invisible in terms of professional authority. They encountered suspicion regarding their native-speaker status and professional competence because of their race. The cumulative toll of microaggressions, institutional exclusion, and everyday racism contributed to emotional fatigue, burnout, and re-evaluation of long-term career plans in Korea among participants in these studies.

Choe and Seo (2021) and Seo and Kubota (2023) analyzed publicly available YouTube videos to examine how Black NESTs in Korea negotiate identity in a racially and culturally exclusionary environment. Choe and Seo reported that many faced discriminatory hiring practices, persistent microaggressions, and racial stereotyping in the workplace. Seo and Kubota emphasized how intersecting identities (i.e., race, gender, nationality, and native-speaker status) related to privilege and marginalization. While participants benefited from their linguistic capital as American native speakers, they also encountered objectification, workplace surveillance, and pressure to conform to Korean beauty standards. In both studies, teachers described the emotional labor of navigating racialized interactions and performing informal cultural ambassadorship. Taken together, these studies illustrate how Black educators in Korea must continually negotiate visibility, belonging, and legitimacy within institutions that privilege Whiteness and native-speakerism.

However, despite these contributions, Choe and Seo's (2021) and Seo and Kubota's (2023) studies raise questions about representation and research ethics. While the content was publicly accessible, the lack of participant consent complicates questions of data use. Moreover, having non-Black scholars analyzing the experiences of Black teachers without direct engagement underscores the need to consider how power, positionality, and voice shape the interpretation of marginalized narratives.

Gender Discrimination among Expatriate NESTs in Asia

As with Seo and Kubota (2023) and Maddamsetti and Hinton (2024), other researchers have considered White male privilege and the marginalization of female NESTs in East Asia. In Kobayashi's (2014) critical review, gendered hiring disparities are shown to be widespread, normalized institutional practices. The study synthesizes prior findings (Appleby, 2013; Hicks, 2013; Stanley, 2013), reporting that White Western men are frequently hired due to cultural preferences and informal recruitment networks. Homosocial hiring practices, where men preferentially hire other men, are sustained by deeply ingrained stereotypes about patriarchal authority and native speaker legitimacy. Female NESTs, by contrast, are often perceived through a gendered lens that devalues their professional authority and sidelines them in leadership roles. Women in these studies often felt undervalued and overlooked, or worse, feeling tokenized or discriminated against in sexist work environments. Kobayashi notes that some women voluntarily resign due to persistent sexist treatment or feelings of isolation in male-dominated work environments. These themes were echoed in Nagatomo's (2016) book about Western female ELT professionals in Japan.

Chesnut (2020), Hicks (2013), and Stanley (2013) similarly detail the underrepresentation and marginalization of women in ELT in East Asia, where physical appearance, marital status, and perceived ability have been reported as factors influencing hiring decisions and promotions.

Chesnut's (2020) work adds a layer by focusing on the role of beauty standards and embodied gender performance. His participants, foreign female teachers in Korea, describe how dress, body

type, and attractiveness influenced their classroom authority and their vulnerability to objectification and harassment in daily life. These women often had to navigate conflicting expectations: to appear attractive and approachable, but not so much as to be seen as unprofessional or overly assertive. This resonates with findings from Choe and Seo (2021) and Seo and Kubota (2023), who show that Black female teachers in Korea experience compounded discrimination based on race, gender, and appearance. In these contexts, beauty norms are racialized, producing an occupational landscape where White femininity may be tolerated or commodified, while racialized femininities are marginalized and encouraged to be hidden.

In summary, while research has documented how White normativity, institutionalized racism, and sexism marginalize non-White and female NESTs in Asia, there is a need for further studies. The majority of studies are limited to single national and educational contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how intersectional discrimination manifests across various working contexts, such as private academies, schools, and universities in the broader East Asian region.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality

Intersectionality explains how multiple aspects of identity shape individual experiences and social realities within systems of power and inequality. It is not simply about the coexistence of identity categories but about how these interact to produce context-specific configurations of privilege, marginalization, and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989, 2013; Collins & Bilge, 2020). Crenshaw's foundational work, for instance, demonstrated that Black women's experiences of discrimination in the United States were not merely the sum of racial and gender-based injustices but constituted a distinct form of oppression shaped by their positioning within both racialized and gendered hierarchies. Accordingly, our study applies intersectionality as a framework for examining how gender, race, and appearance shape the marginalization of female NESTs in East Asia.

Collins and Bilge (2020) assert that intersectionality research is about problem-solving; it is a means of critical praxis, meaning that intersectionality researchers should seek to "challenge the status quo and aim to transform power relations" (p. 40). Therefore, intersectionality research is important because it provides the ability to inform about teaching experiences and outcomes of minority populations.

Although intersectionality is premised on the interrelatedness of social categories, its flexibility allows researchers to adapt the framework to a variety of social problems and methodological approaches (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Misra et al., 2021). Thus, in this study, while we recognize that social categories such as gender, race, and appearance are deeply intertwined, we also argue that examining these identity dimensions in isolation, as part of an intersectional framework, can be analytically productive. Accordingly, the research questions (RQs) are:

> 1. In what ways does gender identity shape the experiences of marginalization among female expatriate English teachers in East Asia?
>
> 2. In what ways do racial and ethnic identities shape the experiences of marginalization among female expatriate English teachers in East Asia?
>
> 3. In what ways does physical appearance shape the experiences of marginalization among female expatriate English teachers in East Asia?

Methods

This is a qualitative study (Miles et al., 2014), exploring how intersecting social categories (i.e., race, gender, and appearance) relate to the marginalization of expatriate female NESTs in East Asia. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate for this topic because it enables an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences, meanings, and identity construction. In alignment with the focus on the lived experiences and marginalization among female NESTs, data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which are especially suited for exploring how individuals make sense of their experiences within specific sociocultural contexts.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. Initial outreach was conducted via social media platforms (e.g., Facebook groups for expatriate teachers) and online communities frequented by English language teachers in East Asia (e.g., Reddit). Interested participants were encouraged to email the first author expressing their interest and to pass on information to others who may be interested in participating. Concurrently, emails were sent to NEST co-teaching program coordinators, requesting that information be passed to potential participants.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants met the study's criteria. The study sought female expatriate NESTs who identified across a range of ethnic and racial backgrounds. We intentionally included White female teachers for two reasons. First, including them provides a comparative lens for understanding how privilege and marginalization intersect. Second, a recent study revealed that female expat teachers experience lower levels of occupational wellbeing than male expat teachers (Moodie, 2022), highlighting the need to examine women's experiences more broadly across racial lines rather than limiting the inquiry to women of color alone. Additionally, we sought participants across various countries and working contexts, including the private sector, public schools, and universities. This approach allowed for variation in institutional and cultural settings while maintaining a shared basis for comparison. Participant information appears in Table 1 below. Four of the seven participants were based in Korea. This imbalance was not intentional but rather reflects the practical challenges of recruiting expatriate teachers across multiple East Asian contexts. Because we were based in Korea, it was easier to establish contact and schedule interviews with teachers there, whereas logistical and access constraints made recruiting participants elsewhere more challenging.

Table 1
Participant Information

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Nationality	Education	Country of Residence	Type of Workplace	ELT Experience (in years)
Amara	35	Black	United States	BEd MA TESOL TESOL Certification Teacher License	Korea	Public School	11
Ashley	25	Asian/ White	United States	BA Economics TEFL Certification	Korea	Public School	1
Brenda	33	Latino	United States	MA English TESOL Certification Teacher License	Mongolia	Public School	8
Daisy	35	White	United States	BA Linguistics MA TESOL TESOL Certification	Japan	University	10
Elize	31	White	South Africa	BA Applied Linguistics TEFL Certification	Taiwan	Private Academy	4
Nala	29	Black	South Africa	BA Psychology TEFL Certification	Korea	Public School	1
Sophie	32	White	United Kingdom	BA MA TESOL TESOL Certification	Korea	University	9

Data Collection

Participants took part in a video-recorded interview (50-90 minutes) conducted by the first author via Zoom. The protocol was semi-structured, allowing for consistency across interviews while also providing flexibility for participants to elaborate on personally meaningful experiences (see Appendix A). Questions focused on participants' backgrounds, language teacher identity, living and working experiences abroad, and occupational wellbeing. Interviews were conducted in a conversational manner to build rapport and foster a reflective space where participants could discuss and expand on points of interest. Transcripts were generated with otter.ai, then manually checked, edited, and cleaned by the first author.

Researcher Positionality

The first author is a Black American woman and was a Fulbright research scholar in Korea during the data collection phase. With two years of teaching and research experience in East Asia, she occupied a hybrid position, experiencing privilege, marginalization, and solidarity with participants within the context of expatriate English teaching. Her identity facilitated *emic* engagement with participants, particularly other women of color, as she shared overlapping social and professional experiences. This positionality enabled deeper rapport in interviews and a heightened sensitivity to the nuances of racialized and gendered experiences.

The second author is a White Canadian man with twenty years of experience as a teacher, teacher educator, and researcher in Korea. His positionality provided *etic* distance from some of the racialized and gendered experiences described by participants but also allowed for insight into the institutional and cultural structures of the ELT profession in the region.

This combination of emic and etic perspectives contributed to the study's trustworthiness by helping us attend to the study's focus and situate the participants' lived experiences within broader institutional and sociocultural contexts.

Analysis

The procedures were as follows. First, transcripts were uploaded to Quirkos Web for analysis. First-cycle coding (Miles et al., 2014) involved covering the data set with descriptive, in-vivo, process, and emotion codes to capture participants' experiences in their own words and the actions, feelings, and conditions they described. Second-cycle coding entailed refining the codes and organizing the code system around emerging categories and themes. This stage reflected a combination of deductive concepts, such as racial identity, gender identity, and appearance, and inductive themes arising from data, such as unwanted sexual attention and body shaming. Together, the authors adopted a reflexive and dialogic analytic process, using memo writing, intercoder discussion, and iterative review to reach mutual understanding and agreement throughout the coding process. Ultimately, this led to the finalized code system, which is used as an outline for the findings write up (see Appendix B). Although the themes were organized by research question, many data excerpts include overlapping codes, reflecting the intersectional nature of gendered, racialized, and appearance-based marginalization.

Findings

Gender and Marginalization

This section addresses RQ1, demonstrating how gender identity shapes female expatriate English teachers experiences of marginalization. Our participants indicated how they experienced misogyny, navigated life in patriarchal societies, felt challenges dealing with cultural norms for women in East Asia, and observed different workplace standards for women and men.

Gendered Hierarchies in Pubic and Professional Life

This theme captures participants' experiences navigating patriarchal norms both in public and professional spaces. Although participants acknowledged that male privilege and patriarchy are global issues, they emphasized that their impact felt more pronounced in their host countries. As Nala explained, *"We deal with misogynism wherever we go. And I think, being in Korea, we're also dealing with the fact that we're foreigners on top of that."*

Unwanted sexual attention in public spaces emerged as a common concern. Brenda noted that in Asia "you are more of a target," while Nala described that she quit going to the gym "because every time I'd work out, I would see people just like, you know, starring at my ass the whole time." These experiences illustrate how women's bodies were frequently subject to scrutiny and objectification, leading some participants to adjust their routines and limit or self-monitor their presence in public settings. This finding also expresses the intersectional nature of women's experiences, being scrutinized for gender and appearance.

In the workplace, participants described experiences of unequal treatment and double standards. Although some cases were subtle, three participants specifically stated that they were spoken to with less respect than male colleagues, despite having similar qualifications. Elize, a teacher in Taiwan, for instance, explained:

> *The way [my coworkers] speak to me and the way the speak to the other foreign English teacher, who's a man, is totally different… They're more respectful, polite, they don't talk down to him, compared to me.*

Sophie echoed this, noting that "sometimes male expats have an easier time being heard or being listened to," adding that her workplace felt like "a boys' club."

Participants also pointed to unequal treatment in teaching assignments. For instance, Elize described how her male colleague "teaches English and all other subjects, like science … They assign me all the cooking classes because he doesn't want to do that." Her comment reflects how gender stereotypes were reinforced through classroom responsibilities, subtly undermining her expertise and reinforcing the perception that women are more suited to domestic or 'soft' subjects.

Classroom authority was also impacted by gendered assumptions. Sophie recounted a male student's sarcastic remark: "Oh, well, I should always listen to the *woman*," and reflected, "I remember being very frustrated at that comment. Because I was like, I'm not your woman. I'm a teacher." Such comments not only objectify women but also erode professional respect and legitimacy.

Brenda reported similar dynamics describing how male colleagues spoke to her in condescending ways: "It's like you don't know as much … like over explaining, condescendingly explaining, things like … let me show you how to use the printer." These subtle microaggressions reinforce hierarchies, framing women as less competent, regardless of their qualifications and experience.

Participants also observed White male privilege. For instance, Amara recounted:

> *I've seen White men who are overweight sleep with their coworkers, show up to work late, intoxicated, smelling like alcohol. … I've never seen a woman, especially a woman with darker skin … be able to do pull off the things that a man, especially a man with fair skin, can pull off.*

Her comments underscore how informal hierarchies can afford greater flexibility and protection to men, while women, especially women of color, are held to stricter standards of professionalism.

In rare but serious cases, gendered power dynamics escalated into overt intimidation. Amara reported a troubling incident of workplace aggression: "I was pushed and shoved … because I would not announce every time that I left the main office room. … [The male supervising teacher] believed that I needed to tell him my whereabouts at all times." While other participants did not report physical violence, this account underscores the potential risks that foreign women may face when they are perceived to be challenging established hierarchies.

Together, participants' accounts reveal how gender hierarchies permeated both everyday life and the professional sphere. From microaggressions and gender stereotyping to disrespect and physical intimidation, participants navigated work environments where professional legitimacy was occasionally undermined because of their gender. These experiences contributed to feelings of exclusion, frustration, and emotional fatigue, and shaped how participants related to their colleagues, students, and institutional roles.

Performing and Negotiating Femininity in East Asia

Participants also described challenges navigating cultural expectations of femininity and gendered behavior that often conflicted with their identities and professional values. Several participants felt that, unlike their male counterparts, they were expected to assimilate into traditional gender roles within their host countries. As Daisy explained, "We are more expected to fit into Japanese female roles, and a lot of the Japanese female traditional roles I do not fit into—I will never fit into." This pressure to assimilate into culturally specific roles led to emotional labor, identity conflict, and stress.

Findings in this area revealed how participants were sometimes positioned through culturally gendered expectations of caretaking, submissiveness, deference, and domesticity. Brenda, a teacher in Mongolia, noted, "There is an expectation that women are still supposed to stay home and be caretakers… women who have degrees and who are intelligent aren't necessarily the ones we should be looking to for advice." She emphasized how being a single woman compounded this lack of professional legitimacy: "Being a single woman … you have less respect than the men." Nala, teaching in Korea, illustrated the gendered division of labor within schools:

> *The women … at all my schools … they always take care of everyone. … If there's a meeting, they're the ones preparing … bringing like snacks and stuff. I have never seen a male teacher [do that] … They just show up. I've also seen … how men … cut the women … off … they just like start talking.*

These accounts reveal how participants felt an implicit pressure to conform to local expectations of femininity, even if they did not fully internalize these norms. While participants were not always certain about the cultural depth or specificity of these expectations, they sensed that deviating from them by being assertive, independent, or professionally ambitious could be viewed unfavorably. As a result, they reported self-monitoring and regulating emotions to avoid conflict or marginalization. In this way, culturally gendered norms subtly privileged men, contributing to unequal professional experiences and reinforcing gender hierarchies.

Racial and Ethnic Marginalization

Here we answer RQ2. In addition to gender, the findings reveal how race and ethnic identity shaped the participants' experiences of marginalization. First, we express challenges participants had navigating cultural differences as visibly foreign women, then we describe direct experiences of racial discrimination, particularly among our participants of color.

Adapting to Cultural and Ethnic Differences

Several participants expressed how living in racially and culturally homogenous East Asian societies heightened their sense of foreignness. They described how they stuck out visibly as foreigners, while also considering how and to what degree to make efforts to assimilate.

Sophie, a White British teacher in Korea, shared her experience of being a visible minority for the first time:

> *[I] go into a place where I became like a minority versus growing up in like a predominantly White town. … I am the only person like this for miles around. I definitely just felt like, oh, I stuck out like a sore thumb here.*

Although Sophie noted her self-consciousness about standing out, she acknowledged her privilege as a White woman, stating that "compared to others, I've not had the worst experiences." Her comment reflects a self-awareness of her positionality in relation to other, more marginalized foreign educators, which was something that Daisy also recognized.

Ashley, a teacher with Korean and White American heritage, further discussed cultural differences, noting the difference between Korean collectivism and American individualism:

> *I think America and Korea's values can be very opposite. Korea is a very homogenous culture. America is a very independent culture, individualized. So, I definitely felt that difference, especially at work when I was trying to fit in, in America, we try not to fit in.*

Her reflection captures the dissonance of navigating a professional environment where conformity and deference are highly valued, in contrast to her socialization in a culture that encourages self-expression and individual autonomy. With this tension, she felt uncertainty as to how an expatriate teacher should act, speak, and belong.

Racialized Experiences

More troubling, our participants' accounts reflected how racial privilege benefitted expatriates who were White or White-passing. Conversely, those who deviated from these standards experienced marginalization and racial discrimination.

Sophie, a White British teacher in Korea, acknowledged that her racial identity afforded her privileges not available to others:

> *In conversations I've had with other people, it's also been more alarming to see … how I'm received as like a White woman versus … a person of color, or a person from a Southeast Asian country. I've noticed a lot harsher reactions and harsher judgment.*

Her reflection highlights the layered racial hierarchies that extend beyond a simple Korean-versus-foreigner dichotomy. Likewise, Ashley, a biracial American, contrasted her experience with that of her Black friends: "I experience a lot of privilege. … I had a couple Black friends who experienced weird comments." Their statements indicate awareness of racial privilege, recognizing that their skin color afforded them a degree of social comfort not extended to people of color.

These discriminatory dynamics were apparent in Amara's experience in Korea. At one job at a public school, she arrived replacing a White teacher, feeling that they intentionally made her uncomfortable because of her race:

> *They did me dirty. I had no computer [or other resources]. … I was replacing a White girl, a European White girl, so they … just went out of their way to let me know that they did not like me.*

Her account of feeling denied basic work resources due to her race in effect made it harder from preparing for her core duty, teaching students. Another example of racial preference and discrimination emerged from her account teaching at a private academy:

> *The foreigner that they liked the most was the Australian foreigner. They couldn't understand anything that she said, so they would put her face up and have my voice. They loved her fair skin and her thinness.*

This practice, using Amara's voice but substituting her image with that of a thinner, White Australian colleague for advertising, demonstrates how Whiteness and conventional beauty standards are privileged. Amara's experience reflects how racialized ideals can shape visibility and representation.

Moreover, Amara also recounted a few incidents of racial violence in public spaces. She said, "I was actually spit on three different times … all by middle aged Korean men … I was just walking and not engaging with them so I honestly don't' know what led up to those … occasions." Additionally, she reported being hit over the head with a bottle in what she described as a racially oriented assault. The long-term toll of these experiences was clear when she explained, "Korea has been the worst mistake of my life." Yet, she explained that "I'm only here because my non-Korean significant other, who is White with blue eyes, loves it here."

Racial stereotyping and xenophobic encounters were also evident in Nala's account. She recalled a friend sticking up for her when a local man insulted her:

> *He came over to us … and he said, 'Oh, your loud African friend,' … I was like, 'Oh, does he think I'm from … the African continent?' But I see that my friend was super mad, and she starts like yelling at him, and I was like what's happening. And then I just hear her like screaming that he's racist.*

This incident, like others, revealed how foreigners can be verbally othered in public spaces.

Taken together, these accounts point to a racialized hierarchy within expatriate experiences in East Asia. Whiteness is an affordance, while those with darker skin can face microaggressions, discrimination, exclusion, and even physical violence. These experiences affect professional opportunities, and they have implications for mental health, belonging, and long-term occupational commitment.

Navigating Appearance-Based Expectations in East Asia

In response to RQ3, the findings explore how expatriate female English teachers' experiences of marginalization intersects with their physical appearance. Across interviews, participants described how appearance norms in East Asia, particularly regarding body size, hair, and grooming, shaped their daily experiences and professional identities. These expectations often compounded existing gendered hierarchies and introduced a distinct set of emotional and social burdens, especially for those whose appearance did not align with local beauty ideals.

Beauty Norms and Social Fit

Across interviews, participants described feeling pressure to conform to East Asian beauty norms. They frequently reflected on how conformity to dominant aesthetic standards shaped their sense of belonging.

Ashley, a teacher of Korean and White American heritage, captured this dynamic:

> *I sense that Koreans care a lot about community and homogeneity. … If you fit into their beauty standards, no matter what ethnicity you are, then I think they are very forgiving and they will really value you, but if you don't, then I think that they are less accommodating.*

Ashley's reflection underscores how aesthetic conformity, especially around dress, body shape, and hair styles, can override other identity markers such as race or nationality. Amara, for instance, reflected on how her treatment during her initial years teaching in Korea was drastically different than it is currently because of weight loss and assimilation:

> *Korea can be fun depending on what you look like. I came to Korea 5'2" 1/2, over 300lbs, dark-skinned, with natural hair. My worst treatment was 2014-2019 when I looked completely different. I'm now 139 pounds, wear my hair straight, and I'm content.*

She attributed improved treatment to changes in her weight and hairstyle, pointing to a perceived acceptability tied to conformity with local norms. In contrast, deviating from these standards can cause scrutiny and exclusion, regardless of qualifications or experience.

Body Size and Social Scrutiny

Negative experiences regarding weight and body size were particularly salient. Five participants explained how their size impacted their experience in East Asia. Sophie, Brenda, Elize, Amara, and Nala discussed body consciousness and negative experiences because of their weight, such as being stared at in public, worrying about fitting into seats, facing difficulty finding clothes, and even being blocked from entering clothing stores.

Such experiences were compounded by the frequency and bluntness of unsolicited remarks. As Elize described from her time in China: "I did lose quite some weight… though, still they will say to your face, 'You're fat.' They're not shy about such things." Brenda recalled:

> *It's very interesting how a lot of Asian cultures see you and are like, oh, you're so White… but then they're like, oh, but you're so big… I don't know if this is supposed to be a compliment or an insult.*

As Amara joked of White privilege, it's almost like "their White card gets declined because their fat card blocks it every time. … Their fatness denies them privilege."

These participants' experiences exemplify how body shaming can impact emotional wellbeing and heighten feelings of marginalization, especially among women whose bodies fall outside normative ideals.

Hair Texture and Styles

Hair textures and styles also emerged as important identity markers, often subject to scrutiny, exacerbating marginalization. For instance, Nala and Amara described how Afro-textured hair was stigmatized and came with unwanted attention and touching. As Nala said, "I've obviously had so many people just like touching my hair;" for instance, "I had a lunch lady… just start touching my hair, but like really aggressively at my scalp… One of my co-teachers had to yell at her to back up." Such acts reinforced feelings of objectification and racialized difference, treating Black women's hair as exotic, unfamiliar, and available for scrutiny. For these reasons, Amara straightened her hair, conforming to local norms.

Discussion

This study examined how the nexus of gender, race, and physical appearance shaped the lived experiences of marginalization among female expatriate English teachers in East Asia. Our findings contribute to the broader field of ELT research by illuminating how gendered and racial inequities shape women's experiences in the workplace and also by revealing how beauty norms and body scrutiny in East Asia further influence expatriate women's personal and professional lives.

In response to RQ1, our participants' accounts demonstrate how their gender shaped workplace experiences in distinct and often unequal ways compared to their male counterparts. Participants reported experiencing marginalization due to misogyny and patriarchal cultural norms. From routine microaggressions and gendered task assignments to more overt acts of disrespect or aggression, participants navigated environments where professional legitimacy was occasionally undermined because of their gender. These findings concur with prior research with expatriate women in East Asia (Chesnut, 2020; Hicks, 2013; Kobayashi, 2014; Nagatomo, 2016; Seo & Kubota, 2023). Moreover, participants were challenged with expectations to conform to culturally specific gender norms (e.g., caretaking, deference, and passivity), requiring emotional labor to avoid conflict and maintain harmony, similar to what Choe and Seo (2021) and Maddametti and Hinton (2024) discussed.

Second, in answering RQ2, racial identity was also found to influence participants' experiences in predominantly homogeneous, monoethnic East Asian societies. One novel finding was the hypervisibility expressed by participants, regardless of race. However, White and White-passing participants recognized their preferential treatment, confirming discussions of White privilege in Asia (Jenks, 2017; Kubota, 2023). Troublingly, our participants of color, especially the two Black participants, reported systemic bias, harsher treatment, and overt racism experienced within and outside their workplaces. Incidents ranged from exclusion and denial of resources to racialized violence in public spaces. Additionally, these participants explained experiences relating to their hypervisibility, feeling surveilled in workspaces and targets of racial stereotyping. These findings align with findings and discussion in prior research (Charles, 2019; Dos Santos, 2020; Jackson, 2016; Maddamsetti & Hinton, 2024; Seo & Kubota, 2023), confirming the unique challenges faced by Black women teachers in Asia in need of redress.

Third, in answering RQ3, participants' experiences reveal how beauty norms in East Asia—emphasizing thinness, youth, light skin, and certain hair textures—can influence the treatment of expatriate female teachers in both professional and public spheres. Many participants described the internal conflicts, struggles, and verbal scrutiny due to their appearance and body shapes. Such accounts highlight how beauty norms in East Asia can disproportionately affect foreign women (see also Chesnut, 2020; Kobayashi, 2014; Seo & Kubota, 2023). Larger-bodied participants faced shaming, stares, exclusion, and unwanted attention. These experiences impacted their sense of wellbeing and contributed to feelings of marginalization. Additionally, our Black participants experienced exoticization and objectification with unwanted attention and touching of their hair. These findings resonate with prior studies (Chesnut, 2020; Choe & Seo, 2021; Seo & Kubota, 2023), extending on them by demonstrating they apply across a diverse set of participants across four East Asian countries and multiple workplace contexts. The pressure to self-monitor appearance and manage microaggressions compounded challenges already faced by women navigating gendered and racialized work environments.

In summary, our study contributes to the literature by suggesting that gender discrimination among expatriate NESTs in East Asia is not merely incidental or anecdotal, but rather is systemic and intersectional, occurring across an aesthetic, racialized, and gendered nexus. Empirically, our multi-context sample illustrates that intersectional marginalization persists across national boundaries and

various local teaching contexts, including schools, private institutes, and universities. Collectively, our participants' accounts illustrate how macro-level ideologies—patriarchy, White normativity, and East Asian beauty culture—contribute to marginalization in workspaces and daily life. For many women in ELT, especially women of color, these dynamics manifest not only in hiring disparities but also in everyday classroom interactions, access to leadership, and emotional labor burdens. Ultimately, this study reframes marginalization in ELT as an intersectional system of social gatekeeping that privileges conformity to gendered, racial, and aesthetic ideals. Recognizing this system opens new directions for equity-oriented teacher policy and research. Addressing these inequities requires not only institutional reforms but also challenging the native-speakerism and White normativity evident in East Asia.

Implications

Grounded in the view of intersectionality as critical praxis (Collins & Bilge, 2020), intersectionality entails more than recognizing overlapping identities; it requires transforming the conditions that reproduce inequality. The aesthetic-racial-gender nexus identified in this study reveals that efforts to advance equity in East Asian ELT must address how institutional, discursive, and embodied norms work together to privilege certain teachers while marginalizing others. Our findings suggest the need for structural, pedagogical, and institutional reforms across multiple levels.

First, educational institutions must acknowledge that foreign female teachers face unique challenges and make efforts towards gender equality in hiring practices and leadership roles. Institutions should implement equity-focused policies, include reporting mechanisms for gender discrimination, and provide gender-sensitivity training for school leaders and staff. Moreover, males in positions of power need to recognize their privilege and make efforts to ensure the power imbalance is not reinforced and sustained. It is important to ensure the professional dignity for all educators, regardless of gender.

Equally, if not more importantly, it is imperative to challenge the White normativity in ELT, ending preferential hiring preferences and differential treatment based on race. Doing so will require a variety of strategies, such as challenging the underlying ethno-linguistic native-speakerism prevalent in East Asia and implementing anti-racist education on many levels, from Ministries of Education to local schools, universities, and private institutes. As in this study and others, teachers of color, particularly Black women, experience intensified marginalization through over racism, exclusion, and surveillance. Schools, universities, and relevant government bodies should incorporate anti-racist training. This training should specifically address racial microaggressions and cultural stereotypes. Institutions and hiring bodies must ensure recruitment criteria centers on pedagogical competence, teaching credentials, and communication skills. Policymakers and school administrators can support teacher inclusion by promoting efforts that embrace diverse representations of professionalism. Guidelines for inclusive hiring practices across co-teaching and foreign teacher visa programs are imperative, as are reporting mechanisms for addressing racial discrimination in hiring practices and workplaces.

Additionally, appearance-based discrimination, particularly regarding body size, hair styles, and dress affect foreign women's sense of belonging and professional legitimacy. Institutions should explicitly prohibit appearance-based discrimination and adopt inclusive dress codes and workplace norms that recognize global diversity in appearance and grooming. Teacher associations can provide forums for discussion and advocacy around body image and aesthetic discrimination, challenging unspoken beauty norms that marginalize racialized and larger-bodied women.

As for teacher education and professional development, Tarrayo (2025) emphasizes that reflective practice grounded in intersectionality fosters both empathy and pedagogical responsiveness. Embedding this perspective into professional development can help educators gain awareness of issues related identity-based marginalization.

Lastly, although native-speakerism was not the central focus of this study, it is important to acknowledge it and challenge its lingering influence (Llurda, 2025). Excluding teachers based on perceived linguistic or national legitimacy means that a large population of experienced and educated teachers are excluded from English language programs in East Asia. Such exclusion likely means that East Asian education is missing out on potentially higher-efficacy English education. Recently, Japan's JET Programme (2025) expanded to include English-speaking teachers from the Philippines and India (among other countries), and such inclusion could be modeled by policy makers across the region in order to help re-focus ELT pedagogy on professionalism, experience, and efficacy above identity markers.

Limitations and Future Research

As with all qualitative inquiry, this study's insights are bounded by its scope and participant composition. The sample, while larger and more diverse than many prior studies, represents the voices of seven women whose experiences cannot capture the full range of expatriate female teachers in East Asia. The data are weighted toward participants working in Korea, reflecting the researchers' professional location and relative accessibility of potential participants there. Consequently, the findings illustrate patterns and mechanisms of marginalization rather than their frequency or universality.

Another limitation concerns perspective. Because our analytic focus was explicitly on marginalization, the narratives emphasize struggle and discrimination more than positive or empowering dimensions of expatriate teachers' professional lives. Future research could offer a more balanced portrayal by exploring moments of resistance, agency, and solidarity that coexist with exclusion. In addition, although this study did not center pedagogy per se, issues of professional legitimacy and workplace equity are deeply connected to teaching practice, classroom interaction, and student learning. Subsequent studies could therefore link intersectional experiences to pedagogical outcomes, such as how discrimination influences teacher self-efficacy or instructional style.

Researcher positionality also shaped interpretation. As a Black American woman and a White Canadian man, we approached the data from both emic and etic vantage points. While this dual perspective enhanced reflexivity, it also introduced interpretive subjectivities inherent in all qualitative analysis. Readers are encouraged to view our interpretations as situated within these positional standpoints.

Building on this work, future research should examine how intersectional experiences evolve across time and career stages, considering whether and how teachers' strategies for coping, resisting, or thriving change as they accrue experience or move between contexts. Expanding participant demographics to include LGBTQ+ educators and nonbinary or gender-nonconforming teachers would also deepen understanding of how multiple identity dimensions intersect in expatriate ELT.

Additionally, future studies could evaluate intervention and advocacy initiatives, for instance, by considering the effectiveness of anti-racist or gender-sensitivity training or the impact of institutional mentorship programs on wellbeing and retention. Participatory and collaborative methods, such as teacher-led action research or community-based inquiry, could empower

marginalized teachers as co-researchers and agents of change rather than objects of study. Ultimately, sustained, intersectional research can help reshape the discourse of professionalism in East Asian ELT from one grounded in racialized and aesthetic hierarchies to one rooted in equity, representation, and pedagogical excellence.

Conclusion

This study examined how gender, race, and physical appearance shape the lived experiences of marginalization among expatriate female English teachers in East Asia. Using an intersectional framework, we found that participants routinely navigated overlapping forms of discrimination, including misogyny, racial bias, and aesthetic judgement. These experiences not only impacted their professional legitimacy and workplace inclusion but also affected their emotional wellbeing and sense of belonging.

This study contributes to the growing body of research that highlights the need to move beyond essentialist views associated with native-speakerism. Instead, we advocate for a more nuanced understanding that acknowledges the complex and relational identities of educators, especially women of color. We argue that addressing inequities is essential for fostering inclusive workplaces, retaining diverse teaching talent, and supporting student learning in East Asian ELT contexts.

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Appendix A

Semi-structured Interview Questions

Background

Tell me about your education background (degrees, qualifications, etc.).

What kind of jobs did you have before moving to [your current country]?

Moving abroad

When did you first move to [your current country]? How long have you been here/there?

Why did you decide to move to [your current country]?

When did you first think about teaching English and why?

Cultural adjustment

Where are you living now? How do you feel about your living arrangements? How do you feel about your neighborhood?

Have you experienced any difficulties adapting to the local culture and customs?

Do you ever feel isolated or disconnected from the local community? How so?

Have you felt any discrimination or othering in your community? Do you feel that the life experiences of expat women [in your current country] are different than those of men in any way? How so?

Local language

How do you feel about using Korean specifically? What is your language relationship to the language?

How does this affect your identity and wellbeing?

Work environment, Student relationships, and Collegial relationships

How do you feel about your job? How satisfied overall are you with your job right now? Why?

What are the best parts of working in this profession and school? What are the most difficult parts?

What are the students you work with like?

How would you describe your relationship with them?

What affects this and how does it affect you and your wellbeing?

How do you feel about your colleagues and the schools you work in and your head of school?

How would you describe the status of foreign English language teachers in your school?

Do you feel you have autonomy in your job at present? If so, in what ways? If not, in what ways?

Have there been any workplace incidents that caused stress and anxiety? Are any gender specific?

How close do you feel with your colleagues and administrators (local and expat)?

How supportive are your colleagues (local and expat)?

Do you feel that you are 'a part of the group' in your school?

Do you feel included in after school activities and meetings? Do you feel any differences between the male and female experience?

Have you experienced any stress caused by relationships with colleagues or administrators?

Have you felt any discrimination or othering in your workplace? How so?

Do you feel that the workplace experiences of expat women are different than those of men in any way? How so?

Work-life balance and Stress

What are the biggest sources of stress in your professional life at the moment?

What are the biggest sources of stress in your personal life at the moment?

Have there been any non-work-related incidents that caused stress and anxiety?

How do you manage the boundaries between personal and professional life?

Wellbeing (other questions)

What do you do to manage your wellbeing?

What do you do to relax?

How much attention do you give to your physical wellbeing? In what ways?

Have you ever felt judged because of your appearance ?

Have you had any unwanted sexual attention at work? With colleagues? With administrators/managers? In the community? How so?

Wellbeing gap

Recent research (Moodie & Kim, 2024) found that expats have lower wellbeing than local teachers, and that perhaps female expat English teachers in Asia are experience lower levels of occupational wellbeing than males (Moodie, 2022). Can you think of any reasons that this may be the case? (e.g., cultural, cultural-historical, specific workplace environment, daily life experience in [your country], discrimination, othering, unwanted sexual attention).

**What advice would you give administrators to help them understand and alleviate this gap? Please be specific.

Note: Interview protocol partially adapted from Sulis et al. (2023, pp. 200-203).

Appendix B

Code System

1. Gender and marginalization
    a. Gendered hierarchies in public and professional life
        i. Misogyny
        ii. Boy's club
        iii. Male privilege
        iv. White male privilege
        v. Gender discrimination
        vi. Inappropriate comments
        vii. Unwanted sexual attention
    b. Performing and Negotiating Femininity in East Asia
        i. Not meeting norms
        ii. Expectations for appearance
        iii. Expectations for marriage
        iv. Being a caretaker
        v. Being a subservient
        vi. Being submissive
2. Racial and ethnic marginalization
    a. Adapting to cultural and ethnic differences
        i. Sticking out
        ii. Blending in
    b. Racialized experiences
        i. White privilege
        ii. Racial hierarchy
        iii. Stereotyping
        iv. Alleged hate crimes
        v. Xenophobia
3. Navigating appearance-based expectations in East Asia
    a. Beauty norms and social fit
        i. Homogeneity
        ii. Youth and ageism
    b. Body size and social scrutiny
        i. Being plus size in Asia
        ii. Being curvy
        iii. Body conscientiousness

iv. Adapting to workplace dress standards

v. Challenges clothing shopping

c. Hair texture and styles

i. Unwanted attention

ii. Unwanted touching

iii. Questioning naturalness of hair

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[1] While we acknowledge the problematic nature of the NEST label for reinforcing a native/non-native speaker dichotomy (cf. Llurda, 2025; Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2024; Yang & Forbes, 2025), it is appropriate in this context as it reflects the way educational policies and hiring practices explicitly categorize and differentiate foreign teachers from local English teachers (LETs) in Asia (see also Copland et al., 2020).