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Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Urmia University

'Native' English Teachers Navigating Native-speakerism: Investigating the Intersection of Identity, Beliefs, and Emotions through Narrative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Despite increasing academic interest in exploring how native-speakerism affects English language teachers' identities, past research has focused primarily on the identities of 'non-native' teachers. This study investigates the intersection of identity, beliefs, and emotions of two experienced teachers who identify as 'native' speakers of English and were educated on native-speakerism during their postgraduate teacher preparation programs. A narrative design which elicited written narratives and semi-structured interviews as data collection methods was used to explore how the participants developed awareness of native-speakerism and how they attempted to realign their identities in consideration of ideologically normative attitudes in their pedagogical contexts. The findings indicate that the participants' professional identities were impacted by emotional experiences in their personal histories and by exposure to the ideas of English as a Lingua Franca. In turn, their awareness shaped their current teaching beliefs and their emotions towards native-speakerism. Furthermore, 'native' teachers of English may experience identity conflict and emotional fluctuations stemming from the way their 'nativeness' is positioned by other educational actors. The study offers suggestions for teacher preparation programs to support 'native' teachers of English in navigating their emotions towards native-speakerism and argues that discussions of native-speakerism need to become more widespread, within and outside of academia. A future research agenda is also proposed to further investigate how 'native' teachers' identities, emotions, and beliefs are affected by native-speakerism.

Keywords: teacher identity; emotions; teaching beliefs; native-speakerism; narrative inquiry

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 11 June 2025 **Revised version received:** 11 Oct. 2025

Accepted: 10 Nov. 2025 **Available online:** 15 Dec. 2025

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10.30466/ijltr.2025.56653.3201

Introduction

Teaching entails both cognitive and emotional work (Schutz et al., 2020), and teachers' beliefs and emotions interact in complex ways with the educational environment to influence their identities (Barcelos, 2015). Indeed, recent research has noted that identity, emotions, and beliefs share similar characteristics, leading to calls to explore the connections between these three constructs (Barcelos, 2015) and the potential sense of powerlessness that may emerge from their misalignment (Shapiro, 2010). Such research is particularly needed when considering the perceived tension between the way language is commonly taught in English Language Teaching (ELT) and the needs of English learners outside the classroom.

Building on this tension, various research paradigms collected under the umbrella term *Global Englishes* (GE) have questioned the assumptions attached to nativeness labels in ELT (Rose & Galloway, 2019). Indeed, GE research is fundamentally concerned with addressing *native-speakerism* in ELT, a heavily criticized (e.g., Copland et al., 2020; Houghton & Rivers, 2013; Selvi et al., 2024) ideology assuming that 'native' speakers are the best models and teachers of a language (Holliday, 2005). Since such proposals for change require teachers to radically reevaluate "beliefs about their long-established practices" (Sifakis & Bayyurt, 2018), and since entrenched beliefs powerfully influence identity, emotions, and other beliefs (Barcelos, 2015), it is necessary to document how teachers educated in the GE paradigms experience professional identity realignment in their educational contexts.

Nevertheless, few studies on teacher identity have investigated its connection with beliefs and emotions (Barcelos, 2015). Furthermore, considering that teachers who identify or are labeled by others as *'native'-English-speaking teachers* (NESTs) have often been negatively overgeneralized in research (Copland et al., 2020; Houghton & Rivers, 2013; Lowe & Kiczkowiak, 2016; Selvi et al., 2024), it is important to explore how they experience identity realignment vis-à-vis the need to address native-speakerist ideologies.

The present study investigates how NESTs formally educated on native-speakerism adjust their professional identities and teaching practices. Building on these considerations, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does awareness of native-speakerism shape immigrant NESTs' identities, emotions, and beliefs in their educational contexts?

2. What challenges, if any, do immigrant NESTs face when realigning their identities as "native speakers"?

Following poststructuralist perspectives on teachers' identity, this study provided a space for participants to actively evaluate their personal histories and reshape their identities in collaboration with the authors. By gaining insight into emotional experiences, it is possible to "understand how teachers see themselves, their colleagues, their students, and the decisions that impact these groups" (Shapiro, 2010, p. 619). Thus, by acknowledging emotions as sites of contestation and by sharing teachers' stories, emotions may be turned into political action for change (Zembylas, 2003) and better avenues may be identified to support NESTS challenging native-speakerism in their classrooms. The study also hopes to challenge persisting essentialist dichotomies which neatly divide teachers according to nativeness, potentially obscuring other aspects of their identities and affecting their confidence as educators (Selvi et al., 2024).

To problematize the false dichotomy of the terms 'native' and 'non-native' speaker, we have followed the example of other scholars (e.g., Holliday, 2005; Lowe & Kiczkowiak, 2016) and used

inverted quotation marks to signal that such labels are ideologically loaded and tend to erase group heterogeneity. Furthermore, despite calls to replace or abandon such labels, we believe that failure to recognize their persistent and widespread use would be far more problematic. Our participants seemed to agree, as they problematized these labels in their narratives, with Grace even gesturing inverted commas during the interview.

Literature Review

Although this paper frames identities, beliefs, and emotions as interrelated constructs, we have opted to review them separately to increase clarity.

Teacher Identity

This study draws on poststructuralist perspectives to conceptualize teacher identity and associated constructs such as emotions and beliefs. Identity is understood as a process of continuous becoming (Zembylas, 2003) which is constructed within socio-historical contexts (Schutz et al., 2020) and power structures and relationships. This view contrasts with *essentialist* perspectives built on the assumptions that clear boundaries exist between socially labelled groups and that individuals within such groups essentially share identical characteristics (Bucholtz, 2003).

There is limited consensus on the definition and meaning of teacher identity (Trent, 2015), and the term itself is potentially misleading, implying an isolated construct which is objective, consistent, and entirely unique to an individual (Joseph, 2016). Poststructuralism offers a more intricate view, framing identity as multiple, negotiable, potentially contradictory, and contested (Baker & Ishikawa, 2021; Darvin, 2016), and as a fluid and dynamic process of becoming, which is socially shaped by discourses and power relations in teachers' educational contexts (Barcelos, 2015; Norton, 2013; Song, 2016; Trent, 2015; Zembylas, 2003).

Since identity is "an ongoing process that changes over time in relation to various contexts" (Schutz et al., 2020, p. 75), it should not be deemed a fixed construct, but should instead be investigated in consideration of its dynamic nature. By emphasizing the influence of the social environment, scholars also indicate that individuals' freedom to construct and select identities is constrained by the labels which are imposed on them by others and by the ideologies and discourses available in their social contexts (Baker & Ishikawa, 2021; Preece, 2016). Furthermore, teachers' professional identity cannot be separated from other personal identities by artificially establishing "where a teacher begins and where the teacher ends" (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011, p. 317), especially since teachers tend to erase such boundaries through their personal commitment to the profession (Zembylas, 2003). Consequently, there have been calls to investigate teachers' life experiences as whole people (Bukor, 2015; Li, 2022).

Teacher Emotions and Beliefs

Despite being historically neglected in language education research (Barcelos, 2015), emotions have recently gained remarkable attention (Wolff & De Costa, 2017). Emotions are socially and culturally constructed (Swain, 2013; Wolff & De Costa, 2017), meaning that they are shaped by individuals' social lives and relationships (Bukor, 2015). This suggests that the ways individuals experience and express emotions are contextually dependent (Zembylas, 2003). In educational settings, this means that teachers' emotions and identity are largely the outcome of their dialogic relationships with other human stakeholders (Shapiro, 2010; Zembylas, 2003), such as learners and colleagues. Since such relationships change over time, teachers' emotions are dynamic, transient, and contingent to

situations arising in the classroom (Schutz et al., 2020). Power is another essential component of all emotional discourses (Van Veen & Sleegers, 2009) and examining both emotions and identity may allow teachers to reshape power rules within their educational settings (Zembylas, 2004).

Beliefs are defined as "embodied conscious and unconscious ideas and thoughts about oneself, the world, and one's position in it developed through membership in various social groups, which are considered by the individual to be true" (Cross, 2009, p. 326). Teachers' beliefs are not merely knowledge, also acting as filters to notice classroom phenomena, and as frames for interpreting events and behaviors (Fives & Buehl, 2016). Similarly to emotions and identities, beliefs are dynamic constructs affected by social contexts and power relations (Zembylas, 2004). Indeed, beliefs cannot be truly separated from emotions, as the two constructs are interdependent and interact in complex ways (Gill & Hardin, 2015).

In summary, teachers' beliefs, emotions, and identities interact non-linearly, shaping their professional practices and development (Schutz et al., 2020). This study aims to explore how these constructs interact in teachers developing awareness of native-speakerism and adjusting their identities as 'native' speakers.

Native-Speakerism in English Language Teaching

Native-speakerism, as defined by Holliday (2005) is an ideology which positions 'native' speakers as ideal models and teachers of the target language. Although many studies highlight its detriments to *'non-native'-English-speaking teachers* (NNESTs), several researchers have criticized this overgeneralized description since native-speakerism may also negatively affect NESTs (Copland et al., 2020; Houghton & Rivers, 2013; Selvi et al., 2024).

Native-speakerism can deprofessionalize and dehumanize NESTs, occasionally reducing them to mere language resources (Lowe & Kiczkowiak, 2016). Although nativeness may confer some privileges (Ruecker & Ives, 2015), the NEST label tends to overshadow one's professional status as teacher (Galloway, 2014; Lawrence & Nagashima, 2020). Compared with the surge of research on NNEST identity (Kim, 2011; Yuan, 2019), fewer studies investigate how native-speakerism affects NESTs' identities. Therefore, this study may add nuance to the scholarly discussion of the NEST label.

Methodology

Research Design and Data Collection Methods

This narrative inquiry follows the tradition of previous teacher identity research conducted through narratives (Wolff & De Costa, 2017), framing teachers' lived stories as indispensable to understand how their identities and emotions are shaped by discursive environments (Zembylas, 2003). Since stories "embody our understandings of…events as well as express our feelings about them" (Barkhuizen, 2015, p. 169), narrative designs are particularly suitable for exploring the dynamic relationship between teachers' beliefs and emotions. Furthermore, since narrative inquiry can investigate both teachers' inner psychological worlds and their socio-historical contexts (Barkhuizen et al., 2025), it fits a poststructuralist framework understanding emotions as socially constructed. Furthermore, narrative inquiry can highlight the complexity of individual experiences and disrupt overgeneralized assumptions on the qualities of NESTs and NNESTs (Lowe & Kiczkowiak, 2016).

Two qualitative data collection methods were used: written narratives and online semi-structured interviews. Both instruments were piloted with two scholars who identified as NESTs aware of native-speakerism, and minor adjustments were implemented following their feedback. The written narratives were elicited specifically for this study to obtain a rich picture of the participants' awareness development, their educational contexts, and their emotional/cognitive worlds. A narrative guide (Appendix A) was developed to help the teachers write stories to address the research questions. Participants had freedom to structure and arrange the narratives however they preferred. Narratives were produced in two parts (one focusing on their formative years, one on their current experiences) and shared by email.

Semi-structured interviews were used to illuminate and further explore the written narratives. Although the interview guides (Appendix B) followed the same structure and order for both participants, some questions were tailored specifically to either Clara or Grace. This was done because each narrative contained unique experiences not found in the other which warranted expansion, or ambiguous statements requiring clarification. To help participants verbalize their thoughts, slides were used (Appendices C and D) as visual mnemonic stimuli. Interview questions were divided into five sections: 1) general questions on the three constructs, 2) specific questions for each participant, 3) questions on identity conflict, 4) questions on the other participant's narrative, and 5) questions based on two scenarios, the first taken from Li, 2022, the second being a story from a 'native' English scholar adapted with permission. Interviews were conducted online and lasted for two hours each. Sessions were audio-recorded, with additional notes being taken on potentially relevant details such as prosodic features. Paolo acted as the interviewer because of the rapport established with both participants in a previous research project.

Participants

Two teachers of English (pseudonyms: Grace and Clara) who identified as female, white, American, and NESTs participated in this study. Both had over five years of teaching experience, were immigrants working for private institutions in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, and had completed TESOL-related Master's programs in British universities offering modules on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). While they were purposefully sampled because of their self-professed status as ELF-aware NESTs, other similarities were revealed in the narratives (see section 4). Both teachers had previously participated in a project with Paolo, in which they were assigned the same pseudonyms used in this study.

Previous narrative research (e.g., Bukor, 2015; Liu & Xiu, 2011) has noted the value of building relationships with participants to enhance trustworthiness and, we would argue, ethical validity. Thus, we believe that our study has benefited from the participants collaborating and remaining in touch with Paolo after the end of the previous project. To safeguard their identities, we are unable to localize their national contexts more specifically and we warn against generalizing our findings beyond their unique micro-settings.

Researchers' Positionality

Consoli and Ganassin (2023) encourage researchers to appreciate the influence of their personal and professional lives on the research process. Although we did not share our participants' positioning as NESTs, we believe that our common scholarly identities as teachers striving to understand and challenge native-speakerism benefited the project. Native-speakerism has shaped our lives and career trajectories as 'non-native' speakers, and both of us are personally and emotionally involved in the research topic. Since it would be impossible to discuss our stories in appropriate depth in this paper, we have made our narratives available on Mendeley Data (https://data.mendeley.com/datasets/hrswr6vh5t/1) to bring our human selves to the forefront

and help readers better understand our beliefs, biases, biographies, contexts, emotions, origins, and values.

Data Analytical Procedures

Data analysis was conducted in two main steps: 1) thematic analysis of the dataset followed by 2) narrative analysis. After receiving the written narratives, we conducted comprehensive thematic analysis through *Quirkos*. Our coding was inductive, highlighting any information we deemed valuable and categorizing codes into major themes. We coded independently and met weekly to discuss and agree on the coding. The finalized codes and themes were used to build the interview guide. The same process was repeated for the interview transcripts. After agreeing on codes and themes, we converted them into storylines following a 'restorying' process used in previous narrative studies (Liu & Xu, 2011; Zhou & Liu, 2023). We built a chronology of Grace and Clara's identity development as NESTs aware of native-speakerism (sections 4.1.1 and 4.2.1) and of their current experiences in their teaching contexts (sections 4.1.2 and 4.2.2). This narrative analysis helped us emphasize the uniqueness of each participant's experience, provided tidier identity development timelines, and highlighted their unique emotions and beliefs. We thus created complementary narratives, filtered through our interpretations and with added insights from the interviews.

Ethical Considerations

The project received approval from our institution's ethical committee prior to contacting the participants. We met with Clara and Grace online to provide initial information on project aims, data collection, and time investment. They received ethical documentation by email and were given at least one week to consider their involvement, while we remained available for clarification. Participants were told that their narratives may be read by a potentially large audience and were guaranteed their rights to confidentiality and withdrawal without repercussions. Indeed, we addressed Clara's pseudonymity concerns by clarifying that we would remove any detail from the study that they considered unsuitable for publication.

As the emotional power of their stories might be lost in a research paper, we asked permission to share the narratives on Mendeley Data (https://data.mendeley.com/datasets/hrswr6vh5t/1). As a token gift and act of fairness to address our power as researchers collecting and dissecting our participants' lives, we both wrote our own stories from the perspective of NNESTs, following the same narrative guide. Clara and Grace loved the idea, and we made our stories available on Mendeley Data.

At the end of the project, we shared our final draft with the participants for member checking and arranged individual online meetings to receive feedback on our interpretations and ensure that all confidential information had been pseudonymized. A challenge was identified in acknowledging Clara and Grace's previous participation in Paolo's study, potentially enhancing the risk of their identities being exposed. This risk was openly discussed with the participants before submitting the paper for peer review.

Findings

Grace's Story: "God is not Interested in Your Idiotic Linguistic Biases!"

Developing Awareness of Native-speakerism

Grace's identity as a NEST aware of native-speakerism unfolded over a long period of time and was marked by critical episodes that affected her emotionally and triggered changes in her language beliefs and her positioning towards 'non-native' English speakers. She experienced early second language learning through her older sister, who was learning German and inspired Grace to study German and English language teaching as an undergraduate. Learning to teach a language as a 'non-native' speaker triggered her early questioning of native-speakerism, as she realized that her 'native' German peers were not necessarily good German teachers:

> *it… drove me crazy, because I was like, well, but you're a native speaker of German, you should understand why this is dative and not genitive, or whatever. And I think that's where it started to click for me. That it's not about being a native speaker, it's about being qualified to teach.*

Indeed, this experience as a German NNEST allowed her to empathize with her 'non-native' English learners during her undergraduate internship. Later, while pursuing CELTA in Germany, she encountered an even greater diversity of 'native' and 'non-native' English accents. Furthermore, her English teaching classes raised her awareness of pedagogical hierarchies privileging certain varieties of English (namely 'White' English), which would become "another piece in the puzzle that [she] honestly didn't understand where to put until diving into ELF". Grace noted that her beliefs "may be more prominent in [her] mind as an American citizen and [her] country's deeply divisive issues with racism" and that she had "deeply wrestled with the way [her] BIPOC (bi-racial, indigenous, and people of color) brothers and sisters have been continually treated in [her] country".

After graduating, Grace moved to the MENA region, where she taught English to refugees and locals in a community center. Some of her students were local practitioners, and a significant emotional episode involved one such teacher. This person appreciated the potential usefulness of communicative language teaching, but felt bad about using English in class because of her accent and for fear of making mistakes. Remembering her own experience as a German NNEST, Grace empathized with and encouraged the teacher not to be afraid of speaking English in class, especially since this teacher was qualified for her context. Following this episode, Grace was emotionally shaken and filled with doubt:

> *Leaving that visit, I could never shake the feeling of something being wrong. She might be a better teacher than I am, especially for her context, so how could she believe that she needed to be a "native" speaker to be as good as me? Why doesn't she believe that she is enough?*

The turning point in Grace's narrative occurred around a year after this emotional discussion, when she stumbled upon a podcast on ELF presented by Professor Jennifer Jenkins. According to Grace:

> *[i]n that brief thirty-minute podcast, it was like my world got flipped upside down. The foundation of native-speakerism had fully cracked, even though I did not likely know that term yet. The pieces were coming together, and I, indeed, became more aware of the number of "non-native" English speakers from around the world I regularly interacted with…I began to realize that these co-workers and friends were not just constantly English learners trying to sound like me, they were legitimate speakers of English…I began my journey into reading more about ELF, and I knew that I wanted to dive more into this at a higher academic level.*

This serendipitous online finding eventually led to Grace's enrolment in a British Applied Linguistics and TESOL postgraduate program which included an ELF component. Both the program and Grace's interactions with her peers were conducive to exploring ELF and native-speakerism. Indeed, she felt surprised at being one of only two 'native' speakers in the program and she also realized that the UK was more diverse than she had imagined, even though some encounters led to frustration and annoyance:

> *As I got deeper into my learning, I found myself frustrated when dealing with my local British friends who insisted that they were the true owners of English, even if it was often said in jest. Not only was it degrading to me and my American variety of English, but it made me angry that, in one fell swoop, all other beautifully accented Englishes were just not legitimate enough. The irony? A northern-accented Brit telling me this in a definitely NOT Received Pronunciation accent. If my bias towards native-speakerism wasn't already smashed, it was now.*

While exploring ELF and challenging her own native-speakerist assumptions, Grace started to connect her ELF-aware 'native' teacher identity to other aspects of her personal identity. In particular, she believed that the celebration of diversity and the challenge of prejudice that she considered intrinsic to ELF synergized with Christian ideals:

> *I realized that I could not rightly love my neighbor and also force them to sound like "native-speaking," "white American" me. For myself as a Christian, this cannot and does not fit into a right paradigm of understanding God's upside-down Kingdom…[Attending church in multilingual settings and listening to sermons from ELF speakers] has also become important for me to help other people (especially my "native" English speaking friends) better understand that accent and dialect diversity is God's idea of the good life. AKA: God is not interested in your idiotic linguistic biases!*

Grace emphasized a connection between ELF and her religious identity, which compelled her to provide social advocacy for marginalized people. She connected this personal belief to pedagogical concerns stemming from her awareness of ongoing linguistic and racial discrimination in her country of origin:

> *at the risk of being labeled as "woke", I believe that white supremacy is deeply rooted in the native-speakerist paradigm, especially because what varieties of "native" English matter to (generally white) people who are touting "native" status or want to achieve "native" status: "black English" or "Ebonics," for example, don't make the cut when it comes to what we consider "native", "proper," or "academic."*

During the interview, Grace explained that she used word "woke" in reference to "the cancel cultural labeling that happens in America right now" which is being used as a derogatory term by conservative Americans to label anything they do not agree with (confront Matsuda, 2018, for a discussion of how the similar phrase "politically correct" has been applied to ELF research). She felt that ELF highlighted racist issues within native-speakerism which she found disgusting, describing the primary emotion she experiences when thinking about it as simply "ick", and believed that framing her pushback against native-speakerism from a Christian perspective allowed her to challenge native-speakerist ideologies held by colleagues and by her own family:

> *But I can offer [them] the ELF paradigm, and say, hey. This is where I'm coming from as a professional. Okay? But also. I'm coming at you as…a sister in Christ…this is not okay on [the professional] level, but it's also not okay on [the Christian] level, and these two things combine together.…This is my philosophy in the classroom.*

Indeed, Grace acknowledged her faith as necessarily manifesting in her teaching, driving her to compassion and empathy. Thus, her perspective of ELF through a Christian lens "continues to

force [her] to deeply and critically think about [her] work as an English teacher", realizing for example that she had subscribed to prescriptive perfectionism in her early teaching years. Her national identity as an American and her experience as a 'non-native' German teacher also seemed to cement her anti-racist pedagogical beliefs:

> *[Teaching to students facing identity crises] really helped me understand and become aware of my frustrations in speaking German and never feeling good enough because of the deeply rooted native-speakerist and mono-cultural ideology that Germany carries. (And, to no surprise, can be seen in the country's movement back towards right wing ideologies.) It frightens me to see America move in this direction as well, which only motivates me more to challenge native-speakerist ideologies I encounter around me, particularly in English education.*

Grace's Current Educational Context

After moving to the MENA region, Grace started teaching adult students from politically unstable areas, some of whom had experienced trauma and PTSD. Grace believes that these students are more appreciative of her teaching, as many of them have experienced "educide" and are thus more open and committed to learning. She is currently diversifying the listening materials of her institution and generally feels appreciated by both students and colleagues. Her current context feels conducive to an ELF-aware teacher identity, since her peers "generally agree that it's useful to help students understand that English is a global language".

Nevertheless, Grace admits that native-speakerism persists in her environment, as all her colleagues are NESTs. Furthermore, her students and their relatives strongly prefer 'native' English, while being biased against local and 'non-standard' accents. In particular, Grace feels the need to "gently push back" against prejudice towards Indian accents because her students are likely to interact with Indian English speakers, but also because she has "zero tolerance towards racism". Despite this, her pushback is only "gentle" because she is not aware of "all of the cultural dynamics happening with [her] Arab students". Thus, she focuses more on helping students navigate their feelings of inadequacy and challenging the idea that her own 'native' English is flawless: "Stop listening to me. ((*laughter*))…Because somebody needs to tell them…you don't need to sound like me"!

In discussing the perceived irony of her exploiting students' desire for 'native' teachers to validate their ownership of English and push against native-speakerism, Grace remarked:

> *Could you make a claim that I'm using my "native" status even in that moment? Sure. But I'd rather it be used in this way than used as the omniscient "native" teacher of English…Am I adding to the native-speakerist noise as another "native" teacher abroad? I have come to the conclusion that I am not at this time, especially if I am doing what I can…through contribution to research, teacher development, and the long, slow work of encouraging accent diversity one student at a time in my classrooms.*

Nevertheless, Grace experiences frustration at the *othering* which results from native-speakerism:

> *It is exhausting after a while to be like. ((mocking tone)) "Oh, you're a native speaker!"…((exasperated tone)) "Yes, yes, I am!"…I think that being the primary judgment of me as a teacher, that is exhausting. Because it's like, man, why did I even bother to get my Master's degree? You know, they just care that I'm a native speaker!...it doesn't say much about me as a person...*

Grace felt uncomfortable at being associated with other NESTs because of her awareness of and efforts to push against native-speakerism. Despite understanding why some may feel that only 'non-native' speakers should discuss the problem, she believes that 'native'

teachers must speak and act against native-speakerism: "yes, I should be here talking about this, because I've been causing the problem". She compared a 'native' speaker debating native-speakerism to a male gynecologist who cannot experience his patients' pain, but still has expertise to be able to help. However, Grace also remarks that, as an ELF-aware 'native' speaker, she needs to constantly reflect on her practice to avoid becoming too proud of her awareness. She is currently trying to balance her emotions through her faith and her belief that good teachers must see themselves as perpetual learners, while trying to communicate this need for humility to other teachers:

> *here's a fine line, though…the last thing that I want is to then become…prideful of my ((mocking haughty tone)) ((waves hand forwards)) awareness...I want to be careful of becoming prideful…how do we live in the happy middle area?...that's the challenge.*

The underlying idea seems to be that prideful teachers would stop trying to improve themselves and their teaching, preventing them from holistically caring for their students.

Clara's Story: "Feels Like What I Assume Being a Very Beautiful Woman Would Be Like"

Developing Awareness of Native-speakerism

Although Clara had difficulty accessing the feelings and perspectives of a time when she was unaware of native-speakerism, her awareness seemed to have begun with the realization of accent diversity in the US. As an undergraduate, she studied Arabic and history in the MENA region and was committed to continue living in an Arabic-speaking country after graduation. This experience influenced her career trajectory since she understood the struggle and the time-consuming nature of learning a second language.

However, the biggest event in Clara's journey was her hiring as an English teacher in her host country despite having limited previous experience and qualifications. She managed to secure this position because the hiring institution had a NEST quota to meet. Even before formally learning about native-speakerism, Clara thought that her hiring had been unfair, although she was unable to verbalize why. Furthermore, Clara felt contextual divisions between 'native' and local teachers at her institution, with NESTs feeling like a separate entity. The two groups were perceived differently in terms of expertise and qualifications, with NESTs being a minority assumed to be composed of "transient, underqualified, and novice teachers (all generally true assumptions)", and thus unable to provide significant input in curricular and administrative decision making. Nevertheless, these teachers acted as the faces of legitimacy and prestige for the institution:

> *We are the marketing appeal for clientele in the private language center market, we are there to bolster the center's claim that they teach and have access to American culture, there to legitimize or provide an image of authenticity…when other teachers tell students they have the 'unique opportunity' of an American teacher…it is always framed as a great benefit to students.*

Nevertheless, some of Clara's colleagues realized her commitment to the local context, spurring her to pursue higher teaching qualifications. To distinguish herself from other NESTs, Clara enrolled in a UK-based postgraduate TESOL program which happened to discuss native-speakerism and ELF. Her exposure to the ELF paradigm allowed Clara to make sense of her teaching experience through a more appropriate theoretical framework and better explain previous unease at being judged positively because of her 'native' status. She mentioned reading narratives and interviews from 'non-native' teachers as having the biggest impact on her awareness, as the (self-)judgements experienced by these teachers resonated with the insecurity she had witnessed in 'non-native' colleagues.

Nevertheless, Clara believed that native-speakerism was possibly even more powerful among her peers in the TESOL program than in her previous teaching context:

> *a lot of people on the Master's program…they would ask me things that I would just think: "wow, you don't get it…they would ask me…"well, why are you here?"…"you already speak English" and I would be…"well, this isn't an English language class…It's a whole other field, you know…we just had that lecture on how none of that's real. But you're still asking me questions like it's real".*

Specifically, she believed that, while peers who had already experienced the job market displayed bitterness towards her 'native' status ("some of them were looking at me like, ((*mockingly angry tone*)) her! She gets all the good jobs! ((*laughter*))"), novice colleagues admired her nativeness ("of course you're a great teacher. I'm sure you're wonderful. Are you kidding me? Listen to your beautiful voice!"). During this period, Clara felt extremely conflicted towards assumptions about her NEST identity as the only contributing factor to her professional and academic success. Although she felt slighted, she acknowledged the additional challenges experienced by NNESTs and was unable to politely convey her unease, as described through the following analogy:

> *I have strong emotions about being identified or categorized as a native speaker when interacting with others when it is framed as an obvious positive or categorical benefit to my students. I am not sure how far this metaphor extends but being a native speaker in the field feels like what I assume being a very beautiful woman would be like. It often makes things easier, but is also generally a distraction. It is a single factor that says little about the content of a person's character, or in this case the quality of my teaching. Additionally when someone brings it up in conversation, the equivalent of "You are so beautiful" you just immediately feel tired because you realize you are being judged for something out of your control and actually quite superficial.*

Nevertheless, Clara felt overall excitement and gratitude towards the inclusion of native-speakerism in her TESOL program. While she had to critically reconsider her 'native' identity, she was happy that scholars were researching the judgement that teachers of English experience over something that they cannot control.

Clara's Current Educational Context

After graduation, Clara returned to her institution, where she could perceive a positive shift in how she was positioned by her 'non-native' colleagues. She felt appreciated as an expert individual, rather than being lumped together with the transient NESTs whose names and faces were hardly remembered by the local teaching staff. Instead, she now "felt that [she] benefited from both professional respect and native speaker preference/bias", with new opportunities being opened to her, which led to her concurrent position as English teacher and teacher educator. Clara feels excited about her burgeoning teacher mentor identity, especially since her national context is transitioning from a historical colonial language to English-based education. She argues that local excitement towards English can only be understood in relation to how the other historical language of education is perceived and operates. While English is framed by her own students as having "overtones of hopefulness, creativity, autonomy, and ease", she is careful about overgeneralizations, as her profession necessarily attracts people with favorable attitudes towards English. As policy changes will lead to an increased need for qualified practitioners, she hopes to mentor the next generation of local English teachers.

Nevertheless, Clara continues to experience conflict, unease, and mixed emotions stemming from her identity as an ELF-aware NEST. For instance, the interview revealed that she is currently participating in an English phonology club, which she considers very useful and accessible for beginner students. However, her role in the club is to provide examples of American pronunciation,

which she describes as akin to being "a parrot" and which she feels is antithetical to her teaching beliefs favoring comprehensibility over 'native' imitation. In another incident, she was invited to give a guest university lecture on decentering NESTs as language models and received very positive feedback from the mostly local audience. However, she was convinced that her success was partly owing to her 'native' identity:

> *People felt very strongly about the topic and were eager to engage. But it was not lost on me that I implicitly benefited from the fact that I was a native speaker giving the talk. No one was quietly judging my language against their own to see if I held this position as a way of justifying a 'lack of mastery' of the old standard. I also found it deeply ironic for a native speaker to stand on a stage in front of two hundred people telling them - stop caring so much about how I sound, what I think, or how I talk.*

Similar episodes in which Clara fears being the undeserving beneficiary of native-speakerism are not uncommon. As a result, Clara experiences anger, shame, and guilt towards the way she is positioned "vertically" and "horizontally" by others. From a 'vertical' perspective, both her institution and its parent organization have clear expectations about Clara's teaching. Their underlining assumption is that she can teach in an 'American' way which makes her professionally appealing:

> *if you asked me if I teach my classes in a way that aligns with 'western methods' or the way I remember positive educational experiences from my childhood, the answer is absolutely yes. Is this cultural imposition? Soft power, educational neo-colonialism? It's the exact hope of the American embassy backed parent organization that runs and funds the school I teach in. When I think about these things, I cringe.*

These feelings are complicated by the critical reexamination of her own practice which she believes to be pedagogically justified and the realization that her current pedagogy is probably no longer the product of a single place after eight years in the MENA region and a British MA. Ultimately, she is unable to feel comfortable about other stakeholders' expectations of her as an American teacher.

From a 'horizontal' perspective, her American colleagues position her within the same group identity, but she rejects such categorization owing to her local commitment and awareness. Nevertheless, she also believes that her strong emotions towards her colleagues are not fully justified, as she risks making essentialist overgeneralizations:

> *I feel a lot of shame around my identity as a NST in my particular context. I find myself being judgemental and disdainful of my other native speaker colleagues. I don't like that they do not speak Arabic, are poorly integrated, are often unqualified, are transient, unstable, etc. I do not like feeling that I am one of them (probably because I was before going back to school and I'm ashamed of it). I hate the feeling that they are here because they could not hold a job in the US for whatever reason (obviously not all, but it is a pattern). I do not like being associated with them currently…I don't know how to resolve these feelings of anger, shame, superiority, and disdain. I think unfairly, my NS colleagues receive a lot of the frustration I have for the system, and my own shame in participating in it before I understood it. I want to respect everyone I work with and it is just as bad for me to participate in the categorical assumptions about their qualifications or lack thereof without taking them on an individual basis.*

This internal conflict causes Clara to rationalize and present her identity as different from other NESTs, with her negative emotions stemming from self-accusations of naivety at such rationalizations: "You can't walk around with your whole life being like, I am the exception and it is wonderful". Ultimately, she cannot consistently persuade herself of being different, leading to anger towards her colleagues and institution. She describes her inability to reconcile this conflict as akin to a tidal motion:

> *I go through…you literally just saw a wave happen ((makes waving motion)) which is like genuine anger, resentment ((moves hand upwards))…Attempt at reconciliation and like an explanation for where my anger is actually coming from ((moves hand downwards)), back up to "yeah, but I'm still angry" ((moves hand upwards)). ((Laughter))*

When asked whether anybody could support her through this struggle, Clara expressed hope and enthusiasm at the ongoing national policy reform, which is stated to introduce a minimum requirement of five years of experience for immigrant English language teachers. This development may force her institution to reconsider NESTs recruitment quotas and generally ease her frustration as the new NESTs would be more qualified. However, there remained a sense of irony linked to guilt over the illegitimacy of her hiring, having benefited from native-speakerism. Despite this ironic conflict, Clara ultimately believes that native-speakerist hiring practices are damaging everyone involved in ELT, and she would be willing to sacrifice her inexperienced past self if this meant getting rid of all transient and unqualified NESTs who "surf on a Sunday".

Ultimately, Clara compares her ELF-aware NEST identity to a well-intentioned "wealthy white American male" politician, whose mere physical presence contributes "to the trend of politics being a typically white, wealthy or male space". She concludes that, while she does not like the optics of being a 'native speaker' and would prefer that NNESTs be invited to lecture about native-speakerism, she also thinks that "the content I have to offer as a teacher outweighs that and is more relevant. And so I'm still here and I'm still doing it".

Discussion and Implications

This study has explored the identity development of two immigrant NESTs in relation to their awareness of native-speakerism and detailed the emotions and teaching beliefs that marked their professional histories. This investigation contributes to previous research interrogating the false dichotomy between NESTs and NNESTs (e.g., Copland et al., 2020; Houghton & Rivers, 2013) by detailing the lived experiences of *ELF-aware* NESTs, an underexplored population which could become increasingly relevant in the future. The study shows that ELF-aware NESTs can be acutely aware of themselves and others, critically scrutinizing their emotions, teaching practices, and potential privileges stemming from their identities. The findings suggest that NESTs willing to challenge native-speakerism may experience inner conflict and powerful negative emotions, depending on how they are positioned by other educational stakeholders. While previous research has noted negative repercussions of native-speakerism on NNESTs' identity and emotions (e.g., Li, 2022), the challenges experienced by ELF-aware NESTs have not been adequately acknowledged. This section addresses the research questions and provides suggestions for teacher education.

Identity, emotions, and beliefs were closely interconnected in the participants' narratives. Many incidents critical to the development of Clara and Grace's awareness of native-speakerism either involved powerful emotions (e.g., Grace's empathetic encouragement of a NNEST) or exposure to new teaching beliefs triggering emotional reactions and identity change (e.g., Grace's discovery of an ELF-related podcast; Clara's experience in the TESOL program). Social interactions during their academic and professional careers in diverse contexts mostly populated by 'non-native' English speakers profoundly impacted all three constructs. Indeed, for both participants, previous experience as foreign language learners triggered empathy and compassion for 'non-native' students and colleagues, helping them develop a predisposition to understanding native-speakerism in English, and shaping their pedagogical practices to emphasize comprehensibility over 'native' accuracy.

Formal education in ELF shaped their beliefs that native-speakerism is a manifestation of discrimination, privilege, and racism, and consolidated negative emotions towards this ideology: disgust, (self-)hatred, guilt, shame, anger (towards backpacking NESTs and oneself), frustration, fear (at the democratic backslide in countries like Germany and the US, of which native-speakerism is both a symptom and a contributing factor), mixed emotions, and irony at one's status as ELF-aware NESTs. Similarly to some NESTs in Copland et al. (2020), Clara and Grace were long-term sojourners heavily committed to their contexts, who admired and valued 'non-native' colleagues. They were also multilinguals, and Clara's status as an Arabic user seemed to affect how she positioned herself and other NESTs, as well as how she was positioned by her Arabic-speaking colleagues. However, their identities as expert, ELF-aware, and locally committed teachers put them in conflict with other NESTs positioned as transient, unqualified, and unaware of the privileges and discrimination embedded in native-speakerism, triggering the aforementioned emotions. This was most evident in Clara's narrative, which echoed the sense of guilt by association described by Hiratsuka (2025).

Our participants' identities as ELF-aware NESTs intersected in a complex way with other personal identities. This is clear in Grace's story, where at least five different components (*ELF-aware 'native' speaker*, *Christian*, *expert teacher*, *social advocate*, *American concerned about social injustice*) synergize in her desire to care holistically for her students (Figure 1). This combination resulted in a seemingly very stable professional identity marked by empathy, compassion, and the belief that teaching English includes challenging racism and helping students navigate feelings of inadequacy. Grace's Christian identity acted as emotional regulator (Her & De Costa, 2022), forced her to remain self-critical by interrogating her practice, and helped her challenge other Christian teachers' pushback against ELF as a "woke" ideology by framing her social advocacy through a shared religious lens.

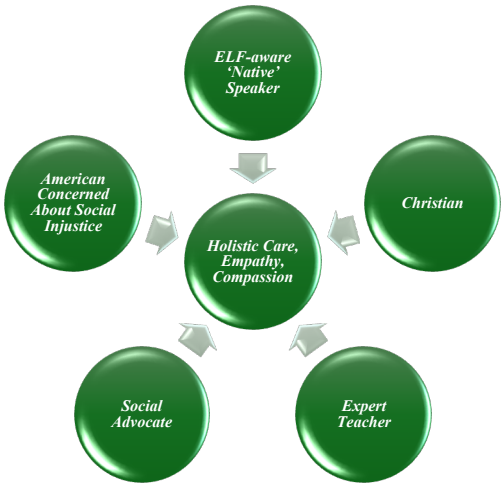

Figure 1. The intersectionality of Grace's identities influencing her core beliefs and emotions

In discussing ELF-aware pedagogy, Sifakis and Bayyurt (2018) mention the need for NNESTs to navigate potential feelings of shame and inadequacy. This study argues that similar emotional challenges might also be experienced by NESTs. Both participants experienced identity conflict, which they expressed through vivid metaphors to illustrate the awkwardness of being an ELF-aware NEST.

Clara seemed to experience more negative emotions than Grace and discussed her identity struggle at greater length. However, while Grace's identity appeared more stable, the interview revealed a similar need to balance her identity, especially her pride as ELF-aware NEST. It is possible that, since Clara had minimal experience and qualifications when she was first hired, she holds stronger beliefs about having benefited from her 'native' identity. Clara's current educational setting may also be more conducive to conflict than Grace's because of existing divisions between NESTs and NNESTs.

Both participants appeared to experience emotional fluctuations, described by Clara as being akin to a waving motion. According to Grace, either end of her identity spectrum ('native' speaker vs. prideful ELF-aware teacher) was problematic and she aimed to "live in the happy middle area". Since the participants framed 'native' speakers as partly responsible for native-speakerism, the peaks and troughs of their emotional fluctuations may be linked to their self-positioning against other NESTs. Peaks are reached when they believe that they are no different from other NESTs, possibly leading to anger, shame, and resentment. Conversely, troughs are reached when they believe their ELF-aware identity makes them different from other NESTs, resulting in comfort and pride. However, while comfortable, excessive pride was framed as problematic, being implied to lead to complacency and sloth, and preventing them from critically addressing native-speakerism. Conversely, acknowledging one's complicity in native-speakerism fosters the desire to improve oneself and do something for others. Indeed, this need to constantly balance their identities did not seem to negatively impact on their teaching practices, in fact allowing them to be more critical and caring teachers.

This study may offer suggestions for teacher educators to better support teachers in tackling the affective challenges of native-speakerism. While our participants were able to navigate their identity conflict without negative repercussions on their practice, less experienced and talented NESTs may struggle significantly, including in their well-being and relations with others. This is problematic because good pedagogical practices partly depend on teachers' emotional well-being (Schutz et al., 2020). Thus, we generally recommend that emotions be given greater consideration in teacher preparation. Teacher educators could raise awareness of native-speakerism through NESTs' and NNESTs' narratives, the latter having been an important step in Clara's understanding of native-speakerism. We also note that both participants were multilinguals who had experience as second language learners, and these identities helped develop empathy towards 'non-native' learners, in turn shaping awareness of native-speakerism. Useful awareness-raising activities for multilingual NESTs might make use of such reflections. We recommend avoiding presenting native-speakerism as an oversimplified dichotomy of privileged villains vs. marginalized victims, and considering ways to help NESTs navigate and possibly regulate their emotions. Teachers like Clara who are "not actually the product of any one place or experience" may also benefit from transcultural awareness (Baker & Ishikawa, 2021), a cultural framework which problematizes nation-bound conceptualizations of culture. Incorporating transcultural awareness in teacher education may help transnational teachers like Clara develop approaches to teaching culture that do not perpetuate educational neo-colonialism, thus ultimately overcoming guilt and fear.

Ideally, in-service support should be provided after graduation, as teachers may be mostly alone in coping with native-speakerism, as exemplified by our participants' stories. One possible avenue of support could be the establishment of alumni forums in which practitioners can discuss ongoing emotional/identity challenges and seek advice from their former teacher educators and peers. Online forums could also be used by conflicted NESTs to share their anonymized personal stories and access those of similarly troubled colleagues. Indeed, our participants felt happy about being able to voice their experiences to a potentially wide audience and mentioned interest in reading the stories of other teachers with similar conflicts. These suggestions echo Yuan's (2019) promotion of online collaborations between teacher educators and NNESTs to assist the latter in the navigation and renegotiation of their professional identities. Yuan (2019) argues that teacher educators could

accomplish this goal by guiding NNESTs in the write-up and analysis of reflective journals and by facilitating self-exploration through action research. These proposals could be similarly implemented with conflicted NESTs as well.

Native-speakerism needs to be more widely discussed in TESOL programs together and should ideally be introduced outside of teacher preparation courses, as without formal education on this ideology, teachers may be unable to understand, verbalize, and challenge its manifestations in their contexts. Thus, we echo Hiratsuka's (2025) proposals for revising language education curricula to emphasize Global Englishes and more inclusive pedagogical alternatives to native-speakerism. More accessible non-academic media such as podcasts are also needed to reach those who cannot formally learn about native-speakerism. We also reiterate previous calls (Copland et al., 2020; Hiratsuka, 2025; Lowe & Kiczkowiak, 2016) to raise awareness of native-speakerism outside of academia, which may require creative channels not usually employed by academics. Narrative databases where teachers may freely access and upload their own stories would be more visible than research published in books and articles. We also suggest following Barkhuizen et al.'s (2025) advice of experimenting with reporting research through *crafted narratives* using media such as dramatic representations, although doing so would require researchers to develop strong literary skills to convey stories through art and fiction.

Conclusions

No claims are made about the generalizability of this study, as we aimed to provide a reflexive platform for two teachers whose voices we felt needed to be heard. We also acknowledge limitations in the cross-sectional nature of the study and in the exclusive use of self-report data collection methods. We conclude this study by calling for more research on the emotions of teachers dealing with native-speakerism, and proposing a potential agenda for the future:

1) Longitudinal designs are needed, for instance, to document the identity development of NESTs enrolled in ELF-oriented modules.

2) Participants in this project worked for private institutions. 'Native' teachers working in public schools in the same contexts may produce different narratives.

3) Narrative research could be complemented with other designs to explore how beliefs are enacted in the classroom, such as ethnography or action research.

4) Emotions are not manifested only through language, but also through facial expressions, gestures, and prosody. Despite obvious ethical challenges, future narrative research on teachers' emotions could incorporate video-recordings or other visual methods.

5) Narrative inquiry with learners, parents, and administrative personnel could add nuance to teachers' stories.

6) The pivotal moment in Grace's story was her discovery of a podcast on ELF. More research is needed on how the virtual environment acts as a socio-cultural context influencing teachers' beliefs, emotions, and identities.

7) Grace's story also showcases German native-speakerism, indicating a need to investigate the experiences of NESTs teaching languages other than English.

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