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Crossing horizons: An Autoethnography of Professional Growth

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ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic study explores the professional development of a female Iranian expatriate teaching in Oman's higher education system. The study explores the intersections of cultural adaptation, pedagogical transformation, and identity negotiation through reflective narrative and critical self-inquiry in a transnational academic setting. Drawing on lived experience, the study examines the realities of academic life abroad, institutional power structures, and the sociopolitical dynamics of Omanization. The narrative demonstrates how critical reflexivity, pedagogical innovation, and professional agency were all sparked by cross-cultural engagement. This study adds to the expanding corpus of research on foreign teachers and the transformative power of teaching across borders, placing it within larger discourses of globalization, educational mobility, and intercultural pedagogy. It makes the case that, rather than being a straight-line adjustment process, it is an evolving practice of becoming, one marked by disruption, resilience, and deep intellectual renewal. The study concludes by outlining implications for institutional policy, support for expatriate faculty, and future research on language teacher identity and autoethnographic inquiry in higher education.

Keywords: autoethnography; cross-cultural interaction; professional development; professional identity; reflective practice; transnational teaching

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Introduction

Transnational educator mobility has emerged as a major aspect of globalized higher education in recent years, particularly in areas like the Gulf, where international academic recruitment and local capacity building take place at the same time. As an assistant professor from Iran who moved to Oman, I have experienced a complex interaction between professional development, cultural adjustment, and institutional expectations. With an emphasis on how cross-cultural experiences have changed my pedagogical practices and reshaped my identity as an educator, this autoethnographic study aims to critically analyze my professional development trajectory within Oman's higher education system.

This work uses autoethnography as a methodological lens through which I examine the affective, intellectual, and interpersonal aspects of my academic journey in an international context. It is situated at the intersection of critical inquiry and personal narrative. I use reflective storytelling to explore the complex difficulties of adjusting to a new educational environment while navigating pedagogical norms, institutional hierarchies, and language barriers. By doing so, I also highlight instances of development, opposition, and creativity that have influenced my teaching philosophy and sense of professional autonomy.

In a broader sense, this narrative is set within the sociopolitical framework of Oman's educational system, which is characterized by the Omanization policy and the changing expectations of both students and academic colleagues. I kept rebuilding my professional identity as I moved through these overlapping fields, not as a fixed role I carried from Iran, but as a dynamic, changing person shaped by critical reflection and cross-cultural interactions.

To deepen the understanding of identity formation in transnational teaching contexts, this study draws on sociocultural theory (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978) and the concept of communities of practice (Fransworth et al., 2016). At the same time, I intend to lean on more recent perspectives of identity as a dynamic, multilayered system of professional becoming (Wu & Zhang, 2025) and as socially situated across transnational teaching spaces (Feng & Kim, 2022). From a sociocultural perspective, identity is considered a dynamic, socially mediated process that evolves through interaction in culturally situated practices. In expat teaching contexts, this interaction often occurs across institutional, linguistic and ideological boundaries, transforming identity construction into both a personal and collective experience.

Similarly, the communities of practice framework places emphasis on the emergence of professional identity through participation and the evolving membership within professional and institutional communities. For expatriate EFL teachers, this process involves aligning personal pedagogical beliefs with local educational expectations, negotiating institutional hierarchies, and redefining professional agency within unfamiliar sociopolitical and cultural structures (Chaaban et al., 2023; Molla & Nolan, 2020). Identifying as a teacher committed to social change shows that innovative pedagogy and teacher agency are shaped through cross-cultural experiences and critical reflexivity (Xu & Stahl, 2022). Combining these perspectives underscores the notion that identity construction for expatriate EFL teachers is not a linear process of assimilation, but rather a dialogic and agentic practice of becoming, one distinguished by resilience and transformation. This notion resonates with the reflexive narrative presented in this autoethnography, clarifying how teaching across borders encourages both personal and professional growth through continuous interaction, adaptation, and meaning-making.

Grounded in these sociocultural and community-based notions of identity, the current study applies autoethnography as both a methodological and analytical framework. In this case, autoethnography lays the grounds for an in-depth exploration of how identity, pedagogy, and professional agency

evolve through lived experiences and reflexive engagement within cross-cultural academic settings. The experiences narrated here both resonate with and extend existing research on expatriate teacher identity in Gulf higher education. Similar to studies of expatriate professors in Qatar and the wider GCC, my account illustrates how nationalisation policies, imported Western institutional models, and mismatched expectations around teaching and learning produce tensions around belonging, legitimacy and academic freedom for non-national faculty (Romanowski & Nasser, 2015). It also echoes recent work on teacher and academic identity in Omani higher education, which highlights how institutional discourses and policy reforms shape ELT professionals' sense of self and professional agency (Al Muqarshi & Kaparou, 2023). In line with research on transnational teacher educators in the Gulf region, my narrative shows an expatriate teacher negotiating multiple, sometimes competing, allegiances while working to enact culturally responsive pedagogy and support local capacity building (Lamers-Reeuwijk et al., 2019).

At the same time, this autoethnography diverges from much of the existing literature in several ways. First, it foregrounds the perspective of a female Iranian ELT academic whose identity is simultaneously "regional" and "foreign," rather than that of Western Anglophone expatriates who dominate many Gulf studies. Second, instead of portraying expatriates only as precarious or marginal, the narrative traces how opportunities for voice, collaboration, and critical, change-oriented pedagogical work emerge within and against Omanization and native-speakerist hierarchies. Finally, by using a sustained, longitudinal autoethnographic lens, the study offers fine-grained insight into the emotional, relational, and reflective labour of identity negotiation over time, dimensions that are often only briefly noted in survey or interview-based research on expatriate faculty.

Through a first-hand account of transnational teaching, this article advances the body of knowledge on expatriate educators, cultural adaptation, and pedagogical transformation. It makes the case that these kinds of cross-cultural encounters can serve as both sites of adaptation and possible stimulants for both intellectual and personal growth. By doing so, it provides understanding of the mutually reinforcing relationship between educator mobility and institutional change in a globalized academic world.

Literature Review

The growing global demand for the internationalization of higher education has intensified academic migration, particularly within the Gulf region (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Canagarajah, 2012). As a result, expatriate teachers have become key players in global education settings, but their work often takes place within complex institutional ecologies influenced by a mix of cultural, political, and pedagogical forces, a topic that has not been given enough attention in the literature (Koh & Sin, 2020). Like many expatriate teachers in the Gulf region, I found that working within such environments required not only adapting to new professional expectations but also continuously reconstructing my sense of self as a teacher and scholar. Cultural adaptation, therefore, became less a personal adjustment and more a professional negotiation that reshaped my pedagogical identity (Trent, 2024; Xu & Flores, 2023).

Research grounded in autoethnography has provided valuable insight into how these negotiations of identity occur through critical self-reflection and narrative inquiry (Leigh, 2019; Uştuk, 2025). This methodological lens situates teaching as a deeply affective act, one through which educators articulate, challenge, and transform their professional identities across cultural boundaries (Canagarajah, 2012; Kudaibergenov, 2025). My own engagement with autoethnographic reflection has similarly revealed how institutional policies, pedagogical expectations, and affective struggles are interwoven in the process of becoming an expatriate educator.

In the Sultanate of Oman, the national policy of Omanization, introduced in 1988 and legally grounded in the Labour Law (Royal Decree 53/2023), affirms that employment is a “right” for Omani nationals and requires employers to develop localisation plans that prioritize Omani citizens. While promoting national employment, this policy also creates particular difficulties and conflicts for institutions and foreign faculty (Al Muqarshi & Kaparou, 2023). While Omanization seeks to strengthen national employment, it also shapes distinct institutional cultures that influence faculty inclusion, legitimacy, and career progression. Within this system, those seeking stability in the workplace often experience a tension between institutional dependence on expatriate expertise and the subtle pressures of localization, a space where belonging was both extended and withheld. These negotiations mirror what scholars have described as the emotional and professional labor of sustaining legitimacy in transnational academic contexts (Koh & Sin, 2020; Gao, 2021).

Additionally, teaching English in the Gulf region places teachers at the crossroads of global language ideologies and local cultural values, creating fertile ground for identity negotiation. For Iranian educators like myself, this intersection evokes a complex sense of proximity and distance, culturally familiar yet politically and institutionally distinct (Gholami et al., 2021). Recent research has highlighted the complex motivations driving educators to pursue transnational teaching careers. For instance, Bright & Heyting (2024) emphasize that expatriate teachers’ mobility decisions are influenced by a blend of personal aspirations, professional ambitions, and broader socio-economic dynamics. The authors argue that international mobility is not merely associated with adventure or cultural curiosity but represents a strategic pursuit of autonomy, growth, and professional renewal. Over time, these motivations evolve, with subsequent relocations reflecting teachers’ increasing focus on professionalism and institutional fit. This resonates strongly with my own experience as an Iranian educator in Oman, where mobility became both a personal and professional pathway to navigate restrictive systems, expand pedagogical agency, and redefine my identity within a transnational academic landscape.

The intricate relationship between institutional policies, cultural values, and ideological influences discussed in the literature emphasizes the need for a theoretical lens that captures identity as both socially mediated and context-dependent. Based on these insights, this study adopts sociocultural theory and the concept of communities of practice to frame the professional identity of expatriate EFL teachers as a dynamic, ongoing process built through participation, negotiation, and reflection within international academic environments. These frameworks help explain how teachers continuously reshape their professional selves by engaging with local norms, institutional expectations, and global discourses of language and power. By grounding the research in these perspectives, it provides a deeper, more detailed look at the real experiences and potential for growth and change that come with teaching across cultural and institutional borders.

Methodological Framework: Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that bridges the personal and the cultural by systematically analyzing the researcher's own lived experiences to gain insights into broader social, institutional, and political phenomena (Wall, 2006). It enables researchers to critically analyze the ways in which their own narratives interact with more general discourses and structures by positioning the self as both the subject and the site of inquiry. In order to investigate my professional growth as an Iranian expatriate teacher in Oman's higher education system, I use an analytical autoethnographic approach in this study.

The study's objectives are especially well-suited to this methodological approach since it permits a reflective examination of the intensely personal processes of resistance, change, and adaptation that arise in cross-cultural teaching environments. The affective aspects of academic migration, which are frequently disregarded in conventional research paradigms, can be captured through

autoethnography. Beyond informing teaching practices across international settings, this approach supports teachers in reflecting critically on their evolving identities and adapting to the cultural and pedagogical changes that shape their professional growth (Sahling & De Carvalho, 2021). In a similar vein, I will highlight tense, unclear, and transformative moments that have molded my professional identity and pedagogical evolution over the past four years.

Every aspect of this investigation is influenced by my positionality as an Iranian scholar in Oman. I occupy a liminal space, culturally proximate yet institutionally and politically distinct. This duality allows for both insider and outsider perspectives, enriching the depth of analysis. I am not only recounting experiences but also interpreting them through the lenses of critical pedagogy, postcolonial theory, and intercultural communication (Canagarajah, 2012; Gao, 2021; Wu & Zhang, 2025).

The data for this study were collected over a four-year period (2021–2025) from a range of personal and professional artifacts, including reflective journals, teaching evaluations, and memory-based narratives. Each source served a specific purpose: reflective journals documented ongoing pedagogical reflections; teaching evaluations provided insight into student perceptions; and memory-based narratives contextualized critical incidents in my professional development. These sources have been revisited and reinterpreted through cycles of critical reflection, allowing for both chronological coherence and thematic depth. I approach these data with the understanding that memory is selective and shaped by present contexts; therefore, subjectivity is acknowledged as both a strength and a site for critical engagement.

Ethically, care has been taken to anonymize specific institutional references and protect the identities of students and colleagues. While this study is deeply personal, it is also situated within broader academic discourses and contributes to collective conversations about professional development, cultural adaptation, and power in transnational academic spaces.

In embracing autoethnography, I do not claim generalizability. Instead, I offer a situated, reflexive, and nuanced account that invites readers to consider the complexities of educational migration and the transformative potential embedded in cross-cultural teaching experiences.

Identity: A Sense of Becoming

Identity is a multifaceted and dynamic concept, often understood as an ongoing process of becoming. It can be seen as layered and fluid, shaped through continuous interaction with sociocultural, economic, and biological frameworks such as nationality, class, gender, religion, and race (Barkhuizen et al., 2013). In the context of this research, my professional identity is viewed as an evolving narrative of becoming, reflecting the processes through which an individual learns, adapts, and constructs their sense of self over time. In a sense, the process of becoming has been for me a process of growth and professional development, an experience gained through the abundant possibilities of research and grant writing. This is while in the previous context of Iran, economic barriers and sanctions had prevented me from achieving this growth.

Within the context of higher education worldwide, both culture and identity play a crucial role in shaping the personal and professional identities of educators from diverse backgrounds. Bandlamudi (1994) challenges the dichotomy of nationals vs. expats in the development of cultural identity, emphasizing that identity formation is not fixed but rather a fluid and dynamic process. She highlights the shifting dynamics that shape self-identity, drawing upon how individuals negotiate the preservation of cultural roots while at the same time trying to redefine both self and culture in new contexts (Bandlamudi, 1994, p. 468).

From the perspective of international educators, successfully adapting to a new cultural and institutional environment requires an understanding of the host country's cultural values, the institution's pedagogical priorities, and its modes of knowledge and practice. Both specific educational cultures and the broader national culture will inevitably define how teachers construct and experience their professional and personal identities. A crucial part of professional development is understanding teacher identity as a continuous process of formation and reformation rather than as a fixed or predetermined aspect. In the teaching process, where establishing trust with students, fostering a secure and encouraging learning environment, and exhibiting emotional control are critical, this developing sense of self is vital. According to Kim et al. (2019), a teacher's effectiveness is greatly influenced by traits like emotional stability, conscientiousness, and a healthy amount of extraversion.

International educators need to develop a sophisticated awareness of their many identities in order to maintain an effective and responsive teaching practice. This involves a thoughtful interaction with their sense of self, their professional identity as educators, and their belief in their ability to bring about change, a concept commonly known as self-efficacy. I contend that this kind of awareness serves as the cornerstone for continued development and excellent instruction in cross-cultural learning settings.

This understanding of identity as a changing process of becoming closely reflects my own professional development trajectory following my transfer from Iran to the higher education system in Oman. Navigating the conflicts between maintaining cultural roots and redefining oneself within new socio-institutional frameworks is a necessary part of identity formation, as Bandlamudi (1994) suggests. Similar to findings reported by Bright & Heyting (2024), my decision to move from Iran to Oman reflected more than a desire for geographic mobility. It represented a search for greater pedagogical autonomy, professional recognition, and opportunities for reflective renewal within an internationalized higher education system. Over time, my motivations also shifted, from initial survival and adjustment toward intentional engagement with institutional cultures and identity negotiation as a transnational educator. I encountered different pedagogical expectations, cultural presumptions, and institutional practices in Oman's academic environment than I had encountered in Iran. These variations required me to constantly reevaluate my professional identity as a dynamic construct molded by critical reflection, lived experiences, and cross-cultural negotiation rather than as a static entity. The process was characterized by tension, disruption, adaptation, and ultimately transformation rather than being linear or passive. I realized that identity work is a crucial and continuous aspect of professional development for transnational academics after rethinking my role as an educator in this new setting. This insight serves as the conceptual underpinning for the ensuing autoethnographic investigation.

Initial Encounters: First Impressions and Challenges

When I first arrived in Oman, I was filled with cautious optimism and a desire to start a new chapter in my career, but I was also apprehensive about adjusting to a new academic culture about which I knew nothing. After more than 15 years of teaching in Iran's higher education system, I brought with me a set of academic standards, professional presumptions, and pedagogical norms influenced by the sociopolitical and educational environment of my native Iran. But I soon discovered that what was comfortable and successful in one situation might be met with silence, resistance, or confusion in another.

The communication gap, in terms of language proficiency as well as expectations regarding discourse, participation, and hierarchy, was one of the first and most startling difficulties when I began teaching. My Omani students turned out to be much more reserved than I had expected. I frequently encountered awkward pauses or blank stares in response to my attempts to promote

candid conversation, critical inquiry, or peer review. Initially, I interpreted this as a lack of engagement or interest, and the toll of the Covid-19 pandemic on students' academic performance and overall classroom engagement. Only later, through informal conversations and classroom observations, did I begin to understand the deeper cultural underpinnings of this behavior: a high-context communication style—that is, a preference for indirect, implicit communication where meaning is conveyed through shared understanding and nonverbal cues rather than explicit verbal expression—along with strong respect for authority and educational histories that emphasized memorization over critique. According to Hall's notion of high-context cultures (1976, as cited in Kittler et al., 2011), much of the meaning is embedded in context, relationships, and shared experiences, which can make classroom silence or indirectness a form of respect rather than disengagement.

The level of language proficiency and my ability as an educator began to set back. In my home country, I was recently recruited as assistant professor to one of the country's high ranking medical universities, teaching medical students from across the country, who were mostly all high achievers. This is because Iran's national examination for university entrance filters the *creme de la creme*, or in other words, the best of the best, selectively admitting the very outstanding and bright students to enter public universities in Tehran, and my students were no exception. This in itself created a very challenging task for me as a teacher, as I had to prepare myself each and every session to be my best self, and responsive to these medical students' bright minds, which I nevertheless really enjoyed. The transition from this context of high achievers to the public university in Oman was poles apart. Now I was faced with students who were just beginning the foundation program, only beginning to learn English, and mostly at a very low level of proficiency.

Institutionally, I also encountered a more bureaucratically layered environment than I was used to. Seemingly simple decisions, such as adapting a syllabus or modifying an assessment, required formal approval from multiple levels of administration. This structural rigidity was initially frustrating and clashed with my desire for pedagogical autonomy. At the same time, I came to appreciate that this system reflected broader values of order, consistency, and centralized control, values that mirrored the larger socio-political fabric of Omani society.

Professional interactions with coworkers were one layer of adjustment that went smoothly. Although I received a warm and friendly welcome, I truly valued the cultural diversity of the foreign faculty as well as the parallels between myself and the locals. I grew up and attended school in the United States, so I felt like I was back in the same foreign environment as I had grown up, making this transition much easier for me. Even though I had no trouble adjusting to the new workplace, it soon became apparent that, although my knowledge was valued, there were unwritten restrictions on my ability to influence institutional decision-making. My early tendency to share ideas, offer new ideas, or question conventional wisdom was sometimes met with courteous silence or evasive sideways glances, which subtly reminded me that I was an outsider.

I was forced by these early experiences to confront the boundaries of my cultural presumptions and to gradually start decentering my previous professional identity. In a situation where my old benchmarks were no longer relevant, I had to relearn how to teach, listen, and establish trust. Even though they were occasionally uncomfortable, these times were crucial for sowing the seeds of change. They set the stage for a change in perspective as well as methodology, which led me to adopt patience, cultural humility, and a more dialogic approach to teaching.

Classroom Dynamics and Intercultural Communication

As my experience teaching in Oman progressed, I realized that classroom dynamics were influenced by the subtle, frequently imperceptible codes of cultural communication in addition to curriculum

and methodology. I had to deal with a variety of communicative dissonances that went beyond vocabulary and syntax even though we spoke the same language, English. Careful decoding was necessary to understand the significance of indirect responses, the meanings behind silences, and the protocol of student-teacher interaction. The Persian and Arabic languages' commonalities helped to mitigate this to some degree. My students were shocked to learn that, despite my mother tongue being Persian and theirs being Arabic, I could occasionally understand them or converse with them in their first language. In contrast to a situation where the written script and culture of the L1 were to be entirely foreign to me as a teacher, these linguistic and cultural similarities made the transition process much easier and less demanding.

In many of my early classes, I noticed that students were reluctant to ask questions, challenge ideas, or even make eye contact. In Iran, I was accustomed to a more vocal and, at times, confrontational classroom environment, where debate, negotiation, and even heated disagreement were common. Here, the emphasis on politeness, deference, and indirect expression created a different rhythm, one that initially felt distant and difficult to interpret.

These experiences prompted a deeper reflection on the cultural scripts shaping communication. I came to recognize that student silence did not necessarily indicate disengagement, but could instead signify respect, hesitation rooted in fear of judgment, or unfamiliarity with dialogic learning. Many students, having been educated in teacher-centered environments, were unsure how to participate in interactive settings. Another layer of complexity was added through socio-cultural norms around gender roles and public expression, especially in mixed-gender classrooms where female students were often more reserved. The extent to which students sat separately and had separate hallways and elevators was a new concept for me. Even though my home country has a similar culture, universities do not adhere to such strict rules and regulations and students more openly communicate once they have entered higher education institutions. For example, in Iran students of both genders volunteer to work in teams for project-based learning. On the contrary, in the Omani context, students strictly select teams of only male or female, and university regulations also forbid teachers from requesting students to have mixed gender teams. This is particularly true of the foundation program, the courses of which I began teaching at the onset.

This obstacle was in fact one of the greatest to overcome. How was I to engage my students who were too shy to speak in front of the opposite gender? To bridge this gap, I began to explore alternative ways of fostering participation. I introduced anonymous response tools, small-group discussions, and reflective writing activities that allowed students to express themselves in less confrontational formats. The observations I made regarding students' need to actively participate in the classroom activities sparked a research idea that led to writing a research grant. At the very onset, during my first semester teaching in Oman, I secured a national research grant for this very topic on how to engage students through technology. This topic was such a success that it eventually led to a number of publications in Scopus-indexed journals, one of which even won the national research award in 2024. Gradually, through my endeavors to enhance my students' engagement and autonomy in the language learning process, I found myself growing professionally as an academic and researcher. At the same time, I began to see changes; hesitant hands raised, thoughtful comments shared in writing, and small signs of increased confidence. These shifts reaffirmed for me that effective intercultural communication in the classroom is less about linguistic mastery and more about creating culturally responsive spaces where students feel seen, respected, and safe.

In the meantime, I had to reconsider my own communicative behavior. I started paying closer attention to pacing, gesture, and tone. I discovered how to accept silence as a communication method, wait longer after asking questions, and present critical criticism in a way that upholds students' dignity. Being more sensitive to the ethical aspects of pedagogy and realizing that who we teach and where we teach are closely related to how we teach were the goals of this process, which went beyond merely adjusting to a new culture.

Reconfiguring Pedagogy: From Iranian Norms to Transnational Teaching

Due to the cumulative effect of these cross-cultural interactions, I was able to rethink my pedagogical identity as a dynamic and changing practice that must be sensitive to local realities rather than as a set of fixed techniques imported from Iran. I started to see myself as a mediator between local educational values and international academic standards, rather than as a content provider.

The process of this pedagogical reconfiguration was not straightforward. It included periods of uncertainty, trial and error, and even failure. I remember a time when I expected students to work in pairs to solve a real-world problem as part of a task-based learning exercise that had proven effective in Iran. The activity stalled, which surprised me. Students seemed uncertain and perplexed. I didn't understand until much later that the open-ended nature of the task went against what the students expected in terms of precise instructions, well-defined roles, and goals. My students found what I thought was learner-centered pedagogy to be ambiguous and confusing.

Instead of giving up on these methods, I started to modify them by explicitly scaffolding tasks, incorporating culturally relevant subjects, and combining blended formats with novel ones. For instance, I incorporated problem-solving exercises based on healthcare settings that were relevant to the future careers of my nursing students. Along with networking with colleagues from various cultural backgrounds and learning from their adaptations and strategies, I also started conducting professional development workshops within the organization.

A richer, more adaptable teaching repertoire resulted from this repeated process over time. Drawing from a variety of pedagogical traditions, I was able to combine Omani expectations of polite communication and cooperative harmony with Iranian tactics based on textual analysis and teacher authority with Western learner autonomy. My classroom was also undergoing change, becoming a place of negotiation as various cultural logics could coexist and influence one another. As a result, my pedagogy changed, not by doing away with my old approaches, but by critically combining them in a way that respected both my history and my current situation. Teaching ceased to feel like a performance based on imported scripts and instead evolved into a dialogic process of learning with and from my students. This transformation deepened my sense of professional agency and guided me to begin teaching not just across cultures, but through them.

Identity Negotiation and Professional Agency

As my career in Oman developed, I discovered that I was constantly navigating the boundaries of my identity as a language instructor, an Iranian expat, a female scholar, and a nearly native English speaker working in a Gulf higher education setting. Negotiating one's identity was not a straightforward or totally predictable process. Institutional frameworks, student expectations, and more general sociopolitical discussions about legitimacy, nationality, and professional skill all influenced it.

Subtle but constant reminders of my differences caused my sense of self to become unstable right away. Despite being acknowledged, I found that my contributions to departmental meetings hardly ever resulted in changes to pedagogy or policy. When it came to my students, I sensed that my authority was cautiously accepted but not automatically granted, especially when compared to Western-educated colleagues. These dynamics were not always explicit, but they signaled an unspoken hierarchy where certain identities carried more symbolic capital than others. My early professional experiences were further shaped by native-speakerism, an ideology that privileges Western linguistic authority and continues to define hierarchies within English language teaching (Lowe, 2024). Following the long-standing debate suggesting that native English speakerism and

non-native English speakerism positionings exist in academia (Duran & Saenkhum, 2024; Yang & Forbes, 2025), it felt like my positionality as a non-native speaker would initially restrict opportunities for advancement. However, this was not the reality I had anticipated it to be, maybe due to the regional context or my native-like accent and background of having grown up in the US.

Nevertheless, instead of becoming defensive or silent, I started to use these experiences as opportunities for critical reflection. I asked myself: What does it mean to be a professional in a transnational academic context? Whose norms define “good” teaching? And how can I assert my expertise without reproducing the very hierarchies that marginalize voices like mine? One of the differences in my new teaching context was the formal and documented voice given to students in feedback on course teaching. Through administrative surveys, teachers are informed of their students’ views on teaching, including the four areas of 1) course content, organization and learning resources, 2) achieving learning outcomes, 3) instructional quality and learning environment, and 4) teaching methods and assessment. The results of these surveys at the end of each semester provided me with insights into what good teaching practices are in my new context and guided me to enhance my teaching portfolio and be alert towards continuous professional development. This itself was one of the many advantages of course and instructor evaluation conducted each semester on all courses, creating self-reflection as a tool for my professional growth.

While this reflective stance marked a turning point, identity was no longer seen as a fixed attribute, but was now a site of agency, a fluid construct shaped through interaction, discourse, and resistance, that is, through moments of questioning or challenging institutional norms, cultural expectations, or imposed professional identities. This initiated a change in me to embrace my hybrid positionality, to draw strength from the fact that I could shift between cultural frameworks, translate pedagogical values, and build bridges across differences. I came to see that I had a distinct perspective from my transnational experience that could help me teach with empathy, creativity, and cross-cultural understanding.

When I was asked to conduct a workshop for new faculty on culturally responsive teaching, it was a potent moment of agency. For the first time, I was positioned as a knowledge producer as well as a practitioner. I combined theory, practice, and personal narrative in my preparation for this session to show how my journey had influenced my teaching. Participants’ comments confirmed that my voice mattered and that my story spoke to those going through comparable changes.

These experiences gave me the opportunity to redefine my professional identity as one of creating the mold rather than one of fitting into an already-existing one. I started to mentor new expatriate coworkers, support inclusive assessment procedures, and take an increasingly active role in curriculum design. My developing sense of agency was based on reflexivity rather than mastery, the capacity to reflect, adjust, and act purposefully in intricate educational environments.

In this way, identity work and professional development became inextricably linked. I improved my teaching, leadership, and teamwork skills the more I thought about who I was becoming. I learned that teaching overseas was not just a career choice, it was a constant process of self-reinvention that called for bravery, humility, and critical awareness.

Socio-political Contexts: Omanization, Policy, and the Expatriate Condition

The realities of educational policy, institutional power, and national identity have become acutely apparent to me as a female expatriate academic working in Oman. Omanization, a policy initiative aimed at increasing the employment of Omani nationals across sectors, including higher education, is one of the most significant of these factors. Although the policy’s goal is admirable and

understandable in light of the country's progress, its effects on foreign faculty members like me have been complicated and occasionally unsettling.

As a female academic who is non-Omani and non-Western, I knew right away that I was in a vulnerable professional position. I had to negotiate a more precarious legitimacy than my Western colleagues, who frequently benefited from greater institutional authority and symbolic capital. Despite my credentials and experience, I was constantly reminded, both overtly and covertly, that my place in the academic ecosystem was transient, dependent, and frequently seen through the prism of national priorities.

Institutional policies were influenced by Omanization in ways that had a subtle impact on leadership positions, hiring procedures, and promotion prospects. There was frequently a subtle conflict between the longer-term objective of localizing the academic workforce and the institutional requirement for expatriate expertise. Because of this, many foreigners, especially those from the Global South, held jobs without being fully integrated into the institution's decision-making or cultural core.

This negotiation takes on a new dimension when it comes to gender roles in the workplace. Gender dynamics in academic settings continue to reflect broader societal expectations, despite Oman's generally progressive views on women's participation in education and the workforce. I frequently came across gendered presumptions, like being undervalued in meetings with male coworkers or expected to take on a caring or accommodating role with students. I occasionally felt that I had to demonstrate my abilities twice: once as a woman and once as an expat.

Despite these obstacles, I eventually improved my ability to decipher institutional cues and create strategic forms of agency. I looked for coworkers who valued cooperation, inclusivity, and respect for one another among both Omani and expatriate colleagues. I positioned myself as a contributor rather than an outsider by participating in institutional initiatives like curriculum localization and professional development workshops that complemented Oman's national goals.

Nevertheless, I continued to be acutely conscious of the precarity that permeates a large portion of the academic experience for expatriates in the Persian Gulf. I had to constantly strike a balance between existential uncertainty and professional investment because of the absence of permanent contracts, the restrictions on long-term settlement, and the ongoing recalibration of institutional needs. I first became aware of the intricate connections between policy, identity, and pedagogy while performing this delicate balancing act.

Although Omanization is rooted in nation-building, it also gives expatriate teachers a space to negotiate their sense of belonging; intellectually, emotionally, and within institutional structures. For me, this meant embracing the paradoxes of being both welcomed and alienated, necessary and expendable. It necessitated creating a teaching methodology and professional culture based on flexibility, modesty, and critical interaction with the sociopolitical realities of teaching across borders.

Eventually, these encounters have helped me better grasp how education is never neutral. Like the educator's identity, it is influenced by ideology, policy, and power. I have a more realistic sense of purpose as I carry on working in Oman; I recognize the limitations of my role while attempting to make significant contributions both inside and outside of the classroom.

Becoming: From Adaptation to Critical Reflection and Growth

When I reflect on my experience working as an expatriate teacher in Oman, I see a path that has progressed well beyond initial adjustment. A deeper, more critical engagement with the meaning of teaching across borders has emerged from what started as a process of cultural and pedagogical adjustment. In addition to being obstacles, the early difficulties of strange classrooms, implicit hierarchies, and cultural dissonance also acted as catalysts for change. Through these encounters, I progressively reshaped who I am as a reflective practitioner dedicated to moral, cross-cultural, and transformative education, rather than just as an Iranian teacher employed overseas.

This transformation has continued as an ongoing process for over four years. It gradually came into being via cycles of perplexity, introspection, education, and development. At first, I was focused on “fitting in,” adapting my teaching methods to fit the expectations of my students, carefully negotiating institutional culture, and establishing my legitimacy in a system that did not fully acknowledge my background. However, agency eventually replaced adaptation. I started to see that critical self-awareness and the guts to challenge preconceived notions, both mine and others, were necessary for genuine professional development, which went beyond mere compliance.

I began to view my experiences more broadly, placing my challenges and revelations in the context of postcolonial hierarchies, linguistic power, and global educational mobility. The classroom evolved from a place of instruction to one of negotiation, identity, ideology, and voice. Through reading about intercultural pedagogy, journaling after difficult lessons, and joining communities of practice with other educators on similar journeys, I became more involved in reflective practices. Through these exercises, I was able to cultivate a more dialogic and critically reflective professional identity.

Crucially, this development was both personal and professional. I learned to embrace discomfort, listen more intently, and keep an open mind to complexity while living and working in Oman. I came to embrace ambiguity as a place for both emotional and intellectual investigation rather than as a sign of weakness. I began to view teaching as an ethical relationship that requires humility, empathy, and a readiness to be changed by the very situations in which we teach, rather than as a means of imparting knowledge.

As I think back on this journey of growth, I’m amazed at how much teaching overseas has changed who I am. It has deepened my understanding of the socio-political forces that influence education in transnational contexts, broadened my pedagogical repertoire, and challenged my presumptions about learning. More significantly, it has assisted me in developing a voice that speaks from the intersections of culture, language, and identity but is also rooted in my Iranian heritage and receptive to international discussions.

This autoethnographic account is a glimpse of a continuous process of becoming rather than the end of my journey. It is evidence of the value of cross-cultural interaction, the strength of introspection, and the potential of transnational teaching to promote not only knowledge sharing but also professional and personal renewal. I now view myself through this critical lens as someone who is constantly remaking herself in dialogue with her surroundings rather than as someone who has adapted to them.

Concluding Remarks

Voice, Visibility, and the Transformative Power of Transnational Teaching

As a female Iranian expatriate navigating the intricate institutional, cultural, and ideological landscape of Oman's higher education system, this autoethnographic narrative has traced my journey of becoming through the intersections of pedagogy, identity, and power. In transnational teaching contexts where personal and professional boundaries blur, I have sought to illuminate how reflection and self-inquiry can transform the challenges of adaptation into opportunities for growth and agency.

In my experience, I have found that teaching abroad is not a linear process, but rather a continuous negotiation between self and system, one of inner beliefs and external structures such as Omanization policies, gender norms, and institutional hierarchies. The difficulties I faced, from readjusting pedagogical strategies to navigating sociocultural expectations have deepened my understanding of what it means to teach with and through the differences. These opportunities paved the way for reflexivity, resilience and intercultural awareness as the main components of professional development in international academic spaces.

Most importantly, this journey has shown how foreign teachers can transition from passive adaptation to active transformation, acting as change agents in their own classrooms and in the larger context of global education. In an area where transnational labor and national identity frequently coexist uncomfortably, my story demonstrates that creativity, reflexivity, and development are possible even in the face of structural limitations.

This study adds to the expanding corpus of research that emphasizes educator subjectivity by emphasizing lived experiences, particularly in underrepresented contexts like the Gulf. It advocates for more complex conceptions of teacher identity in international education that embrace complexity, hybridity, and multiplicity rather than rigid narratives.

By sharing my personal experience and transformation in teaching abroad, I want to show support to other educators who are caught between cultures, languages, and nations, especially during this trying time of world turmoil. Our tales are important. They give voice to the intellectual bravery of critical reflection, the silent work of cultural mediation, and the transformative power of teaching through and not just across boundaries.

Beyond the personal narrative, this study offers broader implications for institutional policy and practice. Institutions employing expatriate educators in the Gulf and similar contexts can foster more equitable and inclusive academic cultures by recognizing the complex identity negotiations that accompany transnational teaching. Policies should move beyond instrumental hiring and retention frameworks to provide structured professional development, intercultural mentoring, and dialogic spaces where local and expatriate faculty can collaboratively exchange pedagogical knowledge. Supporting such initiatives not only enhances institutional cohesion but also cultivates sustainable models of educational internationalization that respect both national priorities and global academic diversity.

For expatriate educators and teacher identity scholarship, this study underscores the importance of critical self-reflection as a means of reclaiming professional agency and reimagining identity beyond deficit or outsider narratives. The findings suggest that expatriate teachers can become active contributors to pedagogical innovation and intercultural understanding when their lived experiences are valued as sources of knowledge and transformation. In other words, embracing autoethnography and other narrative methodologies allows for more context-sensitive, humanized

accounts of teacher development, ones that foreground emotion, power, and positionality in ways traditional methods may overlook.

In the context of the Gulf region and similar transnational education settings, this study recommends that higher education institutions create more intentional pathways for intercultural collaboration and professional support among expatriate and local faculty. Initiatives such as cross-cultural mentorship programs, reflective teaching communities, and institutional dialogues on localization and inclusivity can strengthen pedagogical innovation and mutual understanding. These practices not only enhance the teaching-learning environment but also contribute to sustainable models of internationalization that respect local values while engaging global perspectives.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the potential of autoethnography as a rigorous and transformative approach for researching teacher identity and professional development. By positioning the researcher as both participant and analyst, autoethnography captures the emotional, relational, and political dimensions of academic life that are often invisible in traditional qualitative inquiry. Future researchers can draw on this method to explore the intersections of gender, mobility, and pedagogy in comparable contexts, while using reflexive narrative to challenge dominant discourses about expatriate educators and contribute to more context-sensitive, decolonial understandings of teaching across borders.

Ultimately, this journey demonstrates that transnational teaching is not merely about transferring knowledge across borders but about engaging in the deeper intellectual and emotional labor of *becoming* across contexts. My narrative affirms that creativity, reflexivity, and transformation are possible, even within systems constrained by structural inequities. By sharing this story, I hope to amplify the voices of educators who live and work between languages, cultures, and nations, and to advocate for institutional and scholarly spaces that honor their complex, evolving identities. Our stories matter: they embody the intellectual courage of critical reflection, the invisible work of cultural mediation, and the transformative potential of teaching not only *across* but *through* borders.

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