

“That Goes Against My Philosophy”: Examining the Emotional Labor and Identity Negotiation of ESL Pre-service Teacher

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Abstract

The graduate school experience can be quite intense, specifically for international students who currently teach English to multilingual students. Despite their dynamic and fluid identity, they also undergo a range of emotions as they strive to assimilate into a specific community of practice and to be professionally accepted. The purpose of this narrative analysis is to examine the emotional labor and identity of an international student working as a pre-service ESL teacher in an English program in one of the U.S research-integrated Universities. Theories on language teacher identity propose that LTI is a complex and multifaceted concept encompasses the beliefs, value, attitude, and experiences that shape the sense of self in addition to the role as language educator. In addition, this study adapted poststructuralist approach that the identity is constructed through a combination of individual agency and social influences, consisting of various roles and subject positions. The participant provided her experiences and thoughts during two times of open-ended interviews and her class observation to better understand her complex identity and the factors that had successfully contributed to its construction. The findings indicate a contrasting relationship between the institution's policies and practices and the participant's teaching philosophy, which, in turn, impacted the participant's emotions and identity negotiation. Moreover, the study also contributes to the significant discovery regarding the impact of intersectionality, specifically race and non-native speakerism, as crucial factors contributing to the participant's emotional labor and identity.

Keywords: LTI, Emotional Labor, Race and Non-native Speakerism, Policy and Practice

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Introduction

The present study aimed to explore the emotional labor and identity (re)construction of an international student who is currently working as a pre-service ESL teacher in a language program in her affiliation that contributes to several factors influencing her investment and engagement in her community of practice. It is obvious that the graduate school journey holds significant value for students, particularly those pursuing a language teaching degree, as it provides an opportunity to apply their knowledge. This experience can be quite intense for graduate students, particularly for international students who are not native English speakers and are currently teaching English. Due to the growing number of NNES students being accepted to study in the United States and despite their status as international students who have dynamic identity, they also undergo a range of emotions as they strive to assimilate into a specific community of practice, aiming to gain acceptance. Numerous research studies have explored the transformative evolution of teachers' identity, as examined by Barkhuizen (2017), Wolff & De Costa (2017), and Yuan & Lee (2016). These studies have expanded our understanding and perspectives on teacher education. Additionally, the poststructuralist perspective has gained significant recognition for its role in defining the construction of language teacher identity. According to Pennycook (2001), emotions and identity are not fixed concepts in objective reality or individual minds, but instead, they are complex processes shaped by social, cultural, historical, and political contexts, through which our perception of the world is formed.

The concept of emotions as a form of agency has been the subject of exploration in various studies, including Nazari & Karimpour (2022) and Kocabaş-Gedika & Ortaçtepe Hart (2021). These studies highlight the interconnectedness between emotions and various aspects of language teaching and teacher well-being. Emotions play a crucial role in influencing factors such as motivation, self-esteem, relationships with students and other stakeholders, pedagogical decisions, job satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and burnout experienced by language teachers. The undergirding premise of emotion labor is the way institutional expectations clash with teachers' internal subjectivity and perceptions, and the way teachers manage their emotions considering institutional work (e.g., Benesch, 2017, 2018, 2020a, b; Gkonou & Miller, 2019; Song, 2021 as cited in Nazari & Karimpour, 2022). Furthermore, research on language teacher identity and emotion focused on the in-service or experienced NNES teachers. While the emotional labor and identity construction of international graduate students have not been widely explored.

Language Teacher Identity in the Lens of CoP

Past studies on LTI highlight how we understood teacher identity is not fixed, stable, unitary, and internally coherent phenomenon but it is multiple, shifting, and in conflict (Gergen, 1991; Peirce, 1995; Sarup, 1996 as cited in Varghese et al, 2005), by the same token it is also transformative and transformational. Moreover, they also highlight the importance of how the teachers understand who they are. Duff and Uchida (1997) as cited in Sang (2022) stated that as teachers or students, as gendered and cultured individuals, as expatriates or nationals, as native speakers, or nonnative speakers, as content-area or TESL/English language specialists, as individuals with political convictions, and as members of families, organizations, and society at large. Moreover, Identity shifts are likely to occur throughout a teacher's career because of interactions within schools and in broader communities (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009). Social groups and discourses constantly promote pivotal influence in the construction of teacher identities as well as the institutional practices and policies. Skinner, Leavey, and

Rothi (2019) explains that a teachers' professional identity and their sense of competence and worth are achieved and mediated through interactions with others.

These interactions between language teachers and their students, colleagues, administrators, and other educators play a significant role in shaping the nature of Language Teacher Identity (LTI) through discursive processes (Barkhuizen, 2017). Researchers have also adopted the concept of a "community of practice" to better understand LTI. In the context of a community of practice, members develop relationships over time and their shared activities create a sense of common purpose and identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991, as cited in Nazari et al., 2023). Wenger (2008) explains that as individuals engage in a community of practice, they form a sense of identification that helps them understand both the social system and their roles within it. Moreover, Wenger 1998, as cited in Nazari et al., 2023, describes engagement as an active process of participating in the mutual negotiation of meaning, imagination as a means of constructing identity beyond the confines of engagement, and alignment as the process of adapting one's engaged practices to the nature of the community of practice.

The correlation between Language Teacher Identity (LTI) and Community of Practice (CoP) has been examined in various studies. A recent investigation by Nazari, Seyri, & Karimpour (2023) focused on the emotional labor and identity of three novice language teachers in Iran, analyzing their experiences through the lens of a community of practice. The findings indicated that each community of practice, whether it be a Teacher Education Program (TEP) or a school context, influenced the relational aspects of emotional labor experienced by the teachers. Notably, the study highlighted that identity construction either preceded or followed the emotional labor experienced by the novice teachers. Additionally, the research demonstrated that as these novice teachers progressed in their careers, their emotional labor manifested in diverse forms and was intricately connected to the temporal and spatial trajectories that shaped and reconstructed their identities.

Emotional Labor

As discussed by Zembylas (2003), cited in Kocabaş-Gedika & Ortaçtepe Hart (2021), emotions and teacher identity have a reciprocal and mutually informative relationship on both conceptual and personal levels. This connection is primarily due to the involvement of emotional labor in teaching, a concept originally introduced by Hochschild (1983) to explore the interplay between unequal power dynamics and emotional work in the workplace. Emotions play a central role in teachers' professional development, shaping their self-perception and professional identities (Mehdizadeh et al., 2023; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016; Shapiro, 2010; Song, 2016; Wolff & De Costa, 2017; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020, as cited in Nazari, Seyri, & Karimpour, 2023). Recently, Zembylas (2005a) reconceptualized the notion of "emotional labor" by exploring its connection to three interconnected concepts: emotional suffering, emotional freedom, and emotional navigation.

According to Hochschild (1979), as cited in Miller & Gkonou (2018), there are socially accepted and desired emotions that are considered appropriate in specific situations or contexts. Hochschild further referred to these norms, which often remain implicit, as "feeling rules." Emotional labor comes into play when these feeling rules become linked to the workplace and impact how one's job performance is evaluated, recognized, and rewarded. For instance, Hochschild examined the significant emotional labor demanded of flight attendants who are expected to maintain a pleasant and accommodating demeanor towards all passengers, even in challenging and confrontational situations, to fulfill their work

responsibilities effectively. Kocabaş-Gedika & Ortaçtepe Hart (2021) investigated emotional labor and LTI of two novice NEST with no prior teaching experiences in a formal setting and that by the time of the study, it would be their first-year teaching in the institution in Private University, Ankara, Turkey. The study indicated that conflicts between the imagined and current community of practice hinder NESTs' emotional navigation, and accordingly frame their investment and teacher identity construction and alignments between imagined and present communities enable novice teachers to reframe emotional suffering, enabling a more skilled emotional navigation, more investment, and a facilitated LTI construction.

Poststructuralist Approach

Accordingly, different theoretical perspectives and terminologies contribute to varying viewpoints on identity across disciplines. Poststructuralist theory regards identity as both socially conditioned and constrained, while acknowledging the active role individuals play in shaping their own identities (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2013). Identities are seen as evolving over time, influenced by diverse contexts, and therefore characterized by their dynamic, multifaceted, and intricate nature. Furthermore, Pennycook (2001), as cited in Kocabaş-Gedika & Hartb (2021), argues that emotions and identity should not be perceived as fixed concepts corresponding to objective reality or individual minds. Instead, they are understood as mediated processes through which our perception of the world is constructed, influenced by social, cultural, historical, and political contexts.

According to this perspective, language teachers position themselves within various aspects of the world, which can significantly influence the (re)shaping of their identities. Norton (2000) characterizes identity as "multiple and contradictory," representing a site of struggle that reflects the cultural divisions, inequalities, and disagreements highlighted by Atkinson (1999), as cited in Morgan (2007). Additionally, Norton (1997) cited in Morgan (2007) introduces the concept of investment, which is relevant not only for language learners but also for language teachers. The construct of investment implies that language teachers have complex histories and multiple desires. Investing in teaching philosophy and pedagogy of language learning is also an investment in their own social identity, which undergoes changes over time and in different contexts.

Furthermore, the poststructuralist perspective considers identity as a constantly evolving process shaped by intersubjective discourses, experiences, and emotions. This understanding acknowledges that as discourses change, new configurations of identity emerge over time (Zembylas, 2003). Even seemingly small events within specific cultural and political contexts hold significance in constructing social meanings as they are subjected to discourse practices. As language teachers are embedded within institutions with their own policies and practices, the construction of language teacher identity (LTI) is also significantly influenced and transformed. Within this discourse, the dynamic process of identity formation plays a crucial role in shaping emotional well-being and affective aspects. Haviland and Kahlbaugh (1993), as cited in Zembylas (2003), suggest that emotions serve as a connective element between people's thoughts, judgments, beliefs, and ultimately contribute to the cohesiveness of one's identity.

The Present Study

This study was conducted throughout the spring semester of 2023 from Mid-February to early May. Na Ri is an international student originally coming from Ho Chi Min city,

Vietnam. She is currently a Master graduate student majoring in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics in one of the research-integrated Universities in Arizona, United States. Furthermore, Na Ri is a pre-service ESL teacher in a language pathway program that is collaborating with the University she attends. She has been working as an ESL teacher for a year and teaching basic to advanced English. She teaches international students who will be pursuing their study in higher education. As it is a single subject study, regarding the selection of the participant, I included only NNEST with prior teaching experience in the United States and no teaching experience in the home country. Na Ri started her first teaching experience while doing an internship in one of the high schools in Arizona as an ESL teacher. Therefore, she did not have any teaching experience in Vietnam. She moved to Arizona 8 years ago to pursue a high school. Moreover, she is a passionate and dedicated student and teacher.

To gather data for my research, I employed a combination of open-ended interviews with Na Ri and made detailed field notes. The primary aim of these interviews was to explore emotional labor experienced by Na Ri's and how it influenced the process of her identity negotiation. The interviews took place mainly after Na Ri's teaching sessions. Given that Na Ri's work schedule spans from Monday to Friday, I conducted the interviews towards the end of the week. In addition to interviews, I also conducted field observations to gain insight into the teaching methods employed by Na Ri and to observe any tensions present within the classroom and workplace environment. Furthermore, I paid close attention to the conversations Na Ri had with her colleagues and students outside of the classroom setting. Furthermore, I employed narrative inquiry to analyze the data. Barkhuizen (2013) describes narrative inquiry to do research that focuses on stories we tell about our lives. He further explains that narrative inquiry can help us understand, contextualized knowledge of those intimately involved in teaching and learning; in other words, the meaning they make of their practices in the particular contexts in which they experience their lives.

Findings and Discussion

The findings show that there are several things affecting Na Ri's emotional labor and identity negotiation. The first is the battle between the institutional policy and her own teaching philosophy which prompted her to choose to disobey the rules. While the second important factor is the intersectionality which contributed to the notion of race and non-native speakerism.

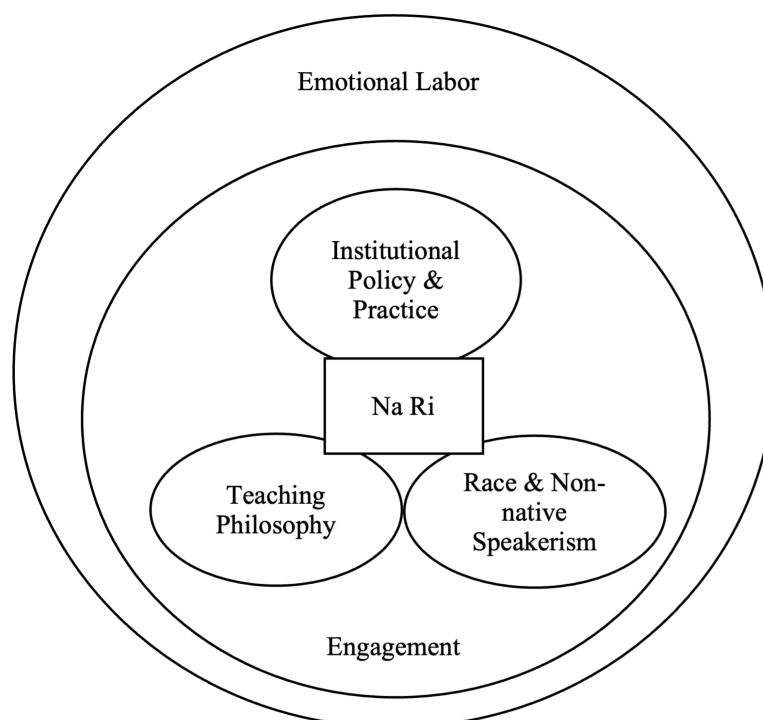


Fig. 1. Factors affecting Na Ri's emotional labor and identity

Institution Policy and Practice vs. Teaching Philosophy

As an international student working as NNES teacher, Na Ri works for 20 hours a week and teaches advanced communication English. Her students come from different part of the world and speak different languages. Since the language program is aimed for the students to work on their English, so the institution highlights several expectations to be fulfilled by both the teachers and students. During the interview, Na Ri oftentimes mentioned the certain policy and expectation employed by her institution was quite difficult for her to adapt. She addressed the policy practically and indirectly discourages the students to use and practice the language outside and inside the classroom.

I, to be honest, feel really under pressure when my manager kept saying I have to stick to the policy even though I tell her what happen or if something happens and, you know, I also should think of my students. I can't just not see or ignore them. But you know, I can't also disobey my boss. (1st interview)

During the discussion about workplace policies, Na Ri displayed strong emotions. She conveyed the challenges of being an individual with no authority to influence administrative decisions, which compelled her to act in a contradictory manner. Among the most disheartening policies was the 'missed-minute' rule, which she found to be inhumane and devoid of any positive impact on the students, only resulting in negative consequences. as agreed upon that teachers' practices and sociocultural contexts affect the construction of identity, and that identity in turn significantly affects those practices (Menard-Warwick, 2008, 2011; Morgan, 2004; Tsui, 2007; Varghese et al., 2005).

I wish I could change the missed-minute policy. I mean what if the students are struggling with their personal life. They are here far from the parents and family, and some of them living far from campus and have to take bus. If we keep counting the

minutes they are missing, it is discouraging them to develop their English skills or to just doing their tasks because they feel they are not being understood.

Na Ri's teaching philosophy revolves around fostering strong relationships with her students. She places great importance on being perceived as a proficient teacher by her students. Thanks to her friendly and open-minded approach, her students find it much easier to discuss their problems and goals with her compared to other teachers. However, this approach sometimes conflicts with the institution's expectations, which has been a significant challenge for Na Ri during her time working there.

I never count the students' missed-minute. One time I was substituting a teacher and there was a student coming late due to mobility because she had to use the bus and well sometimes the bus is late. I reported her attendance as fully participating but then the teacher was angry at me instead of saying thank you. I had clash with her because of that policy. I know that the purpose of the policy was supposedly positive but overtime it becomes really toxic.

The disparity between the policy and Na Ri's teaching philosophy causes anxiety and drains her emotion. Many students have expressed dissatisfaction with other teachers' behavior, which discourages them from expressing themselves freely. Na Ri's frustration mainly stems from her inability to argue with higher-level administrators at her workplace, leading her to take matters into her own hands and implement different rules in her classroom, going against the opinions of other teachers. Her story also shows she does not necessarily hide her true self from what she does to the students, as discussed in works by Menard-Warwick (2008) and Morgan (2004) as cited in Song (2016).

For example, the policy in my campus is quite flexible and that helps us to work on our progress as well as expressing ourselves. I am not saying my workplace should follow it, but I mean it can be flexible to meet the students' need and for them to be able to progress.

Furthermore, Na Ri also explains her battle attending both institutions as teacher and a student. She mentions her classes have flexible time for students to develop compared to her workplace where the students are afraid to express themselves.

Her view specifically takes on the importance of making the institution for the students to feel like "home" instead of making them feel more stressed with internal and external struggles that the students may have encountered.

I want to closely pay more attention to my students' mental health because I don't want to see them struggling because the rules and, we don't know what happen to them outside classroom and maybe they are struggling inside. Obviously, I don't want them to fail. They come from far places, different countries. I can't just make them feel uncomfortable or stranger in their own classes.

Na Ri emphasizes her students' sense of belonging since she teaches multilingual students who come from several linguistic and cultural backgrounds which she also reflects her own journey whether she belongs in the community. Na Ri's concern regarding her students' belonging corroborates with Pham's (2017) finding on students should feel comfortable and relaxed during classrooms without being bothered by the policies. Thus, Na Ri always

provides activities and students collaboration to unify them as well as incorporating sense of security, respect, and tolerance among the students and her.

Intersectionality: Race and Non-native Speakerism

The second major finding is related to how race and non-native speakerism affecting Na Ri's emotional labor and identity. Given the fact that she is an Asian and a NNES teacher allow the students to perceive her as a proficient teacher. Furthermore, Na Ri cares about what the students and her co-workers think of her status. However, according to her story, she has less experience in term of non-native phenomena in her current workplace compared to the time when she did her internship in a public high school.

My students know I am Asian, but they think I am Asian American and have spent the rest of my life here. I guess because I have improved my English and I have been using it in many professional occasions such as during teaching and discussion in classes I take. Well, compared to my time doing internship, the place I work now is better.

Na Ri's teaching experience is intriguing as she often finds herself frustrated with the prevalent requirement in many teaching jobs for candidates to be "native speakers." Regardless of a person's teaching certifications, institutions may overlook them simply due to their non-native speaker status. However, Houghton and Rivers (2013) argue that while being a "native speaker" may initially provide an advantage, there is a glass ceiling for such individuals working in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, leaving them feeling ineffective and powerless (Lawrence, 2016). These issues also involve notions of respect and value judgments regarding skills, which position "native speakers" as unqualified, lacking competence, and unaware of local social and cultural norms, while considering "non-native speakers" as culturally knowledgeable and highly qualified (Keaney, 2016; Lowe & Kiczkowiak, 2016). However, Na Ri's case defies these stereotypes, as her quality, evident through various certifications, exams, and educational achievements, enables her to compete and secure a good teaching position despite being a non-native English speaker and a continuing student.

I personally feel super angry when there is a job ad and one of the requirements is native speaker. I mean that is one thing that I cannot change naturally. I was born Asian. I also think that they are being racist, you know, because they should know that we, non-native speaker, can do better work than native speaker. You see, students are very open to me, and they respect me more because I care about how they feel instead of asking them to be perfect.

Na Ri's response to the issue corresponds with Medyges's (1992, 2001) observations that non-native English-speaking (NNES) teachers serve as better role models for language learning due to the evident relevance of their hard work and understanding of language difficulties. Medyges also explains that NNES teachers tend to be more sensitive, as Na Ri described, leading to students being more open with them compared to native English-speaking (NES) teachers. Additionally, Medyges's research aligns significantly with Na Ri's experience, indicating that NNES teachers tend to design more insightful and creative lesson plans, as well as incorporate higher-order thinking materials, driven by their awareness of their status and a desire to show their capabilities.

The presence of racial factors and non-native speakerism significantly impacts Na Ri's emotions and sense of identity. As highlighted by Martel and Wang (2015), language teachers' perceptions of their own or others' native/non-native speaker status represent complex and challenging aspects of identity formation. This process can lead to emotional suffering, as described by Zembylas (2005a), resulting from conflicts and tensions in various aspects such as goals, ideology, institutional, professional, and personal spheres of power. This emotional suffering may encompass feelings of shame, guilt, low self-esteem, powerlessness, personal inadequacy, failure, inferiority, and discomfort (Benesch, 2017; Hochschild, 1983; Loh & Liew, 2016; Zembylas, 2005b as cited in Kocabaş-Gedika & Hartb, 2021). These interconnected factors play a significant role in shaping Na Ri's emotional experiences and self-perception as a language teacher.

In my workplace, of course I want to be considered proficient teacher without people questioning where I am coming from. I know I said there are students who think I sound like American, but some students expect native speaker to teach them. That's kind of obvious because they spend money coming to America and they want to learn with American. This makes me sad especially because I am also still a student, and the pressure is kinda making me anxious and difficult to focus on the job and study.

Na Ri's experience has a profound emotional and psychological impact on her, leading to moments of self-doubt so intense that she often finds herself in tears. According to Na Ri, she believes that no matter how excellent her performance, achieving complete confidence seems unattainable. Nevertheless, she remains determined, continuously striving to do her best, and actively motivating others. She emphasizes that being Asian, she can still be a proficient English teacher, serving as a positive role model for her students.

Conclusion

The workplace emerges as the primary influence on how a teacher navigates their identity and emotions. This is evident in Na Ri's story, as she finds herself pushing to the brink of emotional distress due to the mismatch between institutional policies and her teaching philosophy, leading to conflicts with other teachers who hold differing perspectives. Zembylas (2002, 2003) demonstrates how school culture shapes emotional norms, encouraging teachers to suppress "negative" emotions like anger, anxiety, and vulnerability, while promoting the expression of "legitimate" emotions such as empathy, calmness, and kindness. Another important thing to pay attention is the interconnectedness of race and non-native speakerism that cannot be fully eliminated in the case of Asian ESL teacher, and it is gained even more impact to teachers' emotional and identity negotiation.

Na Ri's narrative presents several noteworthy pedagogical implications. Firstly, language programs and institutions should prioritize students' needs and remain receptive to adapting policies based on real-world experiences rather than being inflexible. Secondly, the requirement for teachers to be native speakers should be reconsidered, as numerous studies have shown that non-native English-speaking (NNES) teachers can be equally effective as native speakers. It's worth noting that the study's limitations include the absence of classroom observations due to access restrictions and policy constraints. However, the investigation of gender, emotions, and identity negotiation emerges as a significant area of interest for future research.

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