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Neither backpackers nor locals: the professional identities of TESOL Teachers in East Asia studying on an MA TESOL

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses accounts of professional identity constructed by teachers studying for an MA TESOL with a Western university. These teachers share a belief that commitment and competence are key professional attributes; however, contrasts are drawn between the ways in which Western teachers and teachers originating from countries in East Asia seek to demonstrate that they themselves possess these characteristics. The Western teachers distance themselves from the idea that they are itinerant backpackers whose worth lies only in their 'native speaker' status rather than any pedagogical skill, whereas the East Asian teachers distance themselves from inferences of linguistic/pedagogical incompetence.

KEYWORDS

Professional identity, Native English Speaking Teacher, Non Native English Speaking Teacher, East Asia.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article reports on the professional identities expressed by a group of teachers working in East Asia and studying for an MA TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), when interviewed for a study of professional development opportunities in the region. It is now common to apply the language of careers and professions when describing the work of TESOL teachers (Braine, 2010; Canagarajah, 2012; Trent, 2010; Trent, 2012a; Varghese, Motha, Park, Reeves & Trent 2016), although there is evidence that in some contexts teachers do not articulate coherent career narratives in describing their work (Johnston, 1997; Garton & Richards, 2008), and do not necessarily view themselves as part of a global profession (Hayes, 2009). At the same time, the assumption that a so-called Native English Speaking Teacher (NEST) will be superior to a so-called Non-Native English Speaking Teacher (NNEST) has been deconstructed in academic research (see, for example, Árva & Medgyes, 2000; Moussu & Llurda, 2008; Hall, 2012; Cook, 2016), but it is unclear to what extent this deconstruction has impacted on teachers' lives and how they conceptualise their teacher identity. Both of these issues are addressed in this article. It should be noted that we are uncomfortable with the so-called NEST/NNEST dichotomy, and with the terms NEST and NNEST themselves. We do use them throughout this article as

they occur in the literature on which we draw, but by doing so we do not seek to legitimate them.

In some of the countries of East Asia, English is a second language, whereas for others it is a foreign language; one commonality is the effects of globalisation and the consequent shifting distributions of wealth that are leading to an increased emphasis on improving the teaching and learning of English across the region (Kam, 2002). This paper re-visits the concept of professional identity of TEFL/TESL/TESOL teachers (henceforth TESOL teachers) as discussed by teachers of English currently employed in East Asia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2016, *TESOL Quarterly* published a special issue on English language teachers' identities (Varghese et al., 2016), adding to a burgeoning literature on the NEST/ NNEST hierarchy (Braine, 2010; Selvi, 2011), the experiences of trans-national teachers (Menard-Warwick, 2000), female educators in TEFL (Simon-Maeda, 2004), discourses of professionalism (Garton & Richards, 2008; Johnston, 1997) and on biographies of professional identity (Tsui, 2007). Yet, there are few studies that identify the relationship between TESOL work, careers and teachers' professional identity in the burgeoning English language education communities of East Asia although the work of Trent (e.g. 2012a, 2012b) has provided considerable insights into the professional lives of expatriate teachers working alongside local ones.

Whilst the concept of a native speaker of a language has been problematised, the native speaker – non-native speaker (NS – NNS) distinction remains widely used (Llurda, 2018) and continues to impact on how English language teachers are positioned by others (Trent, 2012b). Although, as Smith (2015) points out, the world-wide use of English is increasingly between non-native speakers of English, the native speakers' use of the language continues to be held up by many as an ideal. In Malaysia, for example, the term 'native speaker' is employed in the media and seeking native speaking teachers is an explicit aim of some Ministry of Education teacher recruitment projects (Hall, 2012). Interestingly, Jun Liu's (1999) study of non-native-English-speaking professionals in TESOL found that participants' professional identities as NS and NNS were related to factors in addition to linguistic competence, including cultural affiliation and social identities. Hence, some participants labelled themselves 'native speaker' or 'non-native speaker' according to the social situation, in order to express particular social identities. More recently, Aneja (2016) explored the subjectivities created by four pre-service TESOL teachers, and demonstrates how their narratives differ in their acceptance or resistance of (non)native speakerism. Richardson (2017), in her forward to the latest edition of Peter Medgyes' classic text *The Non-Native Teacher* (Medgyes, 2017), argues that the magnitude of the impact of being a native or non-native speaker on teachers remains undiminished, despite the significant shift in contemporary thinking about the issue. She has pointed out that it continues to be important to employer hiring practices – although the employers themselves often distance

themselves from the discrimination by arguing that they are simply acting on student preferences (Richardson, 2016), and that in consequence the majority of the world's English teachers are defined negatively by what they are not, namely a native speaker. Hence, although the dichotomy is a problematic social construct, it remains important to examine how it continues to impact on teachers' lives.

The issue of professional identity is not an issue of merely academic interest, but pertains directly to classroom practice. Duff & Uchida (1997) identify the importance of their four case-study teachers' sociocultural identities to their practices in the EFL classroom. More specifically, Rao & Li (2017) demonstrate that differences between NS and NNS teachers of English may be important in classroom environments; for example, they found that the native speakers were more tolerant of mistakes and professed greater interest in intelligibility, whereas non-native speaking teachers relied more on rule infringement. Drawing on a literature review of studies looking at NNS teachers of English, Moussu and Llorca (2008) note that several studies suggest that NNS teachers are more self-conscious about their mistakes in English than NS teachers, implying that somehow the competence and ability of NNS teachers is in question. While problematizing the NNS-NS dichotomy, Moussu and Llorca (2008) suggest that the label may have important effects on teachers' sense of self-efficacy and professional identity, citing a range of previous pieces of research which suggest that NNESTs believe that their professional careers may be impeded by the designation of being NNESTs, with a linguistic deficit model continuing to hold sway. Canh (2013) has complemented these studies by looking at the professional identity of expatriate teachers' of English in Vietnam, suggesting that a lack of sense of 'belonging' impedes their construction of a shared professional identity with local teachers. Hall (2012) found that 'native speaker' teacher educators on a publicly-funded scheme in Malaysia were very conscious of their native speaker positioning, and consciously strove to create collegial relationships in contrast to a perceived native speaker – non-native speaker hierarchy. Nevertheless, in Trent's (2012b) work in Hong Kong, teachers from Australia, the UK and Canada on a 'native speaker' scheme found that this prescribed their identity in certain ways because of how they were positioned by others. Teachers are therefore negotiating their identity and view of their own skills in a context of prejudice and assumptions about their identity, such as Walkinshaw and Oanh's students (2014), who reported in a survey that they thought their native English speaking teachers were models of correct pronunciation and language use, whereas their non-native English speaking teachers were better at explaining grammar.

Acquiring academic qualifications and experiences in higher education have been shown by previous researchers to be important in the renegotiation of professional identity (Ilieva and Waterstone 2013). For example, in Suresh Canagarajah's autoethnography of his own process of professionalisation, he describes the significance attached to receiving a higher degree from the US, explaining that he viewed it as the "center of TESOL expertise" (Suresh Canagarajah 2012: 266). Both Park (2012) and Samimy, Kim, Lee and Kasai (2011) have charted the experiences of NNEST students of TESOL who started out with low

professional self-esteem, but found this self-evaluation being raised as a result of their experiences and education during their courses. Similarly, Tsui (2007) offers a fascinating biography of a single Chinese teacher of English, Minfang, charting his negotiation of competing identities as he moves from being seen as the provincial buffoon on his undergraduate course to becoming an established academic in the university. This account highlights the tensions and interplay between self, institutional and social fashioning of identity (see also Leung, 2009).

In summary, there is a need for research examining the professional identity of TESOL teachers in the economies of East Asia. This research should evaluate the significance to the teachers of the NEST/NNEST dichotomy (Trent, 2012b) that underpins much discussion about TESOL teacher identity in the academic literature. Moreover, the significance of teacher professional development in affirming or constructing identity has been signalled in recent literature, but remains under-explored (Trent, 2010). In the remainder of the article, we shall report on a study of teachers undertaking an MA in TESOL in East Asia, analysing the accounts of professionalism and professional identity that participants employed in reflecting on their professional development choices, and exploring the importance of the NEST/ NNEST dichotomy to their reports.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

For this study, we identified sixteen students on three different TESOL Masters programmes offered by a British university at both the UK and East Asian Campuses (see Appendix), each student being interviewed once either face-to-face or using Skype. Our sample was opportunistic, based on students' availability for interview, with students currently (or most recently) teaching in the region being invited to participate. Their national origins are listed in the table of participants in the appendix. Eight of the students were nationals from countries in East Asia teaching in their own country; the other eight participants were nationals of BANA countries, teaching as expatriates in countries in East Asia. Following Kam (2002), we have taken East Asia as the geographical region from which our sample was drawn. The sixteen students were studying either on an online MA TESOL course (eight students), on the face-to-face MA TESOL at the UK Campus (three students) or on the face-to-face MA TESOL at the East Asian Campus (five students).

It should be acknowledged that being interviewed by their academic tutors may have impacted on the accounts that the teachers gave about their professional identities and the significance of their postgraduate studies to their professional lives. However, the focus of the interviews was on opportunities for teacher development, rather than on professional identity or their NS-NNS teacher status; these were preoccupations common to the participants that emerged from the data. It should be noted that we followed institutional and BERA (2011) research guidelines for ethical research.

This is a small scale study and the use of investigator triangulation (Patton, 1999) is acknowledged as a possible limitation. Moreover, it could be argued that these teachers are atypical of TESOL professionals because of the time and money they have spent on pursuing postgraduate studies. We make no claims to generalisability; these interviews are interesting insofar as they illustrated how a discourse of TESOL professional identity can be articulated by teachers working in East Asia, not because of any assumption that they represent all teachers in that region.

The interview data were coded independently by two researchers, and the relationships between code occurrences were analysed. Saldaña's (2012) guidelines were followed in identifying prevalent themes and patterns in their occurrences, and using second cycle coding to generate theoretical themes. From this process, it was concluded that three broad aspects of the teachers' professional identity emerged from the data:

2. The work of TESOL.
3. The ideal attributes of a TESOL teacher.
4. The NEST-NNEST dichotomy.

These themes will be discussed separately although it will become clear that this is a heuristic distinction and that the relationship between the three themes is also significant.

It will be seen below that contrasts were observed between the accounts of professional identity offered by Western teachers and East Asian teachers. Not all East Asian teachers would describe themselves as being non-native speakers; for instance, Bella explained that her 'first language' was English. However, it was clear from the interviews that all of the teachers were aware of the way *others positioned them* in relation to this dichotomy, and in this sense all the East Asian teachers felt they were positioned as 'non-native-speakers' and the Western teachers believed they were positioned as 'native-speakers'. The differences between the predominant themes in these two sets of interviews will be a recurrent issue in the discussion below.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 The work of TESOL

One of the recurrent themes in the teacher interviews was their accounts of the work of teaching. Firstly, all the teachers considered their work to be a 'profession' or a 'career', rather than merely a job; being a TESOL teacher was constructed as a more complex and theoretically-informed practice than something that can be done by a gap year student. This understanding of TESOL work was shared across the Western and the East Asian teacher interviews. We shall look at three dimensions of this – career, theory and complexity – in turn.

4.1.1 TESOL as a career

Most of the teachers explained that their motivation for undertaking the MA TESOL was in order to advance in their careers. For Aisyah, completing the MA was a prerequisite for employment in a university. Similarly, Ian wanted to “improve my employment prospects”. The discourse of business and cost-benefit analysis was a feature of some interviews; for instance, Li Wei described the MA as “a valuable investment: either time-wise or money-wise.” Similarly, Greg believed that “getting a Masters degree will secure my career here.” There were some teachers – Dara and Ching-Lan – who described their prime motivation as being to improve their teaching skills, but these were the exceptions. A more common approach was that of Doug, who admitted that, “To be frank, my reasoning is career advancement and the actual development is sort of a bonus that comes with it.”

In contrast to the work of Duff & Uchida (1997), our participants did not explore how a range of sociocultural aspects of identity impacted on their classroom practices. This contrast might in part be due to Duff & Uchida’s (1997) ethnographic approach using, amongst other methods, journal entries and therefore encouraging a more introspective discourse than that elicited by interviews. Our interviewees employed the business-like language of careers, investments and quality, and their teacher identity was dependent less on interpersonal connections and more on their classroom effectiveness.

4.1.2 Theory and practice

The participants viewed themselves as professionals, and believed part of their professional challenge was to integrate theoretical ideas into their practice, echoing Ilieva and Waterstone’s (2013) suggestion that the curriculum discourses on a TESOL course can open up possibilities for professional identities and practice. For Ai-Leen, this introduced frustrating tensions between the teaching methods she was exposed to during the MA and the preference of the school authorities for “traditional teaching methods”. For Doug, the MA offered a chance to speak with more authority about his work, the theories studied being a confirmation of things that he had worked out for himself. Greg argued that studying for an MA enabled him to practise the educational ideas he preached to his pupils. Mark summarised the idea that teaching was an integration of theory with practice: “as a teacher, you’re doing research every time you’re in the classroom.”

4.1.3 The complexity of teaching

Many of the participants stressed the complexity of the teachers’ role, echoing Tudor’s (2003) suggestion that teachers have to learn to live with complexity; at times, the participants seemed to be debating with an invisible opponent (sometimes, their former selves) who had suggested that anyone could teach. For example, Bella claimed:

The teaching profession, from the outside, is completely different to how it is on the inside. You look at your teacher and you think you know your teacher, and you think, ‘oh it’s so easy; you go in there and you have your books and everything and you just stand in front of the class.’ But the actual teaching experience is much harder and much more complicated but also much more fun and much more gratifying.

The language used to describe teaching evoked something both intangible and highly valuable; Phoebe suggested that teaching was a multi-faceted “service”, whilst Fiona described it as an “art”, echoing Richards’ (1987) claim that good teaching is not a set of trainable behaviours, but is a more complex and ambitious enterprise. For many participants, undertaking their MA studies had reinforced their conceptualisation of the complexity of their role. For example, Fiona argued: “There is a lot more to [teaching] than just stepping into the classroom and just teaching. I kind of knew that there was, but I didn’t really know it in much depth.”

4.2 The attributes of a TESOL teacher

In describing the characteristics of a TESOL teacher, three themes recurred in the interviews: commitment, competence and a career-orientation. Whilst these three themes were shared across the Western and the East Asian teacher interviews, the way in which they were elaborated contrasted across these two sets of interviews. Commitment was a recurrent theme in the interviews; the ideal TESOL teacher was portrayed as someone who was highly committed. However, the way in which commitment was expressed differed between the Western and the East Asian teachers. Both groups shared a common aim, however, in wanting to be viewed as professionals.

Ruecker & Ives (2014) have shown that advertisements for expatriate English teachers often emphasise features such as money, opportunities for travel or an exotic location rather than aspects of the job. By contrast, the Western teachers in our study were anxious to affirm their commitment to their work. There were different aspects of this commitment: firstly, many participants expressed a view of themselves as long-term, career teachers, rather than flitting in and out of the profession; secondly, they expressed commitment to improving their professional practice; thirdly, they expressed their commitment to their students; fourthly, some expressed a specific commitment to East Asia. Fiona was not unusual in blending more than one of these kinds of commitment in her response as she distinguished between two groups of Western teachers:

You have certain types of teachers that decide to come to Japan just for the experience and they decide that they are just doing the job because it’s a job and it pays the bills and they can go travel around and then you’ve got the other types of teachers who enjoy what they do, they’re interested and they want to develop. So I’m more like those kind and I got on better with those...a lot of the teachers who enjoyed the travelling ended up quitting a lot of the time because they would stay for six months and decide that they wanted to move on.

These other, transient teachers were variously described as “backpackers” (Nigel), “gap year” students (Greg), or on “a giant Spring break” (Phoebe); the common theme was that they were a group for whom teaching did not really matter, whereas the Western participants were eager to stress that teaching did matter to them. For Greg, the contrast lay in the way that “I cared more than some of the other people”, adding that “The most important thing to me is that I would like to improve as a teacher all the time.” For other teachers, the difference was based in the length of commitment they had to teaching; for

instance, Ian distanced himself from the transient group by stressing that he was pursuing teaching as a career:

I think there's many teachers here who don't have any formal qualifications although the difference is it doesn't really hold them back as much because they are not going to be career teachers. I think the average stay for most people in this country is about two years and then they go back to what you might say in inverted commas is "real life".

Ian explicitly explained that this was about professional identity:

You get a small number of teachers who are very serious about what they do and really enjoy what they do, consider it to be their career and they almost define part of their teaching identity in terms of what they're not: they are not like the glut of teachers that come in and out, they are serious and so there is kind of like an almost self-sustaining cycle of encouraging each other to develop, putting on conferences and giving people the chance to meet other professionals.

Nigel expressed the same contrast in a more cynical way:

Everyone has to put on like a pious face, kind of like how much they're doing for their students and how much, how they're working harder...because they're trying to break themselves from that backpacker image.

Echoing Canh's (2013) work on the importance of belonging to the professional identity of expatriate TEFL teachers in Vietnam, some Western participants had married a national from the country where they were teaching and this was used to testify to their commitment to their new homes. For example, Mark expressed his commitment to Malaysia by noting that he had a wife and baby and had just bought a house in the country. Both Doug and Greg had married someone from their adopted countries, and Doug stated that he "would never go back", while Greg asserted "I want to stay here." In these many ways, then, we can see the participants challenging the attendant connotations of the NEST/NNEST dichotomy.

Whilst the Western teachers wished to distance themselves from a backpacker identity, the East Asian teachers were more focused on emphasising their linguistic competence, a concern which echoes many of the studies discussed by Moussu & Llordu (2008). For the East Asian teachers, the professional development offered by the Masters course was in part about bringing themselves 'closer' to the English language. For example, Abdul explained that he wanted to improve his English during the MA, and he admitted that, "I have this perception that the only place where you can learn English is somewhere quite near to its origin." Ching-Lan expressed a similar sentiment when she explained that, "I think most of my intention is to practise my English so I tried to choose some university which used English as the main language."

Both types of teachers were thereby engaged in combatting potential threats to their professional identity but there was a contrast between the concerns of the Western teachers (who wanted to distance themselves from the backpacker identity) and the East Asian teachers (who wanted to distance themselves from any association with linguistic

incompetence as supposed NNESTs). Both groups are positioned ambiguously in relation to the idealised image of the teacher they articulated as both competent and committed, and their professional narratives were built around trying to move themselves closer to the ideal.

4.3 The NEST- NNEST dichotomy

The distinctions drawn between NESTs and NNESTs formed an interesting aspect of the interviews which deserves more detailed discussion. Braine (2010) has suggested that it is only in wealthier countries which are able to attract large numbers of Western teachers, that the division between NESTs and NNESTs is significant. However, our participants reported the dichotomy being used by school officials in environments as economically diverse as Hong Kong, Malaysia and Vietnam. Whether the ideal TESOL teacher was necessarily a NEST or a NNEST was an issue which many interviewees discussed, although this subject was not part of the interview questions. Moussu & Llorca (2008) have questioned whether this should be conceptualised as a dichotomy or a continuum, but our participants were clear that it was experienced as a dichotomy that was highly salient to their professional lives echoing, amongst others, the work of Aneja (2016) on the narratives of preservice teachers of English and the work of Trent (2012b) on English language teachers in Hong Kong. Our participants, working across the region, reported the significance of this perceived dichotomy to government, administrative and parent perceptions.

Ian's reports of the situation in Korea were typical; he explained that the Korean government wants there to be a 'native speaker' in every school, so that the children have both a Korean English teacher and a native English teacher. Yet, under this scheme only certain countries are deemed as 'native', and others where English is the official language (such as Malta and Singapore) are not. Similarly, Mark parodied the use of foreign teacher mentors in Malaysia, claiming that foreign mentors with a couple of years' experience teaching English were being asked to mentor Malaysian teachers with 50 or 60 years of teaching experience. Mark exaggerated the differences in order to highlight a contrast between the two groups of teachers, and to emphasise the ironies that he saw in the situation. The project he was working on aimed to develop the teaching skills of Malaysian teachers – there are separate programmes in place to improve their linguistic skills – and yet the inexperienced foreign mentor was seen as being able to improve the teaching skills of the experienced Malaysian. In hearing these accounts, it seems that Menard-Warwick's (2008) suggestion that the NEST-NNEST hierarchy is being eroded is somewhat optimistic in many East Asian contexts. Fiona pointed out that in her teaching context linguistic competence was deemed less significant than accent:

They want to be able to sound either British or American. They normally within their school won't hire anybody who has not got English as their native language from abroad and so even if you were German and spoke perfect English they wouldn't hire you.

The research participants explicitly challenged the implication that a NNEST is an inferior teacher. For instance, Li Wei pointed to her strengths as a NNEST; firstly, that she

has a strong understanding of English grammar, and secondly, that she can understand the difficulties that her students face; in other words, she re-positioned her NNEST status as an advantage. This discursive strategy echoes Xia Wang, the student studied by Park (2012), who during her TESOL course shifts from viewing her NNEST label as a liability to instead celebrating and embracing this aspect of her identity. Bella, a Malaysian whose first language is English, is positioned ambiguously in relation to stereotypes about who constitutes a "native" speaker; interestingly, she stressed that both her use of English in the home and the grammatical education she received at school were important to her understanding and use of English. By contrast, none of the Western teachers talked about their own acquisition of any language, nor about their knowledge of grammar, as a way of asserting their competence.

We discussed above the importance of educational experiences to individuals' conceptions of their professional identity (Park 2012; Samimy et al. 2011; Tsui 2007). There was some limited evidence of this in our data. For instance, Ai-Leen reported a debate within one of her MA classes:

I remember one native speaker, she said that native speakers would be a better English teacher but for me, yes, but it depends on the level. I think it is maybe true up to a certain level but I do see the importance of non-native speakers in the English teaching profession.

In this statement, Ai-Leen is questioning the privileging of native speakers over non-native speakers, but she feels unable to reject the hierarchy completely – she still accepts it “up to a certain level”, although it is unclear whether she means that lower proficiency or higher proficiency students would benefit from a native English speaking teacher. Moreover, this does not question the dichotomisation of teachers into native versus non-native speakers. In contrast to the teachers studied by Park (2012) and Samimy, Kim, Lee and Kasai (2011), then, this TESOL course has not empowered her to reject completely the prevailing discourse.

The MA course did play a role in these teachers' assertions of identity. For Ian, a Western teacher, students on the MA course shared a common identity in being “serious about teaching”. For Ai-Leen and Bella, both East Asian teachers, belonging to the MA course signalled that they were the kind of non-native speakers who were open to international ideas. Bella contrasted the approaches to teaching and learning she had experienced during her undergraduate studies in Australia and her current post-graduate studies to the teaching and learning norms of a Malaysian university, suggesting her exposure to the former would make her a better teacher. To illustrate this point further, it should be noted that several participants contrasted our university with ‘local’ universities, as if it represented something ‘non-local’ (rather than simply a different locality); this was seen as in some sense weightier or offering more credibility (cf. Suresh Canagarajah 2012). As Holliday (2005) has argued, NNESTs teachers are constructed as the Other, and encounter a stereotypical myth that the NNEST teacher is ‘exam-oriented’, ‘rigid’, ‘uncritical’ and ‘good at memorizing’ (Holliday 2005: 21). For these teachers, then,

attending an MA course at a UK university aligned them closer to English and closer to international best practice; it distanced them from an identity they worried others might ascribe to them as ‘non-native’, ‘local’ and, thereby, Other. This echoes Park’s (2012) suggestion that qualifications from ‘inner circle’ (Kachru 1992) countries are used by NNESTs as a means to reconstruct their NNEST status, although following Lee (2015) we acknowledge that the longer-term impact – as identity is negotiated with family members after studies are completed – deserves further exploration.

In summary, the Western teachers distanced themselves from ‘backpacker’ teachers who were transient Westerners simply teaching as part of an Asian experience. The East Asian teachers sought to distance themselves from assumptions of linguistic incompetence or old-fashioned teaching approaches. Hence, for all of our participants, attendance on the MA course was an affirmation of their professional self, and self-definition was achieved by defining themselves in opposition to an ‘other’, real or imagined. Like Trent’s (2010) pre-service teachers in Hong Kong, their teacher education was central to their construction of a professional identity. By obtaining a qualification from an inner-circle country, the East Asian teachers were equipping themselves with concrete evidence that although they might be seen by others as ‘non-native’ speakers, they were not linguistically incompetent; meanwhile, the Western teachers referred to the same qualification to demonstrate that they are not dilettante backpackers who are teaching English for their own convenience. Whilst as researchers we feel deeply uncomfortable with these inferred associations, it was clear that they still had an impact on our teachers’ lives and professional identities.

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis offered here has drawn on the accounts of the work of TESOL articulated by 16 teachers working (or most recently employed) in East Asia and studying for an MA in TESOL. Echoing other recent studies (for example, Canagarajah 2012; Trent 2010; Trent 2012a; Varghese et al. 2016), our analysis of our data suggests the emergence of a strong professional identity amongst TESOL teachers. However, we further suggest that the prevailing hierarchy between NEST and NNEST teachers (Hall 2012; Cook 2016) is reflected in differences in the way this identity is articulated by East Asian and Western teachers, in particular the role they ascribe to their postgraduate studies and in the attributes they purport to possess.

Three aspects of their professional identity emerged from our analysis:

1. The work of TESOL. Being a TESOL teacher was constructed as a professional activity that is complex and theoretically informed.
2. The attributes of an TESOL teacher. The teachers asserted a professional identity that involved commitment. This commitment was manifold – to students, to an ongoing career and to the language – and the emphasis placed on each of these by the teachers differed. For the Western teachers, this involved asserting their

commitment to teaching and to their students, in order to distance themselves from transient backpackers on a gap year; for the East Asian teachers, this involved asserting a commitment to learning new methodologies and theories, a commitment to the language and a commitment to learning from overseas.

3. The NEST-NNEST dichotomy. Whilst the Native speaker/ Non-native speaker dichotomy has been problematized by researchers, explicit reflection on their positioning in relation to this dichotomy (Hall 2012; Trent 2012b) remained an important feature of the teachers' self-identity. The East Asian teachers were concerned that they were identified as NNEST and the Western teachers assumed that they were identified as NEST, regardless of their actual linguistic background.

It should be reiterated that we are uncomfortable with the NEST-NNEST dichotomy, and the purpose of this study is not to legitimate it, but to highlight the continued inequalities it perpetuates in teachers' lives and to consider how it intersects with other aspects of professional identity. Whilst Kumaravadivelu (2016) has used a Gramscian lens to understand the perpetuation of the NNEST/NEST hierarchy, we suggest that addressing and discussing issues of teacher identity is equally important.

Finally, we have signalled the importance of these teachers' postgraduate studies to their accounts of identity, and suggest that this deserves further research. We are left with deep-seated ambivalence over the effects of the expansion of teacher education opportunities offered by Western universities in the East Asia Region, and follow Phillipson (2010) in suggesting that this is an enterprise that is entwined with cultural and social inequalities.

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BIODATA

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APPENDIX A

Appendix: Background of Participants

Pseudonym	Nationality	Country of employment	Programme of study
Ai-Leen	Malaysian	Malaysia	East Asian Campus
Bella	Malaysian	Malaysia	East Asian Campus
Abdul	Malaysian	Malaysia	East Asian Campus
Doug	American	Malaysia	East Asian Campus
Ching-Lan	Hong Kong	Hong Kong	UK Campus

Fiona	British	Japan	UK Campus
Greg	American	Vietnam	East Asian Campus
Li Wei	Chinese	China	Online MA*
Ian	British	Korea	Online MA*
James	British	Hong Kong	Online MA*
Grace	Malaysian	Malaysia	Online MA*
Aisyah	Malaysian	Malaysia	Online MA*
Mark	British	Malaysia	Online MA*
Nigel	British	Japan	Online MA*
Dara	Malaysian	Malaysia	Online MA*
Phoebe	American	Korea	UK Campus

* Run by UK Campus