

Becoming teachers: Navigating identity tensions in the transition from preparation to practice

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ABSTRACT

This study reports on two case studies of novice English as an Additional Language (EAL) teachers in Victoria, Australia, examining the personal and professional identity tensions they experience as they transition from initial teacher education (ITE) into culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) school contexts. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and language portraits, the study explores three interrelated dimensions: (i) the extent to which ITE prepares teachers with relevant knowledge for EAL teaching; (ii) the challenges and affordances encountered within school settings; and (iii) the influence of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, language, and broader ideological structures on teacher identity formation. The findings indicate that although participants valued their university preparation, their professional identities were more powerfully shaped by everyday school practices and collegial communities. Identity tensions were particularly evident where systemic hierarchies positioned teachers as less experienced or less knowledgeable. Overall, the study demonstrates that EAL teacher identity is constructed at the intersection of professional knowledge, lived experience, and the ongoing negotiation of institutional power relations.

1. Introduction

Language teacher identity (LTI) has been an area of research in TESOL, applied linguistics and language education that has attracted considerable interest, resulting in a robust volume of scholarly research. This focus on teacher identity has emerged from the recognition that language teaching is not merely about linguistic competence but also deeply rooted in the beliefs, experiences, and social contexts of teachers themselves (Barkhuizen, 2019; De Costa & Norton, 2017; Mathews et al., 2025; Farias and Veliz, 2025; Weinmann et al., 2024). Research on LTI examines how teachers construct and negotiate their professional selves, how they align or contest personal and institutional values, and how their identities are shaped through ongoing interaction with learners, communities, policies, and ideologies.

A key insight from this literature is that identity construction is dynamic, relational, and often tension laden. Language teachers routinely navigate competing expectations arising from institutional mandates, accountability regimes, dominant language ideologies (Meighan & Veliz, 2026), and their own pedagogical and ethical commitments (Beijaard et al., 2004; Varghese et al., 2005). These negotiations are frequently conceptualised as tensions or dilemmas (Gong & Gao, 2024; Ho-Yan Mak, 2011; Lee, 2023; Uştuk & Yazan, 2023), highlighting the contradictions teachers experience as they attempt to reconcile personal beliefs with professional demands institutional hierarchies and ideologies. Importantly, such tensions are not merely individual or psychological struggles but are

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produced within broader sociopolitical and ideological conditions that shape what counts as legitimate knowledge, language use, and professional practice.

LTI is closely linked to teacher agency (Tajeddin & Yazan, 2024a, 2024b; Veliz et al., 2025), foregrounding teachers as reflective actors who actively negotiate their positioning while making decisions about pedagogy, curriculum, and classroom interaction (De Costa & Norton, 2017). This relationship between identity and agency is particularly salient during periods of transition, such as the movement from Initial Teacher Education (ITE) into professional practice. During this phase, novice teachers are required to translate theoretical knowledge into situated practice while simultaneously navigating school cultures, institutional hierarchies, pedagogical demands and community expectations (Veliz et al., 2025). Mockler (2011), for example, conceptualises teacher identity as simultaneously personal, professional, and political, arguing that identity work positions teachers in relation to dominant discourses such as neoliberalism, standardisation, and performativity. From this perspective, identity is not only a means of aligning beliefs and practice but also a site of resistance, negotiation, and possibility.

These dynamics are especially pronounced in culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) educational contexts (Partridge & Veliz, 2026). Gray and Block (2012) further extend the discourse by linking LTI to society's material and economic structures, suggesting that integrating a range of social categories into identity discourse can deepen our understanding of professional identity. This perspective is crucial in examining how hierarchically organised categories, such as race, ethnicity, religion, language, and gender, interact with broader socioeconomic factors to shape teachers' experiences and self-perceptions. In this context, exploring identity tensions is therefore essential, as these conflicts can shape teachers' emotional well-being, professional satisfaction, and commitment to the profession. Teachers who experience intense identity tensions may struggle with feelings of inadequacy, dissonance, or disempowerment, impacting their effectiveness and sense of agency in the classroom (Flores & Day, 2006).

In CaLD contexts, LTI becomes especially salient because teachers' linguistic repertoires, accents, cultural backgrounds, and racialised bodies are continuously read, evaluated, and positioned within dominant hierarchies of language and professionalism (Veliz et al., 2026). Unlike more linguistically homogeneous settings, CaLD classrooms and schools foreground questions of legitimacy, authority, and belonging, as teachers are required not only to teach language but also to embody socially sanctioned norms of "appropriate" language use, pedagogy, and professional conduct. Research has shown that in such contexts, dominant ideologies of native-speakerism, standard language, and whiteness often intersect to shape how language teachers are perceived by students, colleagues, and families, thereby intensifying identity negotiations (Kubota & Lin, 2009; Norton, 2013). As a result, CaLD contexts function as sites where identity tensions are rendered more visible, consequential, and emotionally charged.

Despite the considerable body of work on LTI, significant gaps remain in our understanding of the specific tensions language teachers face as they transition from teacher education programs to school contexts. Much of the research has focused broadly on factors influencing teacher identity, such as prior experiences, professional development, and contextual demands. However, there is less emphasis on the nuanced and often contradictory tensions that arise as teachers attempt to align their personal beliefs with institutional policies, societal expectations, and diverse classroom realities as they exit ITE programs and enter the teaching profession. These tensions are particularly relevant in language teaching, where issues of language ideology, cultural representation, and social justice frequently intersect with teaching practices (Norton, 2013). Addressing these gaps and tensions in the literature can inform teacher education programs, highlight the need for supportive institutional policies, and promote strategies for fostering resilience and adaptability in language teachers.

The research question that emerges from this context is as follows:

How are EAL teachers' developing professional identities shaped by personal and professional tensions as they transition from ITE programs into diverse school environments?

1.1. Language teacher identity

LTI has been widely conceptualised as a dynamic and socially situated construct that shapes how language teachers understand their roles, enact pedagogy, and position themselves within educational institutions (Farias & Veliz, 2025; Mathews et al., 2025; Tajeddin & Yazan, 2024b). Olsen's (2016) definition of teacher identity is frequently cited for its capacity to capture this complexity, foregrounding identity as an "ever-changing construct" shaped by context, positioning, and meaning making. While this definition is conceptually generative, its breadth can also be analytically limiting, as it risks flattening the specific sociopolitical forces – such as language ideology, racialisation, and native-speakerism – that uniquely shape language teachers' professional lives. In response to this limitation, LTI scholarship has increasingly foregrounded the linguistic, cultural, and political dimensions of identity formation (Eslamdoost et al., 2020; Gong & Gao, 2024; Hemphkin, 2023), theorising LTI as emerging through the interaction of personal histories, social relationships, and institutional and ideological contexts.

A key contribution of LTI research is its explicit engagement with power. Scholars have demonstrated that language teacher identity is inseparable from ideologies of language, legitimacy, and belonging, particularly in multilingual and postcolonial contexts where English and other dominant languages are unequally valued (Kubota & Lin, 2009; Norton, 2013). This perspective has been particularly effective in revealing how teachers are positioned – and position themselves – in relation to dominant discourses of standard language, professionalism, and competence. However, much of this work has focused on experienced teachers, with less attention to how novice teachers encounter and negotiate these ideologies during early career transitions.

LTI is shaped by an interplay of personal histories, social relationships, institutional structures, and global discourses, making it a dynamic process of continual (re)negotiation and adaptation (Barkhuizen, 2019; Varghese et al., 2005). It encompasses how teachers see themselves in relation to their teaching practice, their students, their linguistic and cultural identities, and the broader sociopolitical context of education. As Beijaard et al. (2004) argue, teacher identity is not fixed but constantly evolving through experience,

interaction, and reflection. This evolution is particularly salient for language teachers who operate across multiple cultural and linguistic boundaries. Gee's (2000) notion of identity as multiple and situated across different "figured worlds" has been influential in theorising LTI. Language teachers often adopt multiple professional identities, such as language user, cultural mediator, curriculum implementer, and social justice advocate, depending on the shifting demands of their contexts (De Costa & Norton, 2017; McConnell et al., 2022). Varghese et al. (2005) conceptualised LTI as constructed through the interaction of individual agency and broader social forces, including ideologies, discourses, and institutional policies. Their framework highlights that LTI is not simply about who teachers are, but how they are positioned – and how they position themselves – in relation to power, language, and knowledge (Veliz & Nguyen, 2025). In this regard, identity work becomes a site of resistance and negotiation.

A key phase in the formation of LTI occurs during pre-service education. McConnell et al. (2022) emphasise that this stage is not merely preparatory but constitutive: it is when many language teachers begin to grapple with questions of who they are as teachers and want to become as educators. Morgan (2016) similarly stresses the importance of reconnecting teacher education to the social and political world, calling for curricula that engage teacher candidates in critical reflection about identity, language, and equity. Bar-khuizen and Strauss (2020) and Yazan (2025) go a step further by proposing concrete activities that "pedagogize" identity, making it an explicit and central focus of language teacher education.

The sociopolitical environment in which language teachers work significantly impacts their identity construction. As Duff and Uchida (1997) demonstrated, institutional discourses, curricular expectations, and societal ideologies about language and culture profoundly shape teachers' professional roles. Mockler's (2011) three-dimensional model of identity, comprising personal, professional, and political dimensions, offers a valuable framework for understanding how these external forces interact with teachers' internal values and beliefs. She argues that teacher identity is not formed in isolation but is constantly negotiated within policy environments that often constrain teacher agency. These constraints can manifest as tensions between teachers' personal commitments to equity and inclusion and the institutional mandates they are expected to fulfill. For language teachers, such tensions are especially acute, as they may feel caught between the demands of standardised curricula and the culturally sustaining pedagogies they believe their students need (Johnson, 2006; Lasky, 2005). Mockler's (2011) model highlights the importance of recognising teachers as political actors whose identities are shaped not only by their pedagogical choices but also by their responses to broader educational discourses and reforms. Furthermore, the affective and aspirational dimensions of identity also matter. Teachers' hopes, dreams, and visions for the future are essential components of their professional identity (Yazan et al., 2023). The desire to make a difference, to contribute to social change, or to build more equitable and inclusive classrooms is not peripheral, it is central to how language teachers understand their work and their place in the world.

Drawing on these perspectives, we conceptualise LTI not simply as a descriptive account of who language teachers are, but as a politicised, affective, and agentic process of becoming that unfolds within unequal linguistic and educational landscapes. In this view, LTI is produced at the intersection of teachers' personal histories, linguistic repertoires, moral commitments, and aspirations, and the institutional and ideological forces that seek to regulate what counts as legitimate language, knowledge, and pedagogy. Crucially, LTI is not only shaped by power but is also a site through which power is negotiated, contested, and, at times, resisted. Identity work therefore involves ongoing struggles over positioning, recognition, and belonging, particularly for language teachers working in multilingual, postcolonial, or neoliberal contexts where dominant language ideologies constrain professional agency.

In sum, LTI is a fluid, multifaceted construct shaped by complex interrelations among personal beliefs, social contexts, institutional discourses, and global ideologies. It is an evolving story of becoming – a story that is never fully complete but always in the making.

1.2. Identity tensions

Within LTI scholarship, identity tensions have emerged as a central analytical construct for understanding the contradictions teachers experience as they navigate competing expectations. Earlier work framed these struggles as dilemmas (Cabaroğlu & Tillema, 2011; Windschitl, 2002), a term that effectively captures moments of decision-making but often implies resolution. More recent scholarship has adopted the concept of tensions to emphasise their ongoing, unresolved, and structurally embedded nature (Gong & Gao, 2024; Tajeddin & Yazan, 2024a).

As language teachers, especially novice ones, encounter new environments, experiences, ideological regimes, systemic and epistemic barriers and opportunities in educational settings, they face significant challenges, demands, and pressures that impact their being and becoming as teachers (Tajeddin & Yazan, 2024a; Varghese et al., 2005). These issues, which lie at the heart of LTI development, have been theorised in several ways. Some scholars have utilised the term 'dilemma' (Cabaroğlu & Tillema, 2011; Riffó-Salgado, 2024; Windschitl, 2002) to refer to contradictory, and often conflicting, demands and complexities that teachers have to navigate through their professional journeys. Others have framed them as tensions (Gong & Gao, 2024; Ho-Yan Mak, 2011; Tajeddin & Yazan, 2024a, 2024b), a concept adopted in this study to capture the often ongoing, unresolved nature of teachers' internal and external identity negotiations.

Yazan et al. (2023, p.146) defined identity tension as "an internal struggle between professional/social expectations and personal beliefs and aspirations", noting that such tensions can produce "feelings of internal turmoil" as teachers are "pulled in different directions by competing concerns." These struggles are especially visible during professional learning processes and professional/social expectations where individuals must learn to recognise and manage conflicting ideologies that challenge their values and goals. While the notion of identity tensions may be loaded with negativity, Yazan et al. (2023), indicate that tensions experienced in professional life can be "productive experiences for identity-oriented reflection" (p. 140) which leads to the exploration and negotiation of new dimensions of identity. Tensions in this context reflect the dynamic and situated nature of identity construction, wherein teachers must constantly navigate between institutional demands, sociopolitical realities, and personal beliefs. These tensions do not merely

complicate professional development; they actively shape teachers' practices, self-perceptions, and sense of agency (Tajeddin & Yazan, 2024a; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). Rooted in broader sociocultural, ideological, and institutional contexts, identity tensions are particularly salient in multilingual and intercultural environments, where competing discourses often come into play (Tajeddin & Yazan, 2024a; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020).

Empirical studies offer further insights into the diverse expressions of identity tension in language teaching. Gong and Gao (2024), for instance, identified seven types of professional and sociocultural identities among Chinese as an additional language teachers, illustrating how identity tensions influence their intercultural teaching practices. Their findings highlight the importance of identity-oriented approaches in teacher development. Lee's (2023) study of "Lily," a language teacher in Hong Kong, similarly explored how personal transformation and resistance to economically driven models of language learning can generate deep professional tensions, shaped by broader sociopolitical narratives. Other scholars have examined how identity tensions are negotiated through reflective practice. Drawing on Bakhtinian theory, Uştuk and Yazan (2023) explored how teacher candidates manage identity tensions during practicum experiences by engaging in dialogic reflection which facilitated self-reflection and reflection on their practice. Their study shows that through these reflective dialogues, candidates construct "internally persuasive discourses" that challenge authoritative norms in language teaching. This process of negotiation enables the reconfiguration of professional identities in more agentic and contextually responsive ways.

Navigating identity tensions involves "finding a balance between the personal and professional side of becoming and being a teacher" (Pillen et al., 2012, p. 240). At times, these tensions are compounded by teachers' own cultural, linguistic, and racial backgrounds. Even when they possess extensive professional knowledge and experience, teachers may still feel compelled to assert their legitimacy in the face of racialisation, marginalisation, native-speakerism, whiteness and standard language ideology (Veliz et al., 2024). Finally, identity tensions are often exacerbated during transitions and periods of change. Barkhuizen (2019), Beijaard et al. (2004), and Hempkin (2023) emphasise how tensions arising from shifting roles, expectations, or environments can impact teachers' wellbeing, confidence, and sense of belonging. These effects are particularly pronounced in contexts where institutional support is uneven and dominant ideologies remain largely unquestioned.

In sum, identity tensions are not merely obstacles to be overcome but formative forces in teachers' ongoing development which become critical sites for changes and transformation (Yazan & Keleş, 2024). They are deeply embedded in social, cultural, and institutional structures, and require sustained attention in both research and professional practice. Recognising and addressing these tensions is essential for fostering reflective, resilient, and inclusive language teachers as they establish themselves in their teaching contexts.

2. Methodology

The epistemological underpinnings of this study are rooted in the premise that knowledge is socially constructed, shaped through dynamic interactions within specific cultural, linguistic, and social contexts (Mirhosseini, 2020; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). The study embraces the notion that meaning-making is a co-constructed process and that participants' realities are multiple, subjective, and context-dependent. Within this framework, teachers' professional understandings and identities are viewed as fluid and evolving, shaped through ongoing reflection, negotiation, and engagement with their sociocultural environments. These epistemological commitments informed both the research design and the interpretive lens used throughout the study.

Accordingly, a qualitative case study methodology (Atkins and Wallace, 2016) was adopted to allow for an in-depth, contextualised exploration of novice teachers' identity transitions as they moved from ITE into the realities of diverse school-based practice. The case study approach enabled a holistic investigation of the complexities, contradictions, and tensions experienced by participants as they navigated new professional spaces. Data collection and analysis were framed by this methodology to foreground participants' voices and situated experiences.

Participants were recruited through a non-probability, purposive-convenience sampling strategy (Atkins & Wallace, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Butler-Kisber, 2017; Mason, 2002), which allowed the researchers to engage with individuals who were accessible, willing to participate, and able to provide rich, relevant insights into the research question. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee at author's one institution, and all participants provided informed consent in accordance with institutional and national ethical guidelines.

2.1. Participants

The two EAL teachers who participated in the study were working at two different schools in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The teachers, Hannah and Jason (pseudonyms) had been working in their schools for a period of less than 18 months at the time of data collection, and were therefore deemed novice due to their limited teaching experience in Australian classrooms. Both participants had recently completed master's courses in Applied Linguistics (Hannah) and TESOL (Jason) respectively. They were students at author one's university. However, author one never taught them or had any interactions with them throughout the course of their studies prior to this research. Both teachers shared similar transnational experiences of migration from minoritised communities into an Anglo-monolingual country (Australia). Below are the teachers' profiles:

2.1.1. Hannah

Hannah (pseudonym) is an EAL teacher from the Philippines who had been teaching at a secondary school in suburban NSW for approximately 16 months when the study began. Hannah, an Australian citizen, arrived in Australia after working as an English

teacher in Manila. With a desire for upskilling and developing more specialised language teaching knowledge and skills, she completed a Master of Applied Linguistics at a University in NSW, Australia. Her educational background includes teacher training in the Philippines and several years of experience teaching English in both private and public school settings overseas. Hannah's professional journey in Australia has been shaped by her efforts to reconcile her previous teaching expertise with the expectations of the Australian school system. Her reflections highlighted challenges related to accent bias, professional recognition, and assumptions about cultural competence.

2.1.2. Jason

Jason (pseudonym) is also a novice EAL teacher originally from India. At the time of data collection, he had been teaching at a government secondary school in regional NSW for over a year. Jason was a fully qualified teacher in NSW and had recently completed a Master of TESOL at an Australian university for upskilling and potentially transition into adult settings in the future. While Jason had not yet accumulated a wealth of teaching experience in NSW, he brings extensive classroom practice from overseas, particularly India. His transnational experience includes navigating multiple linguistic and cultural contexts. Jason brings to his teaching a strong commitment to linguistic diversity and draws on his multilingual background to support his students.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through two methods. An in-depth semi-structured interview (see [Appendix A](#)) with each of the participants, and a language portrait from each teacher. The interview addressed three broad dimensions: (i) the role of ITE programs in equipping EAL teachers with a knowledge base for EAL contexts; (ii) teaching experiences, challenges and opportunities emerging in school contexts; and (iii) the influence of hierarchically organised categories (e.g. race, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, etc.), beliefs, assumptions and ideologies that teachers navigate in school environments. Interviews provided an intimate, safe and open space (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; [Talmy, 2010](#)) for teachers to share their views, opinions, experiences and emotions with the researchers.

We also employed language portraits as a methodological tool to explore how pre-service teachers perceive, make sense of, and position their multilingual and multidialectal repertoires within broader sociocultural and educational contexts. Drawing on the work of [Busch \(2017, 2021\)](#), language portraits offer a creative, visual, and introspective medium through which participants can express the emotional, affective, and embodied dimensions of their language experiences – dimensions often overlooked in traditional linguistic research.

Busch's conceptualisation of language portraits is grounded in the philosophical underpinnings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1981), particularly his phenomenological view of perception. According to Merleau-Ponty (1981), perception is not merely a cognitive act but a form of embodied knowing – a way of being in and with the world that resists reduction to objective, scientific categories. From this perspective, language is not simply a tool for communication but is intimately tied to the body, identity, memory, and affect. By encouraging participants to draw and reflect on their language experiences through embodied metaphors and colours, language portraits make visible the lived, emotional, and sensorial aspects of multilingualism. This approach aligns with the study's broader interpretive orientation, valuing personal meaning-making, self-representation, and the affective dimensions of teacher identity. Furthermore, the value of language portraits is well documented in multilingual research. Research (e.g. [Kusters & De Meulder, 2019](#); [Mu et al., 2023](#); [Siegmán & Galloway, 2025](#)) has highlighted the potential of portraits as useful tools for mapping learners' language resources and identities through which they can exercise their agency and autonomy to select the aspects of their linguistic selves that they wish to highlight.

The analysis was guided by a qualitative, interpretive research orientation aligned with the study's epistemological stance. This involved a content analysis conducted by the authors with particular attention to the socio-semiotic elements of meaning making such as text, image, colour, perspective among others ([Krarkar-Esperat, 2024](#); [Kress, 2010](#)). Interview and language portrait data were analysed iteratively and relationally, with the aim of exploring how teachers made sense of their professional experiences, multilingual repertoires, and identity positioning within broader sociopolitical and institutional contexts.

The semi-structured interviews were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach ([Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019](#)). Analysis began with repeated, close readings of the interview transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data and to attend to participants' narrative trajectories, affective expressions, and positioning moves. Initial codes were generated inductively, focusing on salient meanings related to teachers' experiences in initial teacher education, their professional trajectories in school contexts, and the ways they described navigating hierarchically organised categories such as language, race, ethnicity, religion, and gender.

Coding was understood as an interpretive and reflexive process rather than a purely technical procedure. As such, codes captured not only what participants said but also how they positioned themselves in relation to institutional expectations, dominant language ideologies, and notions of legitimacy and belonging. Through constant comparison across interviews, codes were refined, collapsed, and reworked into broader, conceptually coherent themes. Particular analytic attention was paid to tensions, contradictions, and moments of affective intensity, as these were understood as key sites where identity negotiation and agency became visible.

Throughout the analytic process, reflexive memos were used to document emerging interpretations, analytic decisions, and the researchers' positionalities in relation to the data. This reflexive engagement was critical in ensuring that the analysis remained sensitive to power relations and avoided reducing participants' experiences to fixed or essentialised categories.

3. Findings

This study was conducted to investigate how EAL teachers' developing professional identities are shaped by personal and

professional tensions as they transition from ITE programs into diverse school environments. While the findings from both the interview data and the language portraits were strongly aligned and mutually reinforcing, each method also illuminated different dimensions of the participants' experiences. Several commonalities and differences were found in the teachers' accounts in interviews. However, the language portraits provided a unique visual, embodied representation of the participants' multilingual and affective experiences, highlighting the specificity of their lived experiences. Rather than aiming to extract overarching themes across the data sets, the study foregrounds the unique and nuanced voices, perspectives, and identity negotiations of each teacher, acknowledging the situated and complex nature of their trajectories into the Australian teaching profession.

3.1. Case 1: Hannah

3.1.1. Bridging ITE knowledge and classroom practice

Overall, Hannah expressed a strong sense of satisfaction and pedagogical confidence with the academic preparation she received during her ITE program. She believed that the coursework and theoretical foundations had equipped her with a robust understanding of teaching and learning principles. However, transitioning from the structured and relatively predictable nature of university-based learning to the often unpredictable and context-specific realities of the classroom presented ongoing challenges. A key tension for Hannah lay in reconciling the ideals and frameworks learned at university with the complex, situated demands of actual classroom practice and institutional expectations.

I feel I've done pretty well in all my Units at University, so I think I have a solid knowledge of teaching and pedagogy, but each classroom is different, and often the classroom reality doesn't match the overall school ethos or expectations, so it's a bit hard to balance things out. At times the uniqueness of the classroom does not match either the theories you study in university, so you have to play it by ear at times.

Besides having "to play it by ear" at times, Hannah mentioned another tension – one that sits at the intersection of the theory-practice divide. While she values the "foundational knowledge received in the program", she also acknowledges the challenges around the transferability and applicability of theory into practice. She remarks that:

Studies at uni, in my degree, got a bit too theoretical at times, like I had a unit on linguistics. It's fine to know the theory of language but with no application to practice, it's hard to make that connection yourself. Even if a unit is too theory oriented, lecturers should bring it to life and down to earth but that wasn't my case.

Hannah's critique of decontextualised theoretical content as in the case of the linguistics unit is a possible hindrance to the development of meaningful professional, context-relevant knowledge and practice. While she indicates that lecturers have a responsibility to find practical applications of theory, Hannah asserts that "... at the end of the day it's all to us" – that is, it is teachers [us] "responsible to make those connections as we are in the context and know the students and their needs".

An additional tension hinted at by Hannah pertains to complexities around adjusting to the individual attributes, cultures and 'visions' of the two different school contexts she's been exposed to. Even though Hannah brings previous (overseas) teaching experience to her classrooms in Australia, she remarks that:

The school I did my first prac was hugely different from where I'm now. Like, different leaderships, ways of doing things, different cultures, and interactions with staff, so that's been a big learning curve for me because in my home country almost every school follows the same pattern. The knowledge you get at uni does not prepare you for these changing environments, you have to navigate them on your own and figure out ways of surviving and thriving.

Importantly, Hannah does not blame the ITE program for failing to prepare her, but she questions the disconnect between theoretical instruction and the practical demands of diverse teaching contexts. Hannah voiced a call for better alignment between universities and schools, advocating for a more nuanced and contextually grounded preparation for future teachers. She pointed out that "lecturers sort of assume that every school is the same" and "that every strategy you have should work well anywhere."

3.2. Negotiating a new self

Hannah makes reference to her life experiences as well as professional experience in the Philippines when reflecting upon some of the challenges she faces in an Australian school context. These manifest as tensions that she navigates along the process of constructing and negotiating her professional identity. For example, she points out that "the routines here [in Australian schools] are very different than in my home country, so it's quite an adjustment for me". She is aware that:

Teaching in Australian contexts means that students have a bit more autonomy and freedom, "student voice", and that's something I find hard to balance because I come from a more authoritarian or teacher-centred approach, where the teacher is the figure of knowledge and authority. So, this is something I'm sort of finding my way around.

This commentary signals a profound, ongoing identity reconfiguration. It's not simply about adopting new teaching methods but about reworking one's sense of professional being. For Hannah, her prior identity as a teacher, rooted in the Philippines' more hierarchical, teacher-centred system, comes into tension with the student-centred, autonomy-focused values of Australian schooling. With this in mind, Hannah is of the view that "when you come to a new context, it's really a balancing act". She further elaborates on this by stating that:

Sometimes I feel like I have to reinvent myself as I bring together my previous experience, the skills from uni, my students' needs, colleagues' advice, the realities of classrooms, children's emotions and traumas, so it's hard but it's the nature of teaching, and language teaching in particular. But when these things happen it's good to reflect – reflect about yourself, your teaching, your students, the challenges, and sort of come up with the new perspective, a new vision.

Hannah's commentary encapsulates the multifaceted, emotionally complex, and constantly evolving nature of teacher identity, particularly for language teachers who are navigating multiple personal, pedagogical, and institutional demands. It reflects a deep awareness of what can be called identity-as-practice, a dynamic and situated process rather than a fixed or static state. By stating that she has to “reinvent” herself, she acknowledges that her professional self and practice are not only context-bound but in a constant process of evolution and transformation. The transformative potential of a “new perspective” or “new vision” is linked to the value of her capacity to engage in reflective practice.

3.2.1. (Un)Seen and heard in professional communities

For early career language teachers like Hannah, gaining recognition and voice within her professional communities was not a straightforward process. While she reports entering the profession with strong academic preparation and prior teaching experience, she encountered institutional dynamics that often positioned her as peripheral or marked her as ‘different’ within predominantly Anglo-centric school environments. While she does not report any incidents or lived experiences of racialisation at school, her sense of not being recognised as capable is something that seems to be prevalent in what she does and how she relates to others.

For me, navigating the school cultures in Australian schools has been interesting. While I'm getting the adequate preparation in an Australian university, same as all the other teachers, it's that feeling – and that's what it is for me, a feeling – of not being seen like the others. It might be a wrong perception but that's how I felt.

Hannah's sense of being positioned as “different” cannot be understood through a newcomer status alone, but rather through the intersection of race, accent, and linguistic background within an Anglo-centric professional context. While her professional qualifications and teaching experience were formally equivalent to those of her colleagues, her non-White racial positioning and marked accent rendered her subject to heightened scrutiny and self-monitoring, particularly in interactions with White Australian families. These encounters activated what she describes as a shift in her linguistic behaviour – hesitation, overthinking, and attempts to “sound proper” – revealing how accent operates as a racialised marker of legitimacy. In these moments, language became a proxy for professional worth, producing affective tensions characterised by insecurity, hyper-awareness, and a fractured sense of self. By contrast, her interactions with families from diverse backgrounds were marked by ease and confidence, suggesting that her identity tensions were not inherent to her linguistic repertoire but emerged in relation to dominant racialised norms of authority and professionalism. This illustrates how Hannah's identity negotiation is shaped by intersecting structures of linguistic racism and whiteness, positioning her professional identity as contingent and situational rather than stable or universally recognised.

This theme of being seen, unseen or heard speaks to broader issues of professional communities, belonging and knowledge and cultural legitimacy that influence how teachers construct their professional identities. For Hannah, while she indicates that she's developed a “good sense of belonging [in my school]”, she says that the disproportion between huge diversity among students and little among staff “makes it hard to claim a sense of authority and ownership [in my current school]”. Despite all this, Hannah feels positive about the relationships she's formed which have enabled her “to gain more territory in school and learn from others”.

Hannah also finds another clear tension, mainly to do with her professional legitimacy and sense of “professional worth” when interacting with “White” families, something she does not experience with other families from diverse backgrounds.

It's frustrating because when I find myself talking to White families I don't feel the same when I talk to other families from other nationalities. I hesitate, sometimes overthink my English, try to 'sound' proper, use more Aussie language. But when I talk to other families it all comes out natural, I feel confident, relaxed, I don't have to be finding difficult words, and things like that. It's like my identity moves between myself and trying to be what others validate.

This quote powerfully illustrates the racialised and linguistic dimensions of identity negotiation in transnational and multicultural educational contexts. It reflects not just linguistic insecurity but a deeper experience of epistemic and affective marginalisation, especially in interactions with dominant cultural groups, in this case, White Australian families. This reveals linguistic racialisation, where Hannah internalises dominant norms of “proper” English, especially in the presence of White families. Hannah seems to associate Whiteness with linguistic correctness and legitimation, leading to hyper-self-monitoring and performance.

Hannah's difficulty in claiming a sense of authority and ownership can be understood through the notion of cultural legitimacy, that is, the degree to which a teacher is recognised as a credible and authoritative professional within a particular institutional and cultural context. While her school was characterised by high levels of linguistic and cultural diversity among students, this diversity was not mirrored within the teaching staff, which remained predominantly White, monolingual, and locally educated. This imbalance positioned certain linguistic and cultural identities as normative and authoritative, while others – such as Hannah's, were rendered peripheral.

3.2.2. Language portrait analysis – Hannah

Hannah's narratives about adapting to new professional, cultural, and linguistic environments come into sharper focus when viewed alongside her language portrait (Fig. 1). In this visual representation, she positions herself at the centre, rooted in her Filipino heritage and previous professional and life experiences, while actively balancing the demands of her new identity in Australia.

The portrait captures her as a someone negotiating balance and equilibrium between two worlds: one grounded in her home language, traditions, and established sense of self, and the other shaped by the expectations, policies, and cultural norms of her new professional context. This act of balancing is not a neutral process but one that can be perceived as a constant tension, a push-and-pull between belonging and adaptation, preservation and transformation. On one hand, her linguistic and cultural heritage provides a powerful source of identity, confidence, and meaning; on the other, the institutional and societal demands of her current environment require her to recalibrate how she speaks, teaches, and presents herself.

The thought bubbles signal key influences such as university-acquired knowledge, life experiences and prior teaching expertise as well as ongoing challenges that shape her teaching identity. The visual reading of this portrait in conversation with her personal accounts helps us gain deeper insight into how Hannah's multilingual and multicultural repertoire inform, and is continually reshaped by, the complex process of becoming and belonging as a teacher in a new educational landscape.

One particular feature of Hannah's portrait is the blindfold which, besides the colourful Filipino flag centred at her heart, draws the readers' attention and invites some interpretation. The blindfold can be read as a visual metaphor for multiple, intersecting experiences such as concealment, (self or other) imposed limitations, or the withholding of full recognition. It may signify how Hannah is seen (or unseen) within her professional and social context, reflecting a form of symbolic invisibility shaped by dominant ideologies (e.g. neoliberalism, native-speakerism, coloniality, monolingual norms), complex tensions, linguistic hierarchies, and cultural biases. At the same time, the blindfold could represent a self-protective stance, a deliberate act of blocking out the gaze or judgement of others in order to preserve her sense of self. This ambiguity, whether the blindfold is imposed from outside or chosen from within, echoes broader tensions in the lives of racialised and linguistically minoritised educators, who must navigate between visibility and vulnerability, recognition and misrecognition. In this way, the blindfold by no means functions as a barrier or impediment to her professional practice but potentially as an opportunity to visibilise her invisibility.

3.3. Case 2: Jason

3.3.1. A steady transition into teaching

In navigating the complex transition from university-based teacher education to the everyday realities of school classrooms, Jason reflects on the limits of teacher education programs while also acknowledging the growth and resilience he has developed along the way. His reflections speak to the uncertainty that many novice teachers experience, as well as the evolving nature of professional identity. Rather than viewing teaching as a static outcome of academic preparation, Jason frames it as a dynamic, ongoing journey, one that requires adaptability, self-awareness, and an openness to learning. His words capture the tension between feeling prepared and

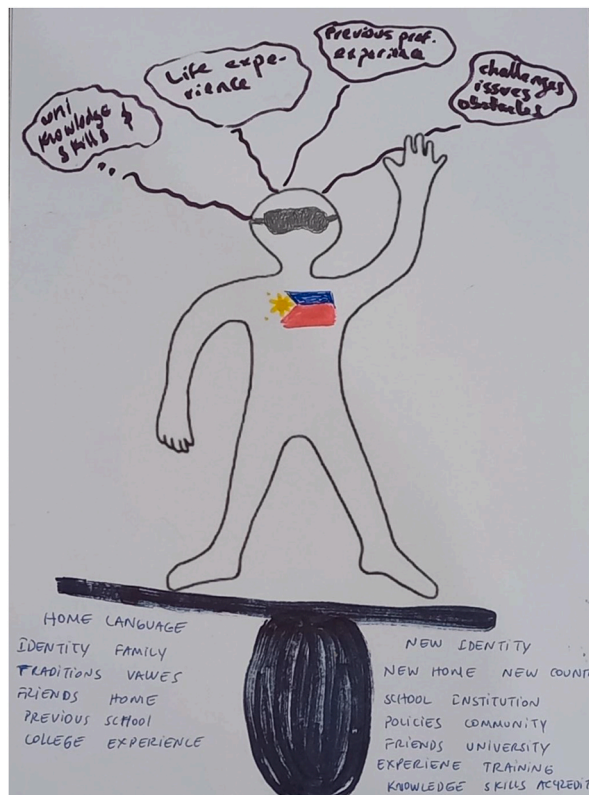


Fig. 1. Hannah's language portrait.

questioning one's effectiveness, while also revealing a strong sense of emerging professional agency:

At first I was a bit hesitant about my ability to step into a classroom but I know universities don't give you everything you need, not all the knowledge and skills needed for this world, but I feel very content and comfortable with the experience, the skills I've developed and the knowledge I've learnt, and what enables me to be the teacher I am today. I am not sure if that will make me an effective teacher but it's really a trade, an ongoing process of finding out more and learning new things. Anyway for now, I believe I have the right skills for it.

In addition to the above, and alluded to earlier, Jason further reflects on where he is at and where he would like to get to as far as his professional development is concerned:

Teaching is like a medical profession, I think. Every patient is different, every disease is different, different symptoms, etc. For me this means that teaching is an ever learning profession so we need to be aware of what we need to develop, what areas to strengthen, and always be open to new learning opportunities.

In Jason's commentary responding to the same question on preparedness, we observe an overall level of satisfaction with a profound appetite for ongoing learning, which demonstrates his desire to develop more expert knowledge.

Overall, it's been a good transition out of Uni, though I'm not done yet. Universities provide the first ingredient for professional life, which is 'preparation'. But preparation is not development or growth, you see what I mean? We have sole responsibility for such development and growth throughout our career. Yes, I think I was prepared for teaching students from different backgrounds, but it's not enough, and it's not enough because it's a two-year program, and there's only so much to learn. Right after uni, I started looking out for opportunities for short courses, PDs, conferences, and a whole range of other places from which lots of great ideas come from.

Jason's assertion about getting the foundational "ingredient for professional life" through university training seems to provide the basis for his developing identity as a language teacher. His LTI, sense of being and becoming as an early career teacher appear to be founded on how he views himself as a professional learner and reflective practitioner with a desire to further his knowledge and skills for greater pedagogical effectiveness.

3.4. Complexities of diversity

When answering questions about the beliefs, assumptions, and ideologies he navigates in school environments, Jason commented that while he has not experienced "major [ideological] clashes" with himself or his linguistic or cultural background in schools, he has had trouble reconciling teachers' varied viewpoints about children from CaLD backgrounds. For Jason, the challenge lies not in overt conflict but in the subtle and persistent deficit framings that many mainstream teachers attach to bilingual or multilingual learners. Specifically, he emphasised the need to change teachers' mindsets about language proficiency not being equated with, or reduced to, a lack of conceptual thinking and processing ability.

He explained that in staffroom conversations about particular children, a recurring and predictable question is: "*Is English their second language?*" For Jason, this question is not neutral; rather, it reveals a pervasive assumption that linguistic difference automatically signals cognitive deficiency, a belief that perpetuates deficit ideologies (Veliz et al., 2024). His irritation – describing the practice as "really annoying" – points to the emotional toll of repeatedly encountering such reductive framings. Jason's response underscores his conviction that the process of learning English should not diminish recognition of a child's broader intellectual capabilities. Drawing on his own lived experience, he resists this deficit lens:

English is my second language, too, and I have no trouble pursuing academic degrees, doing my professional life, and it's this demeaning of their abilities because they're in the process of developing their skills.

Here, Jason powerfully reframes the issue by positioning himself as both a counterexample and a living testimony against deficit ideologies. His academic success and professional identity as a teacher disrupt the dominant narrative that equates linguistic diversity with educational disadvantage. Yet, his comments also reveal the tension he navigates as an educator who simultaneously belongs to, and challenges, the very institutional structures that perpetuate such assumptions. In this sense, the ideological struggle is less about overt clashes and more about the subtle, everyday negotiation of competing discourses: one that marginalises linguistic diversity and another, embodied by Jason, that seeks to reframe it as a resource rather than a barrier.

Jason's advocacy for his students is evident when he reacts to such deficit-oriented comments about students' abilities in ways that validate students' cultural and linguistic strengths and repertoires. He remarked that:

Often when I get a chance to say "hang on, it's not their inability to do things, but probably cultural differences", so it's important we all understand how things are done in their cultures and learn about that as well.

In this statement Jason highlights a key aspect of his professional positioning. It demonstrates his refusal to accept simplistic deficit framings of CaLD students, instead redirecting attention to the broader socio-cultural contexts in which children's practices are embedded. By foregrounding "cultural differences," he unsettles the dominant narrative that equates English proficiency with intellectual ability, and instead acknowledges the diverse ways of knowing, doing, and learning that children bring into the classroom. Despite these ideological tensions or differences in teacher mindsets about diversity, Jason points out that in the end these discussions or "slight disagreements" lead to "some productive mutual learning" only when "teachers have a willingness to share, learn and relearn certain things about diversity and challenge their views about EAL students". While potentially conflicting and challenging, episodes that expose teachers' beliefs and ideologies about EAL students and their diversity may lead to great learning opportunities if the power

of collaboration is deployed.

3.5. Belonging and passion as safe places

For novice teachers navigating complex institutional landscapes, feelings of belonging and sustaining a sense of passion for teaching can serve as powerful anchors. Amid shifting expectations, cultural dissonance, and moments of self-doubt, these affective dimensions become safe internal spaces where teachers reconnect with their purpose and identity. Jason indicated that he always wanted to be a teacher, coming from a family of educators. He developed the passion and is willing to pass that on to students when it comes to their learning.

In my family, teaching runs in our blood. Several teachers and educators in the family, and that shows our vocation and commitment to students and learning, obviously we all started teaching back in India, very different context, not enough resources, different environment and philosophy. So, I think you grow a lot professionally when you're exposed to these contexts.

The commitment to education and to student learning in settings which present certain levels of scarcity is evident in Jason's remark. To further support that statement, Jason pointed out that "as a child I developed a passion for education as I wanted to help others and future children". In these words, passion emerges not merely as enthusiasm for the craft of teaching but as a deeply moral and relational orientation, one that is sustained by empathy, collective responsibility, and a desire to contribute meaningfully to the lives of learners.

In response to a question about whether he had encountered any challenges around gender, race, religion or ethnicity, Jason redirected the conversation toward his unwavering passion and love for teaching, qualities he believes transcend such barriers. Rather than positioning these aspects of identity as obstacles, Jason framed his professional journey as one deeply anchored in purpose.

In terms of challenges of gender, race or ethnicity, I've found no issues. All my colleagues have been great, welcoming, in all schools even doing placements, so no issues. I think when you have a real passion and a deep love for the profession, where you feel motivated to transform kids' lives, those issues are not noticeable, not for me.

Jason's perspective showcases a belief in the transformative power of vocational commitment, a conviction that devotion to students and the craft of teaching can supersede, or even dissolve, potential divisions. His framing suggests that, for him, the relational

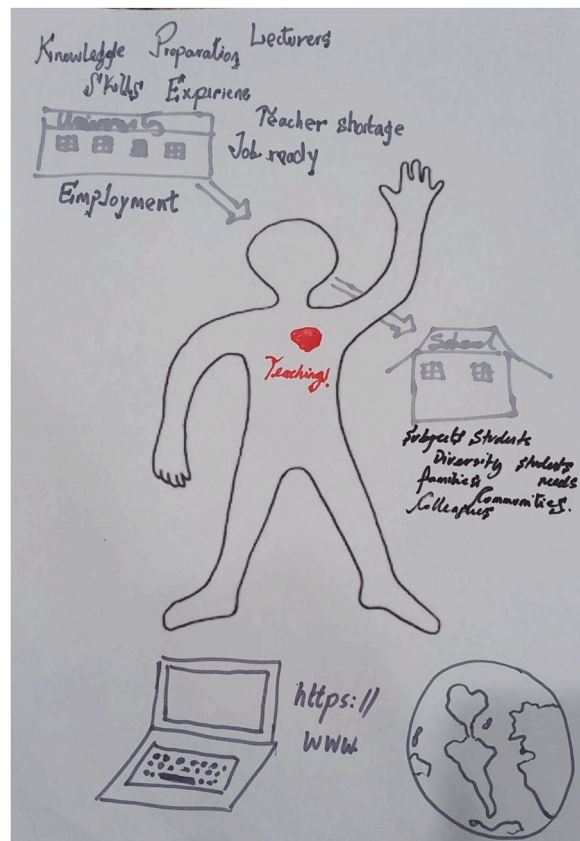


Fig. 2. Jason's language portrait.

and pedagogical bonds formed in the classroom occupy more space in his professional consciousness than any experiences of exclusion. This is not to imply that structural inequities do not exist, but rather that Jason's own narrative is grounded in an ethos where passion functions as both shield and compass. His motivation to "transform kids' lives" acts as a guiding force, allowing him to interpret his interactions with colleagues and school communities through the lens of trust, collegiality, and shared purpose, rather than through the filter of difference or discrimination.

3.5.1. Language portrait analysis – Jason

Jason's account of his professional life, rooted in passion, collegial trust, and an unwavering focus on students, sets the tone for understanding his self-representation in his language portrait (Fig. 2). Just as he downplays the salience of race, ethnicity, or religion in his teaching journey, his portrait similarly foregrounds the languages and experiences that connect, rather than divide, him from others.

The visual and symbolic choices (buildings, computer, etc.) in his portrait reflect a worldview where personal, professional and transnational identities are woven together by a commitment to better educational outcomes for his students. Besides the written words on the portrait, the drawings along with their positioning in the image convey some clear meanings about the role of teacher education and teaching practice in his identity development. By placing the depiction of university at the top (left) of the portrait, Jason is probably attaching importance and salience to the skills, knowledge, experience and opportunities for employment yielded from his teacher education program at university. Along with that is pointing diagonal arrows from university down across his head, through his mouth, to the depiction of his school.

In addition to that, the visual attribute that becomes most salient because of colour and position is the word "teaching" accompanied by a heart symbol, both rendered in a vivid red and strategically placed over the area corresponding to his own heart, visually reinforcing the centrality of his love for the profession in shaping his identity.

4. Discussion

This discussion addresses the research question around how EAL teachers' developing professional identities are shaped by personal and professional tensions as they transition from ITE programs into diverse school environments. Findings revealed four personal and professional tensions experienced by EAL graduate teachers: the role of ITE in supporting LTI, transferring theory into practice, LTI vs personal identity and professional belonging vs personal identity. These tensions shape their developing professional identities in various, ongoing ways as discussed below.

4.1. Tension 1: the role of ITE in supporting LTI

The importance of universities in providing a solid theoretical foundation for LTI was acknowledged by both participants. Overall, Hannah expressed satisfaction and pedagogical confidence with the academic preparation she received during her ITE program. Jason reflects on the limits of teacher education programs while also acknowledging the resilience he developed. Rather than viewing teaching as a static outcome of academic preparation, Jason frames it as an ongoing journey, requiring adaptability, self-awareness, and an openness to learning (Barkhuizen, 2019; Beijgaard et al., 2004; Varghese et al., 2005). Both participants expressed positive recollections of their ITE programs and felt they were, in general, adequately prepared for their teaching careers in a theoretical, foundational sense, indicating the formation of their identity was fostered in a positive way within their course (McConnell et al., 2022).

4.2. Tension 2: transferring theory into practice

Although both participants were satisfied with their ITE, they acknowledged that the transition from university into the classroom necessitated a reframing of their LTI, sometimes requiring support through professional learning. In some instances, it was difficult to make connections between the theory taught in ITE and the practical work of a teacher. This indicates that although LTI was established and supported in ITE, it is constantly evolving (Barkhuizen, 2019; Beijgaard et al., 2004; Varghese et al., 2005), and personal values and beliefs along with workplace expectations impacted the way in which the participants navigated their identity once having completed their ITE (Duff & Uchida, 1997). Self-motivation was needed to develop as a teacher once in a school, exemplified by Jason, who sought out professional learning opportunities. A possible solution to addressing this tension was offered by Hannah, who suggested better alignment between universities and schools, advocating for a more nuanced and contextually grounded preparation for future teachers. The participants, particularly Hannah, would have benefited from more explicit connections to the day-to-day work of a teacher, and ITE could have more closely made these connections within the course content.

4.3. Tension 3: LTI vs personal identity

Complexities relating to education in global contexts were further tensions for the participants to navigate. Hannah referenced her prior experiences in the Philippines when reflecting upon her current challenges. These manifest as tensions such as reconciling differences in routines and focus between her experiences in the Philippines and her current Australian context, with differing power structures that impact on her sense of professional efficacy and belonging (Kubota & Lin, 2009; Norton, 2013). While these complexities may prove challenging, they also present opportunities for self-reflection (Yazan et al., 2023) and reframing of tensions as

resources rather than barriers. Jason advocated for CaLD students within his school, harnessed his personal identity for positive change, and demonstrated adoption of multiple professional identities in response to his context (De Costa & Norton, 2017; McConnell et al., 2022). In Jason's language portrait, his personal experiences connect cultures and languages, revealing the power of merging personal and professional identities, and the positive results of these tensions when channelled into positive means.

4.4. Tension 4: Professional belonging vs personal identity

Balancing professional belonging and personal identity emerged as another source of tension. For Hannah, gaining recognition and voice within her professional community was not straightforward. She encountered institutional dynamics that positioned her as peripheral due to her newcomer status, perceived lack of local expertise, or intersections of race, accent, and linguistic background that marked her as 'different' within predominantly Anglo-centric school environments. Hannah's narratives come into sharper focus when viewed alongside her language portrait (Fig. 1), where she positions herself as rooted in her Filipino heritage and previous experiences, while balancing her new identity in Australia. The portrait captures her negotiating equilibrium between two worlds, a visual representation of the balance between personal and professional aspects of developing teacher identities (Pillen et al., 2012).

Hannah experienced another tension in her sense of professional legitimacy when interacting with "White" families, something she does not experience with families from diverse backgrounds. The English dominant language ideology of the postcolonial Australian context impacts on Hannah's LTI development (Kubota & Lin, 2009; Norton, 2013), linking to her cultural background, and the way members of marginal groups feel perceived by dominant cultures in society. Her personal and professional identities are still somewhat separate in her view, and they often work against one another. Despite this, Hannah has developed a "good sense of belonging [in my school]", which suggests these perceptions are self-imposed and with time, her LTI may shift towards a new perspective where these tensions are reduced.

Jason displays a strong sense of professional belonging on the surface, however, deeper tensions with his personal identity are apparent. For him, the question "Is English their second language?" assumes linguistic difference signals cognitive deficiency. His comments suggest his emotional toll as a language teacher repeatedly encountering reductive framings, confronting him with language ideology and social justice issues (Norton, 2013) conflicting with his conviction that the process of learning English should not diminish recognition of a student's intellectual capabilities. Although he feels strongly connected to the profession, in this regard he is somewhat of an outsider. His personal experiences as an English language learner manifest into insights which differ to those of his colleagues, however, this tension is positively reframed by attempting to change their perceptions and mindsets, addressing the gap between his professional belonging and personal identity.

5. Conclusion

This case study examined how two novice EAL teachers, Hannah and Jason, experienced and navigated LTI tensions as they transitioned from ITE courses into diverse school environments. Focusing on their narrated experiences allows for an in-depth understanding of how identity tensions are lived, interpreted, and negotiated in specific institutional and sociocultural contexts, rather than treating such tensions as abstract or universally experienced phenomena.

The findings show that for both Hannah and Jason, aligning personal beliefs with professional practice involved ongoing negotiation rather than resolution. Their accounts illustrate how identity tensions emerged at the intersection of institutional expectations, school cultures, and their own values and aspirations. Importantly, these tensions were not static; instead, they shifted in response to new experiences, relationships, and moments of recognition or marginalisation. This highlights the evolving nature of LTI as it is enacted in practice, rather than as a stable outcome of teacher education.

Within the limits of this case study, the analysis also suggests that ITE played a meaningful role in shaping how both participants made sense of and responded to identity tensions. Hannah's and Jason's reflections indicate that prior engagement with reflective practices and discussions of diversity provided them with conceptual resources to interpret challenges encountered in schools. However, their experiences equally point to the limits of ITE preparation when confronted with institutional norms, staff demographics, and power relations that extend beyond the university context.

From a practical perspective, this case study offers illustrative insights rather than generalisable claims. For ITE providers, Hannah's and Jason's experiences suggest the value of explicitly legitimising identity tensions and preparing pre-service teachers to anticipate and reflect on issues of belonging, authority, and recognition in diverse school settings. For schools, the findings draw attention to how induction, mentoring, and everyday collegial interactions shape early-career teachers' sense of professional legitimacy, particularly for those working across linguistic and cultural difference.

At a broader level, this study demonstrates the analytic value of case study research for illuminating the complexity and situated nature of language teacher identity work. Rather than establishing causal relationships, the cases of Hannah and Jason provide rich, contextualised accounts that deepen understanding of how identity tensions are produced and navigated in practice. Such insights contribute to ongoing conversations about LTI by foregrounding identity development as relational, context-dependent, and shaped by structural conditions as much as by individual agency.

In doing so, the study underscores the importance of attending to teachers' lived experiences when theorising language teacher identity, while remaining attentive to the methodological boundaries and interpretive scope of qualitative case study research.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Leonardo Veliz: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Victoria Norford:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Priscila Riffo-Salgado:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology. **Jessica Premier:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was sought from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the institution of the first author. Ethics Approval number is HE25-162.

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Authors declare no competing interests (or conflicts of interest) associated with the manuscript submitted for publication.

Appendix A

Semi-structured interview guide

Purpose:

The interview aimed to explore early-career EAL teachers' personal and professional identity construction as they transition from Initial Teacher Education (ITE) into culturally and linguistically diverse school contexts. Questions were designed to elicit reflective narratives around beliefs, experiences, tensions, and agency.

Background and teaching context

1. Can you tell me about your background and what led you to become an EAL teacher?
2. What is your current teaching context (e.g., school setting, student demographics, role)?
3. How would you describe your first year(s) of teaching since graduating from your ITE program?

Personal beliefs and values about language teaching

4. What beliefs do you hold about language learning and teaching?
5. How do your personal experiences (e.g., linguistic, cultural, educational) influence the way you see yourself as a language teacher?

Transition from ITE to school practice

6. How did your ITE program prepare you for teaching in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms?
7. In what ways did you feel well prepared?
8. In what ways did you feel underprepared or challenged when you entered the profession?

Professional identity and identity tensions

10. How would you describe yourself as a teacher at this stage of your career?
11. Have you experienced any tensions or dilemmas between who you are as a person and what is expected of you as a teacher?

Belonging, legitimacy, and authority

13. To what extent do you feel a sense of belonging in your school?
14. Have there been moments where you felt recognised, or not recognised, as a legitimate teacher?

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