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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# "Clowns, Actors, Entertainers, or Comedians?" Metaphorical Identity Conflicts of Native English-Speaking Teachers: A Narrative Inquiry in China

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**ABSTRACT -** Teacher identity is shaped through continual negotiation of personal and professional roles, and this negotiation often gives rise to tensions when teachers adapt to new contexts and expectations. Although interest in teacher identity has grown, limited research has examined how native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) deal with conflicting identities in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. This study investigates the identity conflicts experienced by four NESTs from the United States and the United Kingdom teaching at two Chinese universities. Using a narrative inquiry approach and guided by Pennington and Richards' competencies of language teacher identity, the study analyses teachers' metaphors, such as clown, actor, entertainer, and comedian, to explore how they position themselves within the Chinese EFL context. The findings highlight several sources of identity tension, including the influence of bilingual backgrounds, discrepancies between teaching experience and institutional expectations, racialised perceptions linked to white-skin privilege and vulnerability, and ideological conflicts surrounding English norms and pedagogy. The study extends current understandings of NEST identity construction and underscores the need for more informed teacher education and institutional practices in multilingual EFL environments.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Within Chinese higher education, accelerating globalisation has further entrenched English as the dominant language across communication, academia, technology, and international trade. In this context, what Hamid and Nguyen (2016, p. 28) describe as "the marriage of English and globalisation" has propelled many Asian countries toward an increased emphasis on English education. For instance, Vietnam and Bangladesh have initiated measures to expand English education despite limited national investment in the sector (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016). In China, English has been prioritised within the national education system since 1978 to strengthen international communication and cooperation (Liu, 2024). Notably, English is a compulsory foundational subject for non-English majors in Chinese higher education institutions (Chen et al., 2023).

Driven by the prevalence of "native-speakerism" (Holliday, 2006), native English speakers have long been regarded as the ideal language models in the acquisition process across many Asian countries, including South Korea, Japan, and China (Howard, 2019). Sawalmeh and Dey (2023) also assert that, as English has become a global language, the demand for proficient English teachers, including NESTs, has increased in many non-native contexts. In South Korea, for example, numerous institutions actively recruit native speakers by offering attractive incentives (Howard, 2019). Likewise, Ko and Kim (2021) observe that globalisation has further fuelled demand for NESTs among university lecturers in Korea. A similar situation exists in China. University administrators and faculty members generally perceive NESTs as possessing superior English language proficiency and teaching competence (Deng et al., 2023). As NESTs seek to balance unfamiliar pedagogical norms with culturally shaped expectations of "good teaching," they often face tensions between their professional roles and personal identities.

To understand these tensions, it is helpful to foreground teacher identity as a dynamic construct. Teacher identity refers to how educators perceive, enact, and negotiate their roles within specific contexts (Varghese et al., 2016). In the words of Pennington and Richards (2016), the identity a teacher presents in the classroom, whether in a specific moment or over time, is shaped partly by their understanding of the institutional role of a teacher and partly by their individual identity, which is informed by personal experiences and background. Additionally, this teacher identity is influenced by students' characteristics and the broader instructional context, including the classroom environment, school culture, institutional policies, and even regional or national education systems, all of which shape the teacher's goals and everyday teaching practices. As Li (2025) notes, teacher identity is neither static nor externally imposed but continuously negotiated through lived experiences and the personal meanings derived from them. Most previous studies have investigated and explored a teacher's professional identity and individual identity separately. However, professional and personal identity are closely linked (Pennington & Richards, 2016).

In other words, it remains in constant flux due to the teacher's ongoing negotiation with both internal and external factors. These factors can give rise to identity conflicts (Eslamdoost et al., 2020), which may affect teachers' classroom performance and their ability to deliver lessons effectively (Pennington & Richards, 2016). For NESTs working in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, their identity conflicts may become even more pronounced. On the one hand, they are often valued for their perceived ownership and authority over the English language (Varghese et al., 2016); on the other hand, they may find themselves minoritised within these

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contexts. Therefore, in this sense, understanding identity conflicts of NESTs in EFL contexts is pedagogically significant in the field of English language teaching (ELT).

Despite extensive literature on teacher identity, research that explicitly examines identity conflict among NESTs at the tertiary level in the Chinese EFL context remains limited. Existing scholarship has focused on ideologies of native-speakerism (Holliday, 2006), racialisation in ELT of China (Wang, 2025), and the institutional positioning of foreign teachers in China (Poole, 2024). What remains less understood are the lived, micro-level experiences of NESTs in Chinese universities: how they interpret their roles, balance contradictory expectations, and articulate their identities through personal narratives. To address this gap, this study employs narrative inquiry to explore the identity conflicts experienced by four NESTs teaching in two Chinese universities.

In qualitative research on professional identity, metaphors are widely recognised as meaningful tools for accessing participants' subjective experiences and self-constructions. Metaphor analysis enables researchers to interpret how individuals conceptualise complex phenomena, such as teaching or professional roles, through familiar, embodied language, thereby making implicit beliefs explicit (Schellings et al., 2024). Metaphors in teacher identity research reveal not only how teachers think about their work, but also what values, emotions, and relational dynamics shape their roles in context. Metaphorical expressions thus serve as windows into the emotional, performative, and interpretive dimensions of professional identity that literal descriptions alone may overlook.

Previous research on NESTs' teacher identities across various EFL contexts indicates that they often negotiate multiple, overlapping roles, such as cultural ambassadors (Almayez, 2024; Charles, 2019; Howard, 2019) and caretakers or babysitters (Ko & Kim, 2021). These identity portrayals illustrate how NESTs position themselves within their professional roles and reveal the emotional meanings that they attach to their work as EFL teachers. Therefore, this study also attempts to explore the metaphors NESTs use to describe their identities as English teachers. Through this metaphor-based narrative lens with three analytical techniques, that is, broadening, burrowing, storying and restorying, we seek to understand how identity conflicts are produced, experienced, and managed within the localised context of Chinese higher education.

### 1.1 Identity and Teacher Identity

As a foundational concept, identity can be understood as the distinctive set of traits and attributes that define an individual in relation to how others perceive them and how they compare to others (Pennington, 2015). Briefly, identity and a sense of self are often regarded as inherent aspects of an individual's internal constitution and as core elements of "who we are" as persons (Bamberg, 2011). Although identity encompasses individual traits, it is not fixed or predetermined; it is shaped and continually redefined in relation to the surrounding social context (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Teacher identity is widely recognised as central to understanding teachers' professional lives. It encompasses teachers' beliefs, values, roles, self-perceptions, and agency (Varghese et al., 2016).

Recent research on English language teacher professional development highlights the diverse competencies and beliefs that shape teachers' professional roles and provides a broader context to identity-related discussions (Manap et al., 2025; Md Yusop et al., 2025). Ye et al. (2025) emphasise that teacher identity is multifaceted and shaped by both personal histories and sociocultural environments. In EFL settings, identity becomes especially salient because teachers must navigate cultural expectations, institutional norms, and classroom dynamics that may differ from their own educational experiences. These negotiations can lead to identity conflicts, particularly when teachers are expected to assume unfamiliar roles or when institutional demands clash with personal beliefs.

To capture the multifaceted identities and complexities of language teacher identity, Pennington and Richards (2016) propose that language teacher identity comprises five core competencies that shape how teachers perceive and enact their professional roles. First of all, language-related identity pertains to a teacher's linguistic background and proficiency. In the context of ELT, it includes the distinction between native and non-native English-speaking backgrounds. However, its emphasis is on communicative competence as a critical factor for effective teaching, regardless of the teacher's linguistic background. Secondly, disciplinary identity is grounded in the teacher's content knowledge and developed through both formal education and teaching experience.

Richards and Farrell (2011) explain that content knowledge encompasses two key areas, namely, disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. Disciplinary knowledge refers to subject-matter expertise. For English teachers, this includes knowledge of the English language system (e.g., phonology, grammar, lexis, discourse) and relevant disciplinary perspectives. Pedagogical content knowledge is the specialised knowledge that enables teachers to translate subject matter into teachable forms. It encompasses knowledge of how learners typically understand (or misunderstand) particular language features, effective representations and analogies, instructional strategies for specific content, classroom assessment techniques, and curriculum choices that sequence and scaffold learning. Richards and Farrell (2011) apply this distinction to language teacher education and emphasise that expertise requires both strong content knowledge and the ability to transform that content pedagogically.

Thirdly, context-related identity highlights how the surrounding context shapes a teacher's professional identity. It includes cultural, institutional, and regional influences, all of which impact the teacher's professional development by interacting with his/her personal background and experiences. Fourthly, self-knowledge and awareness refer to a teacher's reflective capacity to recognise his/her own strengths, weaknesses, beliefs, and personal attributes. This self-awareness enables a teacher to make informed decisions in his/her teaching practice and to improve continuously. Finally, student-related identity underlines the importance of focusing on students' needs, the relational aspect of teaching, and the teacher's role in supporting student learning and development.

According to Pennington and Richards (2016), while teacher cognition has long been a central theme in discussions of teacher learning and second-language teacher development, a theoretical shift from cognitive to social perspectives has occurred over the past two decades. This shift has brought increased attention to the role of identity in shaping our understanding of teaching and teacher learning. In teaching, identity is a dynamic construct shaped by the specific contexts in which a teacher operates, and it may exhibit

different features at different times. Richards (2012) outlines ten key areas that constitute the essential dimensions of teacher knowledge and expertise, which form the foundation of effective teaching competence and performance in language education. They are language proficiency, content knowledge, teaching skills, contextual knowledge, language teacher identity, learner-focused teaching, pedagogical reasoning skills, theorising from practice, membership in a community of practice, and professionalism. Therefore, by drawing on the five core competencies of language teacher identity proposed by Pennington and Richards (2016), this study identifies the identity conflicts arising from the multifaceted nature and complexities of NESTs' language teacher identity in the Chinese EFL context, rather than focusing solely on their foreignness or nativeness.

### 1.2 NESTs and NESTs' Teacher Identity in China

Historically, NESTs have been positioned as linguistic authorities, which is a perception tied to the ideology of native-speakerism that perpetuates the belief that "native speakers" represent the ideal model of English (Holliday, 2006). This ideology of native-speakerism is closely linked to the racialised nature of English that continues to reinforce the widespread assumption that the language belongs to White native speakers and that social and cultural prestige is related to speaking English and aligning oneself with whiteness (Ruecker & Ives, 2015). China reflects these global patterns. English entered China through processes tied to racialisation and nation-building, shaping how Chinese people understood their place in global racial hierarchies (Wang, 2025). Although Western missionaries first introduced English education, the Chinese government later supported it, and it gradually gained public acceptance.

In the mid-nineteenth century, English-speaking missionaries opened schools to teach Chinese children English, culture, and knowledge, reinforcing the belief that such knowledge belonged to White Westerners. Western countries came to be seen as important sources of information and technology that China needed to modernise. In the 21st century, large-scale English education initiatives have been central to China's modernisation agenda, shaping the formation of "modern" citizens. Because English is closely associated with Western cultural power, these efforts continue to produce racialised understandings of language, identity, and aspiration. In fact, over the last 20 years, it has become the largest ELT market worldwide. This ideological backdrop influences who studies English, why they study it, and how English education is structured within China. Also, this ideology creates unequal power relations and shapes how teachers are perceived and utilised within institutions.

Varghese et al. (2016) assert that research on language teacher identity has predominantly focused on "minoritised/marginalised teacher identities" (p. 556), while the identities of more privileged language teachers have remained comparatively underexplored. Previous studies on the teacher identity of NESTs in different EFL contexts have revealed that they often embody multifaceted identities, including roles such as cultural ambassador (Almayez, 2024; Charles, 2019; Howard, 2019), replaceable institutional asset or commercial figure (Howard, 2019), professional educator (Almayez, 2024; Howard, 2019), mediator between local curriculum and global pedagogy (Ko & Kim, 2021; Garton et al., 2025), and caretaker or babysitter (Ko & Kim, 2021). Each of these identity representations reflects how NESTs position themselves within their teaching roles and reveals their underlying emotional responses, whether positive or negative, toward their work as EFL teachers. For instance, a cultural ambassador fosters a positive self-perception of the individual's language teacher identity, grounded in his/her native proficiency and inherent cultural knowledge (Howard, 2019). In contrast, caretaker or babysitter conveys a more reductive perception, suggesting that teachers need to provide close guidance and supervision, with students seen as dependent or childlike (Ko & Kim, 2021).

In the Chinese context, research shows that NESTs may simultaneously experience symbolic privilege and practical marginalisation. Recent scholarship highlights the racialised structures embedded within English language teaching in China. Wang (2025) conceptualises English as a race-making technology that underpins hiring preferences and racial hierarchies in the ELT industry, which privileges whiteness in ways that shape foreign teachers' identities and careers. Similarly, Poole (2024) demonstrates how institutional discourse in China's internationalised education sector (re)positions foreign teachers' roles, which affects their professional legitimacy and identity construction. These dynamics complicate how NESTs understand their professional legitimacy and identity. In addition, although prior research has documented a range of tensions experienced by NESTs in EFL contexts, including role ambiguity (caretaker vs. cultural ambassador), tensions in team-teaching with local colleagues, and questions of professional legitimacy, much of this work has treated identity outcomes descriptively rather than tracing how teachers make sense of these tensions through the language of their own lived narratives. For example, Rao and Chen (2020) and Guo et al. (2019) document institutional and ethical dilemmas that NESTs encounter in Chinese universities. Large-scale surveys and student-focused studies (Deng et al., 2023) add vital perspectives on stakeholder expectations and well-being. These contributions show that identity tensions for NESTs are real and multifaceted.

However, there remains a lack of in-depth narrative work that centres NESTS' own metaphors of self as English teachers and systematically links them to sources of conflict such as racialisation/white-skin vulnerability, emotional labour, and institutional expectations in Chinese higher education. The present narrative inquiry addresses this residual gap by analysing the metaphors four NESTs use to depict their identity conflicts and situating them within the broader sociocultural dynamics of Chinese EFL settings. Therefore, the present study seeks to holistically explore both the professional and personal identities of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) within the Chinese EFL context through the lens of identity conflicts.

### 1.3 Research on NEST Identity Conflicts

Drawing on discussions of identity, teacher identity, and language teacher identity, it is essential to acknowledge the strong interconnection between teachers' professional and personal identities. Pennington (1999) notes that teachers construct their professional identity by integrating personal attributes with the broader norms, values, and expectations of the teaching profession. In this sense, a range of factors contribute to the shaping of professional identity. Internal elements such as confidence, self-esteem, motivation, job satisfaction, and self-efficacy play a significant role in defining how teachers view themselves professionally (Sun et al.,

2025; Wu et al., 2024). External and contextual factors, such as the institutional environment, teacher-student relationships, language policies, and curriculum frameworks, also shape the development of a teacher's professional identity (Liu & Li, 2025; Melesse & Belay, 2022; Senom et al., 2025).

Bamberg (2011) outlines three central dilemmas inherent in any claim of identity: (i) maintaining a sense of self over time despite continuous change; (ii) asserting one's uniqueness in contrast to others while simultaneously sharing commonalities; and (iii) negotiating agency as shaped both by the self (a self-to-world direction of fit) and by external forces (a world-to-self direction of fit). These dilemmas create a fertile ground for investigating identity conflicts in the field of ELT (Richards, 2016). For instance, Posada-Ortiz (2022) highlights a common identity conflict that teachers experience when they encounter a disjunction between the theoretical knowledge acquired during teacher education and the practical demands of real classrooms. Given that individuals continuously construct and reconstruct their identities as they assume new roles or engage in new contexts and relationships, such moments of tension can lead to identity stress or even an identity crisis (Pennington & Richards, 2016). In these instances, individuals may begin to question or even reject their established sense of self. In essence, identity conflicts are often triggered by critical self-reflection.

Recent research highlights several challenges faced by NESTs in diverse contexts. The first one is the conflict between their privileged status as NESTs and institutional marginalisation (Lee & Lee, 2025). Although native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) are often hired for their perceived linguistic and cultural "authenticity," research shows that their position in EFL contexts is rarely straightforward. Teachers can hold privileged status because of their native-speaker background, but this privilege coexists with institutional marginalisation. For example, Lee and Lee (2025) reported in the recent narrative study of three experienced NESTs in Korea that, although participants enjoyed autonomy in lesson planning and symbolic capital linked to their native-speaker status, they also reported marginalisation within Korea's hierarchical, exam-oriented education system. Over time, their professional identities evolved through negotiation, adaptation, and reflective practice rather than solely on native-speaker privilege.

Another identity conflict for NESTs in the EFL context is a mismatch between their personal or professional ideals and local institutional or cultural demands (Lee & Lee, 2025). Many NESTs bring global pedagogical philosophies (e.g., communicative language teaching, learner-centeredness) shaped by their native-speaking background. However, local institutions may emphasise exam-oriented teaching, grammar-translation approaches, or rigid curricula. Therefore, a tension arises between what teachers believe and what they must implement. In Lee and Lee's (2025) study, this tension manifested as marginalisation despite their native-speaker status, exposing the fractured terrain of identity negotiation in transnational teaching contexts.

Furthermore, the study by Garton et al. (2025) found that the relational framing of identity in NEST schemes underscores how identity conflict often arises from the gap between assigned identities (by institutions or colleagues) and claimed identities (by teachers themselves). In the 2025 study, local English teachers (LETs) and NESTs frequently positioned themselves and each other in ways that shifted across contexts, shaped by race, institutional hierarchy, and pedagogical role. This dynamic creates a fertile ground for identity conflict: when a teacher's sense of self does not align with the role assigned (e.g., being seen as "assistant English speaker" rather than "full teacher"), or when co-teachers' expectations clash, it can lead to feelings of misrecognition, marginalisation, or role confusion. Such conflicts are not only about professional legitimacy but also about self-esteem, belonging, and agency.

Zhang and Jiang (2025) present a case in which a NEST producing online English-teaching videos on a Chinese social-media platform constructs a multilingual identity: rather than relying solely on "native-speaker authenticity," the teacher draws on multiple linguistic resources, engages in code-switching or flexible language use, and adapts to the sociolinguistic realities of a Chinese audience. This translanguaging strategy challenges dominant ideologies of "native-speakerism." It exposes a subtle form of identity conflict because while "native English speaker" status may grant symbolic capital, it may not be sufficient to meet local pedagogical needs or cultural expectations. Instead, legitimacy becomes a site of active negotiation, mediated by linguistic performance, social media dynamics, and local cultural norms. Such negotiation highlights the fluidity of teacher identity and suggests that NESTs must constantly reconstruct their self-presentation to maintain pedagogical legitimacy in multilingual, multicultural contexts. Therefore, by integrating the insights of Zhang and Jiang (2025), we can broaden our theoretical lens: identity conflict among NESTs should not be viewed only as a clash between professional vs personal identity, or native vs non-native teacher status, but also as a tension between fixed native-speaker identity and fluid multilingual/translanguaging identity shaped by sociocultural and institutional contexts.

While the above studies demonstrate that identity conflicts are common among NESTs, existing research tends to focus on institutional constraints, teacher beliefs, marginalisation in institutional structures, racialised experiences in hiring and classroom interaction or role mismatch in fairly descriptive or structural terms. However, few studies make identity conflict the central analytical focus, especially in the context of Chinese higher education. Furthermore, the use of metaphors as an analytic lens for understanding identity construction and articulating identity conflicts among NESTs remains underexplored. Without this metaphor-level insight, we risk overlooking the subtle, affective and identity-laden dimensions of how NESTs make sense of their roles. The present study addresses these gaps by examining how NESTs narrate and metaphorically frame their professional identities and revealing the tensions they experience in their daily teaching practices.

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Research Design

A narrative inquiry methodology was adopted to explore and present each participant's individual story (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Narrative inquiry is appropriate for this study because identity is understood as storied, relational, and situated: participants make sense of their professional and personal identities by telling and retelling experiences embedded in social contexts. Consistent with narrative methods, the researcher sought rich, temporally grounded accounts of participants' teaching lives and identity work.

Seidman's (2006) three-interview series guided the interview design. Each participant took part in three semi-structured interviews, scheduled across the data collection period to allow reflection between interviews (Table 1). All interviews were audio-recorded (with permission) and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were returned to participants for member-checking and correction to enhance accuracy and credibility.

To make analytic links between data and theory explicit, a set of core interview prompts was used across participants. These questions were designed to elicit narrative material aligned to the five core competencies proposed by Pennington and Richards (2016). The five core competencies include language-related identity, disciplinary identity, context-related identity, self-knowledge/awareness, and student-related identity. Each interview protocol included follow-up probes to elicit rich detail and capture spontaneous metaphor. The explicit metaphor elicitation question in Interview 3 ensured that metaphors that did not arise naturally were still captured for comparative analysis.

**Table 1**

*Interview summary*

| Interview | Topic and Purpose | Sample Interview Questions |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Life history and background**: Designed to establish context (personal and professional background, career trajectory, reasons for coming to China, linguistic biography). | "Tell me about your journey to becoming an English teacher. Where did you train, and how did you come to teach in China?" (maps to background & disciplinary identity) |
| 2 | **Current lived experience**: Focused on participants' present classroom practices, relationships with colleagues and students, institutional roles, and concrete incidents that illustrated identity tensions. | "Describe a recent teaching episode that felt especially challenging or satisfying. What happened, and how did you respond?" (maps to context-related identity; student-related identity) |
| 3 | **Reflection and meaning making**: Invited participants to reflect on the significance of their experiences, to articulate how their sense of self as a teacher had changed, and to respond to preliminary analytic impressions. | "If you had to describe your professional identity as an image or metaphor (for example, a bridge, an actor, a coach, etc.), what would it be and why?" (direct metaphor elicitation linked to all five competencies)<br>"Looking back, how have these experiences shaped who you are as a teacher?" (meaning-making; links to self-knowledge and identity evolution) |

### 2.2 Research Object and Context

This study is part of a larger research project conducted between August and October 2023. Data were collected from four NESTs teaching at two universities in mainland China. Participants were selected through purposive (criterion) sampling via an online survey. Inclusion criteria were: (a) nationality from English-dominant countries (i.e., native English-speaking background), (b) current employment as an English teacher in a Chinese university, and (c) willingness to participate in three in-depth interviews and to share reflective material. Potential participants were contacted via professional networks; participation was voluntary. Before data collection, participants received an information sheet and signed written informed consent.

One institution is located in Shenzhen (founded in 2015, with a STEM-oriented, world-class science and engineering model and an English Centre responsible for compulsory English courses for undergraduates and postgraduates). The other institution is a long-established comprehensive university in Hunan (founded in 1958) with a School of Foreign Languages that offers majors in English and Business English. These contrasting institutional profiles (a relatively new, STEM-focused university and an older, more comprehensive university) provide different contextual conditions for NESTs' identity work and, therefore, allow for a more contextually nuanced inquiry into identity conflicts. Participant demographics are summarised in Table 2. The demographic information presented here is drawn from participants' self-reports collected during the first interview and verified during member-checking.

**Table 2**

*The NESTs' demographic information*

| Name | Gender | Nationality | University Location | Primary Courses | Teaching Experience (Years) | Lingual Background | Highest Level of Education |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jane | Female | British | Shenzhen | Centre-run compulsory English | 23 | Bilingual | Master's Degree |
| Anson | Male | American | Shenzhen | Centre-run compulsory English | 13 | Bilingual | Master's Degree |
| Carlos | Male | American | Shenzhen | Centre-run compulsory English | 20 | Monolingual | Doctor of Philosophy |
| Daniel | Male | British | Hunan | Oral English | 15 | Monolingual | Bachelor's Degree |

### 2.3 Analytic Procedures

Data analysis followed a narrative analytic orientation (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Analysis proceeded in iterative stages to make explicit how themes were generated and how metaphors were linked to identity conflict. Metaphors were identified in two ways: (a) spontaneous metaphors appearing naturally in participants' speech, and (b) elicited metaphors produced in response to the direct metaphor question in Interview 3.

To make the application of Connelly and Clandinin's analytic moves transparent, the following operational definitions and examples (non-attributable and paraphrased for anonymity) illustrate the analytic work performed. Broadening allows the researcher to situate an episode within its broader social, institutional and temporal context. For example, when a participant described an "exam-driven" curriculum, broadening linked that episode to university policy and national assessment cultures, illuminating why certain pedagogical choices were untenable for the teacher. Burrowing requires the researcher to pay close attention to interiority, such as the participant's feelings, motives, and perspectives in a specific episode. For example, when a teacher used the metaphor "I felt like a clown," the researcher examined the emotional valence and the underlying sense of humiliation or performativity implicit in the statement. Storying and restorying require the researcher to reconstruct sequences of events into a narrative that captures change over time and meaning-making. After broadening and burrowing, the researcher retold the participant's account as an analytic narrative that links specific metaphors to identity-conflict trajectories.

The combined use of Seidman's (2006) three-interview series, narrative analytic techniques (broadening, burrowing, storying and restorying), and a rigorous, stepwise metaphor and thematic coding procedure enabled a detailed, participant-centred exploration of identity conflicts. This methodology makes explicit how metaphors and critical incidents were elicited, coded, and interpreted, thereby linking data collection and analysis transparently to the five competencies of language teacher identity proposed by Pennington and Richards (2016) and research aims.

### 2.4 Dependability and Credibility Measures for the Instrument and Emerging Themes

Dependability, as conceptualised by Lincoln and Guba (1985), concerns the stability and consistency of research findings if a study were to be repeated with the same participants, methods, and context. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that establishing credibility in qualitative research can partially ensure dependability, given the close relationship between credibility and trustworthiness. Furthermore, Shenton (2004) emphasises that dependability in qualitative inquiry should focus on the transparency and repeatability of the research process rather than the reproduction of identical results.

Accordingly, to enhance the reliability of the present study, the researcher not only demonstrated credibility but also carefully considered the overall research design and documented it in detail. The interview protocol was carefully developed based on the research objectives and relevant literature and remained consistent across participants. All interviews followed the same semi-structured format. Detailed documentation of data collection, transcription, coding procedures, and analytical decisions was maintained to create a clear audit trail. By providing a clear and thorough account of the research procedures, this study enables readers to understand the methodological decisions made and to replicate the research design in comparable contexts.

Credibility, as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), corresponds to the notion of internal validity in quantitative research and is central to establishing trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry. Connelly (2016) highlights the importance of techniques such as sustained engagement and member checking in strengthening research credibility. In the present study, before interviewing the participants, informal conversations were conducted to establish rapport. Emerging themes were not imposed a priori but were grounded in participants' own accounts. Data excerpts were repeatedly compared across interviews to ensure internal coherence and thematic

consistency. In addition, reflexive memo-writing was employed throughout the analysis to minimise researcher bias and to ensure that interpretations remained closely connected to the data. In addition, a grand member checking was conducted after the researcher completed the narrative accounts of each participant. These accounts were returned to the participants for review to confirm the accuracy of interpretation, wording, and intent, and to identify any misunderstandings or points of disagreement.

## 3.0 RESULTS

This section presents an integrated analysis of the four participants' professional identity construction, drawing together narrative findings as well as Pennington and Richards' (2016) identity domains. First, the narrative accounts of the four NESTs were retold and presented in Table 3 using the analytical technique of broadening to provide an overview of their backgrounds and motivations for coming to and staying in China.

**Table 3**

*Broadening and restorying: NESTs' narrative accoun*t

| NEST | Narrative Account |
|---|---|
| Jane | Jane arrived in China in 2019 and became an English instructor at a university in Shenzhen. Despite over 20 years of English teaching experience across the UK and Spain, she felt frustrated by her limited effectiveness with Chinese students in the UK. She attributed this to a lack of linguistic, cultural, and historical understanding, which motivated her to come to China. After a short academic assignment in Shanghai, she decided to stay to better engage with the local context. Holding degrees in Portuguese and Applied Linguistics, and extensive professional experience, Jean chose Shenzhen for its innovative university environment, international population, and inclusive atmosphere, which she believes supports both her professional development and a deeper understanding of Chinese learners. |
| Anson | Anson came to China in 2008 through a Sino–U.S. exchange programme while studying at a community college in the United States. Originally planning to join the military, he chose China as an alternative path toward independence. After studying marine biology and Chinese, he completed dual bachelor's degrees in the U.S. He later earned a master's degree in Chinese philosophy in Beijing to pursue a career in higher education. Anson has taught English in China since 2009 across multiple educational levels and now works at a university in Shenzhen, which he values for its openness, stability, and professional opportunities. For Anson, his family may not support such a completely different path, but it is indeed something to be proud of. |
| Carlos | Carlos came to China in 2018 after deliberately seeking to diversify his academic career. Trained in history and second-language education, in U.S. he taught middle and high schools, and at a community college, where he also held administrative responsibilities. After initially failing to secure university posts in China, he accepted a kindergarten teaching position in Guangzhou in 2018. During this period, he completed a PhD in Educational Leadership. Recognising limited advancement opportunities in early childhood education, he later reapplied and secured a university position. Across the U.S. and China, Carl has taught learners of varied ages, backgrounds, and motivations, enriching both his professional profile and pedagogical expertise. |
| Daniel | Daniel came to China in 2010 without intending to become a long-term English teacher. Inspired by a travel documentary, he planned a short stay in China before continuing to South America. Before coming to China, he completed EFL training and then secured a college teaching position in Zhengzhou. With a background in engineering and the British army, he initially viewed teaching as a practical option. After negative experiences teaching children, he committed to university teaching. Later that year, he moved to a university in southern China, where he chose to settle permanently. Daniel values the city's simple lifestyle and feels a strong connection with his rural, working-class students. |

Next, across all cases, the participants used rich metaphors to describe their classroom identities, as shown in Table 4. Jane described her as a clown. Anson felt like an actor; Carlos described himself as an entertainer; and Daniel felt like a comedian. These metaphors reveal a shared sense of teaching as performance, marked by emotional labour, improvisation, and audience-orientation. They also index deeper tensions embedded in the Chinese EFL context, including pressures to entertain disengaged students, the need to regulate emotions, and the desire to reconcile personal authenticity with institutional expectations. In this sense, the metaphors function as windows into the teacher selves the participants struggle to inhabit, negotiate, and sometimes resist.

**Table 4**

*Burrowing: NESTs' metaphors of self as English teachers*

| NEST | Metaphor Elicited in Interview 3 | | Sense Behind the Metaphor |
|---|---|---|---|
| Jane | Clown | *"I think actress is a nice word. I think clown is the word I'm thinking of. Just to try and entertain and keep them engaged, I guess, or to illustrate something. But maybe it makes it more multi-dimensional comprehension of it, just evoke... maybe like either laughter or shock or some kind of deep emotional response that maybe makes the learning a bit more effective."* | It conveys Jane's view of teaching as a performative and affective practice that engages learners emotionally. By using humour and surprise, she believes learning becomes more meaningful and memorable. Also, it suggests a form of emotional labour in which authority is downplayed in favour of connection, and it reveals how performance and engagement shape her identity as a language teacher. |
| Anson | Actor | *"Definitely. And that's really draining, especially if you're introverted like me. Here at this university, and even in China, half the battle is getting them to focus and concentrate, not play video games in class. The other half is trying to ensure you are doing your job. It makes you ensure the content is being taught. It's really draining."* | It reflects Anson's perception of teaching as sustained performance rather than spontaneous interaction. It highlights the emotional and cognitive labour required to maintain students' attention while fulfilling instructional responsibilities, particularly for an introverted teacher. It captures the tension between engagement and exhaustion. It reveals how continual performance shapes his experience of teaching and contributes to a sense of emotional drain within his language-teacher identity. |
| Carlos | Entertainer | *"More like an entertainer, not really an actor, but an entertainer, yeah. But also, even if I'm sleepy or have low energy, I have to go to the classroom and not let them know, just turn up more energy or turn out more energy. Because if we go in there sleepy, tired, sad, whatever is going on in our life, it'll ruin the atmosphere of the classroom."* | It conveys teaching as emotional performance and affective regulation. It reflects Carlos' belief that effective teaching requires masking personal emotions and actively projecting energy to sustain a positive classroom atmosphere. It underscores the emotional labour involved in language teaching, where managing one's feelings becomes integral to professional identity and pedagogical effectiveness. |
| Daniel | Comedian | *"By the end of the week, this is getting a bit boring. I can see it a bit. In Western culture, we have stand-up comedians, people who stand up on stage and tell jokes. They do the same jokes every night, and a lot of them are teachers because they've had to do this job, and they've done the same thing. They've learned their lessons. A lot of them then go into comedy. Because being a comedian and selling jokes is very much the same as being a teacher, you just do the same thing every night."* | It frames teaching as repetitive performative labour. It suggests that language teaching involves repeatedly delivering the same "script" to maintain students' engagement, much like a stand-up comedian retelling familiar jokes. It highlights both the performative skill required to sustain attention and the monotony that can accompany routinised teaching, and it reveals tensions between creativity, emotional effort, and professional endurance in the teacher's identity. |

Finally, as shown in Table 5, during the data analysis process, the data were burrowed and categorised into five categories, corresponding to the five competencies. For instance, data on NESTs' interactions with students were grouped under the student-related identity category. Within each category, several sub-themes were identified, which were then synthesised and consolidated into the most representative identity conflict for each competency. Subsequently, the four NESTs' narratives were reconstructed and retold in parallel, according to these five categories. By analysing NESTs' metaphors alongside Pennington and Richards' (2016) identity domains, this section demonstrates how the participants' identity work is shaped by the interplay among language backgrounds, disciplinary trajectories, sociocultural constraints, self-awareness, and student ideologies.

**Table 5**

*Burrowing: Categories and emerging themes*

| Categories | Emerging Themes |
|---|---|
| Language-related Identity | Lingual background; Proficiency in students' L1 |
| Disciplinary Identity | Educational background; Past teaching experience |
| Context-related Identity | Privilege and marginalisation in China |
| Self-knowledge and Awareness | Professional development; Limited support from the department |
| Student-related Identity | Conflicts with students; Students' performance; NESTs' perceptions of English |

### 3.1 Language-related Identity: Monolingual NESTs, Bilingual NESTs, and the Limits of Linguistic Privilege

Language-related identity concerns teachers' linguistic repertoires and sense of legitimacy as language educators (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Although all four participants were NESTs, they differed markedly in their proficiency in students' L1 (Chinese), which emerged as a critical source of identity tension. Their metaphors often indexed this linguistic insecurity, performing as a clown or comedian sometimes masked anxiety over not understanding students' native language or cultural references.

Amongst the four, only Jane and Anson possessed bilingual backgrounds. Jane spoke Spanish, which she described as an invaluable resource in her previous teaching in Spain, enabling her to conduct comparative linguistic explanations. In China, however, her lack of Chinese restricted her ability to anticipate students' difficulties and provide contrastive support. In her words, she tried to be "supportive…critical…motivating…inspiring" and worked to "design lessons that help support students with their individual specific needs" (Interview 3), yet the absence of shared L1 knowledge constrained the extent to which she could do so. Her metaphor of the clown captures this tension: a performer who exaggerates gestures and emotions to compensate for linguistic gaps.

> *"Yeah, especially if you didn't learn another language, if you don't understand what it takes to learn another language. I think it's very difficult to be a really good English teacher. And I think that's the problem with many native speakers. They don't speak another language. They haven't done the job that they're teaching the students to do."*
> (Jane: interview 2)

By contrast, Anson, who spoke Chinese and held a Master's degree in Chinese philosophy, integrated Chinese texts, cultural references, and examples of "Chinglish" into his lessons. His bilingualism deepened his empathy toward students' learning struggles, which he described as shaping his sense of being a teacher who is "engaging, efficient, effective, accepting, understanding, logical" (Interview 3). His metaphor of the actor underscores the linguistic duality he negotiated, that is, switching roles and linguistic codes depending on students' reactions, sometimes masking frustration when students disengaged due to GPA anxiety.

> *"Or I'll share with them examples of students who are being late, like I just told you, and I'll tell them the full story, and they'll see my facial expressions, and they think it's really entertaining. Mhm. But they typically respond positively to these things. If I see that they don't, then I will stop and adjust myself accordingly."*
> (Anson: Interview 2)

Monolingual participants also recognised the limitations of their linguistic privilege. Daniel, for instance, stated that "having some knowledge of Chinese would be beneficial" (Interview 3), especially as he aimed to build safe relationships with students who viewed foreigners as intimidating. Through a comedic metaphor, he conveys repetition and linguistic vulnerability: repeating the same jokes (lessons) nine times a week without fully understanding students' L1 feedback forces him to depend more on classroom affect than on linguistic nuance.

### 3.2 Disciplinary Identity: Teaching Experience and Academic Credentials

Disciplinary identity reflects teachers' content knowledge and professional preparation (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Across the four narratives, disciplinary identity was shaped by the tension between formal qualifications and hands-on teaching experience. This tension is also reflected in the metaphors of performance and competence.

The participants varied widely in academic background. Daniel holds a bachelor's degree in engineering. He entered ESL teaching during a period when universities in China readily hired any white, native-speaking bachelor's degree holder. Daniel's portrayal of himself as a comedian illustrates how he compensated for limited disciplinary training through interpersonal warmth and humour.

> *"Oh, I never thought about that. Mhm. Authorities, no, I try to keep it lighthearted. In my culture, we play jokes with our friends, we play jokes, we joke around with each other, and I try to do that with them as well. Although some of them don't understand, sometimes I forget, and I sometimes may push the joke too far, and I may embarrass them, which I forget, and then I have to apologise and say I'm sorry, and then explain that in my culture, we joke with our friends. So, I try to be friendly more than anything. Like I say, it's get over that fear of me, looming over them an eagle."*
> (Daniel: Interview 2)

In contrast, Jane and Anson had accumulated substantial teaching experience across countries, which informed their identities as reflective, principled teachers. Jane's metaphor of the clown reflects both her creativity and her discomfort. Despite extensive pedagogical expertise, she felt compelled to exaggerate performance to capture student engagement, a form of emotional labour not typically central to her disciplinary identity.

Carlos, the only participant with a PhD, had the strongest academic background but the least initial EFL experience. He described himself as "well researched…flexible…creative" and viewed teaching as a form of performance, identifying himself as an entertainer. His metaphor suggests an academic who demonstrates expertise while simultaneously compensating for limited prior EFL experience. Interestingly, he had once been rejected by the university due to insufficient teaching experience, revealing a shift in hiring practices: while advanced degrees once sufficed, institutions now prioritise teaching experience or require a combination of both.

> *"I do non-empirical research, sometimes empirical research. I do empirical research into new strategies for language teaching. So, I could say I'm well-researched empirically and just as well in networking with colleagues. So, I would say not cutting-edge, but well-researched and flexible. I try to be pretty creative in how I implement the assignments."*
> (Carlos: Interview 3)

Across cases, disciplinary identity was not static but dynamically negotiated through performance. Participants with stronger academic backgrounds used theoretical knowledge to shape identity, while those with less formal training leveraged creativity, humour, and emotional intelligence. Their metaphors functioned as disciplinary coping strategies, enabling them to fulfil institutional expectations even as they confronted mismatches between their academic preparation and classroom realities.

### 3.3 Context-related Identity: White-Skin Privilege and White-Skin Vulnerability

Context-related identity concerns how teachers interpret and respond to institutional and sociocultural contexts (Pennington & Richards, 2016). In China, NEST identity is deeply entangled with the racialised hiring logic of the EFL market. While whiteness is often commodified and idealised (Lan, 2022), the participants' narratives reveal that this privilege is fragile, contradictory, and frequently accompanied by vulnerability. Their classroom metaphors again intersect with these tensions: performing as clowns or entertainers can be a mechanism to navigate racialised expectations or to resist them.

Jane, a white British teacher with extensive qualifications, rejected the label "White Monkey", which is a term referring to foreigners hired for appearance rather than competence. Despite being professionally trained, she felt whiteness overshadowed her identity as an expert educator. Her metaphor of the clown reflects this uneasy duality: performing humour voluntarily while resisting being reduced to a superficial performer hired for spectacle.

Daniel experienced structural marginalisation despite benefiting from white privilege. He noted that foreign teachers were treated differently, excluded from meetings, and not provided office space, which is one of the classic features of the dual administrative system for foreign teachers documented by Lan (2022). His metaphor of the comedian reveals how he coped with structural exclusion through student-centred care rather than institutional participation.

> *"There're offices and things over in that building over there. That's where the Dean is. And the Vice Dean, they're all over there. Now, who else is over there? I have no idea. Foreign teachers and the Chinese teachers, we're very different."*
> (Daniel: Interview 2)

Crucially, Anson, who has brown skin, experienced racial discrimination despite being a native English speaker. In interview 2, Anson mentioned that when he applied for a teaching position at an international high school in China, he was rejected upon arrival because the school explicitly preferred tall, attractive, white candidates, even though he met all the qualifications and had been initially invited to an interview. For Anson, the actor metaphor captures how he constantly modulated his persona in response to students' and colleagues' racialised expectations, sometimes hiding discomfort and at other times amplifying authority.

Collectively, these narratives illuminate the paradox that while whiteness facilitates employment opportunities, it does not guarantee respect, inclusion, or recognition. Moreover, non-white NESTs must navigate dissonant identity positions: privileged as native speakers yet marginalised as racialised bodies. Performance metaphors reveal how teachers negotiate this terrain: they sometimes resist racial stereotypes and sometimes perform into them for survival.

### 3.4 Self-knowledge and Awareness: Native Speaker Fallacy and Professional Development

Self-knowledge and awareness refer to teachers' reflective understanding of their beliefs, strengths, and limitations (Pennington & Richards, 2016). The participants' narratives indicate strong professional self-awareness and a shared rejection of the native speaker fallacy (Phillipson, 1992). Their metaphors are complex, self-reflective, and tinged with vulnerability, and illustrate how they grappled with expectations of effortless linguistic authority.

All four participants, despite being NESTs, actively sought growth. Jane and Anson expressed aspirations to pursue PhD studies, viewing academic advancement as a means to strengthen professional identity and legitimacy. Jane hoped for institutional support, yet her role as an "English instructor" restricted her access to developmental opportunities typically available to academic staff. Carlos, already holding a PhD, sought further training in EFL pedagogy, acknowledging that disciplinary knowledge alone was insufficient.

> *"I would say we probably need at least one professional development on campus a semester. And I would say this would have to be somebody who's not necessarily a keynote speaker or motivational speaker or just some kind of theorist, somebody who's actually a highly accomplished, advanced teacher doing a similar job. They could come from another*

*university, another country, and just give us ideas on EFL teaching... That should happen every year, every semester, at least one time."*
(Carlos: Interview 3)

Yet, institutional constraints limited their professional development. Restrictive employment categories for foreign teachers, absence of promotion pathways, and limited access to training contributed to frustration, self-doubt, and, at times, a sense of stagnation. The metaphors reflect this tension: the clown striving for improvement yet undervalued; the actor maintaining composure despite emotional labour; the entertainer applying creativity while longing for structural support; the comedian repeating performances without institutional recognition. Thus, the participants demonstrated high self-awareness, but institutional structures prevented their professional identities from being fully realised. The native speaker fallacy not only obscured their pedagogical needs but also undermined opportunities for reflective growth and recognition.

### 3.5 Student-related Identity: The ideology of Standard English and NESTs' perceptions of English

Student-related identity centres on teachers' relational work with learners (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Across all cases, tensions emerged between participants' communicative, inclusive views of English and students' deeply internalised ideology of Standard English (SE). This tension frequently shaped the metaphors teachers used, such as performing as clowns or comedians to reduce anxiety, as actors to adapt to expectations, or as entertainers to spark engagement.

The first conflict involved students' low confidence and reluctance to speak English. Participants consistently emphasised that accents and minor errors were natural aspects of learning. Most of Carlos's students were not eager to talk with him, and their spirits were affected by the pressure from their core course, which made him feel frustrated. Similarly, Daniel mentioned the same situation:

*"Not talking to me. Last year, there was one business. It was so frustrating, one business English class. When I sat down in the exam and talked to them all one at a time, they were brilliant; they were the best of all the students. Their class got the highest mark. You get them in the classroom. Nothing. Trying to get anything from them was… it was painful. They would not talk to me in the classroom."*
(Daniel: Interview 2)

The second conflict involved students' reactions to teachers' accents. A student questioned Anson about why he did not sound like Americans in TV dramas. Daniel encountered ridicule from his students for his regional British pronunciation. These interactions illustrate how accent expectations can delegitimise even native-speaker models, affecting teachers' identity construction. The metaphors reveal how teachers responded: the actor masking hurt, the comedian turning ridicule into resilience, the entertainer using energy to restore authority. These conflicts show that Jane's humour, Daniel's warmth, and Carlos's energetic "entertaining" style all served as practical strategies to counteract student anxiety, and NEST identity is not inherently secure. It is shaped by students' ideological assumptions about what "real English" sounds like, reinforcing the performative nature of identity and the emotional burden of teaching against SE norms.

## 4.0 DISCUSSION

Across the four cases, metaphors of performance, namely, clown, actor, entertainer, and comedian, provided a powerful lens for interpreting how NESTs construct and negotiate their professional identities in China. These metaphors capture shared experiences of emotional labour, institutional marginalisation, racialised expectations, and linguistic insecurity. They reveal how teachers continuously perform, improvise, and recalibrate their identities in response to students, institutions, and sociocultural conditions. Integrated with Pennington and Richards' (2016) identity domains, the findings illustrate that identity construction is a dynamic, contextually mediated, and deeply affective process shaped by language proficiencies, disciplinary histories, racialised structures, reflective capacities, and student ideologies.

Furthermore, the findings of this study both corroborate and extend existing research on NEST identity, particularly regarding linguistic background, racialised expectations, and students' ideologies of English. Three significant areas of contribution become evident when the results are viewed alongside recent and foundational research.

First, this study's finding that bilingual NESTs experience greater pedagogical confidence and reduced identity conflict complements prior work on the benefits of multilingual repertoires (Zhao & Xiao, 2025). However, the present study advances this argument by demonstrating that bilingualism is not merely an instructional asset but also an identity resource that stabilises teachers' sense of legitimacy. This insight converges with Zhang and Jiang's (2025) translanguaging study, which showed how a bilingual NEST in China used her multilingual repertoire to construct a flexible, agentive public identity on social media. Similar to the participant in their study, Anson leveraged his Chinese proficiency to build rapport and mutual understanding with students. At the same time, Jane's prior bilingual teaching experience in Spain bolstered her professional self-esteem. In contrast, monolingual teachers like Daniel described persistent feelings of limitation and distance. Thus, this study offers a novel contribution: bilingualism supports not only classroom pedagogy but also identity stability, legitimacy, and emotional security, thereby extending translanguaging scholarship into NEST identity research.

In addition, the study deepens current understandings of white-skin privilege and white-skin vulnerability, and echoes analyses of racialised hiring practices in Asian ESL markets (Lan, 2022). Consistent with Lan's (2022) account of whiteness as a commodified and precarious resource, the findings show that white NESTs may enjoy initial labour-market advantages while simultaneously being structurally marginalised within university systems, including exclusion from meetings, decision-making, and professional advancement. Importantly, this study also demonstrates how these contradictions are personally negotiated and internalised, a

dimension emphasised in Lee and Lee's (2025) narrative study of experienced NESTs in Korea. Like their participants, who navigated contradictory expectations shaped by race, culture, and institutional positioning, the NESTs in this study made sense of racialised privilege and vulnerability through personal metaphors of performance (clown, actor, entertainer, comedian). The present study, therefore, adds new nuance by showing how teachers reframe racialised precarity as part of a performative professional self, and highlights the dynamic interaction between racialised structures and individual meaning-making.

Finally, this study confirms and expands research on students' Standard English (SE) ideology and its effects on both learning and teacher identity. However, the present findings show that such ideologies create an identity burden not only for non-native speakers but also for NESTs themselves. Daniel's experience of being mocked for his regional British accent and Anson being questioned for not sounding "like American TV characters" echoes Garton et al.'s (2025) findings on NEST schemes, where native speakers reported that students and institutions often misunderstand what a "real" or "ideal" NEST should sound like. Their study highlights how NEST status can be both valorised and delegitimised, depending on narrow linguistic expectations. The present study advances this insight by revealing how such ideologies directly shape teachers' self-efficacy and emotional well-being by producing tensions between communicative, inclusive teaching philosophies and student-driven normative expectations. It contributes to a new theoretical implication that SE ideology not only polices student language use but also governs the legitimacy of NEST identities.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

This study examined how four native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) working in Chinese universities construct and negotiate their professional identities through metaphor and narrative. While each participant selected a distinct metaphor to describe their teaching self (i.e., clown, actor, entertainer, and comedian), the metaphors reveal how NESTs conceptualise their role not merely as language instructors but as performers tasked with sustaining attention, stimulating interest, and creating emotionally resonant learning environments. In sum, this study demonstrates that the identity construction of NESTs in Chinese universities is profoundly shaped by performance, emotional labour, and the complex interplay of linguistic, cultural, and institutional forces. In addition, by engaging Pennington and Richards' (2016) five identity domains, the study provides a holistic account of the intersecting pressures NESTs experience. The findings show that language-related identity is strengthened by bilingualism, which enhances empathy and pedagogical confidence; disciplinary identity is shaped less by qualifications alone and more by cumulative teaching experience; context-related identity reveals the paradox of both racialised privilege and racialised vulnerability in Chinese universities; self-knowledge is refined through identity tensions, conflict, and professional self-questioning; and student-related identity reflects the ideological clash between students' expectations of Standard English and NESTs' communicative, student-centred pedagogies.

The findings offer several actionable implications for universities and stakeholders employing NESTs. First of all, institutions should recognise that teaching experience and intercultural competence can be as important as formal qualifications. Hiring policies that focus narrowly on native-speaker status or degree type risk misjudging teacher capability and reinforcing unproductive hierarchies. Performance-based expectations, such as entertaining students, should be explicitly discussed and not implicitly assumed. In addition, given the emotional labour embedded in participants' performative metaphors, universities should provide clearer channels for teacher support, including mentoring, conflict mediation, and mental health resources. For future research, longitudinal studies are needed to trace how identity performances evolve, particularly as teachers balance shifting institutional expectations or classroom conflicts. Research on bilingual NESTs remains limited; future studies should explore how multilingual repertoires influence classroom practices, professional recognition, and cultural adaptation. Finally, further metaphor-based inquiry may reveal how teachers use imaginative language to make sense of ongoing identity negotiation within globalised EFL environments.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Yiyun Liang (Conceptualisation; Methodology; Formal analysis; Data curation; Investigation; Writing - original draft)

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