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Evolving Journeys of Multilingual Teachers of English in Japan

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In this narrative account I document a deeply personal transformative journey through which I attempt to reconcile my multilingual identity with my identity as a non-native English speaking teacher (NNEST), and develop a new and more liberating identity as a multilingual teacher of English. In discussions with four other foreign NNESTs in Japan, we reflected on what our NNEST status represents for us in Japan, the contributions we can make to our learners' linguistic and intercultural development, and how we can bring multilingualism and multiculturalism into our classrooms. These three areas of reflection represent for us important stages in the journey towards incorporating the multilingual turn for learner development into our teaching practices. However, as this narrative account is focused mainly on our experiences as teachers, further exploration is necessary to find ways of fostering multilingual identities for learners themselves.

本稿は、英語を母国語としない教師（NNEST）のアイデンティティと多言語的アイデンティティを調和させ、多言語の英語教師としての新しいより解放的なアイデンティティへと化させていく私の旅を記す。日本在住の4人の外国人NNESTとの議論を通して、NNESTとして活動する私たちの立場が日本でどのような意味を持つのか、学習者の言語的・異文化的発達にどう貢献できるのか、そしてどのようにして多言語主義と多文化主義を教育現場に導入できるのかを探究した。これらの3つの考察は、学習者の発達を促すべく多言語的転回を教育実に取り入れるための第一であると考えている。一方、本稿のナラティブアカウントは、主に教師としてのに焦点をてているため、学習者自身の多言語アイデンティティを育む方法を見つけるためには、さらなる探求が必要である。

Acest studiu narativ reprezintă o încercare de a documenta o călătorie transformațională de reconciliere a identității mele multilingve cu identitatea mea de profesor de limbă engleză ne-vorbitor nativ. Această reconciliere ar putea rezulta într-o identitate nouă și într-un fel eliberatoare ca profesor multilingv de limba engleză. În cadrul discuțiilor cu alți patru profesori ne-vorbitori nativi străini din Japonia, am reflectat asupra a ceea ce reprezintă pentru noi statutul nostru de profesori ne-vorbitori nativi în Japonia, asupra contribuțiilor pe care le putem face pentru dezvoltarea lingvistică și interculturală a studenților noștri și asupra modului în care putem aduce multilingvismul și multiculturalismul în orele noastre. Aceste trei subiecte de reflecție reprezintă primii pași către încorporarea schimbării multilingve pentru dezvoltarea studenților în practicile noastre pedagogice. Cu toate acestea, deoarece acest studiu narativ se concentrează în principal pe experiențele noastre ca profesori, este necesară o explorare mai aprofundată pentru a găsi modalități de a promova identități multilingve și pentru studenți.

Keywords

C: I think at that point it started to become like part of me.

O: So that's when you feel you became multilingual?

C: Yeah, when it starts to affect a little your identity, I think that was the starting point for me.

(Excerpt from my interview with Clara)

Multilingualism and multiculturalism are an integral part of my life, so when I became involved with this issue of the Learner Development Journal, I was particularly inspired by the main theme of the multilingual turn for learner development. This

was because of its focus on "the dynamic, hybrid, and transnational linguistic repertoires of multilingual (often migrant) speakers" (May, 2014, p. 1). This resonated very much with my lived reality as a multilingual immigrant in Japan, although not quite so much with my teaching practices. For a while now I have been struggling to reconcile my multilingual identity with my identity as a non-native English speaking teacher (NNEST). On the one hand, in my everyday personal life, I constantly switch between four languages. I use English, Spanish, and to a lesser extent Japanese at home with my family; I use Japanese as I go about life in Japanese society; and I speak Romanian with my family back in my home country of Romania. In my professional life, on the other hand, I use English almost exclusively, but I have often come up against what my NNEST status means both for how I am perceived by other professionals in the field, in particular native speaking English teachers (NESTs), and also for how I see myself.

As I started working on this narrative account, my personal multilingual identity and my NNEST professional identity felt not only completely separate, but in many ways irreconcilable. I have always felt that when I walk into a classroom, I must assume my English teacher persona, and abide by ideologies of professionalism which may be rooted in native-speakerism (Holliday, 2006) and which often include English-only policies. Moreover, I have always thought that sharing my full multilingual usage with my students would be inconceivable.

In many ways, this narrative account has turned out to be an exploratory journey for me, a journey influenced by the multilingual turn in language education and how it is shaped by social, pedagogical, and practical factors (Conteh & Meier, 2014). Another important voice in changing and shaping my self-perception as a language teacher was Raees Calafato through his review on research conducted with NNESTs, which proposed a paradigm shift in the way these teachers are viewed (Calafato, 2019). He suggests the perception should shift from seeing NNESTs as non-native speakers of the language they teach (with all the implied deficiencies as speakers and as teachers of that language) to recognizing them as multilingual teachers. This paradigm shift goes even further in that it provides a way to "move beyond the native speaker / non-native speaker debate and instead focus on the potential abilities and skills of multilingual teachers" (Calafato, 2019, p. 3).

My journey was also guided by the journeys of four other foreign NNESTs living and teaching in Japan, with whom I conducted semi-structured interviews. Through these interviews, I hoped to co-construct narratives of multilingual NNESTs experiences by adding my own reflections to theirs (Block, 2000). Foreign NNESTs are not very common in Japan for various reasons, including an ingrained belief in Japanese society that native speakers make far superior role-models for language learners (Tsuneyoshi, 2013), which mirrors a similar belief held more widely in Asia (Braine, 2010). That is why I have used my personal connections and relationships to approach the four participants: Maria, Clara, Nicolas, and Mona. Apart from one, these are pseudonyms I will be using throughout this narrative account based on the participants' wishes, in order to protect their identity. I have also refrained from mentioning their countries of origin for precisely the same reason: Given the scarcity of foreign NNESTs in Japan, some of the participants felt they could be easily identified by the mere mention of their home country. I will, however, discuss their linguistic repertoires later in this narrative account, as the languages they speak are an integral part of their identities as multilingual teachers.

Language teacher identity is a concept that is notoriously hard to define (Barkhuizen, 2017). Throughout this narrative account, I would like to keep in mind two aspects that I find particularly relevant. The first such aspect is the fact that language teacher identities are both internal (within each individual teacher) and external (pertaining to the social context

in which the teacher exists); the other is that language teacher identities are continuously evolving, as "they are constructed discursively in social interaction" (Barkhuizen, 2017, p. 8). Based on my own experiences and on the insights gained from interviewing the four participants, in this narrative account I trace my journey of reconciling multilingual identities with the NNEST identity, and thus developing new and more complex multilingual teacher identities.

I begin by describing in detail my own multilingual background, as well as those of the four participants, and then I focus on three main areas that emerged from the interviews: our status and experiences as foreign NNESTs in Japan, what we feel we can contribute to the development of our learners, and how we approach the multilingual turn for learner development in our own classrooms.

Personal Narrative: Becoming Multilingual

I remember lying in bed just before drifting to sleep and feeling utterly mentally exhausted after what had after all been just a normal day. I had attended a few Japanese language lessons in the morning and then spent the afternoon and evening with my new friends—international students from around the world, all of us enrolled in a one-year intensive Japanese program in Osaka, and living in dormitories on the university campus. At the time, I had just arrived in Japan from my home country of Romania in order to attend university, and I was adjusting to my new multilingual reality. I used Japanese in my classes at university, English was the lingua franca when communicating with other international students in my program, I still spoke Romanian with my Romanian classmates and my family, and I was starting to use Spanish to more easily communicate with my new Latin American friends.

Until recently, I considered that particular time in Osaka when I was using several languages concurrently to be the beginning of my multilingual identity. However, as I learned about the early 20th-century work of John Dewey on "continuity," which he sees as "the notion that experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2), I realized that far from being a beginning, these experiences were merely a continuation of the multilingual environment of my childhood and teenage years in Romania.

I was raised in a region in Romania where Hungarian and German communities are part of the fabric of society and from my earliest infancy, close family friends would switch between Romanian and Hungarian or German on a daily basis. My mother, a teacher of English and French, taught me English (and to a lesser extent French, which I also learned in school) from early childhood, and I was also exposed to significant amounts of English media on Romanian TV. During my elementary school years, Romania transitioned from a communist regime to a more democratic one, which brought with it a greater degree of openness towards the west. One way this openness manifested itself was the introduction of European TV channels into Romanian households. Within about two years of this, my childhood friends and I were using fluent Italian, which we all acquired exclusively from watching TV, to communicate on the playground.

Another language I had been interested in from early childhood was Japanese. When I was in elementary school, I came across a collection of Japanese folk tales translated into Romanian and it quickly became one of my favorite books. It also inspired a lifelong interest in the Japanese language and culture, so when an opportunity came up during my teenage years to learn Japanese as an extracurricular activity, I jumped at the chance. I eventually moved to Japan as a foreign student to complete my BA and later my MA at Japanese universities. For over seven years, I was part of the community of foreign students in Japan,

which could be described as super-diverse (Vertovec, 2007), with many countries in the world represented. My closest friends during this time were Latin American, South African, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Welsh, and of course Japanese. English and Japanese were the most common lingua francas used in this community, and all foreign students switched between these and other linguistic varieties in their repertoires.

Even as my own multilayered identities as a multilingual speaker were evolving, the concept of native-speakerism (Holliday, 2006) was a very strong influence on how I saw myself as an English speaker and later as an English teacher. Despite the fact that I was a fully proficient speaker of English, I took every small error or mistake as proof that I was in fact not a native speaker, which I saw as the ultimate goal of my lifelong efforts as a learner of English. Only in the last five to ten years have I become "free," so to speak, from the pressure of my aspiration to become a native-like English speaker, which I had acutely felt for basically my entire experience as an English learner in Romania. This freedom has come about through being exposed to research on the evolution of the multilingual turn in language education (see for example Conteh & Meier, 2014; May, 2014) and the questioning of monolingual bias and the native speaker norm in language teaching (Ortega, 2014).

Participants' Journeys to Multilingual Identities

Before going into the main themes that emerged from our discussions, I would like to briefly introduce the four multilingual teachers participating in this research project. All direct quotes from the interviews are represented in italics, and I have decided to use different colors for each of the four participants:

- Maria – purple
- Clara – blue
- Nicolas – green
- Mona – red

To understand their diverse multilingual backgrounds, I first asked how they acquired the languages in their repertoires. Then, I invited them to talk about their multilingual 'awakening', that is the time they first started to think of themselves as multilinguals. Finally, I explored with them their current linguistic environments and patterns of language use. A detailed account for each of the four teachers follows, as I believe their multilingual backgrounds are a crucial aspect of their teacher identity and their attitudes in relation to the multilingual turn in the language classroom.

Maria

Maria is originally from a Latin American country, where she grew up speaking Spanish. From the age of five, she lived with her family in Belgium for a few years, and she acquired French there *in a natural environment*, without actually studying it as a second language. She feels that:

> *having learned a second language at such a young age helped me acquire other languages with relative ease.*

She goes on to mention that she also acquired English *in a natural way* by watching movies, as well as listening to music and figuring out the lyrics as a teenager. This meant that when she took an English proficiency test around the age of fifteen, her level was intermediate to advanced. She had a brief stay in Japan at the age of seventeen, which was when she started

using English for communicative purposes and also studying Japanese, which she continued once she returned to her home country. Later, she moved to Japan permanently and studied Japanese during her graduate studies.

Maria spoke in detail about how she feels about her command of English and Japanese:

I feel that I can communicate in English but I do not feel entirely free when I use it. At this point, after 16 years of living in Japan, I feel I have the same level of handicap both in Japanese and in English. I can use both of them freely to a certain extent, but I cannot use either of them as I can use my native language.

For Maria, multilingual usage is separated by people, as well as by situations. Her current daily linguistic environment includes Spanish which she uses at home and also at work when she teaches it, English for her job mostly, and Japanese at home with her family and in the wider Japanese society.

I would say it's like 50% Japanese, 30% English, and 20% Spanish, and that changes according to the subject that I am teaching. I use Spanish less than before at home.

When I asked her how she feels about her multilingual day to day life, the first thing she mentioned was missing Spanish, although she does not feel she has lost any ability to use Spanish. About the other two languages in her repertoire, Maria commented:

With Japanese and English I feel the same level of 'foreign-ness'. I feel pretty comfortable in both of them but I don't feel either of them is my natural environment.

Clara

Clara is originally from an Eastern European country and grew up speaking the language of her home country as her first language. She started learning English with a private tutor from six years old through to the end of high school. As part of her formal education, she studied a multitude of languages other than English: Russian from fifth grade to eighth grade, Spanish and Japanese in high school, and German in university. However, Clara said:

I don't remember actually using any of these languages.

She does talk about using some English during international summer tennis tournaments in her childhood, but she was feeling shy about her English abilities. Her Japanese teacher also created some chances for her to use her Japanese, for example by inviting other Japanese speakers to class, but there were not many such opportunities.

When Clara first came to Japan for one year, it was a turning point for her multilingual development. She was in an advanced Japanese class, but struggled very much because she had only learned *textbook Japanese, very polite, very correct Japanese*, which did not help her to make Japanese friends. At the same time, she used English with the other foreign students in her program because everyone was more confident in their English skills. After this one year, she returned to her home country and she remembers:

I really wanted to use the English and the Japanese all the time. It was that something was missing. I was actively looking for opportunities to use the languages. I think at that point it started to become like part of me.

Clara added that she considers this to be the starting point of her multilingual identity.

Currently, Clara uses four languages on a daily basis: English with her husband and at work, Japanese with the administrative staff at work and in Japanese society, and her native

language with her children (but also Japanese with her elder son). The fourth language is Spanish, which she understands because her husband uses it with their children. This linguistic environment is normal for her, and she feels that it is a natural progression of the environment she experienced in graduate school in Japan, where she was surrounded by friends from all over the world.

> *Being surrounded by such a multicultural environment, it becomes the norm. Maybe at the beginning I was confused by the languages, but right now, no problem.*

Nicolas

Nicolas is a native Spanish speaker and was born in a Latin American country. From the age of two until he was six years old, his family lived in Canada, where he attended an English-speaking nursery. At the time, he was more proficient in English than in Spanish, and he talks about learning the alphabet in English rather than Spanish, which influences him to this day.

> *Back home, when I was in elementary school and I needed to look for something in the dictionary, I would say the a, b, c in English.*

In Canada he was also exposed to French in the wider community, but not to the same extent as English.

Nicolas maintained his English after returning to his home country at the age of six, partly through the efforts of his mother who made sure to provide books, as well as tutors and after-school programs in English. During his teenage years, he was also influenced by English language movies and music, and especially computer role-playing games:

> *Believe it or not, I learned most of my grammar and most of my English through role-playing games on PC. Back then, [...] if you needed a character to eat, [...] you needed to write "eat blah blah blah".*

Later Nicolas moved to Japan to attend graduate school. In preparation for this, he studied Japanese for three months before leaving his home country. Because he studied cultural anthropology, he was fascinated by cultures far from his own, and he feels that both his Japanese language ability and his cultural understanding of Japan developed most when he started teaching English in Japan.

> *When I came to Japan, I had no Japanese [...] Teaching to Japanese [people] is what really allowed me to understand Japanese culture. It made me understand more their mindset.*

When I asked him about his multilingual identity, Nicolas explained he considered himself to be multilingual when he returned from Canada in his childhood, and he believes that the environment he was in played an important role in his identity realization:

> *In a place where everyone was speaking Spanish, I saw myself as different.*

But he also talked about his years in graduate school in similar terms, as a time of great change in his identity development:

> *Those two years formed me in a way. I saw the world in a different way.*

Mona

Mona is originally from the Middle East and Farsi is her mother tongue. She started learning English from the age of twelve in an English institution and continued throughout her

teenage years. After that, she also studied French and at the time could speak a little of the language. However, in her early 20s she moved to Japan and started learning Japanese so she says she forgot her French.

At the moment, Mona uses three languages as part of her daily linguistic environment: Farsi, English and Japanese. She uses Farsi at home with her family, although she occasionally mixes some Japanese words when speaking with her children who are attending Japanese school. She uses English at work and Japanese for communication with Japanese friends and her children's teachers.

I asked Mona how she feels about her daily linguistic environment and she talked about how it is natural for her to switch languages now. However, she said it was confusing for her at first, when she would use Farsi words in her English medium language classes or words from other languages in Japanese. She went on to say:

> *But this is happening very rarely these days. Most of the time it's getting like switching between things [languages] automatically.*

She did mention that there is a difference between using her native language and the other languages in her repertoire. It is quite tiring for her when she needs to use English or Japanese all day, especially for academic work, but this does not happen with Farsi.

For Mona, moving to Japan was also an inflection point in her identity, and she sees it as the moment she became multilingual:

> *When we came here I needed to use English or Japanese for communication and then I think little by little [I realized my life was multilingual].*

Even though Maria, Clara, Nicolas, and Mona come from different parts of the world, there are numerous parallels between their multilingual experiences. One fascinating insight that I gained from all four teachers was the fact that the realization of their multilingualism came at times of change, and only after it had already started becoming a lived reality for them. This resonated with me as well because of my own experience of using several varieties in my linguistic repertoire at the same time when I moved to Japan, which I believe brought about my 'multilingual awakening'.

Being Foreign NNESTs in Japan

Following these stories of multilingualism and evolution, I would like to move on to discuss the three main themes that emerged from my interviews with Maria, Clara, Nicolas and Mona, namely, how we see ourselves as NNESTs in Japan, what we believe we can bring to our learners' linguistic and cultural development, and how we grapple with reconciling our multilingual lives with our teaching approaches and beliefs for the classroom.

At this point, more information about how the interviews with the four participants were conducted is in order. For each of the four interviews (which took place over Zoom and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes), I was guided by the idea of co-constructing narratives of NNEST experiences in Japan by adding my own experiences and reflections to theirs. In this approach, I was influenced by Block's (2000) conceptualization of interviews as "co-constructed," so that "interview data are seen not as reflections of underlying memory but as voices adopted by research participants in response to the researcher's prompts and questions" (p. 759). I also wanted to explore my relationship as a researcher with the participants in my research through an approach based on Martin-Jones et al. (2017), who showed that the identities of the researcher and participants can and should no longer be considered in fixed, binary terms, especially in the case of multilingualism research.

As a first step in bridging the gap between the multilingual reality of our private lives and the as of yet inescapable categorization as NNESTs in the English teaching profession in Japan, it is necessary to acknowledge and record the experiences that we have had throughout our teaching careers.

Before I move on to describing these experiences, however, I would like to take a moment to discuss why I believe it is important to provide a medium for the voices of foreign national NNESTs in Japan to be heard. Despite the fact that NNESTs are believed to make up about 80% of all English teachers around the world (Braine, 2010), they have had very little visibility in the field of TESOL until relatively recently (Kamhi-Stein, 2016). The influence of native-speakerism, defined by Holliday (2006) as "a pervasive ideology within ELT, characterized by the belief that 'native-speaker' teachers represent a 'Western culture' from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology" (p. 385), is still undeniable. The traces of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) in Asia and in Japan (Braine, 2010) are still clear in the field of second language education. On the other hand, within the Japanese context in particular, there have been attempts to redefine native-speakerism to also include the discrimination faced by NESTs in terms of employment conditions in Japan (Houghton & Rivers, 2013b). However, different contributions in the same volume edited by Houghton and Rivers (2013a) show that the ELT labor market in Japan is "dichotomized as Japanese/non-Japanese" (Hayes, 2013, p. 132) and also that "the vast majority of foreign English teachers in Japan can be assumed to be native speakers" (Geluso, 2013, p. 94). This means that non-Japanese, non-native English speakers are virtually invisible as English language teachers in Japan.

Focusing on the stories of such teachers could not only create a more inclusive working environment in the ELT field in Japan, but also constitute a first step towards moving beyond the NEST/NNEST dichotomy and seeing most language teachers as multilingual teachers. Unsurprisingly, the four teachers I interviewed had much to share with me, so I have separated this longer section into two subsections, the first dealing with our experiences as NNESTs in Japan, and the second with our self-perceptions as multilingual NNESTs.

Experiences as NNESTs in Japan

During my interviews with the four NNESTs one of the topics that we covered extensively was the discrimination we experienced when applying for various English teaching positions in Japan. In my case for example, in my early career, I had to constantly justify my qualifications as an English teacher in Japan. In one instance, I worked very hard to convince the owner of a small English conversation school to hire me as a part-time English teacher. One of her first questions during my interview was why she should hire a Romanian for the position. I felt it was my job to impress upon her that, as a non-native speaker who had acquired English in a similar fashion to the students in her school (i.e., in an EFL context), I was in fact much better qualified for the position than the NESTs with no formal training she had already employed. There were other instances in my later career when, despite the fact that I had earned an MA in sociolinguistics and language education, and had become a certified TESOL instructor, various administrators and office staff at different Japanese universities questioned my ability to effectively teach English based solely on my Romanian nationality and my "non-native speaker" status.

During our conversations, Maria, Clara, and Mona talked about both systemic discrimination against them as NNESTs and examples of students having discriminatory attitudes. In terms of systemic discrimination, Mona reported a similar experience to mine. At one university, following a successful job interview she was contacted by the administration

by email with concerns about her non-native English speaker status. They asked for proof of her English proficiency, but the faculty member in charge of coordinating the program intervened on her behalf and the issue was resolved.

Clara talked about a different type of systemic discrimination, namely, how English teaching jobs are advertised in Japan. She said about her current job:

It was advertised initially for native speakers so I thought: I'm not going to bother applying.

Maria, on the other hand, mentioned that she has noticed that recently there are fewer jobs advertised exclusively for NESTs.

Maria had a very interesting take on this issue of systemic discrimination in the workplace because she also had the experience of working as an English teacher in her home country before coming to Japan. She described the situation there as being very similar to Japan in that, in certain schools, not very qualified NESTs have much better working conditions and pay than qualified local NNESTs. Maria feels that in Japan, NESTs with the same qualifications as her have a better chance to get a teaching job.

I think it's connected to a larger system of discrimination. Should it change? Absolutely! Should there be a better understanding of how English is not owned by native speakers but it's already a global tool that anyone has access to? Yes, sure!

Although she thinks that there should be systemic change in English language teaching in Japan, she does not feel that individual NNESTs can bring about change on their own.

Another topic that came up in our conversations was exactly how salient our status as NNESTs in Japan is for our careers. When Maria and I talked about how we might be different from NESTs in Japan, she said:

The difference is more important for us than it is for everybody else.

Clara talked about being the only foreign NNEST in the department at one university, but also about how at a different university she was part of a very diverse group of English teachers originating from India, Nepal, the Netherlands, or Uzbekistan.

Another point of discussion with the participants concerned how they feel their NNEST status influences their students. Maria mentioned that at the beginning of her teaching career, she did not feel as accepted by some of her Japanese students, especially those who had lived abroad.

I remember that one of them asked me: where is your accent from? And I said: well, where do you think it's from? And she said: anywhere but not native. So that made also a distinction: you can't pass for a native speaker. [...] I recognize there is less acceptance of the non-native English speaker as an English teacher.

Mona, on the other hand, talked about a certain lack of awareness in her students :

I think most of my students don't really see me as a native or non-native. They are not really paying attention to this, my background, compared to faculty members and administrative staff who are labeling teachers as native versus non-native.

Clara also mentioned how many of her students forget she is not a native speaker of English by the end of the course, and she relayed an instance when a student was actually shocked to hear that as a non-native speaker herself, Clara could understand his struggles with learning English.

Here, I believe it is worth observing that the teachers I interviewed thought more readily of negative experiences related to their status as NNESTs in Japan. This is something that struck

me when reading Canagarajah's (2017) reflections on teacher identity, where he talks about his students' negative reactions to him as an NNEST. To me, this shows a still prevalent belief that native speakers make for superior teachers of languages, as well as the persistence, and perhaps ubiquity of discriminatory practices in the ELT field in Japan and elsewhere. This may go some way towards explaining the difficulties of moving beyond the NEST / NNEST dichotomy and towards reconceptualizing language teachers as multilingual teachers.

Self-Perceptions

Closely reflecting enduring trends in the literature on language learning and teaching (see for example Medgyes, 1994; Moussu & Llurda, 2008; Marr & English, 2019), the very question of what makes a native speaker of English or a non-native speaker of English turned out to be a difficult one in the conversations I had with the four participants. We discussed how we see ourselves and in some instances how we came to terms with our non-native speaker of English status.

We all consider ourselves non-native speakers of English, but when we discussed what this means for us personally, Mona began by saying:

> *This is a very interesting and difficult at the same time question. This is really hard to talk about.*

Nicolas had a more nuanced take on his non-native speaker of English status:

> *I'm not native but that's debatable because my native language is Spanish, but my first language was English.*

On the other hand, Clara talked about a complex she always had:

> *I will always be a non-native speaker of English. It would be presumptuous of me to say otherwise. [...] This was a complex that probably I had. I consider myself a non-native speaker. I'm very aware that I sometimes make mistakes, I don't find the right words or the context.*

Maria had an interesting take on the same complex when we talked about our aspirations to become native-like in our use of English:

> *It is part of a colonial complex of never being as good as the colonizers.*

Such issues related to the self-perceived inadequacy of NNESTs as English speakers have been extensively reported in the literature (see for example Braine, 2010; Marr & English, 2019). Even though there is much advocacy for the abolition of the native speaker norm, that does not make these issues any less real and present in the lives and professional careers of NNESTs.

Nevertheless, the NNESTs I interviewed seemed to make attempts to reclaim the term non-native speaker. A similar attempt is discussed by Kamhi-Stein (2016) who argues that non-native speakers themselves have begun to stop seeing non-nativeness as a negative attribute. Moreover, as far back as the 1990s, Kramsch (1997) questioned the very need for non-native speakers to aspire to become native-like: "Why should they disregard their unique multilingual perspective on the foreign language and on its literature and culture to emulate the idealized monolingual speaker?" (p. 359). This particular quote from Kramsch (1997) struck me as particularly important because, during the same time in the mid-1990s, I remember feeling great pressure (mostly self-imposed) to become indistinguishable from a native speaker of English. During our interview, Maria also talked a lot about how she was focused on achieving *perfect pronunciation* in English when she was younger, but now that she recognizes the diversity in accents, she has

become free from the struggle of having to have a perfect accent.

I described earlier how I also began to feel that I have finally become free from the pressure of aspiring to become a native speaker of English through my involvement with research on the multilingual turn in learner development. Could this freedom be an initial step towards a different awareness of our teacher identities, one that moves us forward on the journey towards seeing ourselves as multilingual teachers?

Influencing Our Learners' Development

The debate over what NESTs and NNESTs can bring to the classroom and thus contribute to the development of their learners has been an enduring one in the literature. On the one hand, NESTs have traditionally been seen as authorities on the language (Canagarajah, 1999), the best models for students (Marr & English, 2019) and purveyors of culture (Medgyes, 1994). However, Braine (2010) and Kramsch (1997), among many others, have questioned this perceived superiority of native speakers of English as English teachers. Indeed, Moussu and Llurda (2008) pointed out that "many so-called NSs can be far less intelligible in global settings than well-educated proficient speakers of a second language" (p. 318). Also, Seidlhofer (1999) makes a further argument for the ability of NNESTs to bring something to the language classroom that NESTs can not. She uses a beautiful journey metaphor to make her point: "native speakers know the destination, but not the terrain that has been crossed to get there; they themselves have not travelled the same route" (Seidlhofer, 1999, p. 238).

Although this NEST versus NNEST debate continues in the academic literature, there are also many attempts to move past it and focus instead on what multilingual language teachers can contribute to the development of their learners (Calafato, 2019). The issue of what we can bring to our students' language learning journeys is one that came up in my discussions with Maria, Clara, Nicolas, and Mona as well. We discussed a shared sense of identity as English language learners that we have with our students, our abilities to make ourselves more easily understood in English, and the wealth of language learning strategies we can share with our learners.

I often see myself in my students; I can identify with their dread at being faced with a "wall of text" in English, and with their puzzling over what can seem like nonsensical English grammar or spelling rules. Both Mona and Maria seemed to share these exact feelings. Mona said about her students:

I have studied English as a second language like them, so I can understand. [...] They are connected with this feeling and they get encouraged, I think. [...] Sometimes I see that my friends who are from English speaking countries, they might not fully understand when students ask them questions about grammar and vocabulary.

Maria said:

It was always easier for me to teach Japanese people, because I have also been a student. [...] I went through the process of not being able to speak English to actually being able to communicate in English. So I guess that being a non-native English teacher helped me kind of understand, or be close, or have some sort of identity with the students in that sense.

Nicolas goes even further in an attempt to describe what a language teacher should be:

To be a language teacher, you yourself must have gone through the process of learning a completely foreign language. [...] If you don't have that experience, you can only teach your students 25% of what it means to learn a language.

In our conversations, comments from students about how easy it is to understand us speaking English when compared to NESTs often came up. In a course end survey I administered to my own students, they commented about my use of English in the class:

She is good at putting in other words, so I can understand difficult words. She often cares about our reaction, and change expression depending on our level of understanding. Without her additional explanation, I could not do my best for our assignment.

Clara also talked about her ability to make herself understood as an advantage in the classroom.

I imagine that for a native speaker it's a bit more difficult to adjust the language they speak, but I usually do it; I'm very conscious about it. I try to speak slowly, use easier words; I don't switch immediately to Japanese, I always try to adjust my language first. I've had no complaints from students. They are quite happy that I try to make myself understood. I don't just go there, talk and leave.

Maria told me about comments she received from students that her English was easy to understand, but she had a very interesting and rather different reaction to those comments, especially in her early career:

I remember many of my Japanese students at the time saying: wow, your English is very easy to understand, which I always took as not a real compliment. Not a back-handed compliment, but it meant that my pronunciation was not exactly like native speakers' pronunciation. It's okay, but I always felt that [sigh] it's easy to understand because it's not the real thing.

One of the more practical contributions we have all felt that we can make to our students' development as language learners is sharing our language learning strategies. We often get questions from students about the best ways to learn English, and we can bring up our personal language learning experiences to help them with that. Clara put it very succinctly:

Because you yourself are a second language learner, you have experience and you can tell them: 'this is what I used to do'.

Maria spoke in detail about some of the language learning strategies she shares with her students:

I remember specifically once when I was teaching listening skills to one group and I told them what I used to do when I used to take tests: I used to take notes in Spanish because it's what comes out faster. So you listen and you take notes in Spanish and then you either write or speak based on those notes. [...] And I told my students to do that, just take notes in Japanese. I remember one student said this is what she wanted to hear but her native teachers have always taught her to take notes in English because you're listening in English and you must write in English and she said this [Maria's advice] was a life saver. [...] It was something I could say because I had the experience of learning the language.

Nicolas went beyond individual strategies and explained that he incorporates teaching strategic competence in his classes. He gave an example of a Japanese Youtuber whose videos he uses in his classes to illustrate this concept for his students and show them that finding a way to communicate is the most important thing when learning a language. In her videos, this particular Japanese Youtuber explains movies in English, and Nicolas says that despite her *very broken English*, she:

has a very high strategic competence. It's the ability of finding a way of overcoming your difficulties with vocabulary and grammar and still get through your message.

However, when Nicolas shared these videos with an NEST colleague, their reaction was:

> *I couldn't go through that video. I just couldn't stand how she was destroying my language.*

Nicolas describes this colleague as someone who speaks no Japanese and whose attitude of expecting Japanese learners to perfectly speak *their language* is not only counterproductive, but also the very opposite of what a multilingual teacher might bring to the classroom.

A concept that I believe summarizes very well the influences that we as multilingual NNESTs can have on our learners' development is that of "language awareness," which Calafato (2019) describes as "explicit knowledge about and conscious perception of language, its structure and vocabulary, its teaching and learning, as well as its use in social and cultural contexts" (p. 4). The enhanced language awareness that NNESTs have by virtue of their multilingualism is what allows us to better guide our students on their own journeys towards multilingualism.

Engaging With the Multilingual Turn and Becoming Multilingual Teachers

For myself and for the other NNESTs I interviewed, living a multilingual life and constantly switching between languages is a normal part of our day-to-day experiences. However, reconciling our multilingual identities with our English language teaching practices has been much more difficult. When considering introducing a multilingual turn in the English language classroom, one would think that multilingual teachers would be the ideal vehicles for this turn, but this has not necessarily been our collective experience in Japan. During our conversations on multilingualism in our classes, the participants and I first discussed how we deal with the still common "English only" mandates. We also touched upon how we use Japanese in our classrooms and how we raise our students' awareness of the variety of English accents, which I see as initial attempts at introducing the multilingual turn into our classrooms. Another very interesting point brought up by the participants was the fact that often multiculturalism is even more important than multilingualism and that our own multilingual and multicultural backgrounds make us uniquely qualified to expose our Japanese students to various aspects of multiculturalism.

One of the first issues that came up in our discussions of multilingualism in the classroom was that of the mandatory English only policies still prevalent at many Japanese universities. Despite the fact that these policies are a manifestation of native-speakerism (Auerbach, 1993) and linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), all of us seem to have internalized this idea. Mona, for example, talked about how, before she started teaching English in Japan, she was convinced that using only English in the English language classroom was the best approach because this was how she learned English in her home country. Maria had an even stronger internalized feeling about the English only mandate:

> *I use words in Japanese, [...] but I know it's kind of a taboo, like many people don't want to do that, many people think that you should never use words from another language in a sentence in another language, but I don't necessarily feel it's a bad thing to do, so I do it all the time.*

Notwithstanding the fact that we are expected to follow English only policies, all the teachers I interviewed not only reported using Japanese in their English classes, but in some cases, how their Japanese ability actually gives them an advantage over teachers who cannot speak the L1 of Japanese students. Maria talked about using Japanese words that cannot be translated into English like for example *ganbaru* (do one's best). Mona shared how she switches to Japanese in low level classes when students do not understand directions, but she made sure to emphasize that she does not translate for students but merely helps them understand and move on with the lesson. She describes her use of Japanese as:

using some words that can make me feel more connected to the students.

Clara talked about using Japanese not only when lower level students need it, but also for administrative purposes in the classroom, such as when she gives students deadlines or explains important assignments. When I asked her how this use of Japanese changes her class, she mentioned:

I had many students write in their final evaluations that they loved it that I used Japanese, because it makes it easier to understand.

In my own case, I use Japanese in my classroom for all the purposes described above, and I also use it for what I call "entertainment purposes." I often use certain phrases in the more colloquial Kansai dialect of Japanese (like *nande ya nen* / なんでやねん [how come] or *sou nan ya* / そうなんや [is that so]) to break the tension or create some levity in the classroom. Moreover, I make more extensive use of my students' L1 by encouraging them to use it in the planning stages of projects. Almost invariably, this proves to be extremely beneficial for students, not only by improving the quality of their final projects, but also in terms of generating target language. During a recent project I conducted, for example, a group of students were discussing in Japanese how they might respond to other groups' presentations, and they came up with an impressive list of possibilities during a three-minute exchange conducted mainly in Japanese: "*Great! Brilliant! Amazing! That's an interesting answer. That makes sense. That's a good idea. Wow, I want to try that too! I will challenge that some day!*" Had they not been able to use Japanese, I do not believe they would have been as successful at generating quite as many useful English expressions.

Another interesting aspect of incorporating multilingual use into our classrooms is raising Japanese students' awareness of World Englishes (Kirkpatrick, 2007) and the variety of English accents used by English speakers around the world. Mona described a content class she taught in which one of the topics covered was the difference between native and non-native English, and she summarized the students' opinions about the topic:

They were really aware about different kinds of Englishes, not only accents or this kind of surface level. [...] Students are probably more ready to be more open in terms of communication with people from different backgrounds, different accents, different kinds of English as a lingua franca, compared to what we are seeing from the other side, which is how teachers are being recruited or what kind of teachers are being hired.

Maria talked about being asked to teach an English pronunciation class, but she explained:

I am very much against pronunciation classes because I think they are just encouraging this idea that there is one correct pronunciation, when there is not even an agreement among native speakers of what is a good pronunciation.

This is why she was very happy to be able to use that opportunity to introduce her students to many different English accents (Indian, Australian, Brazilian). Her students' first reaction was that the speakers' English was terrible, and that they were not native speakers, so the students were very surprised to learn about the existence of World Englishes. Nicolas also talked about how he deals with what he terms his Japanese students' *obsession with perfect pronunciation*. He explained that he gives his students the statistics on how many people around the world speak English as a first language or as an additional language, and he also teaches them about the variety of English accents even among native speakers. Nicolas says raising this awareness in his Japanese students is very important, not only because they gain confidence when they learn they are in fact among the majority of people who speak English as an additional language, but also because he wants to impress upon his students that:

> *There is no such thing as perfect English, even for native speakers. [...] When they graduate, most of the people they are going to speak with are not native speakers.*

Finally, when asked about multilingualism in their classes, some of the participants pointed out how, even if they do not necessarily use other languages frequently, the aspects of multiculturalism that they bring to the classroom are often more important. Clara, for example, talked about how her multilingual background and experiences play a bigger role in her intercultural communication courses than in her English communication classes. In these courses, she says she can give examples of her own cultural misunderstandings and she can put more of an emphasis on multiculturalism. Nicolas in particular focuses on bringing multiculturalism into his classes:

> *I do not think there is such a thing as multilingualism AND multiculturalism. They are both the same thing. Language and culture are an indivisible unit. I can say that because I come from a multicultural background. [...] Even if I were to teach only grammar, [...] I am still teaching culture.*

In my conversations with the participants, I made sure to ask them how they introduce themselves to students they meet for the first time, because I wanted to know how they feel their very presence in the classroom influences their students. In my own case, I often give my students a set of statements about myself and ask them to guess which ones are true or false. I always include a statement about me being from a non-English-speaking country because I want students to begin questioning their assumptions about who their English teachers should be. Maria mentioned that she used to not tell her students that she is from Latin America, but she does not do that anymore:

> *The first time I taught, I remember trying to hide it, and I don't do that anymore. [...] Because I wanted to be taken seriously, but I was very young and inexperienced and I thought that would matter. [...] But I feel I have the confidence now to say where I am from and to say that I am not a native speaker.*

Mona explained that when she tells her students she is from the Middle East, not only do they want to know more about that, but:

> *Students are ready to accept the multilingual identity or background of their teachers.*

Nicolas concluded our interview with these words, which are very similar to the self-realizations of multilingual teachers reported by Calafato (2019).

> *This is what we, multicultural language teachers can bring to the table. It has nothing to do with being native or not. [...] It has to do with whether you yourself have had a multicultural background that you can use as an asset in the classroom.*

I see this reflection as the perfect encapsulation of our shifting identity towards embracing our multilingualism and also the ways we can engage with the multilingual turn for learner development to help our students become more accepting of language diversity and the use of different languages in the classroom.

Final Thoughts and Future Directions

As I bring this narrative account to a close, I wish I could say that I have a clear destination in mind for my journey of evolution from NNEST to multilingual teacher, but alas, I do not. I can, however, say that my multilingual identity and my professional identity as an English teacher no longer seem quite so irreconcilable. Sharing my experiences as an NNEST

with other NNESTs in Japan, as well as reflecting with them about what our presence in the classroom means for our students, and about ways to make multilingualism and multiculturalism an integral part of our teaching and learning, has been transformative for me. Acknowledging who we are and how we got here as multilingual speakers and English teachers, as well as accepting and maybe even letting go of ingrained assumptions, are all necessary steps in the journey towards a fully fledged multilingual teacher identity.

I am, however, left with more puzzles to ponder, but I feel they have become more conscious for me as I work on thinking them through. As this narrative account has focused on teacher identities and practices, one of the main remaining puzzles is what multilingual teachers can do to encourage learners to work multilingually through classroom practices around using languages in combination. Another puzzle relates to how multilingual teachers can help learners develop their own multilingual identities within an interconnected, multilingual, and multicultural world, by opening their eyes to the value of multilingual practices. Resolving these puzzles might mean more than just encouraging students to make free use of their L1 as part of their English language development, because it involves bringing down ingrained norms, both institutional and ideological, about appropriate language use, language ownership, and discourses of power.

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