Negotiating Third Spaces of Institutional Belonging: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Expatriate Language Teacher-Scholars

Luis Javier Pentón Herrera [a], Anna Becker [b], Huseyin Uysal [c, *]

[a] *VIZJA University, Poland*

[b] *Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland*

[c] *The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong*

A B S T R A C T

In this collaborative autoethnography (CAE), we explore how institutions shape our sense of belonging as expatriate language teacher-scholars. Using Bhabha's (1994) Third Space Theory as a theoretical lens, we, three expatriate language teacher-scholars from diverse linguistic, cultural, and professional backgrounds, engaged in critical dialogue and reflection to analyze our personal narratives. Our findings indicate that institutions profoundly influence our sense of belonging through multiple interconnected factors, including language(s) used, professional recognition and support, collegial relationships, and employment stability. Institutions that proactively provided supportive measures—such as language assistance, acknowledgment of professional expertise, and secure employment conditions—significantly enhanced our feelings of inclusion. Conversely, the absence of such support often reinforced our experiences of isolation and exclusion. This CAE underscores the necessity of institutional practices that actively cultivate inclusive environments, accommodating the unique needs of expatriate educators and facilitating their professional and emotional integration. Ultimately, our findings highlight the dynamic, ongoing negotiation of hybrid identities within institutional third spaces.

Keywords: teacher identity; emotions; teaching beliefs; native-speakerism; narrative inquiry

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Introduction

In the field of language education, language teacher identity (LTI) has garnered exponential attention in recent years, turning it into a well-established area of interest. This burgeoning scholarship has illuminated various dimensions of LTI, with significant works at its intersection exploring themes such as power (Barkhuizen, 2016; Uysal, 2024b), professional development (Chen et al., 2023), emotions and well-being (De Costa & Uysal, 2025; Feryok, 2025; Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2022), tensions and negotiations (Becker, 2022; Kim & Uysal, 2024; Yazan et al., 2023), agency (Kim & Uysal, 2025; Tao & Gao, 2021), and investment and beliefs (Kalaja et al., 2015; Uysal et al., 2024), among others. Each of these facets has contributed to a richer understanding of the complexities and dynamics shaping LTI across diverse contexts, highlighting the need to examine the specific environments that influence these identities (Barkhuizen, 2017; The Douglas Fir Group, 2016). The interplay between identity and the emotional landscape of language teaching, as articulated by Miller and Gkonou (2024), underscores how belonging deeply intertwines with both LTI and emotions, reflecting that the sense of belonging—or lack thereof—profoundly affects language teachers' lives.

The concept of belonging has been previously explored and theorized in the field. Belonging has been described as feeling "respected, valued, accepted, included, and connected to a social group or community" (Karim & Hue, 2022, p. 463). Similarly, scholars agree that language teachers' sense of belonging—and by extension, their LTI, emotions, actions, and well-being—are inescapably intertwined with and molded by the institutions they reside in and/or interact with (Miller & Gkonou, 2024; Nazari & Xodabande, 2022). Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Wenger's (1998) work on *Communities of Practice* positioned belonging as a process of participation and identity formation, where individuals construct meaning and legitimacy through shared practices. Expanding on the relationship between belonging and identity, scholars like Anthias (2018) have suggested that to belong is to feel personally and emotionally connected, which stipulates an essential engagement with the physical and social places where individuals operate. This engagement is essential for language teachers, as our identities are never constructed in isolation (Barkhuizen, 2017). LTIs are molded by the intricate web of relationships and structural conditions within our educational institutions. As Varghese et al. (2005) argue, teacher identity is "multiple, shifting, and in conflict" (p. 22); "social, cultural, and political context—interlocutors, institutional settings" (p. 23); and "constructed, maintained, and negotiated primarily through discourse" (p. 35). This means that institutional contexts are never neutral backdrops but actively shape how LTI is experienced and enacted.

Despite the apparent role of institutions in shaping LTI, much of the existing literature has focused primarily on how institutional demands adversely affect LTI from secondhand perspectives (Aminifard et al., 2025; Kayi-Aydar, 2019). However, firsthand, autoethnographic accounts of how institutions as distinct entities can support expatriate language teachers' sense of belonging remain scarce. Thus, in this collaborative autoethnography (CAE), we, three expatriate teacher-scholars from diverse linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and social backgrounds, who currently work in higher education and reside in Poland (Luis Javier and Anna), and Hong Kong (Huseyin), employ Bhabha's (1990, 1994) Third Space Theory as our theoretical framework to explore the question: *In what ways do institutions affect our sense of belonging as expatriate language teacher-scholars?* The significance of this study lies in its contribution to filling a notable gap in LTI research and the field, which has tended to examine institutional demands from second-hand perspectives rather than through firsthand, autoethnographic accounts (cf. Aminifard et al., 2025; Kayi-Aydar, 2019). By situating our narratives within Bhabha's Third Space, we extend current understandings of belonging beyond its common framing as a personal or emotional state to show how institutional practices and policies actively affect our sense of belonging as expatriate language teacher-scholars. In doing so, this CAE simultaneously enriches theoretical debates on hybridity and identity negotiation while also

providing practical insights for institutions seeking to cultivate inclusive and sustainable environments for their international faculty.

As a final point, we recognize the need to clarify how we describe ourselves within this paper: whether as teachers, educators, scholars, or teacher-scholars. This clarification reflects the complex and hybrid nature of professional identity, where the roles of teachers, educators, and researchers can no longer be considered static or distinct, as they often overlap, shift, and are negotiated across different institutions and cultures. Our diverse professional trajectories demonstrate that identity is rarely fixed but continually negotiated through the intersection of these roles and contexts. In this paper, we therefore primarily refer to ourselves as language teacher-scholars, a term that captures the multifaceted nature of our careers. All three of us have taught languages in various contexts, and although only one of us is currently engaged in classroom teaching, we have also worked as language teacher educators and are actively involved in research. The language teacher-scholar identity acknowledges this hybridity, positioning us not solely as teachers, nor exclusively as researchers, but as professionals whose roles span teaching, research, and teacher education (Barkhuizen, 2021; Consoli & Dikilitaş, 2021). We also occasionally use the term *educator* when emphasizing our roles in teacher preparation and broader pedagogical practices.

Theoretical Framework

In this CAE, we employ Third Space Theory (Bhabha, 1994) as a way to understand the complex interplay of our identities within a space defined neither by one entity nor another but by the richness of hybridity. This theory posits that knowledge production occurs in a 'Third Space'—an ambiguous area that fosters the creation of unique identities through the engagement and interaction of differing perspectives. As Bhabha explains, "the non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space—a third space—where negotiation of incommensurable differences create a tension peculiar to borderline existences" (1994, p. 312). In describing this third space, Young (1995) emphasizes the presence of a "restless, uneasy and interstitial hybridity" (p. 25), which fosters cultural transformation, with hybridity becoming a lasting condition rather than a temporary stage. Bhabha's notion of the Third Space challenges traditional binary oppositions and instead fosters a site where new forms of meaning and identity can be negotiated and articulated. The theory suggests that this liminal space is dynamic, which allows for the continuous production and re-positioning of meaning and symbols, as these are not fixed but open to reinterpretation and recontextualization (Kim, 2020).

Third Space Theory has been extensively applied in educational research to explore identity formation and a sense of belonging, particularly among educators (Mendieta Aguilar & Rütti-Joy, 2023). This framework highlights the dialogic processes whereby teacher identities evolve through the negotiation of personal and professional narratives within institutional contexts (Zeichner, 2010; Zhang & Yuan, 2019). Thus, Third Space emerges as a milieu where individual and ideological differences do not merely coexist but actively engage with one another to forge new hybrid identities. Such insights are instrumental in examining the nuanced roles of institutions in shaping LTI, as educators navigate the interplay of diverse realities, ideologies, and professional demands. Scholars like Gutiérrez (2008) and Moje et al. (2004) illustrate how Third Space Theory can serve as a transformative lens to explore the construction of hybrid identity within multilingual and multicultural educational settings, recognizing the various actors (e.g., institutions, communities, policies) affecting this process.

In our CAE, we found Third Space Theory particularly relevant to our research and lives as we are language teachers and scholars who reside in a literal third space. The three of us were born in one country, earned our PhDs in a second country, and now live in a third country (shown in Figure 1).

For us, Third Space Theory represents not only a theoretical framework but a tangible representation of our lives, allowing us to delve into how we, as expatriate language teacher-scholars, construct and negotiate our professional identities in these transnational contexts. We consider Third Space particularly effective for studying belonging because it captures the fluid, hybrid nature of expatriate identity formation, which we find to be rarely fixed within a single cultural, linguistic, or institutional frame. Belonging for expatriate teacher-scholars, such as ourselves, often involves navigating contradictions (e.g., professional recognition alongside marginalization, or institutional support alongside exclusion). Thus, Third Space offers a conceptual lens through which to view these tensions not merely as deficits, but as generative sites of negotiation and meaning-making (cf. Moje et al., 2004). As such, Third Space offers a powerful framework for understanding how belonging is continually reconstructed through our interactions with institutions across shifting social, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. By employing this theory, we are particularly interested in exploring the processes that shape our engagement and adaptation within our current professional third space. In this CAE, we examine these dynamics and focus on how we create new meanings and understandings about how our institutions affect or have affected our sense of belonging as expatriate language teachers.
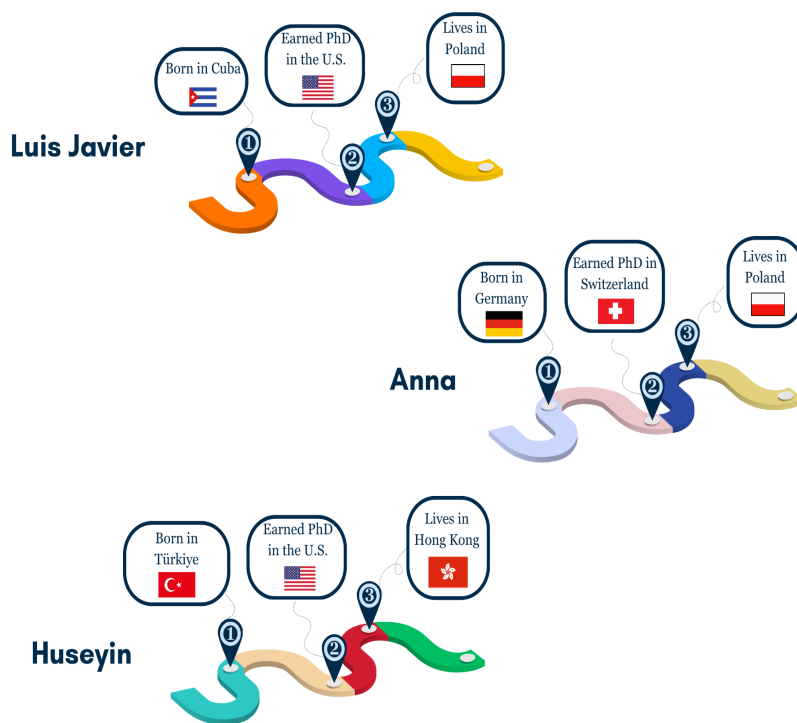

Figure 1. Our Personal and Professional Trajectories

Methodology

In our study, which spanned from January to March 2025, we employed CAE as outlined by Chang et al. (2013), which is characterized by its self-reflective, context-conscious, and critically dialogic approach. This methodology enabled us to explore and articulate our LTIs as language teachers,

scholars, and educators within various institutions and international contexts through a process deeply rooted in personal and shared narratives (Yazan, 2024). Although the main phase of data collection and analysis took place from mid-January to late March 2025, we also engaged in virtual pre-writing conversations (via emails and WhatsApp) in early January and continued refining our analyses into early April 2025, illustrating the iterative and ongoing nature of CAE. Initially, our collaborative effort began with the formation of our research team in response to a call for proposals for this Special Issue. At the time, Luis Javier was collaborating separately with Anna (see Pentón Herrera & Becker, 2025) and with Huseyin (Uysal & Pentón Herrera, 2026) on two different projects. Recognizing that, despite our diverse linguistic, cultural, and professional backgrounds, the three of us were all negotiating our professional lives in an actual third space (i.e., an institution located in a country other than our place of birth or a country other than the place where we earned our doctorates), Luis Javier invited us to come together to pursue this study and more deeply explore our experiences as expatriate language teacher-scholars. The rationale for our collaboration was thus to address a notable gap in the field: the lack of firsthand, autoethnographic accounts of how institutions shape expatriate language teacher-scholars' sense of belonging.

To carry out this study, we relied on both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration. Our primary platforms for collaboration were Google Documents, where we drafted and commented on each other's narratives, and WhatsApp, which we used for written and voice-based discussions, but we also used emails occasionally. All materials—including personal narratives, discussion threads, comments, and shared academic artifacts—were stored in a shared Google Drive folder, which functioned as both a data repository and an evolving research log. This systematic organization of data reflects Chang et al.'s (2013) recommendation that CAE projects treat personal memory data, dialogic exchanges, and cultural artifacts as interconnected sources of evidence. For instance, one WhatsApp voice note in which Anna reflected on her struggles with temporary contracts was later transcribed into Google Documents and became a focal point of our discussion about stability and belonging. We began data generation by asking each other questions (e.g., How have institutions shaped your sense of belonging as an expatriate teacher-scholar?) centered around our primary research focus on our sense of belonging at our institutions. We responded to these questions and open-ended prompts through personal narratives (both individual and collective), dialogic exchanges, and academic artifacts, which were shared primarily via Google Documents and WhatsApp, and sometimes via email. Engaging with each other's autoethnographic explorations led to iterative reflection, clarification, and deeper collaborative analysis.

Our approach to data analysis combined individual and collective reflection. Individually, each author revisited their narratives to highlight turning points and institutional influences. Collectively, we engaged in cycles of reading, questioning, and responding to each other's texts, both in Google Documents and via WhatsApp. Through this dialogic exchange, we began to notice recurring themes, such as the role of language(s), institutional recognition, collegial support, and stability, that cut across our experiences. These emergent categories were not pre-determined but inductively derived from our interactions, resembling thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our analysis was therefore iterative, where insights gleaned from one discussion informed the next, blurring the lines between data generation and analysis (Chang et al., 2013). Reflexivity was a hallmark of our process. In practice, this meant that colleagues' comments frequently reshaped our interpretations—for example, when Luis Javier asked Huseyin whether his past institutional experiences influenced his teaching philosophy, which prompted deeper reflection on pedagogy. Such reflexive interventions (Byrd Clark & Dervin, 2014) illustrate how CAE fosters critical re-positioning of the self in relation to others (Yazan, 2024). This reflexive practice also aligns with Spry's (2001) notion of the "convincing I" (p. 713), in which autoethnographic inquiry moves beyond confessional storytelling toward theoretically informed critique.

To enhance the reliability and validity of our findings, we implemented member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by sharing our analyses with each other for feedback, ensuring that interpretations

were accurate and resonant with all team members' experiences. Additionally, we sought feedback from external peers, which provided critical outsider perspectives and further strengthened our analysis. Framed within Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of trustworthiness, we worked toward credibility (through member checking and reflexive dialogue), transferability (by providing thick descriptions of our experiences), dependability (through iterative cycles of analysis and peer feedback), and confirmability (by keeping a transparent record of our data in Google Drive). This triangulation of data sources, combined with reflective discussions and external validations, strengthened the rigor of our research process, ensuring that our conclusions were robust and grounded in a collective, scrutinized understanding of our experiences. Recognizing that autoethnographic narratives have the power to "move listeners in personally meaningful ways" (Grant & Lloyd-Parkes, 2024, p. 13), we carefully framed our accounts to be both relatable and reflective of the complexities of our experiences.

Introducing Ourselves

Before we introduce ourselves individually, we will highlight what brings us together. All three of us have experience in teaching language courses across various levels and contexts, and we have also worked in language teacher preparation programs. Additionally, each of us identifies as an expatriate, though this term holds different meanings for us. For Luis Javier, for example, the label 'expatriate' is intertwined with a history of trauma from having been born and raised in Cuba. He and his family are political refugees and, as a result of this, his family is currently dispersed throughout Poland, Cuba, Costa Rica, and the United States.

For Anna, the literal meaning of the word 'expatriate'—ex (out of) and patria (country) is very visual. Being labeled or self-identifying as an expatriate comes close to processes of deterritorialization and the removal of belonging and home. Losing one's home (even temporarily) and deterritorializing in an undetermined space can be lonely and scary. Knowing where to belong brings security and stability, on which human beings often rely. As a German citizen (but not a resident), the labeling is very real. For instance, on her ID card (Personalausweis), it specifically says that she has "keine Wohnung in Deutschland," loosely translating to 'no residence in Germany.' This is thus a very visual demonstration of being an expatriate, of being out of the country. At the same time, she does not currently possess another document stating her residence anywhere else, making her question her belonging to a specific (actual) space or whether the processes of (de-)territorialization, as described by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), better capture a constant in-between, moving between countries, jobs, and homes.

Lastly, for Huseyin, the label 'expatriate' is closely tied to his transnational academic journey, which has required continuous adaptation to different institutional cultures and expectations in Türkiye, the U.S., and Hong Kong. While his expertise lies in multilingual education and teacher preparation, he has often found himself navigating roles beyond his specialization, particularly in liberal arts settings where disciplinary boundaries are blurred.

As language teacher-scholars navigating a third space in our personal and professional lives, we are well aware that the label 'expatriate' comes with labor (i.e., mental, emotional, spiritual, etc.) that is often invisible in academic discourses. Certainly, living in various countries and learning new languages and cultures is fascinating, but being an expatriate comes at a cost, usually in the form of stability, belonging, and constant adaptation. At the same time, as we navigate through institutions, we are asked to continuously grow and expand our LTI to meet institutional demands, needs, and expectations. Figure 2 illustrates how our LTIs have had to shift and evolve throughout these transnational movements to adapt, conform, and/or allow us to reside in those places and institutions. Below, we delve deeper into our personal narratives.

	Luis Javier	Anna	Huseyin
Evolution of professional identities and responsibilities	Language teacher in primary and secondary schools and volunteer language teacher for refugees	Language teacher in secondary schools and volunteer language teacher for refugees	Language teacher at university and volunteer language teacher in primary and secondary schools
	↓	↓	↓
	Doctoral researcher, language teacher, and language teacher educator	Doctoral researcher and language teacher	Doctoral researcher and language teacher educator
	↓	↓	↓
	Language professor in higher education (**most current**)	Research fellow (**most current**)	Language education researcher (**most current**)

Figure 2. Evolution of Our LTIs

Luis Javier

Engaging in this discussion has made me realize that my past and present beliefs connected to institutions—and to migration itself—trace back to my adolescence. When I reflect on institutions, I categorically view my country of birth, Cuba, as my first encounter with institutional failure. This realization dawned on me long before I had the language to express the profound sense of betrayal I felt. The Cuban government, meant to nurture and protect its citizens, instead failed my family and me in ways that were both deep and personal. This formative disappointment was compounded a year later by another betrayal, this time from another crucial institution in my life—my family. At 17, after being ostracized and kicked out of the house by my father for 'coming out' as part of the LGBTQ+ community, I found myself homeless and alone in the United States. With very few options left as a 17-year-old homeless refugee with no family or knowledge of the English language, I joined the U.S. Marine Corps, but I had to hide part of who I was, as we were under the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy [1].

These early-life personal experiences contributed to my perceiving institutions as impersonal entities that were not concerned with my well-being, and that sought my conformity, offering acceptance only at a tremendous personal cost. Also, I realize now that these experiences framed for many years, and perhaps continue to frame, to a certain extent, my worldview as a perpetual battle for survival in a world that seemed relentlessly unprotective. Migration, which I find inextricably linked to my institutional experiences, has profoundly shaped my identity and sense of belonging. It has also underscored the volatile nature of my relationships with institutions—first as a political refugee and then as an expatriate navigating new cultural landscapes. My journey, which also includes the journey of my family—now dispersed across Cuba, Costa Rica, the U.S., and Poland—profoundly contributed to my feelings of rejection, solitude, longing, and disappointment. Reflecting back on my experiences with migration and institutions, I realize now that both migration and institutions often made me feel unprotected and alone; constantly yearning to feel accepted and

secure but never truly achieving it… continually uprooting my personal and professional lives in search of stability… often envisioning "me, alone, against the world."

I think it is important for me to share this personal background because, even though I am a language teacher, I am also a human being. I don't think it is possible to fully capture or understand my identity as a language teacher without knowing who I am and where I come from. I truly believe that you can't know the teacher if you don't know the person. My personal experiences connected to migration and institutions were, sadly, relived and reinforced in the United States, where I taught Spanish and English at all grade levels (i.e., primary, secondary, higher education, and adult/community programs) for over 13 years. While teaching at various institutions, I felt alone in more ways than one. I was often the only teacher from a Hispanic or migrant background, which, in all honesty, made many of my colleagues uncomfortable. They did not know how to interact around me, often dropping little "facts" about Cuba and Cubans as if that was the only topic of conversation I was capable of talking about. Sometimes, stereotypes were thrown around in a joking manner, and all I was able to do was smile to avoid any awkwardness. For example, one time, a colleague jokingly said, "Mr. Pentón, bring Cuba Libre to the next faculty meeting…muy picante," playing into the stereotype that, as a Cuban, I must be skilled at making that drink.

Other times, being the only teacher from a Hispanic or migrant background also meant having to 'defend' myself, my credentials, and my reputation at those institutions. For instance, at various institutions, I had to gently correct or clarify to colleagues and school staff, on multiple occasions, that I was not the janitor and that I had, in fact, earned a doctoral degree. Also, Hispanic and migrant students at my schools would often come to me to ask for support as they learned I was empathetic to their experiences—something that many teachers, unfortunately, lacked. However, my students' trust in me made some colleagues jealous, straining our professional relationships— "Uhhh, Mr. Pentón, all students love you," I recall some colleagues mockingly saying in our faculty meetings. While all of this was happening, I was also struggling to stay afloat economically, perpetually working a full-time job in primary or secondary schools while simultaneously juggling two to three part-time jobs in higher education and/or adult/community centers. These experiences continued to increase my sense of loneliness both as a migrant and as a language teacher, feeling in a perpetual state of limbo and simply accepting that I had to work very hard to gain approval and validation from institutions.

Eventually, I arrived at a stage of severe burnout and exhaustion from teaching, which led me to seriously consider a career change during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. However, thankfully, my fate changed when I moved to Poland in 2021. At the University of Warsaw, my first workplace in Poland, my colleagues extended a warm welcome, making concerted efforts to ensure I felt part of the team. They frequently reassured me of their support and emphasized that the University of Warsaw was invested in my success and well-being. This was perhaps the first time I ever considered the fact that institutions could or should care about their employees. Many of these colleagues have become personal friends, playing a crucial role in my sense of belonging in this new country. After two years, my temporary contract at the University of Warsaw expired, and I was hired by my current institution, Uniwersytet VIZJA, formerly known as Akademia Ekonomiczno-Humanistyczna w Warszawie.

At my current institution, which I call "my forever home," I have found the personal and professional fulfillment I had long sought. When my university rector hired me, he made sure to give me all the support I needed to permanently stay in Poland and move my career forward. He offered a generous salary, a full professorship, and an indefinite employment contract (*Umowa o pracę*, in Polish, which is equivalent to a tenureship in the U.S.). His words during one of our conversations, "I will support you and your career as long as I am rector. You have great potential, and I want you to succeed," have profoundly impacted me, allowing me to finally feel like it's no longer "me against the world,"…that I am no longer alone in academia, and that I can put down

roots in an institution and a country. When people ask me, "When are you leaving Poland?" I often reply quickly and without thinking, "Never!" and I feel my love for Poland is, in big part, for the love and appreciation I feel for my Polish friends, rector, and institution. For the first time in my life, I feel welcomed, safe, accepted, protected, stable, and like I belong somewhere. For the first time in my life, when I think of my professional self, Dr. Luis Javier Pentón Herrera, I feel proud to be connected to and represented by an institution—Akademia Ekonomiczno-Humanistyczna w Warszawie. I no longer feel unprotected or alone.

As I was ending an earlier draft of this section, in a conversation with Huseyin, he asked: "Luis, do you think your past experiences in exclusionary institutions have shaped how you approach your role as a language teacher and mentor today?" Huseyin's words prompted me to dive deeper into how my journey has influenced my teaching philosophy. Indeed, having navigated isolation and misunderstanding, I am acutely aware of the challenges that come with cultural and linguistic barriers. This awareness informs my pedagogical strategies, where I prioritize inclusivity, empathy, belonging, and safety—and as a language teacher, I have learned to expect the same for myself from my institution. I strive to co-create a classroom environment where all students, especially those from vulnerable and marginalized backgrounds, feel seen, valued, and supported. This commitment extends beyond academic instruction; in many ways, my scholarship and the niche topics I publish are biographical, reflecting what I either endured or yearned for in my earlier years of life (e.g., homelessness, refugee studies, language learning, social-emotional learning, and well-being). My journey has taught me that being an effective language teacher is not only about imparting knowledge but also about nurturing and caring for the person, the human being, that resides inside the student. I believe my collective life experiences have been integral to who I am as a language teacher today. Rather than letting adversity harden my heart, I've channeled it into a resilient form of compassion, striving to lift others up and ensuring my students never feel alone in their struggles.

Anna

As a first-generation college student, I was particularly struck by how much I felt like I belonged to academia. I remember spending hours in the library during my studies browsing, reading, but mainly admiring the sheer quantity of books, the wealth of specialized knowledge, and the authority those authors had in their academic fields. The library, as much as the university, was an institutional place where I felt a strong sense of belonging. The more classes I took and the more I understood about the field of education and second/foreign language studies, the more I identified with certain ways of thinking and writing. Although this experience was in my country of origin, it just might have been a different country context, given the very different social and linguistic environment. From growing up speaking 'a dialect' to being expected to write seminar papers in academic English and German, academia was a great personal and professional transition for me. From very early on, though, it felt like the university, the institution as such, took me in and taught me everything I needed to know to complete my degree, and more... More importantly, in addition to feeling like I belonged, I felt like I could never learn enough, instilling in me the desire to never stop learning and exploring.

When I was teaching German as a foreign language in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, my status as an expatriate language teacher became clear and problematic early on. I had conducted my teacher training in Switzerland for upper secondary schools (grades 11-13), but was employed at a lower secondary school (grades 7-10). Given that I did not have the appropriate diploma to teach those grades, the school could only give me a work contract for one school year. As a consequence, I could not get a permanent resident permit, which had many other repercussions, such as being denied a phone plan, apartment lease, and bank account. This experience shows how crucial institutional support for expatriate teachers can be since they often have to navigate these bureaucratic obstacles by themselves in a different country context, foreign language, and with limited resources. When the working conditions for expatriate teachers become a burden and

deprive them of basic social necessities, it can be very demotivating and discourage teachers from taking on these new positions. Such circumstances impede the feeling of belonging; in fact, for me, they instilled the feeling of exclusion and of being unwanted. This is to the detriment of local students, teachers, and schools since they usually benefit greatly from a rich exchange and presence of expatriate language teachers. Unfortunately, due to the lack of institutional support to obtain a resident permit that would allow me to sign an apartment lease, have a phone plan, and open a bank account myself, I saw no other choice than to resign from my position and take a more stable job at the university.

At the University of Fribourg, I found the working environment to be very capacitating and almost family-like. These conditions facilitated my doctoral studies enormously and brought back the desire to immerse myself fully in the academic world. The warm welcome and good relationships with my colleagues in the department—to this date—have constructed a unique sense of belonging, which, I believe, have heavily influenced how invested I am in academia. It indicates that when institutions accommodate their employees, take them seriously as individuals, and prioritize human beings over management, employees readily give back and contribute to the institution's well-functioning. When institutions care about employees' belonging and well-being, there can be collaboration instead of competition and higher motivation to succeed.

After completing my doctoral degree in Switzerland, I received a Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellowship to conduct research in Warsaw, Poland, linked to the influx of migrants due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. I was extremely honored and happy to receive such a distinguished professional opportunity that I did not hesitate at all and moved to Poland for this job. At that time, I had underestimated what it would mean to leave my life behind in Switzerland and settle (again temporarily) in another country where I did not even speak the language. The institutional support I received was very warm and welcoming; the colleagues with whom I interacted respected me for my work and were happy to help me. The language barriers, however, were sometimes difficult to overcome, and I often felt like an outsider. Support infrastructure for researchers generally existed and exceeded other places in which I had worked; yet, as an international scholar who relied heavily on English as a working language, I faced several additional challenges. For instance, documents had to be translated for me, I had to rely on research support officers to complete certain administrative tasks since they could only be done in Polish, and in certain situations, such as departmental meetings or gatherings, I was the only person with insufficient linguistic skills in Polish to follow.

While it was my responsibility as a new resident of Poland to acquire the much-needed linguistic and cultural knowledge, research institutions employing international/expatriate scholars should also be in a position to adequately support and accommodate them. Offering free language courses in the local language or providing important documents and guidance in English on all institutional levels for newly arrived expatriate employees could be helpful and facilitate adjustment. Also, being employed merely temporarily, in my case, for two years, was a big obstacle to establishing a feeling of belonging. Given that, in academia, such temporary contracts are rather common and often expected, especially on a postdoctoral level, before obtaining a tenured position, it is surprising that institutions are not better equipped to accommodate expatriate employees more holistically. More specifically, institutions should be tasked with helping their ever-changing workforce adjust better to a new location, new culture, and new appointment. Often, expatriate teachers give up much of their life to work in a different country. Institutions should, thus, offer stability in unstable conditions, decelerate processes of deterritorialization, and provide a new 'home away from home.' Having moved yet again and oscillating between places, I am looking (again) for an institution that can provide me with the feeling of belonging, inclusion, and connection in my new home while coming to terms with the fact that belonging, at least for me, will have to be reconceptualized in our hyper-fast, rapidly changing world.

Huseyin

In 2011, right after completing my college education, I found myself standing in front of a classroom as a volunteer teacher at a public primary school, teaching English to Turkish students whose enthusiasm for English often wrestled with the rigid structures of grammar drills and standardized assessments. These challenges continued to occupy my mind as I transitioned into a teaching role at a private university in Türkiye. At the time, I was still grappling with my own evolving sense of professional identity as a young Turkish man from a small town in Türkiye. My master's studies focusing on psycholinguistics had given me a deep understanding of language processing, but I often felt disconnected from the practical realities of language teaching. The theoretical frameworks I studied felt distant from the lived experiences of my students, and this dissonance planted the first seeds of my search for a more meaningful connection between research and practice.

By the time I left Türkiye for my doctoral studies at the University of Florida, I had already begun questioning where I truly belonged in higher education. I was a language teacher, but I was also a researcher-in-the-making. While I had found belonging in academia in a broad sense, my experience showed me that this belonging was conditional. For me, it was contingent on institutional structures, disciplinary hierarchies, and shifting professional expectations. I often felt that my identity as a researcher was recognized and rewarded, leaving little room for my teaching identity in an institution where research took precedence. I was multilingual, yet my scholarship was primarily being conducted in English. I was becoming keenly aware of how my experiences straddled multiple spaces—geographically, linguistically, and intellectually. Therefore, moving to the United States for my PhD studies marked a significant transition, not just academically but also in how I understood my own professional trajectory. As I navigated the expectations of the American higher education system, I found myself drawn to teacher education—not just as a field of research, but as a space where I could contribute meaningfully. I was no longer only teaching English; I was also preparing future educators to do the same. However, this shift came with its own set of challenges.

Unlike my previous teaching experiences, where the emphasis was on linguistic proficiency, my role as a language teacher required me to engage with broader socio-political discourses. These included the often-overlooked experiences of racialized English learners from immigrant backgrounds—unlike my students in Türkiye—as well as issues of linguistic justice and native-speakerism (Uysal & Kubota, 2024). My work was no longer about helping students master a second language; rather, it focused on equipping language teachers with the knowledge and tools to support linguistically diverse learners, fostering a critical awareness of "the wider social context in which English is learnt" (Uysal et al., 2024, p. 607). This shift reflected a larger tension in higher education, particularly at colleges of education, where faculty are often expected to balance research and teaching in ways that do not always align with their disciplinary expertise or institutional expectations (Uysal, 2019).

During my first full-time job as a teacher educator at a small liberal arts college where I taught for three years, I found intellectual fulfillment in this space, and yet I often felt like an outsider. Being a non-native English-speaking teacher educator in a predominantly monolingual academic setting placed me in a position where I had to constantly assert my legitimacy. In faculty meetings and professional circles, I was acutely aware of the subtle ways in which my expertise was questioned—not necessarily because of my credentials, but because of the ways in which my presence challenged dominant narratives about who gets to be seen as a language education expert.

One moment stands out. After a department meeting at this elite college, I referenced my expertise in multilingual education while discussing curriculum needs. A senior colleague frowned and later dismissed my statement, saying, "Well, we don't have expertise in this department. You're expected to teach anything in educational studies." Based on my later interactions, it became clear that my

colleague was conveying the institution's preference for faculty to serve as generalists rather than specialists, emphasizing breadth of teaching over deep expertise in a specific discipline. The remark was framed as pragmatic, even neutral, but it carried the weight of an assumption—that my disciplinary knowledge was secondary to institutional demands.

This was not the first time I had encountered such dismissals, but it reinforced a hard truth: in academia, particularly as an international scholar in a liberal arts setting, belonging was often contingent upon conforming to institutional expectations rather than being recognized for one's actual expertise. In simple terms, at that institution, I was not considered a language teacher or a language teacher-scholar; I had to conform to being a versatile instructor who filled curricular gaps, regardless of my expertise, reinforcing the notion that institutional belonging was tied to adaptability rather than disciplinary identity.

Despite these challenges, my years in the United States were transformative. I learned how to navigate institutional expectations, mentor aspiring educators, and carve out a research identity that centered on multilingual education and equity. Yet, language education itself occupied a precarious position in the United States, unlike in Türkiye, where it was deeply tied to state-mandated tests and job qualifications. As a field, it was often politicized and secondary to STEM fields in the U.S. academia. This instability was compounded by the uncertainty of my contract, which was not renewed until late spring or early summer. This recurring cycle of uncertainty each year during my three-year career at this institution reinforced how institutional structures shaped my sense of belonging. While I was struggling and seeking ways to feel a sense of professional stability and belonging by organizing events on my campus, another transition was on the horizon—this time, to Hong Kong.

Arriving in Hong Kong was both exhilarating and unsettling. Unlike my move from Türkiye to the United States, where I had anticipated cultural shifts, this transition felt more ambiguous. On one hand, I was joining a vibrant academic institution with a strong emphasis on language education research. On the other hand, I was stepping into a system that functioned differently from both the Turkish and American contexts, which I had previously navigated. The most immediate shift was the institutional culture surrounding research. In the United States, my academic trajectory had been shaped by the ethos of contributing to knowledge through publications. Still, there had been relatively little pressure regarding journal rankings or citation metrics. In Hong Kong, research is a game—one that involves strategic authorship, journal impact factors, and an acute awareness of how each publication contributes to one's career trajectory. I find myself asking new questions about my role as a scholar. Am I here to continue the work I had started in the United States, or am I expected to mold my research to fit the institutional expectations of Hong Kong's academia? Is my scholarship valued for its intellectual contributions, or is it primarily evaluated based on where it is published and to what extent it is aligned with institutional priorities, particularly in grant writing? I have not found straightforward answers to these questions, but they have forced me to confront the reality that institutional belonging is not just about personal adaptation—it is also about systemic structures that shape what is considered legitimate, valuable, and—in my case of grant proposals—"trendy" enough.

At the same time, Hong Kong has provided an unexpected sense of familiarity. The institutional emphasis on citation metrics and journal rankings reminded me of my early academic experiences in Türkiye, where similar structures existed—though not in my own teaching role. While I was not personally held accountable for these metrics at the time, I became familiar with them through my collaborations with colleagues in research positions, as we worked together on journal articles. This prior exposure allowed me to reframe my transition to Hong Kong not as a rupture, but as an extension of my transnational academic journey. The awareness that I had encountered versions of this system before—albeit indirectly—helped smooth my adaptation process, but it also reinforced the idea that my academic identity was not rooted in any one place.

As I reflect on my trajectory—from teaching English in Türkiye to preparing educators in the United States and establishing myself as a researcher in Hong Kong—I see a recurring theme: belonging is never static. It is something that must be negotiated, sometimes fought for, and occasionally redefined. Institutions play a crucial role in shaping this process, offering both opportunities for growth and challenges that require adaptation. In each academic space I have inhabited, I have learned new rules, adopted different professional identities, and recalibrated my expectations. In Türkiye, I was a language teacher searching for a research focus. In the U.S., I was a language teacher-scholar navigating linguistic and professional legitimacy. In Hong Kong, I am a language education researcher learning to reconcile intellectual curiosity with institutional demands. Fortunately, this journey has been supported by a collegial environment that values mentorship, internal funding, and opportunities for scholarly growth. With this support, I am able to engage in research that is both meaningful and impactful, while also refining my role as a scholar who contributes to global conversations in language education.

Yet, through these transitions, one reality remains clear: institutions do not merely serve as passive backdrops to our careers—they actively shape our professional identities and sense of belonging. They determine whose expertise is valued, what knowledge is prioritized, and how legitimacy is conferred. My experiences across three different academic systems have shown me that institutional belonging is rarely granted unconditionally; it is structured by policies, hierarchies, and disciplinary norms that often require negotiation. Whether through professional relationships, scholarly contributions, or institutional engagements, I continue to seek spaces where my work is not only recognized but also valued. And perhaps, in this continuous journey of adaptation and negotiation through various institutions, I am not just finding belonging—I am also learning to redefine it on my own terms.

Discussion

In response to our research question on how institutions affect our sense of belonging as expatriate language teacher-scholars, it became evident to us that belonging does not occur in isolation; it is a complex process influenced by our past (i.e., before), present (i.e., during), and future (i.e., after) experiences and interactions with institutions. To capture this complexity, we found it useful to think of belonging as unfolding across three temporal phases: *before*, *during*, and *after*. The 'before' stage refers to how personal histories and prior institutional encounters shape expectations of legitimacy and support; the 'during' stage captures the immediate experiences of engaging with colleagues, policies, and institutional practices; and the 'after' stage highlights the longer-term outcomes of stability, growth, or continued precarity. While our narratives rarely fit neatly into one category, this cyclical lens helped us make sense of how belonging is continuously renegotiated. In the discussion that follows, we integrate this temporal framing with three thematic insights drawn from our narratives: (1) institutional recognition, power, and belonging, (2) language and communication as gateways or barriers, and (3) stability, precarity, and the search for belonging. These subsections highlight the key factors that shaped our narratives and also provide clear takeaways for readers about how institutions mediate our sense of belonging as expatriate language teacher-scholars.

Institutional Recognition, Power, and Belonging

Initially, the pre-existing conditions, shaped by personal histories and early interactions with institutions—however 'institutions' may be internalized or understood—form part of the 'before' stage of belonging and set the stage for how expatriate scholars later perceive institutional legitimacy. For example, Luis' narrative reveals a backdrop of institutional failures and personal challenges that have molded his expectations and perceptions of belonging, particularly highlighted

by his sentiment of feeling in a perpetual cycle of professional unattachments—or unbelonging (Miller & Gkonou, 2024)—in the world, making sacrifices to please his institutions to be included and belong. His early experiences in Cuba and the U.S. demonstrate how recognition (or the lack thereof) becomes embedded in one's memory of institutions, shaping the expectations carried into new environments. This historical perspective is crucial as it underpins the expectations and the lens through which he, and perhaps other expatriate language teachers, engage with new institutional environments, fundamentally influencing their initial and ongoing interactions within these spaces. Drawing on Maiese (2018), our findings suggest that individuals rely on past experiences and emotions as sources of data to interpret their interactions with institutions— whether consciously or unconsciously. This aligns with prior research (Karimi et al., 2025), which underscores how emotions inform institutional sense-making in ways that shape long-term perceptions of belonging. In simple terms, as language teacher-scholars, our CAE showed that our histories, experiences, and emotions are sources of data—whether we are aware of it or not—that we use to make sense of and assign expectations to institutions (i.e., schools and universities) before we interact with them.

These dynamics continue 'during' institutional engagement, as seen in Huseyin's experiences at a liberal arts college, where institutional discourse positioned him in ways that undermined his expertise. After contributing insights from his specialization in multilingual education, a senior colleague dismissed him by saying, "Well, we don't have expertise in this department. You're expected to teach anything in educational studies." This remark positioned Huseyin as a "generalist" rather than a specialist, implicitly devaluing his disciplinary identity. Such moments demonstrate that recognition is not only symbolic but materially shapes whether expatriate language teacher-scholars are positioned as insiders or outsiders within their institutions. As Varghese et al. (2005) argue, teacher identity is discursively constructed through institutional positioning, while Barkhuizen (2016) emphasizes that power and legitimacy are central to how identities are enacted. Taken together, Luis' 'before' experiences and Huseyin's 'during' experiences illustrate how recognition and legitimacy operate across different stages of belonging. When recognition is withheld—whether by mistaking a faculty member for a janitor, as in Luis' case, or by dismissing disciplinary expertise, as in Huseyin's case—expatriate language teacher-scholars experience exclusion and unbelonging.

Language and Communication as Gateways or Barriers

During the phase of actual interaction with institutions, several factors come into play that either foster a sense of belonging or exacerbate feelings of alienation. Anna's experiences in Poland, for instance, underscore the pivotal role of language and collegial support in shaping one's sense of inclusion. Her struggle with not speaking the local language (i.e., Polish) vividly illustrates how linguistic barriers can impact the feeling of belonging, contrasting sharply with her experience in Switzerland, where she spoke the local language(s). In Poland, Anna was thus more reliant on institutional support to establish a sense of belonging, whereas in Switzerland, the agency linked to speaking the local language was established naturally through interactions. This highlights the broader significance of communication in institutional integration and belonging (Karim & Hue, 2022). Additionally, the varied reactions from colleagues—ranging from supportive to indifferent— seem to significantly influence our integration into this new institution, as recorded by our collective narratives.

We, thus, agree with Xun and Barkhuizen (2025) that a sense of belonging, especially when it comes to arriving and navigating a new institution, is not naturally inherent in teachers, or any individuals, for that matter. Within the teaching profession, a sense of belonging is all the more essential since many changing factors (e.g., place, training, policies, socioeconomic/political situation) and people (e.g., administration, students, and parents) interact on different levels, making it an incredibly complex practice. As Xun and Barkhuizen (2025) put it, "Instead, [belonging] is created and

enhanced by the positive emotional experiences of caring and respect through their formal and informal interactions with colleagues and leaders within the immediate professional learning community in the workplace" (p. 9). Helpful interactions and care, in our experiences, seem to be particularly critical throughout the 'during' phase, as it marks the active period where the sense of belonging is either cultivated or hindered by daily interactions and institutional practices.

Stability, Precarity, and the Search for Belonging

Beyond immediate interactions, our experiences reveal how institutions also shape longer-term trajectories—the 'after' stage of belonging, where stability and precarity come to the forefront. Luis' transition from feeling isolated to finding a sense of community and acceptance at his new institution in Poland exemplifies a successful achievement of belonging, which allowed him to envision a stable future where he can finally put down roots and slow down in the relentless pace of academic life. Conversely, the narratives of Anna and Huseyin, who have faced instability in their earlier institutions, reflect a lack of belonging that perpetuates a need for constant mobility and adaptability in the "hyper-fast" academic environment, as stated by Anna. This ongoing state of flux has prevented Anna and Huseyin from feeling fully integrated or settled—feeling like they truly belong—with(in) their institutions, which highlights the importance of institutional support in expatriate language teachers' and teacher-scholars' belonging (Rigdel et al., 2025; Xun & Barkhuizen, 2025). That said, we also contemplated during our explorations whether the feeling of arriving or belonging can, in fact, be achieved to the same extent by everyone. Given the super-diverse and hyper-fast global society in which we live and work, we may always be looking for the connective tissue that makes us feel like we belong, like we are a valuable part of an institution. The trend appears to be moving in the opposite direction, with fewer permanent positions available in academia, which may impede one's sense of belonging and foster a constant need for mobility. This is very much in line with Third Space Theory (Bhabha, 1994), as the space in which we navigate our lives and identities is necessarily dynamic, allowing—or forcing—a constant (re-)positioning of oneself, flexible to be (re-)interpreted depending on the changing context.

Expanding further on the point of the hyper-fast, urgency-driven environment of contemporary academia, it is vital to recognize that the 'publish-or-perish' culture is more pervasive than ever, especially for language teacher-scholars like Anna and Huseyin, who are continuously navigating institutional landscapes in search of spaces where they can cultivate stability and a sense of belonging. This state of ongoing transition, therefore, affects their well-being as they must continuously produce academic content (i.e., high-quality publications, obtain grants, etc.) to remain competitive and secure a stable position at their current institutions or elsewhere. In this sense, the 'after' stage highlights that belonging is not a fixed endpoint but an ongoing negotiation shaped by institutional policies, professional relationships, and broader academic trends. Figure 3 represents this process as cyclical, showing how belonging is continuously reinterpreted before, during, and after institutional interactions. Importantly, this before-during-after model is cyclical, illustrating that our sense of belonging remains in flux, continuously shaped by institutional experiences. Our findings suggest that, much like LTI, belonging is never static but an ongoing negotiation mediated by institutional policies, professional relationships, and broader social and academic trends—all of which are always changing.
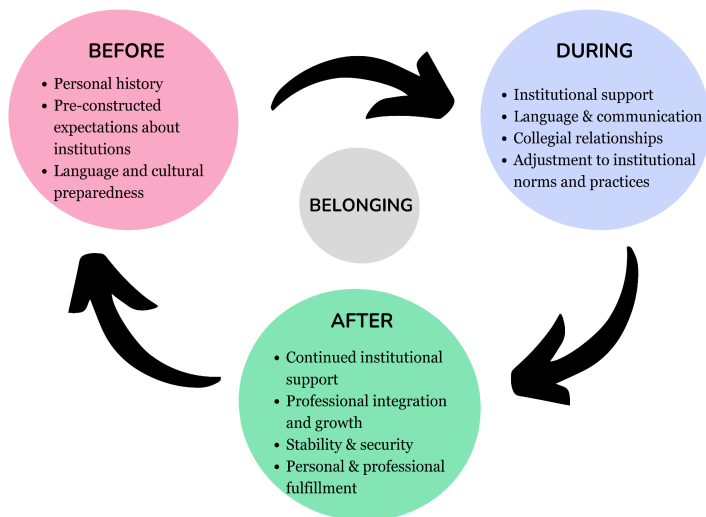
BEFORE
- Personal history
- Pre-constructed expectations about institutions
- Language and cultural preparedness

DURING
- Institutional support
- Language & communication
- Collegial relationships
- Adjustment to institutional norms and practices

BELONGING

AFTER
- Continued institutional support
- Professional integration and growth
- Stability & security
- Personal & professional fulfillment

Figure 3. Factors Affecting Our Belonging as Expatriate Language Teacher-Scholars

Final Thoughts

Our findings carry important implications for teacher education. As language teacher-scholars who are also language teacher educators, we argue that questions of belonging are not only central to practicing teachers but also to those preparing to enter the profession. Programs that prepare future language teachers should intentionally address the emotional and institutional dimensions of belonging, rather than focusing solely on pedagogical techniques or content knowledge. For example, teacher candidates could be guided to reflect critically on how institutions shape their LTIs and to develop strategies for navigating legitimacy, linguistic challenges, and precarity. Embedding structured discussions, mentoring opportunities, and reflexive practices into teacher education curricula would help novice teachers anticipate the institutional conditions they are likely to encounter. Moreover, programs should model inclusive practices by recognizing the diverse experiences of teacher candidates themselves, many of whom—like us—are navigating transnational, hybrid, and third spaces. By preparing teachers to understand and negotiate institutional dynamics, teacher education can contribute to more sustainable, supportive professional pathways.

We would like to end this CAE by stating that, through our stories, we have highlighted the crucial role of institutions in shaping our sense of belonging as expatriate language teacher-scholars. Our narratives also underscore the transformative potential of reflexivity in both teaching and research. By systematically examining our own experiences, we deepened our understanding of institutional constraints while opening new possibilities for agency and well-being. Reflexivity created opportunities to interrogate assumptions, reconsider how our identities were positioned, and co-construct richer understandings of professional belonging. As recent work has emphasized, autoethnographic works can function as powerful forms of personal and professional development, promoting emotional, critical, and transformative self-reflexivity among teachers and teacher educators (Pentón Herrera et al., 2025). In this sense, engaging reflexively operates as both a methodological approach and a pedagogical stance, enabling teacher-scholars to critically analyze their instructional practices and institutional roles (Byrd Clark & Dervin, 2014; Uysal, 2024a). We

argue that institutions, in turn, must support reflexive and developmental practices—such as mentoring, collaborative reflection, and opportunities for critical self-examination—through policies and practices that build belonging in flexible, responsive, and humanizing ways.

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Luis Javier Pentón Herrera is Professor at the University of Economics and Human Sciences, Poland (Akademia Ekonomiczno-Humanistyczna w Warszawie), a Fulbright Specialist, and an English Language Specialist with the USA Department of State.

Anna Becker is an Assistant Professor and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow in the Institute of Slavic Studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, Poland. Switzerland. Her research is at the intersection of applied linguistics and education and focuses on multilingualism in schools and society, identity, migration/mobility, policy, and research-practice relationships from a comparative perspective.

Huseyin Uysal is a Research Assistant Professor at The Education University of Hong Kong. He holds a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction (with a specialization in ESOL/Bilingual Education) from the University of Florida. His research focuses on multilingualism and criticality in teacher education.

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[1] The "Don't ask, don't tell" (DADT) was a U.S. military policy in effect from 1994 to 2011 that prohibited military personnel from discriminating against or harassing service members from the LGBTQ+ community, while also barring openly individuals from the LGBTQ+ community from military service.