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Restorying the Self: The Identity Work of Expatriate English Teachers in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

A major destination for expatriate English instructors is South Korea, where teacher profiles are diverse, from those that come for adventure to those genuinely interested in a career in teaching, and others whose intentions and identity change with experience. This study explores how three expatriate language teachers from Western countries negotiate their personal and professional identities while engaging in various forms of investment in relation to their imagined futures, and how they navigate their professional identity development while adapting to new cultural norms and professional expectations. Guided by storytelling as a meaning-making mechanism, this study employs narrative inquiry within a qualitative case study framework, allowing for rich, multifaceted insights into the participants' experiences. Through narrative interviews and photo novellas, the study contributes to our understanding of expatriate language teacher identity formation by revealing the fluid nature of identity construction, which is influenced by their interactions within their institutions and the impact of their life-wide learning that takes place both inside and outside their school. The findings hold important implications for teacher preparation programs, institutional support systems, and professional development initiatives designed for expatriate language teachers who endeavor to strengthen their professional identity on their path to becoming and belonging as a language teacher.

Keywords: identity; imagined futures; expatriate language teachers; South Korea; life-wide learning

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1. Introduction

South Korea (hereafter Korea) is one of the most prominent destinations for expatriate English teachers, attracting applicants with diverse profiles, ranging from those seeking life and cultural experiences, to others genuinely interested in a career in language teaching. Regardless of their motives, expatriate teachers encounter unfamiliar circumstances through which they negotiate and explore their professional purpose and identity (Barkhuizen, 2016, 2023; Menard-Warwick et al., 2019). Recent scholarship has argued that teacher identity is not a fixed attribute, but a dynamic, contextually mediated process shaped by discourse, power relations, and investment in imagined futures (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Hiver & Whitehead, 2018; Li, 2025; Norton, 2013). Korea, therefore, offers a compelling context for exploring the fluid processes of identity construction, or what has been referred to as identity work (Barkhuizen, 2014; Block, 2015; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). Narrative inquiry, which privileges stories as a means of accessing and co-constructing meaning, has emerged as a particularly effective methodology for capturing the complexities of identity negotiation (Barkhuizen, 2022), as it is through narratives that teachers articulate their experiences of cultural adaptation, professional development, and personal transformation, allowing researchers to examine how these processes unfold across time, space, and interaction (Kramp, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1995).

Understanding the expatriate English teachers' identity work is therefore important as it reveals the underlying processes that guide their personal and professional trajectories, which take place at the nexus of the past, present, and future, shaped by teachers' experiences and their pursuit of imagined professional identities. Examining how expatriate teachers in Korea construct and negotiate their identities offers valuable insights into how teachers make sense of their evolving roles and aspirations within new cultural and institutional contexts. Furthermore, this understanding has important implications for current and prospective expatriate English teachers, helping them anticipate how their personal and professional trajectories may develop over time in similar transnational teaching environments.

This article draws on the experiences and perspectives of three expatriate EFL teachers employed in language institutions in Korea and how they negotiate their personal and professional identities while engaging with institutional practices and local social conventions and discourses. By focusing on teachers' investments in imagined futures, the present study aims to illuminate how their identity work transforms as the result of lifelong and life-wide learning (Heikkinen et al., 2012), and how it is mediated by opportunities and constraints within their context (Barkhuizen et al., 2024). In doing so, this research contributes to a growing body of literature that explores the intersections of transculturality, identity, and power in language teaching (Menard-Warwick et al., 2019). It foregrounds how identity work is influenced by broader sociocultural contexts while highlighting the personal experiences, environmental circumstances, and agency of teachers as they navigate these contexts in pursuit of a career as an English language teacher. In exploring the imagined identities and broader personal, cultural, and professional experiences of the participants, this study examines two research questions:

1. How do the participants construct their imagined identities as expatriate language teachers in Korea?
2. What identity work on a personal and professional level do expatriate English language teachers in Korea engage in?

With the objective of articulating potential implications for teacher preparation programs and institutional support systems that can enhance the individual and professional growth of those working in language education settings abroad, this study concludes with recommendations for how

teachers can engage with their students, colleague, and schools to facilitate sustained growth in identity development, and embrace opportunities, within and beyond their institutions, to advance along their path of belonging, being, and becoming a language teaching professional.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Expatriate EFL Teachers in Korea*

Following decades of Japanese occupation, war, and poverty, Korea experienced rapid industrialization and urbanization in the 1960s, creating opportunities for global trade and mobility and making economic growth increasingly reliant on their competitiveness in global markets. In line with increased globalization and Korea's growing aspirations for asserting itself as part of the international economic elite, the promotion of English gathered pace from the early 1980s, and over the next two decades developed into a national obsession (Park, 2009). This "English fever" initiated the recruitment of hundreds of expatriate Native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) to Korea and the years that followed, thousands more arrived to fill the growing need in the Korean EFL labor market (Moodie & Nam, 2016), many were transient, particularly in the beginning, but many others began to stay longer and advance their qualifications, careers, and identity as language teachers (Howard, 2019; Moodie, 2023).

Recent studies on expatriate English teachers in South Korea have primarily examined professional identity and agency from institutional or professional development perspectives. Hiver and Whitehead (2018) explored how teacher identity and agency interact within classroom practice through complexity theory, while Lee and Jang (2023) and Yim and Hwang (2019) focused on professional identity formation, participation, and belonging within communities of practice. Howard (2019) documented the marginalisation and ambivalence experienced by expatriate teachers in Korea's EFL industry. While these studies provide valuable insights into professional development, they largely focus on work-based adaptation, teacher agency, and commitment. Our study extends this conversation by exploring expatriate teachers' personal and professional trajectories, their sense of belonging, and the life-wide learning that unfolds across their personal, social, and professional contexts.

Moreover, while identity work has been widely examined in relation to agency and teacher learning, fewer studies have explored it through the lens of investment in imagined identities (Norton, 2013; Barkhuizen, 2016) and how such investments shape teachers' personal and professional trajectory outcomes. This gap is particularly salient in the expatriate Korean context, where teachers navigate cultural displacement, institutional hierarchies, and shifting senses of legitimacy and belonging. Our study therefore contributes to this emerging discussion by examining how expatriate English teachers in Korea construct their imagined professional futures and how these identity negotiations influence their evolving trajectories of becoming and belonging as legitimate educators.

2.2. *Identity Work in Language Teaching*

There are varying views and positions of scholars regarding the concept of identity. The traditional conceptualization of identity as fixed and relatively stable has been challenged by contemporary poststructuralist perspectives, which view identity as complex, context-dependent, and subject to constant negotiation and reformation in relation to the social contexts in which it is situated (Hall, 1996; Hiver & Whitehead, 2018). In this view, identity can be labelled as "a dialectical relationship between the 'inner' and 'outer' aspects of the self, involving our own sense of who we are, the ways in which we represent ourselves, and how we are represented and positioned by others" (Benson et al., 2013, p. 2). Early work by Hall (1996) refers to the construct of identity as *identification* to

reflect its nature as a continuous process, while Weedon (1997) prefers using the term *subjectivities* when discussing identity, which represents an individual’s self-view, their understanding of the world and their relationship with it. Harré (1999), on the other hand, views identity as a process of *positioning* individuals in interaction with one another and with the environment, engaging collectively with others while enacting a sense of “personal uniqueness” (p.55). A more recent conceptualization applies a transdisciplinary framework (Douglas-Fir Group [DFG], 2016), which accounts for the interplay between macro (societal), meso (school), and micro (classroom) level processes in teacher identity construction. In sum, all the above views are underpinned by the common poststructuralist belief that identity is fluid, influenced by context and social interaction, and in a constant state of flux (Block, 2007).

In line with poststructuralist views of identity, this study focuses on expatriate English language teacher identities in Korea. Specifically, it focuses on the identity work of expatriate EFL teachers by exploring their imagined identities through their personal and professional experiences, taking into account their career trajectories and the distinct, subjective affordances and spaces they inhabit and encounter.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Context and Participants

The participants in this study worked in generally similar institutional contexts in Korea, and thus had comparable, but also distinct circumstances, encounters, and experiences that impacted their identity work. Although there are many different institutional settings in which expatriate teachers work in Korea, the two contexts that participants in this study have been employed are at private after-school language academies, called hagwons in Korea, and government-sponsored English immersion programs. English hagwons are for-profit after-school academies that cater primarily to young and adolescent students, focusing on phonics and basic English conversation and composition in the early stages and predominantly standardized test preparation in the later stages. In contrast, government-sponsored immersion programs are funded and operated by the Korean government. The main aim of these immersion-style programs is to provide short-term opportunities, ranging from one to six weeks in which students typically visit a facility operated by the Ministry of Education (MOE), where students are encouraged to practice English conversation and engage with L1 English speaker teachers.

Table 1 provides demographic data about the participants, although it must be noted that because the narrative instruments disclose a degree of personal information (e.g., sensitive experiences, interaction with other staff members), the demographic data is limited to ensure confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy. As their context and stories are elaborated in detail in the subsequent sections, only their essential demographic data is presented here.

Table 1
Participant Information

Name	Age (moved to Korea)	Years in Korea	Academic Major	Degree Level
Darcy	29	11	Linguistics	Masters
Lena	23	1	ESOL	Bachelors
Rose	29	3	Graphic Design	Bachelors

3.2. Theoretical Framework

In line with the relativist ontological position that guides this research, which views realities as products of lived experience, the contexts in which this experience originates, and the people with whom it is co-constructed (Block, 2007; Creswell & Creswell, 2018), this study relies on narratives as a lens for exploring and analysing participants' stories as expatriate English teachers in Korea. The core strength of stories lies with their potential as meaning-making mechanisms, engaging individuals in a narrative mode of thought that is deeply rooted in our thinking (Bruner, 1986). Storytelling entails an interpretive process in relation to the meaning of our lived experiences and is "...the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.1). Telling stories is also a medium for identity work in the postmodern era, especially in contexts of global mobility and rapid social change (Benson, 2018).

A narrative approach allows for exploring the temporality of human experience in the current study. The temporality of narratives allows for inquiry into context related shifts in knowledge, beliefs, and thoughts, as well as temporal shifts in identity and the nature of investing in future imagined identities. Through the temporal dimension of narratives, experiences are often evaluated in relation to the past, present, and future, and narrative representations can capture the unfolding of human experience through time (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Therefore, in this study, the participants' experiences are explored through their teaching careers, with the focus on how their living/teaching abroad experiences enrich their experiential base (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), offering insight into their context-specific identity work while teaching abroad in Korea.

Yet, despite the importance of the temporal in narrative research, time is not always the most salient or relevant consideration for assigning meaning to experience, understanding, or perceptual change. The concept of *life-wide* learning offers a perspective that aims to circumvent the entrenched fixation with time and accommodate a broader vista of living, learning, and growing (Barnett, 2011). Particularly within the jargon of "professional trajectory," there is a tendency to conceptualize one's journey as a line with interspersed points, but a substantial amount of identity work happens in the margins, in the indistinct moments that manifest from the "breadth and diversity of experiential and situational learning experiences" (Giraldo-Garcia & Chang, 2023, p. 4790). Life-wide learning accounts for the continuous, seemingly ordinary process of formal, informal, and self-directed intentional and unintentional learning that builds and shapes identities (Reischmann, 2014), which, in aggregate, is the material of maturation, transformation, and self-actualization (Reischmann, 2017).

Life-wide learning aligns with a poststructuralist view of identity in that it recognizes that change is impacted by numerous temporal and atemporal factors and attends to the internal and external influences that are ever-evolving in construction of the self, and that individuals are continuously making sense of and responding to contextual circumstances (Hall, 1996). Indeed, the significance of context, social interaction, and interpretation of environment and events, which embody poststructuralism, are also at the core of life-wide learning in that knowledge, competencies, and dispositions are understood as being concurrently cultivated across different settings, domains, and experiences (Jackson, 2019). Within the poststructuralist frame of identity, life-wide learning and identity work are perceived as unstated and emerging within the local-global interplay of interaction and discourse, in the complex, non-linear process of what Graven et al. (1998) fittingly describe as "learning as becoming" (p. 189).

3.3. Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process for this study unfolded over a four-week period. In the first week, the authors collaboratively developed and refined the research questions that guided the inquiry. This was followed by a two-week period in which semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant via Zoom. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. All interviews were recorded and automatically transcribed and stored on a password protected Zoom cloud. After the interviews were completed, the researchers distributed the photo novella instrument electronically to participants, which they returned within two weeks.

Narrative Interviews

As the primary focus of this project was the subjective experiences of the participants and the way those guided and informed their identity work, we considered narrative interviews to be an appropriate method for uncovering such complexities. Eliciting stories in this way permitted the participants to make sense of life experiences that were important to them through longer turns at talk and the capacity to control the focus of the discussion, allowing for the more active co-construction of narrative and meaning through genuine interaction with the participants. In addition, as Chase (2011) recommends, we sought to avoid asking sociological questions and instead looked to invite stories, in conjunction with follow-up questions, when necessary, in order to explore topics of interest and initiate discussions related to the research. Following the interviews, the transcripts were cleaned and corrected for accuracy before data coding.

The interview questions (Appendix A) were designed to elicit open, reflective narratives about participants' personal and professional experiences in Korea. Rather than seeking fixed responses, they served as flexible prompts that invited participants to co-construct and make meaning of their journeys. This approach aligns with the study's focus on identity work as a dynamic process situated at the intersection of participants' lived experiences and their investment in imagined identities. Follow-up questions were used to deepen participants' reflections and uncover how their evolving sense of self as expatriate teachers related to their professional trajectories and imagined futures.

Photo Novellas

Using photographs to explore participants career trajectory as language teachers, Greenier and Moodie (2021) found the including participant-produced photos can affix a layer of complexity and visualization that can help contextualize narratives, create a shared understanding between participant and researcher, and empower participants to determine how they are portrayed. Giroir (2014) similarly used photographs to investigate Saudi students' outside-the-classroom L2 learning while studying in the United States, asking students to take photographs that represent their goals and views of themselves over time. The essential conclusion is that the photo stories complemented the sense-making and dialogic nature of the research and provided a medium for interaction and reflection with participants.

Expanding the repertoire of visual instruments, *photo novellas* are used in this study to allow participants to multimodally communicate their experiences and perspectives on their careers. Photo novellas have been reported to engage participants "in a creative process that has the potential to bring them to deeper level of insight and knowledge" (Kirova & Emma, 2008, p. 38), and to engage participants' reflections and insights about their experiences and invite researchers to connect the verbal and visual modes in search of deeper meaning (Burke and Evans, 2011). The approach used in the current study requested participants to select four photographs, arranged in

chronological order, that represent different points in their career (Appendix B), with no specific directions given on how to select the photographs beyond representing their story in Korea. Participants supplemented the photos with written stories (the “novella”), rather than verbal interviews, allowing them to control the direction, focus, and themes of their narrative rather than being dictated by the researchers’ questions. Once complete, the participants were asked to return the photo novellas to the principal researcher who blurred aspects of the photos and removed parts of the written narrative that would disclose the participants’ identity.

3.4. Data Analysis

Polkinghorne’s (1995) “narrative analysis”, based on Bruner’s (1986) narrative modes of thought, closely informed the analytical approach in this study. *Narrative analysis* entails narrative writing as the key element of analysis, where “storytelling plays a significant role in the analysis of data and reporting of findings” (Benson, 2018). Data from various sources is presented in storied form, with the key narrative element being “a plot that displays the linkage among the data elements as parts of an unfolding temporal development culminating in the denouement” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). Polkinghorne (1995) claims that narrative analysis is usually conducted with non-storied data; however, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to *restorying* as an approach that allows for reconstruction of storied data in narrative analysis (Benson, 2018).

In qualitative research it is often the nature of the data at hand and the aims of the research that determine the approach to data analysis. For example, Barkhuizen et al., (2014) explain that establishing whether data is in narrative or non-narrative form is important for deciding the approach to data analysis. Given the narrative foundations of this study, the data were used to elicit stories from participants, as the meaning-making function of stories was central to narrative interviews and photo novellas.

We chose to conduct narrative analysis by writing three stories (one for each participant), thereby preserving the richness of the individual stories and their verisimilitude. Highlighting the importance of the temporal dimension of the study, relating to experiences prior to arriving in Korea, the present EFL teaching journey, and the participants’ imagined future identities, we were able to use narrative analysis for its key strength: “its capacity to provide access to long-term experiences and act as a means of representing the coherence of such experiences” (Benson, 2018). In other words, each participant’s data was emplotted into a story that highlights the salient themes from the data and offered a narrative analysis of the relationships between those themes and their implications for the research questions. The salient themes from across the stories and the entire data were illustrated with relevant textual extracts and accompanied by analytical commentary that explored the relevance of the themes in relation to the research questions.

4. Findings

This section presents brief profiles of the participants through narratives constructed by consolidating the narrative interviews and photo novellas. The stories offer insights into the individual perspectives and experiences of the participants and thus responds to Research Question 1 regarding how participants develop their imagined identities as expatriate language teachers in Korea. The analysis below will be complemented by cross-case thematic analysis in the Discussion, which aims to highlight the salient themes across the outlined stories and illustrate the significance in the context of the participants’ evolving identities.

4.1. *Darcy's Story*

As Darcy arrived in Korea with a background in linguistics and previous teaching experiences, her motivations were grounded in a clear vision for her future. With an advanced degree in linguistics, she moved to Korea with the intention of building a career. Her imagined future was one of long-term investment, both personally and professionally. This clarity of purpose provided her with direction and shaped how she navigated challenges, setbacks, and opportunities.

Her first year, however, tested that resolve. In the private academy system, she quickly realized she was being used as “nothing more than a glorified tape recorder,” with her training and expertise seemingly irrelevant. Here, her identity work became a site of struggle (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Hiver & Whitehead, 2018): the professional identity she had imagined—grounded in knowledge, training, and pedagogical methods—was undermined by institutional practices that reduced her role to one that resembled a babysitter. However, her long-term goal and the associated investment in her imagined future as an educator in Korea helped her to navigate this struggle and resist disempowerment. As she later explained, she was “not ready to give up on something I’d worked three years in just a year’s time,” and so she chose to leave the academy system for the government sponsored immersion program, a move that marked her first decisive act of reclaiming agency in Korea.

Her move to the government-sponsored program was the turning point that re-energized her trajectory. In her new role, she was encouraged to design interactive, fun, and practical English lessons. Through this, she began to rebuild her professional identity, reclaiming a sense of expertise and purpose. The government-sponsored immersion program became the setting where her imagined identity as a skilled teacher aligned more closely with her lived reality.

As her career stabilized, Darcy’s personal life also began to intertwine with her professional journey, deepening her investment in Korea. Meeting her partner and subsequently marrying only confirmed her imagined future in Korea as permanent. She acknowledged moments of doubt: “What if you hate it? What if it gets too lonely?”—but choosing marriage meant there was “no need for a plan B.” This commitment extended her vision of a future in Korea, transforming it from a professional project into a holistic life plan. It also spurred new professional ambitions, as she began a master’s degree in TESOL, strengthening her academic profile, and accepted a promotion at her institution. The combined investments of relationship, postgraduate study, and career advancement solidified her security and sense of belonging in a foreign context.

Her imagined identity continued to evolve as she took on leadership roles. Rather than remaining “just a teacher,” she became head of R&D and later a program coordinator—roles that allowed her to shape curriculum, mentor colleagues, and influence institutional direction. Once again, her identity work was a site of struggle (Hiver & Whitehead, 2018), as moving from peer to authority required renegotiating relationships, overcoming doubts, and asserting her voice in decision-making spaces. However, through this struggle, she began developing an even more empowering imagined identity as a leader and innovator in language education. When her institution was affected by the COVID pandemic, rather than going “down with the ship,” she described herself as having “ascended.” Taking on responsibility for rebuilding the program allowed her to set “the standards, the rules, and hire and train English teachers.” The crisis became an opportunity to transform vulnerability into authority, once again reasserting her agency.

Now, after more than a decade in Korea, Darcy reflects on her journey with pride and satisfaction. She sees herself as one of the few people who can genuinely say, “I love my job.” The phrase encapsulates the outcome of years of investment in her imagined future. Her identity work —

marked by struggles against marginalization, negotiations of belonging, and the pursuit of leadership—demonstrates how the power of an imagined future can shape real outcomes.

Darcy's story illustrates the dynamic interplay between plans for the future, identity work, and imagined identities. Her initial clarity of purpose distinguished her from peers and gave her resilience and direction. Identity work functioned as a site of struggle, from her early disempowering experiences to her negotiations of authority, to her response to the pandemic crisis. At each stage, she invested in a vision of herself as a professional, a partner, and a leader in Korea. That imagined identity, present from the start, became the catalyst of her eventual success, and a cornerstone of what she was invested in as a person and a professional.

4.2. *Lena's Story*

Like many expatriate language teachers, Lena's decision to come to Korea was shaped by a complex set of underlying motivations. At one level, teaching English offered secure employment and professional opportunity. At another, Korea was imagined as a site of new beginnings and personal adventure. She described her first weekend outing with colleagues as "the very beginning of my new life in Korea," a moment that also became "the beginning of many new friendships." These comments suggest that her motivations were not solely career-focused; she was also investing in the possibility of belonging, independence, and personal growth.

Once in Korea, however, Lena soon found that her identity work required more than professional adaptation. Living alone for the first time, she struggled with the silence of her apartment, contrasting it with the constant noise of her family home in Canada. She recalled that "going from that to being by myself every day was rough" and that even after socializing with friends, her apartment still felt "too empty." In response, she adopted a kitten, which helped her "feel less lonely" and gave her "something to come home to." This small act was a significant piece of personal identity work. By creating a sense of comfort and companionship, Lena invested in re-establishing belonging in a context that otherwise threatened isolation.

Strong family ties contrasted with this new experience of isolation and continued to exert a strong pull on her sense of self. Holidays proved particularly difficult, as Christmas had always been tied to family traditions such as attending church with her mother or gathering at her grandparents' house. Experiencing her first Christmas "halfway across the world" was an emotional test, eased only by her brother's visit. His arrival not only re-anchored her emotionally but also allowed her to reconnect with her Canadian identity while simultaneously embracing her new Korean context. As a native French speaker from Quebec, her brother's visit was especially meaningful as it provided her a chance to speak in French. Such moments highlight the ongoing negotiation between separation and connection that expatriates must manage as they reconstruct their personal identities abroad.

Lena's professional identity work was equally significant. In her early months, she invested heavily in collegial networks, emphasizing how friendships with colleagues provided stability and belonging in a foreign workplace. She spoke warmly of the first weekend when she met the colleague who would become her closest friend, highlighting the role of relational ties in negotiating professional identity. Later, when she was unexpectedly offered a leadership position, her identity work took a new turn. The role required her to renegotiate her status from peer to authority, something she admitted still felt "strange" as she adjusted to giving orders and evaluating colleagues' performances. At the same time, the promotion provided her with a new sense of agency and influence, marking her transition into a professional identity with greater institutional power.

These experiences also contributed to the construction of Lena's imagined identity as an expatriate teacher. Initially, she had viewed her stay in Korea as short-term, but the leadership offer encouraged her to extend her commitment "for another year at least." In this way, her imagined future shifted from a temporary sojourner to a longer-term professional investing in her career.

Lena's story demonstrates how motivations, identity work, and imagined futures are deeply intertwined in the expatriate teaching experience. Motivated initially by opportunity and adventure, she engaged in personal identity work to negotiate loneliness and maintain family ties, while also developing a professional identity that moved from peer to leader.

Ultimately, Lena's experiences highlight the fluidity of expatriate identity formation. They reveal how expatriate teachers must continually negotiate belonging, independence, professional growth, and cultural adaptation in order to construct coherent narratives of self. For Lena, the process of investing in friendships, taking on leadership responsibilities, and creating symbols of belonging allowed her to imagine new futures for herself as an expatriate teacher—futures that extended beyond her initial motivations and visions for the future in Korea.

4.3. *Rose's Story*

Before arriving in Korea, Rose had no plans of becoming English teacher. With a background in graphic design, her underlying motivation for moving abroad was primarily personal rather than professional. However, when she and her husband were offered a joint teaching position at an English Campus, the "irrefusable benefits"—housing, healthcare, salary, and respectful students—made the move an appealing opportunity for change. What began as a one-year commitment extended into multiple years, first at the government sponsored immersion program, and now at a private academy. Her investment was less about building a teaching career and more about exploring new horizons and creating shared experiences with her partner.

Once in Korea, however, Rose discovered that her personal and professional identity work would become an inevitable part of her daily life. At the government sponsored institution, she quickly learned that the role of foreign teachers was not that of traditional educators but of "edu-tainers." She described herself as stepping into character, donning a "professional mask" in the classroom as a fun-loving extrovert, then removing it to return to her natural, more introverted self in the office. This duality became a site of struggle for her. On the one hand, she felt a duty to prioritize her students by embracing the performance. On the other, she sometimes found herself "coming home and not feeling as my normal self," a sign of the personal toll this constant role-shifting demanded. Nevertheless, she persisted, viewing the mask as part of her professional responsibility—an expression of her professional investment in creating spaces where students felt comfortable and engaged.

Community, both real and imagined, played a central role in Rose's identity work. Working alongside her husband provided a sense of stability, while gatherings with other foreign teachers offered companionship during special occasions. Yet she reflected that these interactions often carried "an air of inauthenticity," as if people came together "only because we had no one else." In contrast, her friendships with Korean staff felt more genuine precisely because they were built on choice rather than convenience. Despite language barriers, these connections allowed her to immerse herself more deeply in Korean culture and everyday life.

Her identity work as a teacher was shaped most strongly by her interactions with students. She was struck by the depth of respect and affection Korean learners showed their teachers, likening the bond to one between children and parents. When students left her messages, drawings, or notes on the whiteboard, she felt "personally privileged" to receive such appreciation. These expressions of

gratitude affirmed her role and strengthened her imagined identity as a caring and committed educator. For Rose, the students' appreciation was not just encouraging—it made it “so easy...to give my all to the students in the classroom,” whether for a single class or a week-long camp.

Looking back, Rose's story reveals the fluid interplay between motivations, identity work, and imagined futures. Initially motivated by practical benefits and personal adventure, she engaged in identity work that required navigating the tension between authentic self and professional mask, forging intercultural friendships, and negotiating community among expatriates. Through it all, her imagined identity as a teacher crystallized in relation to the bonds she built with students—bonds strong enough to make her feel a deep sense of privilege and purpose.

5. Discussion

5.1. *The Imagined Identities of Expatriate EFL Teachers*

Informed by poststructuralist views of identity as a site of struggle and negotiation within unequal power relations (Hiver & Whitehead, 2018; Darvin & Norton, 2015), the narratives of the three participants—Darcy, Lena, and Rose—reveal how expatriate EFL teachers in Korea continuously invest in teaching and belonging as a means of constructing desired professional and personal selves through identity work, thereby responding to Research Question 2.

Darcy's narrative demonstrates how investing in imagined identities can function as a stabilizing and motivating force. Her clear vision of a professional future in Korea—first as a competent teacher and later as a leader—anchored her through experiences of marginalisation and institutional constraint. Darcy invested in pedagogical expertise and leadership as forms of professional capital that could legitimise her membership in the Korean EFL field (Image 1).



Image 1: Darcy gives a presentation



Image 2: Darcy with her colleagues

Her transition from “glorified tape recorder” to respected colleague and curriculum coordinator exemplifies how strong agency and strategic investing can help change disempowering narratives into empowering professional trajectories (Image 2). Her imagined identity was not static: it evolved from peripherality to legitimacy (Wenger 1998), from outsider to a valued insider—mirroring the fluid nature of investing (Barkhuizen, 2016). As is seen in Darcy's case, in the expatriate-teacher context such investments can extend to negotiating legitimacy within institutional hierarchies and

the social context that shapes teachers' access to valued forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1991; Darwin & Norton, 2015).

Lena's story foregrounds the affective dimensions of investing in imagined identities. Her initial motives—adventure and independence—quickly intertwined with the need to construct emotional belonging that is often lost when exploring unknown contexts (Image 3). Through caring relationships, pet companionship, and leadership responsibilities, Lena exhibited what Pavlenko and Norton (2007) describe as *ongoing negotiation of membership* in desired communities. Her investing in an imagined identity demonstrates an implicit shift from transient foreigner to emerging professional. Investing in social networks and a leadership role became resources for re-anchoring her sense of self and achieving empowerment through attaining symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) (Image 4).



Image 3: Lena with co-teachers

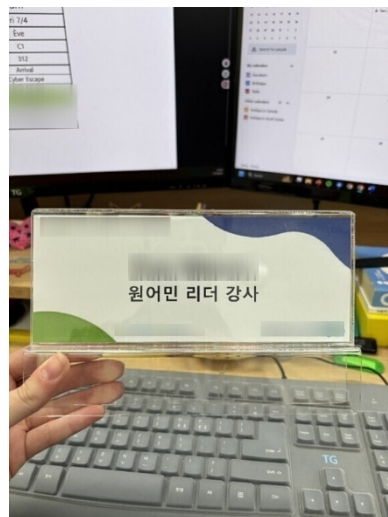


Image 4: Lena's "Leader Teacher" placard in first month of teaching

Finally, Rose's account underscores the emotional and ethical labour involved in sustaining an imagined identity that bridges authenticity and performance. Her use of the "professional mask" illustrates the dual positionality of many expatriate teachers who must embody institutional expectations of enthusiasm and entertainment while privately reconciling their own dispositions (Image 5). Yet, her investment in student relationships—evident in the gratitude and affection she received and the sense of connection she felt—enabled her to author an imagined identity grounded in care and reciprocity (Image 6). In doing so, she converted emotional investment into symbolic capital that affirmed her legitimacy and sense of purpose within the Korean teaching context.



Image 5: Rose the “Edutainer”



Image 6: Board of Appreciation

Across these stories, imagined identities emerge as dynamic, and often implicit projections of who expatriate teachers wish to become. Each participant’s investment reflects the intersection of personal desire, professional aspiration, and contextual constraint. The “plot” revisions (Barkhuizen, 2016) in response to shifting possibilities, highlight the teachers’ re-storying of their professional and personal futures as they encountered institutional boundaries, cultural dissonance, or opportunities for advancement. The process of imagining future selves thus becomes central to maintaining agency and coherence in contexts where belonging is partial and continually renegotiated.

Ultimately, the stories reveal how imagined identities of expatriate EFL teachers can be hybrid, contingent, and dialogic. They are shaped by participants’ transnational mobility, their positioning within Korean institutions, and their affective investments in relationships and career advancement. These identities are neither fully foreign nor fully local but are situated in what Kramsch (2009) calls “the third place”—a symbolic space where teachers reconcile competing discourses of professionalism, culture, and selfhood.

5.2. *Life-wide Learning as an Expatriate and EFL Teacher*

While *lifelong* learning examines the linear acquisition and development of skills and expertise over the lifetime, *life-wide* learning aims to articulate the horizontal, synchronous assemblage of life knowledge and cultural, intellectual, and psychosocial resources that are contemplated, learned, accumulated, and accessed simultaneously and interdependently (Giraldo-Garcia & Chang, 2023). The emphasis in life-wide learning is that knowledge and skills are acquired and developed across different domains and settings that are ongoing, interconnected, and superimposing (Barnett, 2011), aligning precisely with the poststructuralist view of identity construction (DFG, 2016; Giraldo-Garcia, 2023).

To articulate this element of atemporal experiential development within the participants’ stories, two dimensions of life-wide learning are explored, *spaces and relationships*. In accord with Kramsch’s (2009) concept of “the third space,” the teachers in this study were continuously balancing professional spaces in identity work with complex, shifting, and occasionally dissonant, liminal spaces of cultural awareness and adaptation, perceptual change, and personal growth. The growth opportunities were temporal in terms of when they presented themselves, but their impact on identity was an amalgam of social, emotional, and intellectual forces, occurring consciously and subconsciously, professionally and personally, and deeply interconnected to a myriad of contextual factors (Reischmann, 2017).

For Darcy, her sense of self was shaped through the experience of accepting a leadership role. This was not simply a matter of career trajectory, but an emotional space that extended beyond the professional, facilitating a perceptual transition from that of a “babysitter” to being a valued educator, curriculum innovator, and leader within her organization. Accepting the challenge of revitalizing the program after the global pandemic afforded her the opportunity to invest more fully in her career, leaven her vision for language education in Korea, and validate her self-efficacy as a change agent; within this rewarding yet challenging space she enriched her purpose and identity as a dedicated, professional language educator (Barkhuizen, 2016; Kramsch, 2009).

Lena, like Darcy, moved from an initial psychological space of personal and professional transience and ambivalence, where being a teacher in Korea was considered “an adventure,” to assuming a genuine investment in her career and organization through accepting a leadership role. For her, life-wide learning transpired through intellectual and psychosocial spaces, marked by agency, influence, and responsibility. Life-wide learning is embodied in the various resources she sought out for personal and professional development, including her institution, partner, friendships, and the broader language teaching community (MacKinnon, 2022), all of which cooperatively, simultaneously, and to a large extent subconsciously, catalyzed her sense of being, becoming, and belonging as a language teaching professional (Heikkinen et al., 2012).

In Rose’s story, she inhabits a space of what could be described as a dualling identity. She was aware of her institution’s expectations for foreign teachers as “edutainers” and endeavored to create an environment where students felt safe and engaged, but she, at times, found this in direct conflict with her identity as an introvert, and the need to wear a “professional mask” became exhausting. But through the interactions she shared with students, consequentially marked by their respect and affection, and her desire to “give her all” to her students, her identity was shaped in the spaces of emotional and relational work that extended beyond the classroom (Bartlett, 2010; Giraldo-Garcia & Chang, 2023; Heikkinen et al., 2012).

In all three stories, we see life-wide learning manifest from both personal and professional *relationships*. Arriving with a background in linguistics and long-term career goal, Darcy felt her professional identity challenged, however, as her resolve to be an ELT professional began to waver, she met her Korean partner and married (Image 7), reaffirming her commitment to living and teaching in Korea.



Image 7: Darcy gets married

Further, while initially feeling like a “babysitter” and “tape recorder,” Darcy’s leadership role within her institution, and the transformation in relationships that accompanied it, helped her be more knowledgeable of and conscientious to the Korean context (Block, 2015), and hence to understand her students and colleagues better, and through this new responsibility and affirmation, she has come to genuinely perceive herself as a language teaching professional.

For Lena, her brother’s visit helped quell feelings of emotional distance from her family and provided a much-needed piece of calm, reassurance, and reconnection to her deeply held familial bond and her French-speaking identity. Her decision to adopt a kitten was also a significant gesture of companionship that provided a latent yet visceral mortar to Korea. Additionally, her developing sense of belonging as a language teacher in Korea made her more conscious of her role as a cultural mediator and she began to engage more frequently in local practices, such as visiting popular Korean destinations and decorating her home with pictures taken at photobooths. As a result of her promotion, she was concerned that these relationships might change but she has worked hard to maintain a balance between the personal and professional, a testament to her capacity to appreciate the importance of relationships in her identity construction as an expatriate teacher and leader. Although it was difficult to inform her family of her desire to stay, they understood and accepted her decision, demonstrating again the essential nature of agency and purpose in identity work (Barkhuizen, 2016).



Image 8: Lena adopts a cat



Image 9: Lena’s brother visits Korea

Like Darcy and Lena, Rose developed significant relationships as part of her identity development and life-wide learning that helped her persist during periods of doubt and professional ambiguity and served to enhance her cultural understanding and connection to living and teaching in Korea (DFG, 2016). While moving to Korea with her husband provided continuity, stability and assurance during difficult moments, the close and lasting friendships she built with her Korean colleagues is at the heart of her identity work. Asserting that her relationships with other expatriate teachers, while amicable, seemed forged out of convenience and carried an air of superficiality, the connection she developed with Korean colleagues felt more “genuine,” and this acceptance and authenticity has anchored her sentiment of belonging.



Image 10: Rose having dinner with Korean colleagues

Rose's relationship with her students, one of admiration and affection, has also become a crucial aspect of her identity as a language teaching professional. By connecting her ongoing identity construction to the specific context in which she works and the community she serves, she has positioned herself in relation to the interactions she has with her environment while simultaneously exemplifying her uniqueness, distinguished by recognition by her students and colleagues (Giroir, 2014; Graven et al., 1998; Harré, 1999; Howard, 2019). The concept of life-wide learning is exceptionally relevant in Rose's narrative because there is little reference given to the domain of time in her progression, either in terms of occurrence or duration, rather she focuses on the relationships that were built as a result of her experiences, effort, and real-life interactions (Jackson, 2019; MacKinnon, 2022).

6. Conclusion

Investigating the lived experiences of expatriate EFL teachers and their investments in professional and imagined identities reveals often unexplored dimensions of teaching and learning in transnational contexts. It highlights that embarking on an EFL teaching "adventure" can become deeply intertwined with teachers' future aspirations and their ongoing negotiation of legitimacy and belonging. Through engaging in storytelling and reflecting on their lived and imagined experiences, the participants actively re-storied the plots of their lives—reinterpreting past events, re-envisioning possible futures—thereby engaging in the act of *restorying the self*.

The teachers' narratives illustrate how professional and personal investments—whether in pedagogy, relationships, or self-development—can unfold into pathways toward constructing more agentic, meaningful personal and professional identities. However, as these stories also show, the pursuit of such imagined futures is often conditioned by institutional hierarchies, cultural boundaries, and other contextual constraints, all of which can restrict teachers' ability to convert their investment into valued forms of capital enroute to their imagined future.

Within the participants' professional efforts to realize legitimacy and belonging, an essential dimension of their development comes through life-wide learning, learning that is the product of integrating and applying knowledge and skills acquired and accumulated through different domains, settings, and social interactions (Giraldo-Garcia & Chang, 2023; MacKinnon, 2022). Data analysis demonstrates how the emotional, psychosocial, and intellectual spaces they create and inhabit play a significant role in the formal and informal learning they engage in as they continuously enhance

their knowledge, competencies, lives, and identity as expatriate language teachers (Barnett, 2011). Relationships, a pivotal factor in life-wide learning (Giraldo-Garcia & Chang, 2023), are also imperative to personal and professional growth as expatriate teachers seek to establish their identity through an interconnected web of social and emotional interactions and experiences that invariably nurture and shape their sense of being and becoming (Graven et al., 1998).

The narrative approach employed in this study provides a humanised account of expatriate teachers' identity work, allowing them to be seen not merely as "foreign instructors" but as individuals pursuing complex life objectives. Storytelling emerges as a valuable meaning-making act, offering teachers an avenue to interpret their experiences, reassert agency, and articulate their place within the professional and cultural landscapes they inhabit. This process of narrative reflection holds potential not only for researchers but also for institutions, which might consider integrating more reflective and dialogic practices into teacher development programs, approaches that acknowledge the affective and identity-related dimensions of teaching abroad.

Furthermore, our participants' stories reveal a strong desire among expatriate English teachers to shape meaningful personal and professional trajectories and to find belonging within the Korean teaching context. Darcy's empowering transition, from a position of limited agency to that of a legitimate and confident educator, suggests that attainment of desired personal and professional identities in the Korean EFL context can be challenging but remains achievable.

However, future research could advance more ethically and pedagogically responsive frameworks for supporting expatriate teachers. Such frameworks would move beyond administrative or contractual concerns to consider the personal, emotional, and identity-related realities of life and work abroad, incorporating the life-wide learning lens to understand more fully the diverse range of influential factors beyond the classroom that impact their identity work. Institutional efforts toward community involvement, mentorship, and intercultural dialogue would help counter the positions of inequality that expatriate teachers frequently navigate. Some studies, such as that of Lee and Jang (2023), recommend providing systematic institutional support to help novice native English teachers in Korea navigate cultural and professional challenges and develop a stronger sense of professional identity. Our findings would indicate that the experience of teachers like Darcy, who successfully transitioned from a position of limited agency to that of a legitimate educator, would be invaluable in providing guidance for current and aspiring EFL teachers. Therefore, rather than relying on formal teacher preparation programs, we recommend that a teacher-led body, perhaps supported by the Ministry of Education of Korea, guided by experienced mentors such as Darcy, provide contextually grounded support and practical preparation that current and aspiring EFL teachers in Korea could truly benefit from.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Why did you decide to teach English in Korea?
2. What were some of your perceptions of Korea before you arrived?
3. What were your expectations in relation to being an English teacher?
4. What were your initial impressions when you arrived?
5. What have been some of your most memorable experiences in Korea?
6. How well do you feel you have adapted to your new job?
7. How have you adapted to life in a new country and culture?
8. To what extent do you feel that coming to Korea has changed your future plans, and how so?

Appendix B: Photo Novellas

Task 1: Insert four photos that represent your personal and professional journey as an expatriate English teacher in Korea.

1.	2.
3.	4.

Task 2: Drawing on the photos you have included above, explain your personal and professional journey in Korea, detailing some of the achievements and challenges you have experienced. Please provide some specific examples and share your reflections on how they have shaped your experience.

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