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# Teacher identity and agency in language teaching: Adult ESL instructors as explorers

**Abstract.** As the world becomes more globalized, various social, cultural, and historical contexts are shaping teacher identities. Exploring teacher identities is essential in understanding experiences, interactions, and beliefs that influence language teachers' practices inside and outside the classroom (Farrell 2011). This narrative study, conducted in a large urban community college located in the southeastern region of the United States, engaged seven adult ESL instructors in critical reflection on their assumptions, teaching, personal experiences, and an institutional environment. Data collection included semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, journal entries, and classroom observations, including notes about artifacts used in the lessons. The findings of this study highlight the relationship between teacher identity and agency in teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Participants characterized themselves as explorers, who valued various cultural experiences and acted agentively to create culturally responsive lessons and an enriching learning environment. These findings have significant implications for language teacher training and further research.

**Keywords:** language teacher identity, language teacher agency, language teaching, adult ESL, culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

## 1. Introduction

With a growing immigrant population in the United States, the number of English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in higher education institutions has been steadily increasing. The Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education (2015) reported that adult ESL instruction is the largest and fastest-growing section of the adult education system in the United States. More than 40 percent of students are enrolled in adult ESL programs in community colleges across the nation. Adult ESL classes are culturally and linguistically diverse spaces and prepare English Language Learners (ELLs) to “acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to become productive workers, parents, and citizens” (U.S. Department of Education 2016: 1). While adult ESL classes

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are increasingly popular, some researchers have asserted that limited research on successful strategies for teaching adult English Language Learners exists (Cronen et al. 2005; Burt et al. 2008; Mathews-Aydinli 2008; Snell 2013).

Research in English language teaching also highlights the importance of understanding teacher identity (Beauchamp & Thomas 2009; Buchanan 2015; Farrell 2011; Kumaravadivelu 2012; Mockler 2011; Varghese et al. 2005). For example, Farrell (2011: 54) asserted that exploring teacher identities is essential in understanding “beliefs, assumptions, values, and practices that guide teacher actions both inside and outside the classroom”. A number of scholars contended that, teacher identities are shaped by various social, cultural, political, and historical contexts. Thus, teacher identity is not fixed, but changes depending on different interactions, experiences, and environments (Buchanan 2015; Kumaravadivelu 2012; Mockler 2011; Varghese et al. 2005). While identity work in language teaching is currently gaining significant interest, little empirical research has been conducted on adult ESL instructor identity and agency negotiation when teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners. This research fills a void by shedding light on adult ESL instructors’ identity construction and agency negotiation. It sought to answer the following research question: What is the role of teacher identity in shaping a sense of agency for teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners?

## 2. Literature review

Two concepts framed this study: teacher identity and teacher agency. Teacher identity refers to how teachers construct their ideas of “how to be, how to act and how to understand their work and their place in society. It is negotiated through experience and the sense that teachers make of that experience” (Sachs 2005: 15). Professional identities vary among teachers and can change throughout their careers (Buchanan 2015; Mockler 2011; Sachs 2005; Walkington 2005; Varghese et al. 2005). Buchanan (2015) added that teacher identity is seen as both a process and a product and is shaped by multiple social, cultural, political, and historical contexts. It is created through relationships, and it changes based on interactions and various factors, such as context, experiences, policies, and school culture. Kumaravadivelu (2012: 58) also highlighted that teacher identities are “constructed at the complex intersections between individual, social, national, and global realities”. Therefore, Buchanan (2015), Kumaravadivelu (2012), Sachs (2005), and Walkington (2005) agree that teacher identity is how teachers define themselves through their experiences, and that teacher identity is negotiated throughout their careers.

Many scholars in the fields of TESOL and English linguistics have theorized on teacher agency. There are many definitions of teacher agency. In this study, it is characterized as “a capacity to act that is achieved within continually shifting contexts over time” (Priestley et al. 2015: 3). It helps us understand how teachers are “reflexive and creative, act counter to societal constraints, and are both enabled and constrained by their social

and material environments” (Priestley et al. 2015: 3). Thus, teacher agency in this study is understood from the ecological perspective because it is shaped by culture, social contexts and structures, physical resources, and environment (Priestley et al. 2015). For example, Dadvand (2015) explored pre-service teachers’ beliefs and agency using an ecological approach. Pre-service teachers, in that study, showed a strong sense of agency in “creating a more democratic classroom environment” (Dadvand 2015: 87). Studying teacher agency through this lens helps us recognize how “the interplay of individual efforts, available resources, contextual and structural factors” (Biesta & Tedder 2007: 137) constrain or enable teacher practice as they “act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment” (Biesta & Tedder 2007: 137). Research on language teacher agency has focused on advocacy, decision making, and accepting or resisting curricular reforms, policy environments, prescribed resources, and school practices (Edwards & Burns 2016; Kayi-Aydar 2017; Lasky 2005; Ollerhead & Burns 2016; Tao & Gao 2017).

A growing body of research in language teaching (Beauchamp & Thomas 2009; Edwards & Burns 2016; Kayi-Aydar 2015a; Kayi-Aydar 2015b; Kayi-Aydar 2017; Tao & Geo 2017) also illustrates the interdependent relationship between agency and identity. Mockler (2011) stressed that teachers who are aware of their professional identities are better positioned to make a difference in their classrooms and in the community. This means that teacher identity influences teacher agency. In other words, how teachers see themselves through their experiences enables or constrains them to perform certain actions and to engage in instructional practices. Research indicated that concerning identity, teacher agency is negotiated in various ways: through participation in continuous research opportunities (Edwards & Burns 2016; Tao & Geo 2017), incorporation of new projects and strategies in the classroom (Colegrove & Zúñiga 2018), enrollment in a doctoral program (Kayi-Aydar 2017), participation in professional development (Brooks & Adams 2015; Edwards & Burns 2016; Jaar 2017), engagement in the community of practice (Liu & Xu 2011), and enrollment in study abroad programs (Trent 2011). Kayi-Aydar (2015a) argued that language teachers’ life experiences and interactions with their mentors shaped their sense of agency and influenced their professional identities. In another study, Kayi-Aydar (2015b) explained that Paloma, a language teacher, acknowledged that her agency was shaped throughout her personal and professional experiences, and affected by the social context and interactions. Furthermore, in Tao & Gao’s (2017) study language teachers exercised a strong sense of agency for continuous learning and sustained engagement in teaching. This study adds to this body of research by providing an insight into how adult ESL instructors’ personal and professional experiences and contexts shaped their identities and influenced their sense of agency in teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

In addition to the research affirming a strong connection between teacher identity and teacher agency, some researchers highlighted the role of power in negotiating identity and agency. Teacher identity and agency formation are influenced by power structures since teachers experience educational, social, and political constraints during their teaching careers (Kumaravadivelu 2012; Ollerhead & Burns 2016). Recently, researchers in the TESOL field called for more liberating education to resist current practices that promote passiveness and cultural assimilation (Eyring 2014; Griswald 2011; Kolano et al. 2014; Kumaravadivelu 2012; Samoukovic 2015). Morgan (2009) asserted that language teachers most often take on the identity of technicians who mainly focus on transferring knowledge and rarely exhibit the role of transformative practitioners. This is because language teachers may consider English language teaching as an ideologically neutral activity or ESL teachers may feel incapable to work towards transformation. Kumaravadivelu (2012: 56) explained that transformative practitioners “play the role of change agents raising educational, social, cultural, and political consciousness in their learners”. This study offers an additional insight into this debate.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Theoretical framework**

Drawing on critical theory, especially on Paulo Freire’s (1993) work, this study focuses on understanding the social, historical, and contextual conditions of teachers’ work in promoting culturally inclusive classroom environments by engaging participants in critical self-reflection. Freire (1993) argued that if teachers engaged in critically examining their assumptions, experiences, and practices, they were more aware of their own purpose as teachers. Accordingly, the goal of this research was to bring awareness of identity and agency construction in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. The exploration of language teachers’ identity and agency through critical reflection via interviews and journal writing shed light on the complexities of teaching and supporting ELLs and the actions participants take to advocate for their diverse students. This study uses a critical lens in learning how teachers recognize that “inclusive practices are not isolated from the structural and cultural contexts of their workplace that might encourage or impede such practices” (Pantić & Florian 2015: 345).

#### **3.2. Study design**

This narrative study engaged seven adult ESL instructors in critical reflection on their identities, teaching, and an institutional environment. The purpose of this narrative study, then, was to gain a deeper understanding of multiple participants’ narration of their identity and agency negotiation (Creswell 2014). Phillion & He (2007) underlined that a narrative study as a research methodology offers an opportunity to delve into

participants’ personal experiences and gives them a safe space for storytelling, meaning making, and relationship building. This narrative study offers a way of understanding experiences of a group of adult ESL instructors and their identity construction process. In supporting a theoretical understanding of critical theory and in taking an ecological approach to agency into consideration, this narrative study provides a useful framework for studying how participants’ various contexts and experiences influenced their understandings of their identity and agency for teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

### 3.3. Setting and participants

The participants of this study were seven adult ESL instructors working in one community college. Thus, the purpose of this narrative study was to understand the identity and agency negotiation of a group of teachers working in the same institution. This community college is located in the southeastern region of the United States and serves about 3,000 ELLs representing 152 countries. It has eight campuses and offers a variety of courses for ELLs who want to enhance their language and academic skills. ELLs can attend classes free of charge that are part of the following non-college-credit programs: adult ESL, ESL transition, family literacy, and refugee education. Table 1. shows characteristics of seven participants. They differ in teaching experience, educational backgrounds, as well as locations and students they teach. The criteria for participant selection was as follows: (a) currently employed as an adult ESL instructor at the community college; (b) has a degree or certificate in teaching ESL; (c) has a minimum of three years of teaching experience; and (d) works with culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Table 1. Participants’ information

<b>Instructor’s Pseudonym</b>	<b>Degree/ Certificate</b>	<b>Teaching Experience</b>	<b>Class Location</b>	<b>Student English Language Proficiency Level</b>
Agnes	M.A.T. in TESOL	5 years	On-campus	High Intermediate
Andrew	B.A. in International Marketing certificate in teaching adult ESL	29 years	On-campus	High Intermediate

<b>Instructor's Pseudonym</b>	<b>Degree/Certificate</b>	<b>Teaching Experience</b>	<b>Class Location</b>	<b>Student English Language Proficiency Level</b>
Cici	B.A. in Foreign Language certificate in teaching adult ESL	15 years	On-campus	Multi-Level
Mary	M.A.T. in TESOL	10 years	On-campus	Intermediate
Suzy	B.A. in Spanish certificate in teaching adult ESL	14 years	Community	Literacy
Sebastian	M.A.T. in TESOL	25 years	On-campus	High Intermediate
Tim	M.A. in History certificate in teaching adult ESL	9 years	Community	Literacy

### 3.4. Data collection and analysis

In addressing the research question, data were collected through multiple methods. Data collection lasted one semester (five months) and included three semi-structured interviews with each instructor, and two classroom observations, including my notes about artifacts used during the lessons. The purpose of combining these methods was to explore teacher identity and agency in more depth. Each participant participated in three individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol included open-ended questions that centered on participants' experiences, practices, perceptions, and opinions. Participants also engaged in reflective writing. They received a prompt every two weeks during the data collection period (10 prompts in total) and reflected on their personal and academic observations, experiences, and interactions in an easily accessible, password protected Google Document. I also observed each participant twice for an entire class to collect the data about teachers' pedagogical practices and classroom interactions. During each classroom observation, I looked through artifacts, such as handouts and PowerPoint slides and looked through texts and activities in the textbooks used during the lessons I observed. The notes on these artifacts were primarily used for triangulation purposes.

All interviews were transcribed and jotted memos from the interviews and classroom observations were expanded. The interview transcripts, written reflections from

the reflective journals, and expanded field notes, including notes about PowerPoints and handouts were coded using an inductive, iterative process, and all data were analyzed for thematic categories. Consistent with Creswell (2014), a thematic analysis process involved identifying words and phrases and organizing them into meaningful categories and thematic clusters. A thematic analysis was used to discover central themes across the entries. Interpretation of the data consisted of reading the texts, identifying codes, rereading the data, discerning categories, taking notes, and determining overarching themes that provided an insight into the teachers' personal and professional experiences and practices. The thematic analysis of all data illustrated the commonalities among data and illuminated particular nuances in the data (Creswell 2014).

## 4. Results

The results of this study indicated that some aspects of participants' identities strongly relate to being explorers who pursue opportunities to learn about different people, countries, cultures, traditions, and languages. Participants' personal curiosity and pursuit for gaining various new experiences is felt in their classrooms. Participants characterized themselves as explorers, who valued diverse multicultural experiences and relationships and acted agentively to create culturally responsive lessons and an enriching learning environment. Four themes emerged from data analysis: (1) international connections enhance commitment; (2) transforming learning through inclusion and empowerment; (3) teaching as a conscious and continuous quest; and (4) active efforts in building community bridges.

### 4.1. International connections enhance commitment

All participants drew on a variety of international experiences that contributed to shaping their identities as explorers. Such global connections seemed to enable them to be understanding, considerate, accommodating, and committed instructors who care about addressing students' needs. Five categories developed during data analysis, such as intercultural roots, international partners, multicultural friends, international traveling, and multilingual experiences.

The thematic data analysis revealed that possessing intercultural roots, such as grandparents or parents who immigrated to the United States affected instructors' professional identities. Cici, Mary, Suzy, and Tim shared that knowing that their relatives came from another country facilitated their efforts in relating to experiences of immigrants who learned a new language. Thus, participants in this study saw the interconnection between their family history, culture, personal experiences, and their teaching. They exhibit a strong sense of agency in supporting ELLs because they were familiar with the hardships their relatives or ancestors went through in the past. For example,

Cici reflected that her cultural heritage influenced her work with ELLs, and she sympathized with them. She commented,

My cultural identity influences my work in that I know my roots were from another place also. I can see how both cultures play an important part in my life. I identify with a lot of ELLs.

Having a significant other from another country has also affected adult ESL instructors' teaching. Agnes, Cici, and Tim shared that seeing what their partners had experienced as immigrants opened their eyes to the challenges immigrants face in terms of learning a new language, finding a job, and acclimating to a new community. Such realization made them more understanding to obstacles ELLs experience, and they became agentive in supporting their students in their educational journeys. For example, Agnes reflected that she decided to become an ESL instructor after seeing her husband's struggle. She explained,

My husband didn't speak any English. So that really kind of geared me towards TESOL as well. Seeing his struggle, what he went through that really influenced me to help others.

Some participants also shared that they had multicultural friends, and they built such friendships since childhood. They went to school and college with immigrants, lived in diverse neighborhoods, and had international co-workers. Thus, their explorer identity is evident in continuously seeking opportunities to cultivate friendships with culturally and linguistically diverse people. All participants shared that they loved learning about other cultures and customs and have maintained close relationships with immigrants throughout their lives. Such diverse connections seemed to transform their perspectives, enhanced their understanding of the ELLs' experiences and needs, and strengthened their commitment to teaching ELLs. This indicated that their interactions with immigrants in their spheres provided opportunities for developing identity as explorers and that enhanced their sense of agency for teaching ELLs. For example, Cici reflected that she was intentional in building international friendships by stating,

I had a lot of international friends, like, you know, pretty much my whole life. So, I had a feeling for international people and sensitivity.

The thematic analysis also showed that participants in this study traveled to many countries, for work and pleasure. Agnes and Suzy studied abroad; Agnes, Sebastian, and Tim taught overseas; and Agnes, Mary, Suzy, Tim, and Sebastian regularly took trips to various countries. For instance, Tim shared in his reflection that he received his CELTA certificate in Canada, taught English in Europe, North and South America,



and traveled around the world to see fascinating places and meet diverse people. Suzy has also traveled to many places, and she reflected that such experiences broadened her horizons. She mentioned,

I would say probably my travel background and being able to experience other parts of the world, other languages, meeting people from different places, um, helps me relate a little bit about how it feels to be somewhere totally different.

Some teachers expressed in their reflections that since they had an opportunity to learn a new language, they recognized the complexity of learning a second language. Mary, Agnes, Suzy, and Cici had learned Spanish in college or while visiting Latin America and Spain. Classroom observations also revealed that these adult ESL instructors used Spanish when teaching and encouraged students to learn classmates' languages to facilitate learning. That finding provided evidence that participants actively promote linguistic pluralism in their classrooms. For example, Mary expressed,

Through learning a language and study abroad opportunities, I was able to step outside my bubble and experience what it feels like to be in a very different environment. These experiences have greatly influenced my work as a teacher with ELLs since it helps me to better understand what it might be like to walk in their shoes, not understanding the language and how to navigate a very complicated system.

Participants' accounts illustrated the intricacy of teacher identity negotiation throughout their lives and suggested that having international connections enhanced their commitment to teaching ELLs. Their reflections and field notes indicated that participants drew on their past experiences and interactions, such as cultural heritage, diverse relationships and friendships, and traveling to other countries while narrating their identities as explorers. They constructed multiple identities, but exploration was manifested throughout their various experiences as they took active opportunities to explore diverse countries, cultures, and languages. They make deliberate choices to learn about diverse places and people, and such international connections have provided a venue for building a strong commitment to supporting immigrant students in their classrooms. In short, these findings highlight the importance of considering the multiplicity of past experiences and various relationships that have contributed to shaping a teacher's identity as an explorer.

#### **4.2. Transforming learning through inclusion and empowerment**

Participants in this study are also agentive in promoting transformative learning through sharing their diverse experiences and actively encouraging students to share,

compare, and contrast their perspectives and experiences. There are four categories in this theme, such as sharing own experiences, validating students' voices, transforming viewpoints, and challenging marginalization.

A few participants, such as Cici and Andrew reflected that they did not travel overseas but gained enriching experiences by living in diverse neighborhoods or interacting with family members or friends who came from another country. Therefore, all participants have many diverse experiences that they share with students in the classroom in order to relate to students' backgrounds. Such diverse experiences influenced participants' sense of agency in establishing close, genuine relationships with students and in delivering interesting, culturally responsive instruction. For example, Andrew reflected that he openly shared his personal history with his students and his diverse experiences enabled him to empathize with them. One of his activities engaged students to share own educational, cultural, and social experiences, and he encouraged students to interrogate him about his past. He was very transparent about his diverse upbringing in the northern United States. He also explained this in his reflective journal by stating,

My urban background and cultural sensitivity to people's interactions with the struggles that life can bring helped me to understand how an individual can see his or herself within any situation, including learning new educational material or investing in an instructional session.

The thematic data analysis also revealed that participants validated students' voices in various ways. For example, they explored students' backgrounds, interests, and needs through collaborative and communicative activities and peer sharing. Such instructional strategies help students enhance their critical thinking skills by comparing and contrasting own experiences. For example, Agnes considered using activities that helped students learn from each other very beneficial by commenting,

I give them a chance to share in every class how the topic can relate to their lives in their home countries, as well as their lives in the United States. This allows them to get to hear from their different classmates. I feel like my students feel comfortable to share with me and their classmates.

When creating a collaborative, communicative, and culturally responsive classroom environment, some participants, such as Agnes, Mary, Suzy, and Andrew go beyond learning about students' backgrounds. They facilitate transformative learning by letting them share unique perspectives and challenges they face while learning English and living in the United States. These participants explained that they also discussed common misconceptions and generalizations about immigrants in order to transform students and fellow teachers' views. For example, Andrew shared that it was crucial

to engage students in explaining certain holidays, traditions, and customs to dismantle stereotypes. He explained,

What many people think Cinco de Mayo is, it's the day of independence for Mexico. And a lot of the Mexican people in the class who were from Mexico said it's not. It's about a part of independence, but it has not nothing to do with the independence of Mexico itself. So that's a different perspective. And most native-born people here celebrate it as a big holiday and party all day when most Mexican born people do not. So that was very different than many people in the class didn't know that came from this reading that story.

In addition, Agnes, Mary, Suzy, and Andrew actively empower students to raise concerns and dispute common power structures. Classroom observations and artifacts, such as handouts with discussion prompts and icebreakers illustrated that participants promoted critical pedagogy in their classrooms. They pose problems and challenge societal and cultural norms during classroom discussions and select readings that extend students' knowledge about discrimination. The results illuminated teachers' strong sense of agency in offering opportunities for students to critically analyze inequalities in the society and empowering them to resist marginalization. For instance, Suzy mentioned,

It is important to make students aware that in the U.S., discrimination and bigotry does exist, but is not considered acceptable and is against the law. They also learn about the struggles of others including slavery, the fight for freedom and justice, the right to vote, and gender equality. Many can personally relate to these issues and understand that, in many cases, these are issues that we still struggle with today.

The findings of this study indicated that participants are agentic in creating opportunities to value and validate students' experiences by allowing them to openly share and compare their stories. Such an approach depicts participants' identity as explorers because they actively promote a safe, welcoming, and inclusive classroom environment that facilitates explorative, transformative learning. This study adds to the existing literature on teacher identity by drawing attention to two ways exploration in the classroom is manifested: first, the teacher-explorers who value and validate various experiences and views, and second, the others who deliberately delve deeper into the nature of power relations and engage in social justice work.

### **4.3. Teaching as a conscious and continuous quest**

In addition to sharing and validating various experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives, participants in this study actively explore in their classrooms by analyzing their

dispositions, being inquisitive, prioritizing students' goals, creating culturally responsive materials, and adjusting instruction.

Participants maintain their explorer identities by evaluating their dispositions. Their narratives indicated that they were reflective practitioners who regularly examined their practices, experiences, and biases (Kumaravadivelu 2012). For example, all participants reflected on being aware of their privileges. They reported they did not have to go through the hardships of being a foreigner who did not enjoy the privileges of being a citizen and a native speaker of English. Such awareness enabled them to be more understanding and compassionate instructors. For example, Cici shared her recognition of students' challenges and her active quest to be an empathetic teacher. She explained,

My experiences are different from some ELLs in that some of them have lived through war, terrorism, starvation, and horrible circumstances. They have lived with majorly corrupt governments and have seen it all. I have never had to face these terrors. I am a very compassionate person though and feel deeply for other people and their experiences.

The participants' accounts also revealed that all participants were inquisitive and curious individuals who were intentional about learning about students and their backgrounds, interests, and needs. For example, adult ESL instructors approached students during group work activities or formed circle times to ask students' personal questions to engage them in deeper conversations that connected the content and language skills with their personal experiences. Also, Suzy explained that it was important to keep educating herself about students as their previous experiences affect their learning. She is aware of students' complex histories and seeks ways to find out about their stories and such knowledge informs her teaching. She actively seeks to understand students' challenging histories, feelings of marginalization, and current life circumstances. She commented,

I always learn from my students. I believe we can learn from each other. They bring new ideas, different experiences, different education and I have learned a lot from my students. They bring a lot to the table.

While exploring students' experiences and backgrounds, all participants reported they prioritized students' goals. They conduct needs assessment by talking to their students, giving them questionnaires at the beginning of the semester, and analyzing their student files. They are aware of students' various goals and prepare lessons that address their unique needs. For example, Andrew explained how he deliberately tried to address his students' needs by commenting,

Cause you know, so, I'll have time to study a student, each student to see all their needs and how to do it and go back and say, okay, I need to do this. What happens is, uh, maybe the next semester I figure out that in some of my classes I need more vocabulary. Everyday situations, common situations as opposed to, um, or I need more audio, um, exercises so people can hear the different accents of U.S. citizens.

Another way participants actively explore in their classrooms is through being creative in providing culturally responsive materials. In their reflections, Agnes, Mary, Suzy, and Andrew shared that their curriculum did not include diverse students' experiences and voices and that they actively worked to expand the mandated curriculum by giving students a voice to transform perspectives. Simply, they empowered ELLs to be active, agentive learners. Instead of conforming to the required curriculum, participants are agentive in providing additional resources and designing own handouts and PowerPoint slides that are more culturally responsive than prescribed materials. The notes on the artifacts used in the lessons show that participants create or bring materials that relate to students' lives, such as conversation starters, newspaper clippings, websites, and authentic materials that connect to students' interests and heritage. This finding supports the important argument to resist the Eurocentric curricula through the incorporation of culturally responsive materials in teaching ELLs (Gunderson et al. 2014; Wiggan 2012). For example, Mary explained her determination in providing materials that were relevant to students' needs by commenting,

Instructional materials are contextual and need to be chosen carefully and adapted to backgrounds and capabilities of students. Students must be able to relate to the ideas presented and be capable of interacting with the materials and delivery. All my materials are matched to the needs of students. I am constantly searching for new materials. I love to try out new textbooks. So anytime that anybody in the department gets their hands on a textbook, I have it.

Participants also reported that they adjusted their instruction if something did not work or needed more explanation. Instead of strictly adhering to their lesson plans, they are agentive in being mindful, flexible, and accommodating instructors. They actively reflect on their teaching and analyze students' progress and change their lessons instantaneously when they see the need. That shows that they are risk takers who are not afraid of changing gears and searching for other options when something does not go according to their plan. For example, Tim explained,

Sometimes I'll do a lesson plan and the lesson plan just for whatever reason flops and then I have to make an immediate decision and say okay this wasn't working, you know, I missed

the boat on this one and I'm going to have to focus. They're having trouble with this particular part of the lesson plan, so I'm not going to be able to move on. I'm going to have to divert.

The results of this study suggested that participants undertake an agentive expedition in their teaching by exploring own dispositions, being curious, focusing on students' goals, creating culturally responsive materials, and adjusting instruction. Therefore, the instructors' current teaching practices represent their identities as explorers, and such conscious exploration in the classroom unveils their sense of agency in teaching diverse learners. They exhibit a strong sense of agency in exploring their students' needs and delivering instruction that matches their goals, interests, and cultural backgrounds. This finding supported claims by Borjigin (2017) who argued for providing culturally responsive teaching strategies that connected adult ESL students' backgrounds, promoted critical consciousness, and created an inclusive environment in adult ESL classrooms.

#### **4.4. Active efforts in building community bridges**

Another theme illuminates participants' exploration beyond just teaching language and content: adult ESL instructors maintain explorer identities by working diligently in building bridges between their classrooms and community. They continuously promote community resources, invite students' food in their classrooms, organize field trips, and participate in students' celebrations in their neighborhoods. Whether it is through inviting guest speakers, promoting community events, or connecting students with community organizations, participants show a strong sense of agency in building strong partnerships that can help students integrate into society.

Most of the participants make efforts to connect students to the community by promoting events and organizations that could help them feel more welcomed in their neighborhoods. That implies participants' active pursuit in advocating for their diverse ELLs in public spheres. For example, during the classroom observations, Mary, Agnes, Suzy, and Sebastian invited guest speakers and shared artifacts, such as brochures about upcoming events to engage students in participating in job fairs and community work. Furthermore, Suzy emphasized the significant contribution of local refugee agencies in facilitating students' acclimation in their communities. She explained,

Refugee support services, um, they put together a lot of events and activities. So, those of us who work in the refugee community and teach the community classes, um, we also communicate with refugee support services and whenever they have some kind of celebration or activity. Then we will take that information to the classrooms and let them know about it and encourage them to come.

Participants also discussed how they welcomed students' food in the classroom by encouraging them to share their dishes at the end of the semester. For example, Andrew, Mary, and Suzy showed me pictures of the parties they organized to celebrate students' heritage. Such events offer a space for cultural validation, in which students can practice communicative skills. For instance, Sebastian explained how he welcomed students' food to create an inclusive community in the classroom,

Inviting students to share food from their countries is another way to create interest along with a sense of community. They have the opportunity to learn what is different, and it may help to break down cultural barriers, promote awareness of diversity, and encourage mutual respect.

Teacher identity as explorers is also manifested by providing enriching experiences outside the classroom. For example, some participants go beyond just teaching within the classroom walls and take students to local libraries, museums, or movie theatres. For example, Sebastian shared that he had taken his students to a few places in the city,

We went to the public library, uh, talked about library cards. We went to, we walked by museums and we went to the IMAX. And, we watched a movie, a couple of years ago, we watched about something about China panda bears. This time we watched about the nature in Africa. They were totally fascinated by the IMAX.

In addition, some instructors go out to students' neighborhoods and join them in their personal celebrations. Mary and Suzy volunteered in the World Refugee Day Festival to support their refugee students. Additionally, Suzy, Mary, and Agnes shared that they attended students' weddings and birthday parties.

Ultimately, in spite of having students of varied experiences, backgrounds, and needs, all seven participants are intentional in providing welcoming, enriching, and validating experiences in and outside their classrooms. Participants' current instructional strategies and interactions elucidated their strong sense of agency of being explorers who continuously learn about their students and provide enriching instruction that helps ELLs be more successful students and community members. In short, exploration in the classroom goes beyond merely building close relationships since it also strengthens students' sense of belonging and appreciation of their new community.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study illustrated that participants exhibited a strong sense of agency in supporting their culturally and linguistically diverse students, and their identity as explorers contributed to their strong sense of agency. Participants' past and present

experiences, interactions, and practices indicated that they were explorers because they engaged in various relationships and experiences to learn about other people, countries, cultures, and languages. They also use intentional, culturally responsive teaching strategies, such as supplementing curriculum, being student goal-focused, being constantly inquisitive, and exposing students to other experiences outside the classroom. Thus, the findings of this study confirmed a close relationship between teacher identity and agency as participants' explorer identity played a crucial role in developing their strong sense of agency for teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Beauchamp & Thomas 2009; Buchanan 2015). In addition, research on language teacher agency focuses on advocacy, decision making, accepting or resisting curricular reforms, and policy environments (Edwards & Burns 2016; Kayi-Aydar 2017; Lasky 2005; Ollerhead & Burns 2016; Tao & Gao 2017), and the findings of this study provide additional insights into how multiple sociocultural influences, including the past and present personal experiences, relationships, and practices affect language teacher agency.

This research study is essential in furthering our understanding of the role of identity as being dynamic and negotiated throughout teachers' lives. Thus, it contributes to the large body of research that problematizes identity as never constant (Buchanan 2015; Bukor 2015; Day et al. 2006; Miller 2008; Mockler 2011; Olsen 2008; Sachs 2005; Walkington 2005; Varghese et al. 2005). Participants' identity negotiation is an ongoing process. Their previous personal experiences, interactions, and current teaching practices illuminated their identities as explorers. Participants have continuously explored in their individual spheres and found opportunities to explore with their students inside and outside the classrooms. Thus, their past personal experiences influenced them as teachers. They became compassionate, understanding, supportive, and committed instructors because they have had opportunities to learn about diversity and inclusion in various local and international contexts. That noteworthy observation provided strong empirical confirmation that the personal lives of teachers and their professional roles in the classrooms are closely intertwined (Bukor 2013; Day et al. 2006; Olsen 2008; Palmer & Christison 2007).

This study drew on critical theory to investigate the role of teacher identity in exercising teacher agency in adult ESL classrooms. It is timely during a debate on transforming language teacher education. Kumaravadivelu (2012) and Wiggan (2012) asserted that language teaching supports the reproduction of dominant cultural and societal thinking and called for engaging language teachers in critical reflection to become aware of how they are positioned in various historical, social, and institutional contexts. Kumaravadivelu (2012) and Morgan (2009) advocated preparing language teachers not to be merely technicians or reflective practitioners but to become transformative intellectuals. The findings of this study offer additional insight into this debate by suggesting another way teachers enact their identities: exploration. This study revealed that



some adult ESL instructors, such as Agnes, Suzy, Mary, and Andrew are transformative practitioners who are change agents empowering students to challenge misconceptions, stereotypes, and marginalization in society (Kumaravadivelu 2012). These instructors recognize the relations of power and dominance as well as challenge hegemonic pedagogies and hidden curriculum by promoting equitable and transformative education. But, Cici, Tim, and Sebastian are more than technicians or reflective practitioners as they are not passive teachers but instead actively take advantage of various opportunities to explore students' needs, backgrounds, and goals. Their identities as explorers are evident in being inclusive, creative, deliberate, autonomous, and committed teachers, but they have not taken a leap into challenging power structures. The reasons may be many, and it might be a focus of further research. Although Agnes, Suzy, Mary, and Andrew as explorers actively work towards social change in education, Cici, Tim, and Sebastian are still intentional in transforming their students' learning by exploring and supporting their ELLs' needs and language goals and embracing students' perspectives, opinions, and experiences in their teaching. That noteworthy contribution to the current literature draws attention to exploration as a crucial aspect of teacher identity.

That discovery also confirmed the importance of taking into a consideration "a holistic understanding of the dominant influences on teacher identity and instructional practices" (Bukor 2015: 323) as past and present personal experiences have a significant impact on language teacher teaching. This narrative study looked at participants' language identity development by analyzing data holistically and comparing and contrasting participants' stories. Thus, analyses revealed that the common aspect of participants' identities was exploration even though they exhibited multiple identities throughout their lives and experienced shifts in their identities.

## 6. Pedagogical implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for language teacher preparation programs, language teacher professional development, and further research. This study points to the importance of exposing pre-service language teachers to diverse experiences, for example, ensuring pre-service language teachers have an opportunity to learn about diverse learners during their clinical field experiences. This study also highlights the potential usefulness of incorporating critical self-reflection assignments in the methodology courses in which pre-service language teachers can make connections between their various experiences and teaching practices. The themes that developed in this study suggest the need to critically evaluate own dispositions, foundations of commitment to teaching diverse students, the interconnection between family history and teaching, diversity of own neighborhoods, and influence of own language learning experience on teaching practices. Such critical reflection can provide an extension

to reflecting on practice and can stimulate pre-service teachers to purposefully explore multiple factors that influence their teacher identity and nurture their sense of agency.

As far as professional development is concerned, this study calls for engaging language teachers in critical reflection and dialogue that facilitate sharing experiences, perspectives, and classroom practices, as well as challenging power structures and marginalization in education. Such collaboration among faculty could promote exploring students' unique stories, their living circumstances, and their various needs. The findings serve as a premise for transforming teacher professional development training in order to enhance instruction quality and improve the learning environments of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Teacher training is not just about gaining new knowledge but also a factor in improving teacher agency by helping teachers build their professional identities. Therefore, this study is significant because it raises awareness on deliberate, ongoing efforts in developing teacher identity and teacher agency.

Moreover, further research is needed to deepen knowledge about adult ESL instructors' experiences and practices. It would be beneficial to extend this study to longitudinal and comparative ways. Analyzing participants' teaching over a course of a year would help provide a more in-depth illustration of their practices. Also, comparing their experiences with the students and staff's perspectives would be helpful in understanding their institutional context.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper explored how participants' identities affected their sense of agency. This study answers the research question by providing important insights into teacher identity playing a pivotal role in shaping teacher agency for teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Because adult ESL instructors have had numerous opportunities to explore other cultures, countries, and traditions, they have been open, curious, committed, innovative teachers who currently exhibit a strong sense of agency for teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners. They actively support and advocate for their ELLs in their classrooms and in the community. These findings are relevant to both researchers and practitioners. However, it is important to remember that this narrative study may not be generalizable to other institutions. Rather, the purpose of this study was to learn about seven participants' experiences and contexts that shaped their identity and agency.

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